

# What We Remember

*The construction of memory  
in military discourse*

MARIANA ACHUGAR

DISCOURSE APPROACHES TO  
POLITICS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE



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# **What We Remember**

The construction of memory in military discourse

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## What We Remember

# *Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture (DAPSAC)*

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## Introduction

This book explores the discursive manifestations of the conflict over how to remember and interpret the military's actions during the last dictatorship in Uruguay (1973–1985). The meaning of these events is still being debated and negotiated in the Uruguayan political arena. Discussion about how to remember a traumatic past is not unique to Uruguay; South Africa, Guatemala and Argentina are countries, which have also struggled with similar issues. What is unique about the Uruguayan case is that even though it is one of the two Latin American countries characterized as a full democracy (The Economist 2007),<sup>1</sup> the military has not admitted any wrong doing and until the 2006 election the government had not created a context in which the judicial system could investigate crimes committed during the dictatorship (Skaar 2007). Until the left wing came to power in 2006, Uruguay had not prosecuted those charged with violations of human rights nor complied with international extradition requests.<sup>2</sup> Uruguay has lagged behind both Argentina and Chile in the prosecution of the military for violations of human rights during the dictatorship period.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The Economist in 2007 surveyed 165 countries and ranked them according to a democracy index that incorporates electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture (Kekic 2007). The other Latin American country that appeared in the top 28 of the list was Costa Rica (which does not have Armed Forces), Argentina was ranked 54th.

2. Uruguay held its first human rights trials in September 2006, when it began the trial of six military officers and two police officials charged with human rights violations during the 1973–1985 military dictatorship. Since that moment several key political and military figures related to the dictatorship have been indicted, including former president Juan María Bordaberry and Gen. Gregorio Alvarez. Under the government of Tabaré Vázquez, Uruguay also complied with international extradition requests –as in the case of extradition to Chile of three military officers wanted for the murder of DINA secret police agent Eugenio Berríos.

3. In Chile there was an amnesty law passed in 1978 by the military regime. The first democratic government after Pinochet left power (Patricio Alwyn) created a commission to investigate the facts that produced a final report, report Rettig. In 1993, retired general Manuel Contreras, director of the DINA during Pinochet's regime, was convicted for the murder of Orlando Letelier (Allende's foreign affairs minister killed in Washington D.C. in 1976). In addition, in 1991, president Patricio Alwyn gave a public apology on behalf of the state to the families of the victims of human rights abuses. The case of Argentina is similar to Chile's in that there was an amnesty law passed by the military in 1983. During the first democratic government, Raúl

During the first three governments after the dictatorship, the amnesty given to the military through the Law of Expiry (*Ley de Caducidad de la Pretensión Punitiva del Estado*) was used to prevent the investigation of the past and the prosecution of those responsible for violations of human rights. It took almost 20 years from the end of the dictatorship for the government to investigate what happened to the disappeared and interpret the law in a way that has permitted the indictment of several emblematic representatives of the dictatorship (e.g. Gen. Goyo Alvarez in 2006).

The Uruguayan model of dealing with the past has been political, as reflected in the passing of amnesty laws, declaring days of national atonement or making monuments to remember the martyrs of both sides. Attempts to deal with the past via the judicial sphere have been stalled until recently. Uruguay is the only democracy where there was a popular vote that ratified an amnesty for the military for violations of human rights (Skaar 2007). The Law of Expiry ratified by this public referendum created a context where the government has the power to decide whether violations of human rights during the dictatorship should be investigated. The issue of how to interpret this law and deal with the responsibility of the state and the military in relation to human rights violations is still contested by those who want further investigations about human rights abuses and demand accountability, as well as by the ones who want to keep things as they are. The military has used this law to argue for the legality of their silence and avoid judicial indictments. On the other hand, those connected to the families of the disappeared, political prisoners, exiles and some of the left consider this a law that justifies impunity and contradicts international law agreements signed by Uruguay. This debate has not been resolved as of 2008. In 2007, a group of human rights organizations, unions and civilians began to collect signatures to have congress annul the Law of Expiry.

