

Article

Inside ‘State Terrorism’: Bureaucracies and Social Attitudes in Response to Enforced Disappearance of Persons in Argentina

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Abstract

This article examines different social attitudes that members of state bureaucracies established with regard to the system of disappearances under the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) in Argentina. Although there have been significant contributions on the role of the state under the dictatorship in terms of transitional justice approaches, only recently have a number of works shown the grey areas of state officials and the cleavages and nuances that cut across the various levels of state bureaucracy. In this framework, applying a sociological analysis, this article examines a number of administrative records produced during the dictatorship by workers of a morgue and of a public hospital, located in the provinces of Córdoba and Buenos Aires. In these records, the workers documented the existence of practices involved in the different stages of the system of disappearances. The article has four parts. The first section provides an overview of the political and historical context of 1970s Argentina. The second section presents a brief review of the literature on the role of the state under the dictatorship. The third section focuses on a letter by a group of morgue workers from the province of Córdoba addressed to dictator General Jorge Videla demanding proper work gear and a rise in pay in consideration of the hazardous nature of the tasks they were ordered to perform in connection with enforced disappearances. The fourth section examines entries made in the incident books of the nursing service of the Posadas Hospital, located in Haedo, a town in the province of Buenos Aires, which provide evidence that some of the hospital workers were forcibly disappeared. The article concludes with a reflection for both academics and practitioners, suggesting the need to rethink state bureaucracies by questioning how they are represented as monolithic machines and re-examining the relationships between civil society and the state and the responsibilities under regimes that commit human rights abuses.

Keywords: Argentina; disappearances; social attitudes; state bureaucracies

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Introduction

This article examines different social attitudes that members of state bureaucracies adopted towards the system of disappearances under the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) in Argentina. Specifically, it looks at a number of administrative records produced by workers of two government services (a morgue and a public hospital), located in two different provinces of Argentina (Córdoba and Buenos Aires).

I will first examine a letter sent by a group of Córdoba morgue workers in 1980 to then dictator General Jorge Rafael Videla, containing labour demands motivated by the nature of certain tasks these workers were asked to carry out under the system of enforced disappearances. I will then analyse a series of entries made in the incident books kept by the nurses of a hospital in Buenos Aires province, which reveal the repression experienced by that health care facility during the dictatorship and, in particular, the enforced disappearance of some of its workers. In both cases, I complement my documentary analysis with interviews with some of the authors of those documents and with other individuals involved.¹

Although these are only two cases, and we cannot extrapolate from them a general conclusion, the analysis of these administrative records and testimonies contributes to the understanding of the rationale(s) underlying the workings of state bureaucracies under the dictatorship. This goes beyond the case of Argentina and allows for a more in-depth discussion of the complexity and challenges of the workings of state bureaucracies in contexts in which mass and systematic crimes were perpetrated, and it contributes to the debate on individual and collective responsibilities in those scenarios. It takes a sociological approach that views the state, and its agencies, as a scenario of conflicts and disputes, with impersonal rules and personal relationships. This perspective will provide insight into the range of relationships that some of the personnel of state bureaucracies established with the system of disappearances and other repressive practices during that period. It will also help identify the various ideas and feelings that were put into play among such workers with regard to the perpetrators of the crimes and their victims.

The article is divided into four parts. The first section provides an overview of the political and historical context of 1970s Argentina. The second section presents a brief review of the literature on the role of the state under the dictatorship. The third section focuses on a letter by a group of morgue workers from the province of Córdoba addressed to dictator General Jorge Videla demanding proper work gear and a rise in pay in consideration of the hazardous nature of the tasks they were ordered to perform in connection with enforced disappearances. The fourth section examines entries made in the incident books of the nursing service of the Posadas Hospital, located in Haedo, a town in the province of Buenos Aires, which provide evidence that some of the hospital workers were forcibly disappeared. The article concludes with a reflection for both academics and practitioners, suggesting the

1 The interviews with morgue workers are part of a series of 12 interviews conducted in 2003 in connection with human rights violations in the province of Córdoba, during the research for my doctoral dissertation on the history of the *Nunca Más* ('Never Again') report. The interviews with the Posadas Hospital workers are part of a series of 18 interviews conducted from 2014 to 2016 in the framework of a research study financed by the National Scientific Research Council (CONICET) on the crimes committed in that hospital during the military dictatorship. The interviewees gave me their permission to use their names when citing the interviews.

need to rethink state bureaucracies by questioning how they are represented as monolithic machines and re-examining the relationships between civil society and the state and the responsibilities under regimes that commit human rights abuses.

Enforced disappearances as an emblematic symbol of repression in Argentina

On 24 March 1976 a military junta staged a coup d'état in Argentina. Military coups and political violence were not new to the country as Argentina had a long and intense history of coups and political violence dating back to 1930, when the constitutional government of Hipólito Yrigoyen was overthrown. However, the last military dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1983, systematically adopted an unprecedented form of political crime—enforced disappearance—that embodied a deliberate decision on the part of the state to exterminate dissenters.

The crime of enforced disappearance was carried out through clandestine operations, thus adding a new element of secrecy to politically motivated murders. This characteristic also set Argentina's dictatorship apart from the other regimes that spread across Latin America's Southern Cone in the 1970s. While all the dictatorships of the region were inspired by the National Security Doctrine, only Argentina's dictatorship adopted the practice of enforced disappearance of persons as its predominant form of repression. The number of disappeared persons recorded by the National Human Rights Secretariat (*Secretaría de Derechos Humanos de la Nación*) as of 2016 stood at 7,140, with another 1,336 individuals summarily executed by the dictatorship.² In contrast, other dictatorships of the Southern Cone resorted predominantly to forms of repression that were public. In Chile disappearances accounted for only one third of the 3,200 people murdered following the 1973 coup (see *Comisión Asesora Presidencial para la Calificación de Detenidos Desaparecidos, Ejecutados Políticos y Víctimas de Prisión Política y Tortura 2012*), and in Brazil there were 243 cases of disappearances (see *Comissão Nacional da Verdade 2014*). Similarly, in Uruguay, where the predominant form of repression was prolonged political imprisonment, there were 41 cases of disappearances (see *Secretaría de Derechos Humanos para el Pasado Reciente de Presidencia de la República 2015*). (On the legacy of human rights abuses in the region, see *Roniger and Sznajder (1999)*.)

