

Unit 2 Freedom

II. Put a Spin on it: *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and Legacies of Torture*

Essential Questions

- How can carefully selected words manipulate society?
- How can a terrorist state create a public world and a clandestine world?

It seems almost unbelievable that Argentines either didn't know about all the atrocities occurring during El Proceso, or chose to ignore what they may have suspected. How can this be possible? Marquerite Feitlowitz, writes about the junta's verbal manipulation of the Argentine people in *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and Legacies of Torture*.

Read a passage from Chapter 1 to get a sense of how the three commanders of the junta, Jorge Rafael Videla, Emilio Eduardo Massera and Orlando Ramón Agosti used words to convince people that the Process of National Reorganization would restore Argentina to sociopolitical order.

- Read actively by annotating the chapter.
- Use a yellow highlighter to highlight the main idea of a passage.
- Underline key words used by the junta in red
- Underline key words that reflect the author's opinion in blue.
- Complete the organizer

What are the author's main ideas? Consider her views, the junta's attitudes, the people's reactions.

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

Key vocabulary used by the junta

Words that express author's opinion

List important people, places, events mentioned in Chapter 1.

People

Places

Events

Record 2-3 impressive quotes by members of the junta. Note who made the statement.

Record 2-3 impressive quotes by the author.

How has this reading altered your understanding of life in Argentina from 1976-1983?

What questions do you have about the reading, or El Proceso?

CHAPTER ONE

A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and
the Legacies of Torture

By MARGUERITE FEITLOWITZ

Oxford University Press

1998

A Lexicon of Terror

The aim of the Process is the profound transformation of consciousness.

--General Jorge Rafael Videla, 1976

We know that in order to repair so much damage we must recover the

meanings of many embezzled words.... --Admiral Emilio Massera, 1976

THE GRAND ORATOR of the Process was Admiral Emilio Massera, master of the majestic rhythm, learned tone, and utterly confounding--but captivating--message. As a young man he had studied philology, and language would remain a life-long obsession. Here is but one of his darkly shining verbal jewels: "Unfaithful to their meanings, words perturb our powers of reason." The quote is taken from "The Quiet and Subtle Cyclone," one of his most widely disseminated speeches. In his opening he makes clear that he speaks not only for himself, but on behalf of the entire navy, whose union with the army and air force is "brotherly" and "indestructible." (They were in fact bitter rivals.) Grandly solemn, he says that his themes derive from a "meditation" on "objective reality," which he italicizes in the published text. That reality is "a veritable world war whose battlefield is the human spirit," a war in which "even the Word of God is used by murderers to invent a theology that justifies violence." Here, as elsewhere, Massera is tormented by the state of the language, which he compares to "an abject Tower of Babel," and warns his audience to beware of words. They are "unfaithful," will betray the unsuspecting, destroy the innocent. "The only safe words are our words." The warning is surreal, for it captures exactly what Massera himself is doing: spinning an intricate verbal web to ensnare his audience and "perturb [their] powers of reason."

Brutal, sadistic, and rapacious, the whole regime was intensely verbal. From the moment of the coup, there was a constant torrent of speeches, proclamations, and interviews; even certain military memos were made public. Newspapers and magazines, radio and

television all were flooded with messages from the junta, The barrage was constant and there was no escape: Argentinians lived in an echo chamber. With diabolical skill, the regime used language to: (1) shroud in mystery its true actions and intentions, (2) say the opposite of what it meant, (3) inspire trust, both at home and abroad, (4) instill guilt, especially in mothers, to seal their complicity, and (5) sow paralyzing terror and confusion. Official rhetoric displays all of the traits we associate with authoritarian discourse: obsession with the enemy, triumphal oratory, exaggerated abstraction, and messianic slogans, all based on "absolute truth" and "objective reality."

The Dirty War, though unprecedented in its extent and cruelty, did not erupt from a vacuum. Rather, it drew on a reservoir of beliefs, phobias, obsessions, and rhetoric that have filtered down through a variety of ultraconservative movements, tendencies, and regimes. Resonating through the speeches, articles, and proclamations are echoes ranging from the Inquisition to the Opus Dei, from the Praetorian Guard to the Nazis, from the ancien regime to the French war for Algeria. For all their shadings and variations, these elements had long coexisted in Argentine politics. In one guise or another, extreme archaic conservatives have always been a force--now in shadow, now casting the light. In the nineteenth century, the pioneering educator, writer, and eventual president Domingo Sarmiento called them "barbarians"; for the eminent contemporary historian Tulio Halperin Donghi, they constitute "the dark underside of Argentine politics." Virtually every institution and political party has been colored by, or has negotiated with, these extremist factions. For Argentines, the discourse is so familiar that even if one doesn't agree, the language--to some extent--gets internalized. The official rhetoric of the Dirty War drew much of its power from being at once "comprehensible," incongruous, and disorienting. "It made you psychotic," said Mother of the Plaza Renee Epelbaum. "We could barely `read,' let alone `translate' the world around us. And that was exactly what they wanted."

The terrorist state created two worlds--one public and one clandestine, each with its own encoded discourse. I will examine each, and eventually draw a straight line from the public pronouncements to clandestine practice, where language became a form of torture. But before we enter the "night and fog" of Argentina, let us consider some of the texts and speeches that were delivered in the (so-called) light. Once again we need to emphasize that the coup of March 24, 1976--coming after two and a half years of political chaos under Isabel Peron--was generally met with

great relief. Both within and without the country, the takeover had long been expected. The junta's first proclamation opens with an extended litany of the ills that have corroded the nation's institutions. The sentences are extremely long, solemn, and dirge-like, full of adjectives like "exhausted," "impossible," and "defeated"; hinging on nouns like "dissolution," "anarchy," and "frustration"; "corruption," "contradiction," and "loss." In the reader or listener, the preamble induces fatigue, discouragement, and a keen desire for a change of direction. Politics aside, on the level of rhetoric, the coup is a welcome resolution. The takeover is described as the result of "serene meditation," suggesting that the new leaders are dear both in mind and conscience. Further on, the junta pledges to "fully observe the ethical and moral principles of justice ... [and to act in] respect of human rights and dignity." The new government will be "devoted to the most sacred interests of the Nation and its inhabitants.

