THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF MEMORY ACTIVISM

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Latin America has a long history of violence that originated during colonization. Although violence has continuously shaped confrontations between opposite political projects, it is the second half of the twentieth century that has been the privileged focus of memory construction in the continent. In the context of the Cold War, Latin America experienced a new cycle of violence perpetrated under different frameworks – military dictatorships, civil wars, and authoritarian regimes – which left thousands dead, displaced, and "desaparecidos" (disappeared). The shaping of collective memory around this legacy of violence is inseparable from activism, through which civil society mobilized early on to claim justice for the victims and give meaning to what happened. This recent past continues to be a relevant object of dispute in present-day politics, informing public debate, governmental policies, and recent mobilizations.

Memory activism refers to the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels (Gutman and Wüstenberg, introduction). It encompasses citizens' political activities ranging from high-cost, high-risk protests to commemorative micro-memory projects aimed at shaping and transmitting a particular version of the past; it articulates with diverse spheres, encompassing legal, cultural, artistic, and social performances under the umbrella term of "memory practices." Memory activism intersects differently with demands of justice and truth, sometimes considering them as inseparable – there is no memory without truth and justice – while at other times privileging one of them, especially in political contexts in which, when achievement of justice is hindered, memory or the search for truth appears as the main tools to keep the struggle for recognition of past human rights violations open in the public sphere. The importance of the concept of "memory struggles" (Stern, 2006; Allier-Montaño and Crenzel, 2015; Jelin, 2017) in the continent testifies to this complex understanding. As Villalón puts it, "the politics of 'framing public memories' can be thought of as a long-term dialogue between parties with diverse views and power, all struggling for legitimacy and recognition of their versions of the past and, thus, their expectations for the future" (Villalón, 2017). Even further, as Jelin highlights, there is "an active political struggle not only over the meaning of what took place in the past but over the meaning of memory itself" (Jelin, 2003: p. xviii).

Beyond this complexity, it is possible to identify some particular traits regarding memory activism in Latin America. First, Latin American memory activism is rooted in *the human rights movement* that emerged during the 1970s and consolidated, albeit unevenly, in the following decades. Although some argue that it is better to conceptualize it as a "network" (Sikkink,

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2018), the expression "human rights movement" was – and still is – the way in which actors themselves, first, and political society as a whole, later, refer to the set of organizations and activists that carry out public actions and demands toward the state for the recognition of the violations occurred during the period (Jelin, 2017). This "new actor" was in fact a dense constellation of heterogeneous actors which included "afectados directos" – groups of victims and relatives of victims – domestic nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations, and religious institutions. Essential to the success of the movement was their linkage with the international human rights network, which include the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International, Americas Watch, the various organs of the Catholic Church involved in human rights work, the Ford Foundation, and a variety of European public and private funding agencies (Sikkink, 2018: p. 80), for whom Latin America was of central concern during the period, and who managed to exert pressure and trigger international attention to the executions, torture, and arbitrary imprisonments that were taking place in Latin America. Centrally, international human rights law and norms provided a new conceptual framework, in which the repressive actions of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes were effectively "framed" as violations of basic rights of the citizens that were inviolable, regardless of their political orientation.

A second aspect that can be recognized in the shaping of collective memory in Latin America is *the importance of truth commissions*. Truth commissions, some of which were associated with judicial processes, represented the main way of producing knowledge about the dynamics of political violence in the region. Their reports signalled a break between the present and the past and, following the rationale of "Never again," were based on the hope that memory would prevent the use of violence for the resolution of political conflicts in the future (Allier-Montaño and Crenzel, 2015). The Argentine CONADEP and the report that resulted from this truth commission, entitled *Nunca más* (1984), became a paradigm for other truth commissions in Latin America. Following the Argentinian example, almost all Latin American countries produced reports, such as *Brasil Nunca Mais* (1984), *Nunca Más* (1989) in Uruguay, *Nunca Más* (1990) in Paraguay, *Informe de la Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación* or "Rettig Report" (1991) in Chile, *De la locura a la esperanza: la Guerra de 12 años en El Salvador* (1993), *Guatemala: memoria del silencio* y *Guatemala: nunca más* (1996), *Colombia: Nunca Más: crímenes de lesa humanidad* (2000), and the *Informe final de la Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación* (2003) in Peru. These reports had different impacts: while the Argentine *Nunca más* report became a bestseller with an unprecedented number of copies sold for a publication on such a subject, and definitively shaped a hegemonic narrative of the period, others had little reception and scarce social significance. Nevertheless, in all the cases, the reports represented arenas in which the meaning of the recent past was constructed and disputed. The historical trajectory that lead to the eruption of violence, the role of political parties, religious institutions, companies, or society as a whole, as well as the effects of violence on the population, were all matters of contention. Divergent criteria were adopted in defining victims and perpetrators, for instance, in relation to the decision to include or exclude murdered guerrillas or members of the armed forces from the category of victim. This officialized different notions of what constituted human rights violations in each country (Allier-Montaño and Crenzel, 2015 p. 9).