The system of enforced disappearance involved the detention or abduction of individuals by military or police officers who took them to clandestine detention centres, generally located in military or police facilities, where they were held illegally and tortured. Most victims were murdered, and their bodies were then buried in unmarked graves, incinerated, or thrown into the sea. Furthermore, their property was looted, and many women who gave birth in captivity had their babies taken away by their captors, who registered them as their own. Throughout the commission of the crimes, the state denied any responsibility in them. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, CONADEP*) created by President Raúl Alfonsín on 15 December 1983, shortly after the restoration of democracy, was mandated with investigating

2 See Registro Unificado de Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado, <http://datos.jus.gob.ar/dataset/registro-unificado-de-victimas-del-terrorismo-de-estado-ruvte/archivo/c6b674bc-e178-41f3-81f5-0f10038e1688> (referenced 29 May 2018).

the fate of the disappeared (National Executive Decree No. 187 of 15 December 1983, *Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina*, 19 December 1983: 2). It prepared a report, known as *Nunca Más* ('Never Again'), which revealed the magnitude of the state's role in the implementation and execution of the system of disappearances. When it was first issued in November 1984 the report quickly became a bestseller, in what was an unprecedented phenomenon for works on the subject.³

The role of the state under the dictatorship

The concept of 'state terrorism' and the denunciation of human rights violations

During the 1970s, as military dictatorships and autocracies that systematically violated the human rights of their citizens spread across many parts of the world, state terrorism became a topic of interest. While many researchers reserve the term 'terrorist' for non-state actors (Sluka 2000), in the late 1970s Herman and Chomsky introduced the concept of state terrorism to understand political violence within the sphere of influence of the United States in the context of the cold war, particularly in Latin America (Chomsky and Herman 1979). These authors defined state terrorism as the exercise of terror to protect capitalist interests, and accused the United States of promoting these regimes in collaboration with local elites. Under the premise that all conflicts are a threat to security and part of a subversive strategy, state terrorism involves the use of legal and illegal methods to persecute social and political movements and the use of terror to intimidate civil society as a whole. The concept of state terrorism was appropriated by transnational human rights networks, which, as studied by Sikkink, expanded globally over this period, especially in Latin America (Sikkink 1996). As military dictatorships spread across Latin America these networks, which often included organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Right Watch, took up the concept of state terrorism to denounce the systematic use of torture, summary executions, enforced disappearances, and the lack of legal instances that victims could appeal to for protection and redress. In that context, these networks provided those making denunciations, both inside the country and in exile, with standardized models for gathering reports of abuses, as well as concepts with which to examine them (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

In the case of Argentina, state terrorism emerged as a concept after the coup, when the military control under which the country found itself meant that there were no legal or political constraints on repression and the practice of enforced disappearances became systematic. The disappearances were denounced by human rights organizations in the country and by political exiles abroad. The most thorough and accurate account was published in 1977 by a group of political exiles, the Argentine Human Rights Commission (Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos, CADHU), under the title *Argentina: Proceso al Genocidio* ('Argentina: Genocide on Trial'). In this report, state terrorism was understood as a repressive system that indiscriminately targeted civil society, and the practice of

3 By 2016, the *Nunca Más* report had sold 650,000 copies, 45,000 of which were translations into different languages published outside Argentina. These are approximate figures, as they were calculated on the basis of information provided by the report's publishers, Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires (EUDEBA), and Cámara Argentina del Libro, neither of which have accurate records of the number of copies distributed.

enforced disappearance as a systematic policy implemented by the armed forces. However, the report was not made available in Argentina (CADHU 1977).

The first official use of state terrorism as a concept can be found in the report issued in 1980 by the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) following its 1979 fact-finding mission to the country in response to hundreds of complaints of disappearance (IACHR 1980). In the report, the IACHR documented 5,580 communications it had received relating to disappearances, and it described the impunity with which the perpetrators acted, the transporting of victims to 'different military establishments' where they were tortured, and the subsequent official refusal to give information to the families. In its conclusions, it attributed the responsibility for the disappearances to a decision 'adopted at the highest level of the Armed Forces' (ibid: 13–18, 148–52).

In 1983, after the reinstatement of democracy, state terrorism became the prevailing term employed to describe the Argentine dictatorship's use of violence. That year, Eduardo Luis Duhalde, a lawyer who had a long and outstanding track record defending political prisoners and was a leading CADHU member, published *El Estado Terrorista Argentino* ('The Argentine Terrorist State').⁴ Duhalde argued that under the dictatorship the state was organized as an undivided bureaucratic monolith that exercised 'absolute control over the government and the state's coercive apparatus' and which, imbued with the National Security Doctrine, was at the service of the 'war against subversion' (Duhalde 1983: 54).

This characterization acquired official status with its inclusion in the prologue to the *Nunca Más* report issued by CONADEP in 1984. In *Nunca Más*, the disappearances were presented as a product of state terrorism, a terrorism deployed by a dictatorial state that targeted life with deep and pervasive effects. Society was portrayed either as the potential victim of the terrorist state, which aimed its violence at 'anyone, however innocent', or as an innocent bystander, whose justification, if any, of the horror was explained by the situation of widespread and random repression (CONADEP 1984: 9).

Nunca Más became the canonical interpretation of the political violence and repression of that period in Argentine history, and it contributed to disseminating the concept of state terrorism in the country in a number of ways: as a bestseller; as evidence used by the prosecution in the 1985 trial of the military juntas that governed the country during the dictatorship; and as a meaningful vehicle for conveying knowledge of the repression to younger generations (Crenzel 2011).