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Alfonsín sponsored investigations of crimes committed during the dictatorship (CONADEP) and the justice system tried and convicted military officers responsible for human rights violations. And, more recently the military leadership (Gen. Martín Balza) has publicly recognized in 1995 the illegitimate character of the repression and systematic human rights violations carried out by the dictatorship. On the other hand, the case in Uruguay differs because the amnesty to those responsible for human rights violations during the years of military dictatorship was passed in 1986 during the democratic government and later ratified by public vote in 1989. In addition, there was no official report from the government investigating violations until 2000 with the creation of the Commission for Peace (except see Alvarez 1997). The first military officer trial in Uruguay was in 2006. These actions show a very distinct development at a much slower pace for things to change and come to terms with the past. See Roniger & Sznajder (1999) for comparative information among the Southern Cone, Acuña & Smulovitz (1997) for more information about the Argentinean case and Sutil (1997) for an analysis of the Chilean case.

Since the return to democracy in 1985 until today there has been a tension between the need to remember and the need to forget in order to move on. This tension reveals itself in the numerous debates over the dictatorship period, that continue to fill the political arena. Some of the most important debates over how to remember the period include: what dates to commemorate (February 9, 1973 when the military made a public announcement of their political position or June 27th 1973, when the military dissolved parliament; May 20th day of remembrance of the disappeared or April 14th day of remembrance of those *fallen in the fight against terrorism*); what monuments to build (for the disappeared or for the *victims of terrorism*); as well as if international law or national law should prevail in the resolution of human rights abuse cases. In this context of struggles over how to remember the dictatorship period, I explore the following questions:

1. How does the military construct a discourse about the past that allows it to justify the violation of the national and international laws which it is supposed to protect? In other words, how does the institution reconstruct the dictatorship period as a historical fact?
2. How does the military construct its identity in relation to ethical norms? Said in a different way, how does it present itself in connection to violations of social norms?
3. How is the discourse of the Other represented in the military's discourse? What aspects of the discourse of the Other are contested or questioned? That is to say, how does the dialogue between different social actors involved in this struggle over memory appear in the military's discourse?

From the discourse analytic perspective, the focus of the investigation is on the construction of memory as a discursive practice. This means discourse here is conceived of as a social practice, a particular way of making meaning of experience (Fairclough 1992). The social nature of discourse and meaning making situate this practice in particular communities that operate in particular socio-cultural and political contexts (Lemke 1995b).

By looking at memory as a social and discursive practice, I focus on the dynamic and socio-semiotic aspects of memory. The goal is to identify particular semiotic practices and linguistic patterns deployed in the construction of memory. This allows us to understand the mechanism through which the military constructed/s its memory of a traumatic period, how it naturalizes it, as well as how it responds to challenges from outside groups. The identification of these practices also allows us to look at how the military constructs a particular ideological interpretation of events, since these memories are used to maintain a difference in power between social actors in the Uruguayan political scene. From the discursive perspective we can describe linguistically what is remembered, how it is

remembered, and who remembers it in order to explain how the institution constructs a narrative explaining the past and in the process maintains an institutional identity of itself as a lawful state apparatus.

The case of Uruguay is particularly interesting because of the wealth of documents produced by the military to justify its actions during the dictatorship. In contrast to other military institutions in the Southern Cone, the Uruguayan military have tried to document and explain its actions to the national and international community. According to the Uruguayan historian Aldo Solari (1988):

all of the military in the Southern Cone have justified their actions. The central arguments are the same or almost the same. I believe, however, that there is a need to do a comparative analysis of the justifying texts. It could be the case that the common element, the doctrine of national security, could have made us lose sight of subtle differences that could be important. In that sense there is something unique in the Uruguayan regime that acquires a distinctive intensity. There are two traits closely connected: a) the obsession with self-justification; b) the tremendous intellectual display in that justification. I don't believe that in Chile or Argentina there are documents analogous of the type exemplified by *De la subversión a la paz* [From subversion to peace], *Testimonio de una nación agredida* [Testimony of an assaulted nation], etc. Those are long books that bear witness to that obsession and also to the intellectual effort to express it in a coherent philosophy.

(p. 236)<sup>4</sup>

The existence of this type of text allows us to trace the development of the military's discursive formation about human rights violations from the early 1970s until today, when the topic is still being debated.<sup>5</sup> These texts represent a particular interpretation of the meaning and significance of these events that is influenced not only by the past, but also by the present political situation (Halbwachs 1992). The task of maintaining a collective memory of the dictatorship period for the military institution<sup>6</sup> requires a constant negotiation of the internal needs of the

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4. All translations are mine.