A third aspect of Latin American memory activism, which can be observed from the adoption of truth commissions – including the fact that almost all shared the same title – is *the circulation of actors, memory practices, and repertoires of actions across the continent*. The armed forces and authoritarian governments shared, within the framework of the Cold War, a common anti-communist discourse in which these forces were "saving" the country from internal enemies represented by guerrilla movements or – by extension – any citizen considered to be subversive.

Activists contested these messianic narratives by denouncing repressive policies as human rights violations. In this process, organizations born in one country served as inspiration for others, as, for instance, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, which became a powerful icon throughout the continent and beyond, an image of the transformation of private suffering into a political claim; symbols travelled from one country to another – for example photographs of the disappeared to represent their absent bodies – and human rights NGOs informally exchanged evidence, strategies, and experiences, but also congregated formally in networks, as shown for instance in the foundation of FEDEFAM (Federación Latinoamericana de Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos), in 1981, which united national organizations of relatives of the disappeared.

Fourth, the outcome of memory activism in different countries is not uniform. The recognition of victims in the public sphere and the achievement of truth and justice has been very different from one country to another, despite the strong commitment of bottom-up citizens' actions or the sustained work of non-governmental organizations. "Successful" initiatives to bring perpetrators to trial were followed by declarations of amnesties or several official efforts to put a premature end to the processes (such as in Argentina, Mexico, and Chile). While truth commissions or similar mechanisms may have evidenced the responsibility of perpetrators, the findings did not necessarily lead to their criminal punishment. In other cases, efforts by committed civil groups to find the truth and promote justice were met with indifference by a society that did not feel implicated in the suffering of victims (Peru).

It is generally difficult to measure the "effectiveness" of activism. As Sikkink asks: what do we mean by a successful or effective human rights movement? (Sikkink, 2018 p. 73). In the short-term, "a successful human rights movement is one that has an immediate impact on the victims of human rights violations – that is, by saving lives, stopping torture, helping to get political prisoners released from prison, limiting police abuse, and so on" (Sikkink, 2018 p. 73). But we have to consider it also from the perspective of medium and long-term objectives. And here the category of "memory" becomes central, since from a long-term perspective, the struggle for memory has helped to destabilize and delegitimize authoritarian governments, as well as contributed to transforming the cultural context and thus democratizing Latin American societies. This is because the claim for memory is a claim for constructing meaning, for understanding how the past influences and shapes the present. Memory relates present inequalities with past oppressions and, as such, its political force lies in mobilizing the past to inform contemporary struggles for a more democratic and inclusive society. Even if activism does not have a visible impact immediately, in the long-term its claims can resurface in a different socio-political conjuncture and draw the attention of the public sphere. Collective memory, considered as a long-term process, has "periods of latency": new events or the emergence of new generational actors can actualize what was dormant.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin America experienced a *second wave* of memory, truth, and justice mobilizations – the first wave having occurred earlier, during transitions into democratic regimes and around the signing of peace accords (Villalón, 2017). This second wave is the result of several factors, among them the emergence of a second generation with new questions and demands, who employs a new vocabulary to address past violence – disruptive, ludic, or celebratory, that aligns with the traits of contemporary digital activism – limited or null achievements of justice processes; and the emergence of new kinds of violence associated with the spread of international narcotic drug trafficking, the rise of gangs, and the competition among non-state armed groups for the control of resources (Villalón, 2017).