State terrorism revisited

The concept of state terrorism became predominant in Argentina in the denunciations of the dictatorship and it gained currency in the context of the transition from dictatorship to democracy (McAllister 2015). Twenty years after the restoration of democracy there was a conceptual shift in the prevailing understanding of the state and the relations between civil society and the exercise of terror under the dictatorship. During the Néstor Kirchner administration (2003–2007), the Executive Branch and Congress reopened trials in cases of human rights abuses. These trials had been suspended as a result of the adoption of certain

4 A Peronist left-wing activist, Duhalde was forced to leave the country in 1977 and lived in exile in Madrid, Spain, where he denounced the dictatorship's crimes. In 2003 he was appointed National Human Rights Secretary and occupied that position until his death in April 2012.

laws after the military juntas trial which prevented further trials from moving forward.⁵ In this new political scenario, the administration postulated state terrorism serving the dictatorship as a rational instrument employed by a privileged sector of society to further its interests and to attain its material goals. In this perspective the common 'we' proposed by *Nunca Más* was displaced by an image of a society divided between complicity and resistance to the dictatorship. At this point the judiciary started to investigate the role of businesspersons and corporations (including Carlos Blaquier, owner of the sugar and paper company Ledesma, and Marcos Levín, owner of the transportation company La Veloz del Norte), bringing them to trial.

At the same time, the involvement of different social groups in the practice of political violence and the responsibilities of a range of civil society and political actors in the repression became a subject of study by academics (Lvovich 2010; Sheinin 2012; Bohoslavsky and Verbitsky 2015; Bohoslavsky 2015). The state and its administrative bodies were no longer seen as mere instruments of repression and became the focus of new studies. A number of studies revealed grey areas and ambiguities in the actions of state officers and agents. Additionally, these studies revealed cleavages and nuances in public bodies at all levels of state bureaucracy, including hospitals, courts, maternity wards, civil registries, morgues, and cemeteries, during the military dictatorship, specifically in connection with the practices involved in the system of enforced disappearance of persons (Visacovsky 2002; Tiscornia 2004; Sarrabayrouse Oliveira 2011; Villalta 2012). These new studies were echoed in new international contributions that discussed Arendt's analysis of totalitarian rule, understood as a bureaucratic apparatus that wields an absolute power over its victims (Arendt 1963, 1973). In this way, they posited that these state bodies were characterized by (1) their complexity, (2) the different uses that their members made of their written regulations, and (3) the combination of unwritten codes and flexible chains of command that stimulate military officers to compete among themselves for recognition from their superiors and various kinds of benefits. In other words, they cannot be analysed adequately through one-directional models with top-to-bottom type hierarchies in which the prevailing power relations are exclusively between active superiors and passive subordinates whose role is merely to receive orders from above and mechanically carry them out (Breton and Wintrobe 1986; Blass 1999; Lozowick 2002). This called for a more complex understanding of the 'administrative bureaucracy of evil'.

Simultaneously, there was a surge in studies that examined the relationships between civil societies and totalitarian regimes, stressing the consensus on which the latter rested and the active involvement of 'ordinary people' in the commission of such crimes (Browning 1992; Akhavan 1996; Gross 2001; Power 2001; Fletcher 2005; and Gellately 2009).

Under this new framework for understanding this matter, I examine a number of administrative records produced during the military dictatorship by workers of two government services (a morgue and a public hospital), located in two different provinces of Argentina

5 In December 1986 Congress passed the Full Stop Act, which stipulated a term of 60 days for filing criminal actions against crimes committed during the dictatorship, after which term all causes of action would be extinguished. In May 1987, it passed the Due Obedience Act, which considered that all acts committed by subordinate officers, except those connected with the abduction of children and the misappropriation of property, had been carried out by superior orders and under coercion, thus making them not responsible.

(Córdoba and Buenos Aires). In these records, government workers described and documented, for various reasons, the existence of practices that were part of the different stages or moments of the system of enforced disappearance of persons.

I take a sociological approach to examine certain actors and their actions and agency within different state bureaucracies with respect to enforced disappearance, which was the iconic form of violence of the last dictatorship. I argue that ideas, values, and feelings played a significant role in the behaviours of these actors and in their responses to situations of extreme violence. Examining them opens up the possibility of exploring the territory of active participation of several sectors of civil society, including within the apparatus of the state, which was eclipsed by the notion of an omnipresent and homogeneous state. In sum, these cases offer an opportunity for analysing the relationships among various social groups in Argentina with respect to the unique form of violence that impacted the country in the 1970s.

A letter to General Videla

CONADEP enabled the production of a body of testimonies of state crimes that was larger and more diverse than that collected under the dictatorship, as thousands of reports were filed for the first time during the evidence-gathering work by the Commission.⁶ Most reports came from relatives of disappeared persons and provided information on the abductions, the perpetrators, and the efforts made by family and friends to appeal to judicial, police, and military authorities to find their loved ones. Most importantly, CONADEP documented testimonies by survivors of disappearance operations. As part of its work, the Commission gathered a new set of testimonies from other witnesses to the disappearances. These witnesses included neighbours who had seen the abductions; people who lived near clandestine centres and could confirm the presence of military or police personnel in them; doctors and nurses who had assisted disappeared pregnant women; and cemetery workers who confirmed the existence of unnamed graves and secret burials.

Most prominent among these witnesses was a group of morgue employees from the province of Córdoba, who came forward with a letter they had sent on 30 June 1980 to the then de facto president, General Jorge Rafael Videla, demanding better pay, and specifically requesting that Videla take steps to provide them with suitable gear for their day-to-day tasks and to raise their salaries to compensate for what they described as unsanitary working conditions. To reinforce their demands, the workers had included an account of how they had received dozens of corpses of ‘subversive elements’ showing evident signs of violence, and how they had been instructed to secretly bury them. According to CONADEP this was ‘one of the most significant pieces of evidence’ obtained by the Commission, as it confirmed that Videla was fully aware of such practices.⁷ Their demands for better salaries and improved working conditions began five years earlier under the constitutional government of María Estela Martínez de Perón. The workers had taken this complaint through a number of intricate administrative paths, which were explained in detailed in the letter, and had been met with either silence or threats from their superiors.