5. In December 2007, the military through its retired officers associations, *Centro Militar* and *Centro de Oficiales Retirados de las FF.AA.*, published a new book giving their version of the past, *Nuestra Verdad: La lucha contra el terrorismo (1960-1980)* [Our truth: the fight against terrorism (1960-1980)]. The authors state that it is their contribution to the current debate among political actors to introduce the voice of the military. According to the publisher the book has been sold out and is going into its fourth edition of a thousand copies each (Muro 2008).

6. It is important to point out that no institution is monolithic and as a result there are competing subgroups within any group. "Accounts of the collective memory of any group or society are usually accounts of the memories of some subset of the group, particularly of those with access to the means of cultural production or whose opinions are more highly valued" (Olick 1999a: 339) This has to be kept in mind when the term *collective memory of the military* is used

institution and the social situation in which it is immersed. Through this shared construction of memory the military maintains its sense of community, it reaffirms its institutional identity and it constructs a shared vision of the role of the institution in the future of the country. The investigation of Uruguayan military discourse of the dictatorship period provides an opportunity to capture the dynamic process of remembering and at the same time helps us understand the current debate over human rights violations.

The book is organized into eight chapters and two appendices (brief historical chronology of the period and sample texts from the corpus). The first chapter provides the theoretical basis for the analysis of memory as a social practice and the relationship between memory and language. The second chapter gives a description and justification of the methodology used in the discourse analysis. This description includes a detailed explanation of the tools used and how the findings are interpreted from a critical perspective. Chapters Three through Five give a chronological analysis of texts from different genres. These analyses include texts produced by the institution as well as by individual officers. Chapter Six provides a contrast between the position of the Armed Forces and the social actors aligned with it (the right), and the position taken by Others (Family of the Disappeared, and Left wing social actors). This contrast allows us to have a better sense of how the struggles for memory play out in the public sphere and the place of Military memory in this debate. Chapter Seven analyzes a speech given by the current Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and looks at its reception by other social actors associated with the institution and the opposition. This chapter provides an opportunity to document the fractures in the dominant military narrative about the past as well as its reception in the political sphere. The last chapter is a conclusion that summarizes the findings and shows how they relate to the questions posed in the introduction.

This analysis of military discourse can help us understand some of the reasons why the construction of memory of the dictatorship period continues to be a topic of discussion and political debate in contemporary Uruguayan society. Through the exploration of the discursive ways in which this powerful group represents past events and participants, we can trace the ideological struggle over how to construct a traumatic past.

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throughout the book. The texts analyzed here come from the dominant voices within the institution, because those are the ones with more impact on the general discussion over how to construct a national memory of the dictatorship period. See Chapter 1.





## CHAPTER 1

# The construction of memory

This first chapter situates the approach to memory and remembering that will be used to analyze the case at hand: the Uruguayan military's collective memory of the dictatorship period. The approach outlined results from an interdisciplinary look at the topic that draws from previous work in a wide range of fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, history and semiotics. In developing this theoretical framework, I focus in particular on the role language has in the process of memory construction and remembering. The goal is to identify the particular discursive practices associated with this social activity, memory construction.

### Remembering and memory

Memory is a central part of the brain's attempt to make sense of experience, and to tell coherent stories about it. These tales are all we have of our pasts, and so they are potent determinants of how we view ourselves and what we do. Yet our stories are built from many different ingredients: snippets of what actually happened, thoughts about what might have happened, and beliefs that guide us as we attempt to remember. Our memories are the fragile but powerful products of what we recall from the past, believe about the present and imagine about the future.

(Schacter 1996: 308)

The process of remembering integrates present, past and future in a single task through which we construct a discourse that allows us to objectivize our experience. Memories are the product of the fusion of diverse elements. The act of remembering and the product of this process are experienced by individuals, meaning that it is individuals who actually remember and have memories, but individual memory is always connected to the social through language.

It [individual memory] is not completely sealed off and isolated. A man often appeals to other's remembrances to evoke his own past. He goes back to reference points determined by society, hence outside himself. Moreover, the individual memory could not function without words and ideas, instruments the individual has not himself invented but appropriated from his milieu.

(Halbwachs 1980: 51)