This new wave continues to address violence experienced during the second half of the twentieth century, but also adds new layers of complexity to the understanding of the past by incorporating elements of ethnicity, class, and gender, which had previously only played a

secondary role. For example, sexual violence committed against women during the repression of the 1970s now resonates in contemporary feminist activism. Further, the role of society as a whole is scrutinized: in Argentina, what has been termed as the "theory of two demons" represented violence during the dictatorship as the outcome of a fight between two opposing forces, while "innocent" society remained on the margins. Today, however, society's role is emphasized, as is illustrated by the change of terminology in referring to the period as "civil-ecclesiastical -military dictatorship," rather than "military dictatorship."

Moreover, the second wave of memory questions the "new violence" facing Latin American societies today, which is committed by drug-trafficking groups, "maras," and other non-state groups with different degrees of alliance or collusion with the state. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, violence was committed against political dissidents, or against the civilian population that supported, or was accused of supporting, insurgency groups. On the contrary, in the framework of current conflicts, violence is committed against the most vulnerable groups of the population – women, migrants, youth, or specific sectors that denounce violence, such as journalists and human rights defenders. Unlike violence exercised during the second half of the twentieth century, which was mainly politically motivated, that of the twenty-first century is principally motivated by criminal or economic reasons.

Although these new types of violence differ from the repressive terror exercised during the second half of the twentieth century, there are also continuities. Neoliberal economic policies that were implemented during the dictatorships are the basis for inequality and fragility of the social fabric, which fuels criminal violence in the new century. In this sense, neoliberal policies figure prominently in memory activism since the violence perpetrated in these contexts is intertwined with economic policies that reinforce structural inequalities.

Impunity is also a factor that connects both contexts. Contemporary memory activism emphasizes the continuities between the past and the present, between policies implemented in the past and their effect today. An important example of how the past and the present are connected is the case of the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa on 26 September 2014.

Ayotzinapa is relevant, first, because of the massive mobilizations that it triggered in a country considered to be marked by a "lack of memory," with the notable exception of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre (Allier-Montaño and Crenzel, 2015; Allier-Montaño, 2016). Second, the case can be situated at a crossroads of different contexts and temporalities of forms of violence: on the one hand, it is representative of the crisis of disappearances in Mexico in the framework of the "War on Drugs," with more than 100,000 persons who have disappeared, marked by the collusion of state forces and organized crime and multiple patterns of victims, motives, and perpetrators (Karl, 2014; Robledo Silvestre, 2016; Mata Lugo, 2017; Yankelevich, 2017) on the other hand, Guerrero was at the center of state repression during the so-called Dirty War (between the 1960s and 1980s), and is the Mexican state with the largest number of disappearances during that period.

Although the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa is exemplary of the disappearances of the "War on Drugs" period – in that it illustrates collusion between the state and organized crime, a plurality of motives, as well as structural impunity – activism around the case does not seem to address the current situation of disappearances more generally. Rather, it situates Ayotzinapa in a long genealogy of state repression that goes back to the "Dirty War," the Tlatelolco massacre, as well as more recent cases of state violence, such as the repression in Atenco, or the massacres of Aguas Blancas and Tlatlaya. In this sense, it re-actualizes a "latency" of social movements, and challenges the idea that Mexico is a country without memory.

In Argentina today, the emblematic struggle of Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is taken up by the Argentine feminist movement "#Niunamenos" (#NotOneWomanLess).

"NiUnaMenos" recuperates the memory of the women who confronted dictatorial power, a memory of resistance, to fuel present-day struggles. It represents "activism of memory" at the same time as "memory of activism," i.e. a genealogy of struggle that nurtures today's demands.

As these examples show, memory activism in Latin America continues the struggle initiated in the last century, recuperating its repertoires of contention, tactics, and values, and, at the same time, it addresses the complexities of human rights violations in the present, creating new strategies to reveal how the past can help to illuminate the present and imagine a better future.

Note

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