They were also concerned over the inquiries made by relatives and friends of the victims, who came to the morgue in the hope of finding their missing loved ones. The workers did not

6 See report of Graciela Fernández Meijide, secretary of the Commission, to the Commission’s plenary meeting, in CONADEP Archive, minutes 19, 10 April 1984: 71.

7 For the letter from the morgue workers, see *Clarín* (1984: 8).

know how to respond to such requests for information. In the letter, they said they had been reassured by the words of Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Figueroa, an acting military judge who had visited the morgue and, as they informed Videla, 'was the only authority to ever give us any instructions as to how we were to proceed with the relatives and friends of the bodies of subversive elements, because, as there was nothing (and there is still nothing) stipulated, we often found ourselves in a dilemma when the families demanded that we let them recognize the bodies. [Figueroa] put our minds at ease so that we could carry out our tasks correctly' (*Trabajadores de la Morgue* 1980: 3). The absence of written instructions or orders demonstrates the irregular nature of these procedures and at the same time the intention to leave no records of the criminal practices. At the same time, the peace of mind felt by the morgue workers after receiving instructions from Figueroa reveals on the one hand that the power of words stems not from words themselves but from the institutions that legitimize them (Bourdieu 2001: 11–39). It also illustrates the seemingly apathetic attitude of the morgue workers toward the 'bodies of subversive elements' and their failure to empathize with the relatives of the disappeared and their anguished search for their loved ones.

In the letter the morgue workers also gave a detailed account of the operation that followed an extraordinary order issued by the Superior Court of Justice of Córdoba, whereby it was 'resolved that all the bodies that were in storage would be buried at night'. This operation was conducted on 15 December 1976, beginning at 6 p.m. According to the morgue workers, both Captain Muller, chief of the Sanitation Department of the Municipality of Córdoba, and the Fire Department of the Córdoba Police were called in for the task and, upon seeing the state of decomposition of the bodies stored in the morgue, they both refused to participate in the operation. The bodies were finally transported by the morgue workers themselves six hours later, at midnight, in trucks supplied by the province's Ministry of Social Welfare. The orders to bury the bodies in the San Vicente cemetery had been signed by Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Figueroa in his capacity as military judge on 24 August, 19 October, and 14 December.

The workers sought to justify their labour demands by providing a precise and detailed account of the operation:

It is impossible, Mr. President, to properly convey an accurate image of what we experienced when we opened the doors to the rooms where the bodies were stored, as some of them had been deposited there for over 30 days without any refrigeration whatsoever; we were met by a swarm of flies and the floor was covered by a thick layer of larvae and maggots, over ten centimetres deep, which we had to shovel up and remove in buckets. Our work clothes consisted only of pants, a tunic, boots, and, for some of us, gloves . . . Despite all of this, we put up no objections and did as we were ordered; it should be noted that most of these bodies belonged to subversive criminals. We then started out for the San Vicente cemetery, with morgue workers and Technical Autopsy Assistants riding in the back of the truck with the bodies and guarded by two units of the Province Police, which were assigned to an operation mounted specifically for that purpose. The spectacle at the cemetery was indescribable; the police units illuminated the mass grave into which we dropped the bodies identified by numbers and with the pillars of the nearby wall as reference point; from behind that wall and even from the rooftops the people who lived around the cemetery watched us as we performed our macabre task.

This passage of the letter was transcribed in the *Nunca Más* report (CONADEP 1984: 244).

According to the morgue workers' account, the bodies were interred at night, with support from the police and the Third Army Corps, under the command of Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, in

mass and individual graves at the San Vicente cemetery. The corpses had evident signs of torture, numerous gunshot wounds, and marks on their hands and feet indicating that they had been tied up, and they were delivered with the express order that no autopsies be performed. (*Trabajadores de la Morgue* 1980: 1)

They concluded their letter by appealing to Videla, as ‘Supreme Authority of the Nation, to consider, investigate, and examine our case, as it is not, and has never been, in our spirit to take any action that will affect the normal performance of our work, being as most of us are heads of honest and Christian households who believe in the justice of God and man’, further noting that ‘if some workers have not signed this letter it is for fear of being penalized by our superiors’. This clarification was made because while the letter was submitted indicating the positions of six morgue employees—Lisandro Maurici (Chief Technical Autopsy Assistant Officer); Francisco Rubén Bossio (Technical Autopsy Assistant Officer); Orencio Fontaine (Morgue Officer); Enrique Zavalía (Senior Morgue Clerk); Alfredo Svoboda (Deputy Morgue Assistant); and José Caro (Deputy Morgue Aid)—it was only signed by four (Bossio, Zavalía, Svoboda, and Caro).

The importance of the morgue workers’ letter is reinforced by the fact that in February 1984 they were called to testify before CONADEP, and in the course of their testimony they produced a copy of the letter. Their oral testimony coupled with the letter provided concrete evidence of what had happened at the judicial morgue and the San Vicente cemetery. More importantly, this evidence implicated Videla in these heinous acts.

What is interesting to highlight here, however, is not the obvious legal responsibility of Videla, the colonel, the captain, or the firemen and policemen involved, but the ideas and feelings expressed in the morgue workers’ letter towards the *de facto* president, towards the military commander who instructed them on how to respond to requests from ‘relatives and friends’, and towards the victims, whom they referred to as ‘the bodies of subversive criminals’.

