

## Foreword: On Memory and Memorials

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One of the problems facing us in these times, defined by Zygmunt Bauman as Liquid Modernity, is that everything becomes diluted, in a constant, disconcerting flux. Even words, I believe. They either flow or they stagnate, losing their true nature. The word “memory,” for example, runs the risk of becoming a mere label or an empty signifier into which everything fits, so nothing has value. True value, not mere exchange value.

I have consulted many texts to write these few words, for a good book always elicits further reflection and investigation. It will never tell us what or how to think, but instead broadens our horizons of thought and illuminates obscure areas of topics so familiar we tend to pass over them.

This volume, edited by Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh A. Payne, is one such catalyst. Both editors have been analyzing the issue for a long time, as shown by their scholarly work on the legacies of authoritarianism and the anthology entitled *The Art of Truth-Telling about Authoritarian Rule. Accounting for Violence: Marketing Memory in Latin America* represents a change of direction. It is not about remembering or avoiding the past, but about how to keep remembrance alive without losing respect. The various essays point to the razor’s edge we are treading, and to the chasms yawning on either side into which it is very easy to slip. There is a strong pull from those in favor of oblivion at all costs, those who accept the two Argentine laws known as “Due Obedience” and “Full Stop” as well as the pardons. They say we need to clean the slate and start over (*borrón y cuenta nueva*). According to them, nothing happened here; you cannot live in the past. They demand we turn the page.

But when you turn that page the other tendency appears, the chasm on the opposite side: those who seek to profit in one way or another from others’ pain and the morbid curiosity of some audiences. They degrade the word “memory,” misusing it to the point where it loses its meaning.

We would not be able to concentrate on the razor’s edge if we did not

point to these two extremes and give examples of them. At that edge, the recuperation of memory is working to obliterate a word that was imposed on us by state terrorism: *desaparecidos* (the disappeared). First coined in Argentina, the term spread to other countries with authoritarian regimes, and was used to cover the criminals' tracks and make their victims invisible. From the very first marches of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo to the tireless efforts of present-day human rights organizations in Argentina, the goal has always been to restore the victims' identities and their presence in collective memory, and to pursue punishment for the perpetrators, which is essential to the health of society. The Space for Memory Institute (known as IEM in Argentina) leads the recuperation effort today: recuperation of the children of the disappeared, and also of the clandestine spaces where the horror took place.

There has been rigorous debate on the issue, debate that speaks to various tragic circumstances around the world. What to do, for example, with Ground Zero, which is in fact an enormous cemetery? The question echoes one that arose in this southern latitude during the first months of the Kirchner administration: should ESMA, the Navy School of Mechanics, where so many were tortured, be made into a museum? A disturbing question, given the ever latent danger of banalizing evil. The controversy surfaced more recently in Argentina when March 24th, the anniversary of the start of the last, and most ferocious, military dictatorship, in 1976, was declared a national holiday. The decision caused widespread unease: should families be going out for picnics on such a day of mourning? I personally am in favor of the holiday; it is important to pause, to mark the day. That is what it is about, after all: marks, wounds that have turned into scars that recall the military coup. There will always be people who attempt to profit from those wounds, and so it is important to reflect on the paradoxes presented in this book. One of them is still ongoing in my country these days. It was reignited during the inauguration of the Rodolfo Walsh Space at ESMA. Walsh was one of the most emblematic victims of the repression, the author who wrote the Open Letter to the Armed Forces. His daughter Patricia, a Socialist Party congresswoman, was deeply opposed to the inauguration. A place such as ESMA, she said, should only be used for silence and recollection and not for the sound and fury of cultural events. She had expressed her indignation even before it was announced by Hebe de Bonafini that she intended to open a cooking school for low-income women in another part of the complex, dedicated to the Universidad de las Madres.

On the pro-museum side, the recuperation of marks is an important issue. On 28 August 2008, to mention just one case, the newspaper *Página/12* published the story of a man who only recently came to learn the facts about his detention thirty years ago. A team from the IEM, engaged in a meticulous cleaning of the basement of the officers' quarters at ESMA, a place infamously known as the Capuchita (little hood), came across a faint inscription engraved on a water tank. "De Marco-PC," it read. They managed to find the Communist Party member who had written the inscription. Ernesto de Marco, now a taxi driver, had been kidnapped in 1978, and he always thought he had been held at a police station. Only when he recognized his own inscription did he find out the truth about the place where he had been left, naked and tortured, until one day they gave him back his clothes. Not knowing whether he would leave the building alive, he had scratched his name with his belt buckle as a last message that has now returned to him from the past.

This is how we are constructing the ambivalent narrative of memory, or rather the scaffolding to hold it up, which the essays that follow analyze in depth. For my part, if I want to play devil's advocate, I concentrate on one of Jean Baudrillard's latest books, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, in which he speaks yet again of representation and simulacra. But simulacra no longer exist, he says, because nowadays the distance between the real and the imaginary has disappeared. Everything hinges on an Integral Reality (Baudrillard's term), which rests on "the deregulation of the very reality principle." Virtual reality has superseded ordinary reality and we have lost our grip on experience in the process: "Once all transcendence is conjured away, things are no longer anything but what they are and, such as they are, they are unbearable. All illusion is gone from them and they have become immediately and totally real, with no shadow and no commentary." In which case, all memory, all references to the past, become useless, merely one more commodity permitting the freedom of exchange proposed by Adorno.

But if I wish to defend the structure of the bastions of memory (museums, monuments, parks, books, teachings), I turn to Marc Augé and his book *Le temps en ruines* (*Time in Ruins*), in which he proposes returning in various ways to a time when there was "a need to identify at the very least with [one's] own past—even if that meant, as it often has, completely reinventing it." According to Augé we are now in a time of Supermodernity. "Humanity is not in ruins, it is under construction. It still belongs to his-

tory. A history that is frequently tragic, always unequal, but unavoidably shared.” In that case, it is better to keep the memory of the past alive in order, as is often said, not to repeat it.

And so: Liquid Modernity, Integral Reality, Supermodernity. Each of these models is horrifying in a different way. We can only protect ourselves by drawing our own conclusions. That is, by reading books like the one you have in your hands, which are open to controversy and paradox and not closed to dialogue.