On the one hand, the morgue workers appealed to Videla as President of the nation, the last one they could turn to after pressing their case at every other level of the bureaucratic apparatus. But they also saw him as embodying the satisfaction of their demands. The acknowledgement they seek falls within a universe that does not go beyond their immediate corporate interests—a salary rise and the recognition of the hazardousness of their tasks—and they see their demands as righteous despite the nature of the situation in which they participate, even when faced with the distraught relatives of the victims. The bodies and the desperate searches serve as mediators for their demands and justification for their appeals to authority (Crenzel 2005).

On the other hand, the military commander emerges as the authority that solves an immediate urgent need, namely how to respond to the demands of individuals who came looking for their murdered relatives. The instructions they receive are seen as satisfying their emotional and rational need to avoid taking responsibility for covering up a crime. Lastly, the victims and their relatives are objectified. To the workers the victims are bodies—almost objects—that are picked up, transported, and deposited, and whose decomposition is only described by them in order to support their labour demands. And the feelings of the despairing relatives seeking to learn the fate of their loved ones are viewed as an irritating imposition that is resolved by the instructions of the military commander. In their letter, the morgue workers therefore display a hierarchy of social ties, prioritizing some over others. The objectification of the victims is illustrated by one of the morgue workers, José

Caro, in an interview in which he recalled: 'Sometimes, just out of curiosity, and not because anybody asked us to, we would count the number of gunshot wounds on the bodies we received. One time we counted more than 70' (interview conducted by the author with José Caro, 25 October 2003, and testimony by Caro in *Sr. Presidente*, documentary directed by Liliana Arraya and Eugenia Monti, 2007).

Thus, the letter from the morgue workers differs from most of the testimonies that were made public in printed news media and on television and which gained official status through their inclusion in CONADEP's *Nunca Más* report or through their certification as legal evidence in 1985 in the trial of the military juntas. Those testimonies highlighted the emotional and cognitive experiences of the wounded subjectivities of the relatives of the disappeared and of the survivors of the system of disappearances. They constructed a humanitarian narrative that, through a realistic account that described in detail the victims' bodily suffering, sought to build a bridge of empathy between the victims and the public, based on their shared humanity (Laqueur 1989). Even as it reproduces part of the letter sent by the Córdoba morgue workers to General Videla in 1980, the *Nunca Más* report reinforces that humanitarian narrative, as it makes no mention of how these workers acted in the face of what they saw, or how they interpreted it at the time of their involvement. *Nunca Más* includes that portion of the letter because the workers' account of their participation in clandestine burials provided proof that Videla knew what was happening. But the report omits the fact that the morgue workers described their involvement to support their demands for a pay rise. Thus, the normalization and instrumental use of the horror by these workers is eclipsed in *Nunca Más* (CONADEP 1984: 244–5).

In this way, testimonies from members of civil society support the humanitarian narrative of the victims, constructing a 'we', a community of citizens that took no part in the exercise of violence or in state terror. It is on this projected society—innocent of all forms of terrorism—that the country's democratic hopes for the future are pinned (Crenzel 2011). As Baer and Sznajder argued, 'traumatic narratives of victimizations that ignore politics and history, in other words, conflict associated with memory, establish a relationship between opponents who share significant cultural references' (Baer and Sznajder 2015: 344). The construction of the 'we' in *Nunca Más* was in fact part of a policy of memory based on a certain legal paradigm, under which criminal accountability was only pursued in the case of the military juntas that ruled the country during the dictatorship, and any responsibilities—moral, political, and even criminal—that civil society and political actors may have had in the crimes were ignored. Civil society was portrayed as a victim of the crimes. Thus, the report does not interrogate its readers regarding their responsibilities.

Hence, the cemetery letter defies the common understanding in the country that associates memory only with individual narratives and subjectivities of suffering (Radstone 2007: 21). In the context of transition to democracy, CONADEP's narrative strategy was intended to prove the responsibility of the military juntas, and not to analyse wider responsibilities of civil society. This strategy was oriented to reinforce the dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship.

In the letter, the appeal to empathy takes on a different meaning. The morgue workers appealed to Videla's empathy by focusing on the values exalted by the rhetoric of the dictatorship, namely, Christian faith and morality, the duty of following orders issued by an authority, and a work ethic based on discipline. In that context, bodies are merely elements and, therefore, serve as an instrumental device to make the dictator empathize with their demands.

In fact, several years later these workers helped identify the mass grave in the San Vicente cemetery where they had buried the bodies mentioned in the letter (interview conducted by the author with Darío Olmo, a member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF), Córdoba, October 2003). In an interview conducted by the author, one of the morgue workers, Rubén Bossio, even claimed they deserved compensation for that contribution, just as the ‘relatives of the lefties’ had been compensated, thus equating—in a sort of score-keeping of pain and injustices—the abuses suffered by the disappearance victims with the poor working conditions they experienced (interview conducted by the author with R. Bossio, 24 October 2003).⁸ Similarly, Alfredo Svoboda, another morgue worker, recalls: ‘When we asked to be classified [as workers who performed hazardous tasks] they responded by firing us. And who stood up for us? Nobody. We were left out in the street. Everyone goes on about human rights, but what about our human rights?’ (interview conducted by the author with A. Svoboda, 25 October 2003).

The workers’ failure to empathize with the victims and their detached attitude with respect to their fate are combined with the lack of fear they felt of those who murdered the victims and caused all that pain. When some of the workers do show fear (by not signing the letter to Videla although they allowed their names to be included), it is out of concern that their immediate superiors will object to their going over their heads by bringing a labour demand directly to the President, and not because they are afraid of the dictator’s reaction. The morgue workers’ recourse to the top state authority, personified by Videla, is limited to their petitioning him because they see him as their last chance to succeed in their demand to have their service valued and their working conditions acknowledged.

Was their attitude towards the violence inflicted on the ‘bodies of subversive elements’ the result of an over-adaptation to the crude manifestations of that violence, which they witnessed daily, and of their desire to please their superiors in the hope of obtaining the acknowledgement they thought they deserved? That does not appear to have been the case, as they went beyond their immediate superiors to address the highest state authority, having first turned to everywhere else, from the authorities directly above them to the provincial government. Moreover, the drawn-out administrative process that had them unsuccessfully pressing their demands at all levels does not appear to have been triggered by an immediate subjective desire to rapidly suppress the horror they might have felt at the violence by normalizing that violence, or by a strategy to adapt to the official discourse in order to protect their own lives as witnesses of the practices of the system of state crimes. Instead, they appear to have been merely involved in a lengthy labour struggle—their demands originated in 1975 and the letter was sent to Videla in 1980—in which they pushed forward unfazed despite being repeatedly ignored or turned down. Another interpretation could be that their reaction to extreme violence was the result of the very nature of their job, which involves working with death on a daily basis. But this hypothesis is refuted by their own emphasis on the exceptionality of the events in which they participated, an exceptionality that they use as a way of justifying their demands.

It could be said that the letter expresses an awareness that does not go beyond the corporate interests of the morgue workers. Their labour claims are not altered despite the events they are narrating. They use their involvement in such events instrumentally to

8 On the identification of the mass grave, see *El Último Confín*, documentary directed by Pablo Ratto, 2006.

support their demands. There is no feeling of shared humanity with the victims that stirs their compassion when faced with the bodies, bodies which they manipulate in two senses: in the concrete task of transporting and burying them, and as a device to appeal to the dictator's goodwill. Moreover, this way of characterizing the victims also reproduces the objectification that already existed in the discourse of the dictatorship.

A nursing service in an army occupied hospital

In 1946, the emergence of the Peronist movement put workers at the centre of the country's political life. Driven by the implementation of a model of import substitution and domestic market growth, under an authoritarian populist project, it led a process of upward social mobility and expansion of workers' and women's rights. In 1955, Juan Perón was ousted by a coup, triggering an escalation of political violence and polarization. The Posadas Hospital, located in the town of Haedo, in the province of Buenos Aires, was built in the 1950s during the first government of Juan Perón and until 1972 its services included conducting medical research to provide health care for patients with chronic lung disease and tuberculosis. In 1969, social protests were an indication of the emergence of a mass popular movement, in which class-based segments within the labour movement grew stronger and guerrilla organizations were formed, and the Posadas Hospital, like the rest of the country, was affected by the country's political radicalization. In 1973, under the government of Héctor Cámpora, a member of the Peronist Left, the hospital incorporated into its residency programme a group of young doctors who were highly devoted to their profession and committed to public health care and providing access for all.

On 14 June 1973 the hospital was occupied by doctors, technical staff, and general service personnel who wanted to implement an 'open doors' health centre that would offer services to everyone in the community, in contrast to the specialized health centre model that had operated in this facility up to that time (Barousse 1997: 5). They also called for the resignation of the hospital's director, who had been appointed by the outgoing military dictatorship. This demand was granted on 10 July 1973, after major protests (Eggers-Brass 2009). According to a report from the Intelligence Division of the Buenos Aires Province Police (Dirección de Inteligencia de la Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, DIPBA), now filed in the archives of the Buenos Aires Provincial Commission for Memory, people from the shanty town neighbouring the hospital also participated in the occupation (Batallón de Inteligencia 601 1976).

Over the following months the hospital's activities expanded and intensified. More beds were added and new medical services were offered (Juzgado Nacional en lo Criminal y Correccional Federal N^o. 3, *Causa Hospital Posadas*, 2007: 31). At the same time, a close relationship between the staff and the people of the surrounding neighbourhoods was forged through the hospital's Association of Professionals and the State Workers' Union, which represented a significant proportion of the workers. Located in what was at the time a heavily industrialized district, during this period the Posadas Hospital provided a meeting place for many trade unions from the numerous factories in the area (Instituto Histórico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires 2002). Perón began his term as President on 12 October 1973, amid great expectations among the youth and leftist sectors of the Peronist movement. Their hopes, however, were dashed when Perón passed a number of repressive laws and decrees against guerrilla groups. In 1974 the Peronist Left was removed from the hospital's management. The newly appointed director, Dr Arturo Pimentel, took office protected by

armed guards. This was followed by an escalation of repression that culminated on 28 March 1976—four days after the coup—with military troops occupying the hospital. The operation was led by General Reynaldo Bignone, who was the military junta delegate in the Ministry of Social Welfare and would later rule the country as de facto president from June 1982 until December 1983. One hundred soldiers were deployed for the operation, backed by tanks, armoured cars, helicopters, and members of the Buenos Aires Province Police and the Air Force (*Juzgado Nacional en lo Criminal y Correccional Federal N° 3, Bignone, Reynaldo Benito Antonio y otros sobre privación ilegal de la libertad, 2007*).

The military conducted searches and stationed officers at the entrance of the hospital with a list of all the workers, who had to wait in line while the officers checked the list and determined who was to be arrested. In all, over 50 workers were detained and taken to different clandestine detention centres or to prisons where they were held for months without charges being filed, while their homes were raided and their families tortured (*Juzgado Nacional en lo Criminal y Correccional Federal N° 3, Causa Hospital Posadas, 2007: 189*). The searches and detentions were not limited to the hospital and extended to the surrounding neighbourhoods (*Canali and Rametta 2008*).

After the coup, on 14 April 1976, Medical Colonel (Retired) Julio R. Estévez was appointed to the position of hospital director. With the collaboration of a group of workers who had been removed from the hospital in 1973 during the Cámpora administration (*Bertoia 2013: 73–4, 96*), Estévez hired a group of policemen (both retired and active), who the hospital personnel referred to as the ‘Swat’. This group spread terror throughout the hospital, where a clandestine detention centre was set up in a small building that was located on the premises and had originally been built as living quarters for the director but was later used for sessions with psychiatric patients, before it was turned into a holding place for individuals who had been forcibly disappeared (*Juzgado Nacional en lo Criminal y Correccional Federal N° 3, Bignone, Reynaldo Benito Antonio y otros sobre privación ilegal de la libertad, 2007*).

Gladys Cuervo, a nurse at the hospital, was one of the workers who was abducted and held as a disappeared person in a clandestine detention centre. Surprisingly, her disappearance was documented in a number of administrative records produced by different authorities and employees. First, the registry kept by the Public Health Secretariat of the Ministry of Social Welfare contains a file drawn up during the dictatorship (case no. 2020-2146/77-0) labelled ‘Disappearance of Agent Gladys Cuervo and Others’. This case file was opened on 10 January 1977, as a result of a communication (no. 23/77) issued by the head of the hospital, Estévez, and addressed to the National Director of Health Facilities, informing him that members of the hospital’s personnel ‘have disappeared from their homes and work places, presumably detained or kidnapped’, and thus requesting ‘instructions on how to proceed with respect to their possible dismissal, preventive suspension, and any uncollected wages that may be due to them’. In his communication, Estévez noted that the ‘date of detention or abduction’ of nurse Gladys Cuervo was 25 November 1976.

The Personnel Department of the State Secretariat of Public Health asked Estévez to clarify the reasons for the absence of these individuals and also to include the ‘version given by each of the relatives who reported the alleged detention or disappearance of the worker’, and to state whether there had been any ‘police and/or judicial involvement’ in the disappearances. A month later, via a communication dated 9 February 1977, Estévez reported to the Head of the Personnel Office of the Secretariat of Public Health that ‘Gladys Cuervo and Rubén Galluci were released on 20 January 1977 and 25 January 1977, according to

concrete accounts'. On 2 November 1977 the hospital's acting assistant director, Juan Antonio Costa, again indicated in writing that 'according to accounts' Gladys Cuervo 'was released on 21 January 1977'. The Legal Department decided to dismiss the two detained workers on 9 December 1977, due to the 'long time elapsed since the disappearance of the workers' and the 'outcome of the steps taken'. On 21 November 1978, by resolution 3871/78, the State Secretary of Public Health, Rear Admiral Manuel Campo, ordered the dismissal of Gladys Cuervo and others. In this way, the disappearance of a nurse and other workers and their subsequent release were recorded in public documents by several high-ranking administrative officials.

How can this attitude adopted by members of the armed forces be understood in a context marked by the government's intention to deny the existence of the disappeared and claim no knowledge of their fate? These officials were able to engage openly in a bureaucratic exchange regarding the administrative fate of the disappeared employees because of the situation of prevailing impunity. Cuervo and other hospital workers were dismissed despite the fact that their abductions were documented in official records. Most surprising, complicity with illegal repression, which went against every rule, was combined with an attempt to comply with administrative procedures.

Gladys Cuervo's detention on 25 November 1976 is also mentioned in the incident book of the hospital's nursing service (which in administrative jargon was called a 'report'), where the supervising nurses recorded anything out of the ordinary that occurred during their shifts.

On pages 194 and 195 of book number 13, Lidia Hajewski, Chief of the Nurses Department, wrote: 'They've taken Gladys Cuervo'. According to Hajewski, in the testimony she gave to CONADEP in 1984 and which was cited in 2007 by the Morón Federal Court of First Instance in Criminal and Correctional Matters (the first court to thoroughly investigate the human rights abuses perpetrated at the Posadas Hospital), she was informed by a fellow nurse that Cuervo had been asked to report to the hospital director's office. As Hajewski believed that 'something unusual [always] happened' in the director's office, she had asked all the nurses to inform her whenever anybody was called in to see the director. So, 'although no one was allowed in, because it was a restricted area', she went 'into the outer office' where she saw somebody who told her that Cuervo 'had not been called into the director's office'. She then went to the floor Cuervo worked on, where she was told that Cuervo had indeed 'been called to the director's office and that she had gone over there'. Hajewski testified that after an hour 'the rumour that [Cuervo] had been detained began circulating in the hospital', which is why she decided to write in the incident book: 'They've taken Gladys Cuervo'.⁹

This entry is written in the incident book alongside many other entries of a very different nature. The line immediately above, for example, reads: 'Consuelo Dip can take the three days off she requested'; and an entry that appears on the previous page, made the day before, says: 'Changed two sheets, they're in the room'.

Its inclusion with work-related entries could lead us to view the recording of Cuervo's detention as the result of routine administrative practices, according to which any unusual incidents must be documented and such procedure cannot be altered no matter how exceptional the incident. Other entries similar to the one referring to Cuervo's detention can be

9 Testimony by Lidia Hajewski, pages 721–3, file 129, Case 2628/84. National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, regarding report filed.

found in the incident books of the nursing service. In book 13, supervising nurse Mirta Bordón noted that the assistant nurse ‘Mrs Cairo de Garassino was arrested’ during the night shift of 26 November 1976; Consuelo Giménez de Dip wrote: ‘Activity. Mrs Gutsch informs that at about 3.30 p.m. Mr Fraga Os was taken away in handcuffs (the hospital police identified themselves as military agents)’; Élide Cano de Verdún and Sabina Peralta de Manzur logged the detention of Dr Ujelis, and noted that as a result ‘all surgeries were cancelled’ on 5 January 1977; and another entry documents an extraordinary meeting of the chief nurses held on 6 January 1977, convened among other things to discuss, under agenda item 2, the issue of ‘yesterday’s arrests’, adding that they would be receiving ‘information from the Director’. Finally, in an entry made on 3 September 1976, in incident book 12, on page 214, lines 18–19, Mirta Bordón wrote: ‘Gunshots were fired inside the Hospital today. It’s outrageous, it feels like the Far West in here at night.’

How should this entry regarding Cuervo’s detention and other similar entries in the ‘report’ be interpreted? Was it the intention of the chief nurses to leave evidence of the repression, or were they simply recording these facts as they did some lines above or below with the minor incidents that happened during their shifts, as an administrative act?

Looking back, almost 40 years later, Cuervo insists that the entry on her detention made by her superior and other similar events that were recorded were not the result of a will to resist that was grounded on political convictions. The chief nurses were not activists and their ideological sympathies leaned toward the defence of the status quo. But she stresses that neither can these entries, which are mixed in with banal annotations, be interpreted as a normalization of the horror. She sees them, instead, as a product of a commitment to professional duty, which led these workers to record anything that happened during their shifts, and a sense of what was right that did not permit them to omit such serious events (interview by the author with G. Cuervo, 5 August 2014). It was a benevolent action that resulted from a sense of moral responsibility and professional duty and which was felt to be natural. As Sznajder noted, ‘This sort of compassion is an unheroic quality, unlike the absolute goodness of saints’ (Sznajder 1998: 126).

Similarly, Graciela Santana, a member of the nursing staff, recalls that Mirta Bordón cried after the abduction of Cairo de Garassino, even though she did not share her politics. Santana remembers that she was in shock and decided to write the report recording the abduction (interview by the author with G. Santana, 16 June 2016). Carlos Apezteguía, an emergency room doctor who was abducted during the dictatorship, believes that ideologically the nurses who recorded the abductions had no sympathy for the radicalized groups. In fact, they were among the staff members who had been removed from the hospital during the period of the hospital’s social mobilization. Apezteguía thinks that what prevailed among the nurses and explains their attitudes was a sense of professional duty that required recording daily events, as well as loyalty toward their fellow workers (interview by the author with C. Apezteguía, 15 June 2016).

Ethics are not an abstract issue, they are a consequence of social relationships, which in this specific case were founded on personal knowledge gained through shared work (Foth 2013). Could it be that the nurses’ reaction to extreme violence was the result of the very nature of their work, which involves caring for others and entails a benevolent attitude towards society? Possibly not. In fact, several researchers have shown that there is no single behaviour that characterizes the nursing profession. Nurses, for example, played a decisive role in Nazi health policies, specifically in the euthanasia programme (Benedict and Shields 2014).

Beyond a binary interpretation and the two extremes of complicity and resistance, or the limits of the concept of normalization of the terror, these entries in the nurses' incident books are still open to multiple readings and constitute indicators of the complexity of the experiences of those who suffered or witnessed violence. Lastly, they caution us of the need to avoid simplified readings of the relationships that social groups and 'ordinary people' established with the political violence of those years, and to understand the distances and proximities between the moral order that the dictatorship tried to establish and the pluralist moral orders that coexisted at that time in Argentine society.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed the perspective that posited the state as an undivided bureaucratic machine in the perpetration of acts of extermination that targeted civil society, which became widespread in the early years of Argentina's restored democracy, furthered by the *Nunca Más* report and the military juntas trial. In contrast, I have chosen an analytical approach that seeks to identify nuances, cleavages, and contradictions in the practices, ideas, and feelings experienced by the members of the state bureaucracies in response to the repressive violence exercised by the last military dictatorship in Argentina. I argued that this approach allows us to rethink state bureaucracies, the relationships between civil society and the state, and social attitudes and responsibilities under a regime of terror. The examination of administrative documentation calls into question the monolithic nature of the state as an organization, while at the same time highlighting the enormous possibilities that such material offers for understanding the diverse relationships that personnel within various public bodies established with dictatorial violence and with the regulatory structure itself. This opens up a path for exploring the relationships that broader groups of Argentine society established with the dictatorship's repressive and regulatory practices.

The account presented here reveals some of these relationships. On the one hand, the letter from the morgue workers evidences the lack of empathy with the victims and the pain and distress of the victims' relatives and friends. It also shows the workers' instrumental use of the horror, and of the bodies, to further their own interest as a group. To do that they appeal to Videla, the highest authority of the military junta, to whom they resorted without fear, seeking a response to their demands.

On the other hand, in the case of the Posadas Hospital the communications by the hospital director informing of the abductions and releases and requesting instructions as to how to proceed reveal two paradoxes produced by impunity: the recording of illegal procedures in legal—and official—administrative documents; and the complicity with illegal repression combined with a formal adherence to the rules of public administration. The entries in the incident book of the nursing service, for their part, appear to have been the result of another kind of moral mandate, which, grounded on a work ethic and a sense of doing the right thing, meant that the nurses were unable to ignore their duty of documenting violations, without that entailing a deliberate act of political resistance.

The article thus poses a first challenge to academic reflection and the various intervention policies in the field of human rights: namely, examining the complexity of state bureaucracies and the diverse relationships established with the perpetration of massive and systematic human rights violations. In that framework, it suggests abandoning the monolithic images of state bureaucracies and the vertical image that portrays the abuses as the result of the unleashing of state violence against civil society as another undivided whole.

In this way, the article contributes to questioning the notion of state terrorism that posits a vertical model of terrorist state and victimized civil society that ignores both the cracks in state bureaucracies and the heterogeneous relations that the various groups of civil society establish with regimes of terror. Moreover, it shows that the ways society dealt with dictatorial violence were diverse and that such diversity was not founded on the proximity or distance with respect to the experiences of violence but on the way in which these were conceptualized by the actors. The article thus highlights a second challenge, by suggesting that the dominant account of the memory of the human rights violations in the country (produced by what was the world's first successful truth commission) eclipsed the responsibilities of various actors in the perpetration of the abuses and also in the detachment with respect to such abuses.

The examination of these frameworks, their genealogies, and characteristics thus emerges as a pending challenge in the field of academic and historical studies to gain a more in-depth understanding of this period. Such an investigation would enable us to deconstruct two perspectives that are equally mistaken and removed from reality: the perspective crystallized in *Nunca Más*, which presented a society oblivious to the disappearances as they occurred; and the perspective that emerged in the country in the heat of the crisis of the early twenty-first century, which posited society's complicity and full awareness of these crimes.

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