The commanders have begun not by imposing themselves, but by apparently acceding to the needs (the "tacit and/ or explicit request") of the citizens for order and decency. Where earlier the tone was funereal, now it consoles, uplifts, offers a covenant. "Each citizen must join in the fight. The task is urgent and arduous. There will be sacrifices, the strict exercise of authority in order to definitively eradicate the vices that afflict the country." But only those who are "corrupt" or "subversive" need to worry. Only those who have committed "abuses of power." The country was now embarked, "with the help of God," on "a quest for the common good, for the full recovery of el ser nacional." This expression recurs in these initial documents and was throughout the regime a dominant note. El ser nacional translates as "the collective national essence, soul, or consciousness." It harks back to the Inquisition, helped justify the Conquest, and its variants have figured in a host of reactionary movements ever since. It arises from and speaks to "the delirium for unanimity," in the apt phrase of Argentine historian Juan Jose Sebreli. El ser nacional was first used in Argentina by Peronist nationalists in 1943, in *Cabildo*, a notoriously fascist, anti-Semitic magazine, in an article entitled "We Are One Nation." One of the many ironies of Argentine society is that el ser nacional has been used by Peronists, anti-Peronists, military dictatorships, and some far left-wing groups as well. To the Gentlemen of the Coup, el ser nacional resonated with divine purpose, with the country's grand destiny. It reinforced the message that the coup was tantamount to normalization, integration. The expression also served to locate the Process within each Argentine; to resist the Process was to deny one's self.

Stalwart were these Gentlemen of the Coup, invulnerable to the pettiness of doubt. For a small minority, this precisely was a problem. The night before the takeover, Videla received a worried letter from Retired Colonel Bernardo Albarte, who in the 1970s had been General Peron's personal delegate. Born in 1918, Albarte was brilliant and eloquent; in officer's school, he had graduated first in his class. He wrote Videla to inform him that three days earlier, security forces had attempted to kidnap him; and that a young colleague of his had been murdered, then "left to rot in an unmarked grave, his stomach slit and his entrails exposed." Albarte expressed concern for "the funereal discourse of certain comrades who insist on classifying the dead as 'desirables' or 'undesirables' and on concealing the assassinations as 'excesses committed in the line of defense.'" He lamented "the lack of questioning, reflection, or criticism." Then he asked the man who would soon be leading the nation: "What does it portend for us Argentines if we allow a General to deprive us of democracy with the argument that it could lead to an atheist, materialistic, totalitarian government?" (emphasis in original). Within hours Albarte was dead: In the middle of the night, a "security squad" threw him out the window of his sixth-floor apartment located, ironically enough, on the Avenida Libertador.

Albarte would not have been fooled by the coming double-talk about democracy. The Process of National Reorganization would entail the immediate "dissolution" of all republican institutions--the Congress, provincial legislatures, and municipal councils; political parties, trade unions, and professional as well as student associations. Sitting members of the Supreme Court would be "removed" and new judges appointed. These actions were being taken "to ensure the eventual restoration of democracy ... and the revitalization of [its] institutions. The three commanders--Videla, Massera, and Agosti--carefully explained that they themselves would make decisions according to "a simple majority"--the very model of democratic rule. A model the rest of the country could follow "when it was ready.

The domestic press not only swallowed, but amplified, the double discourse on democracy. A March 25 editorial in the *La Prensa* is typical. Built into the message is the underlying premise that Peronists must be routed and the party forever prohibited:

The truth is that a republic does not consist only in the observance of

certain electoral and parliamentary rites. It rests--as the most enduring philosopher has taught us--on the principle of virtue.... Unless he were as penetrating as Tocqueville ... an observer of our contemporary reality might commit the crass error of thinking that our democratic institutions have fallen.... We repeat that even though a government has fallen, the institutions fell in 1973 [with the return of Peron]. ... On the ruins of the economic and moral crisis, we must create the conditions that will allow an authentic democracy to function. Without ire or hate, but without forgetting the immediate past whose sorry lesson must be incorporated into our history so that the coming generations can keep themselves alert.

Lest anyone misunderstand, the junta stressed that the country was not entering a period of "revolution." Since 1930, that epithet had been assumed by a host of governments--both military and civilian, nationalist and progressive, paternalist and tailored to the free capitalist market. "Revolution" was, in fact, one of the junta's forbidden words. The days of spontaneity and froth were over. The country was being rescued by a plan, the Process for National Reorganization, whose basic objectives--"to eradicate subversion and to promote economic development based on the equilibrium and responsible participation of the various sectors of society"--would be realized with "rationality," "resolve," "structure," and "sobriety." By realizing these goals--its "sacred responsibilities"--Argentina "would join the Western, Christian concert of nations."

What was the initial response from this "concert of nations"? They immediately recognized the new government. Editorials in the major foreign press were overwhelmingly positive; many expressed wonder that the incompetent Mrs. Peron had been allowed to stay in office for so long.

Two days after the coup, the junta announced that General Videla had been designated President of the Nation. He, as well as the other two members of the ruling junta--Admiral Massera and Brigadier General Orlando Ramon Agosti--had assumed office "as acts of service" and would receive no salary. Newspaper and magazine articles introducing Videla all emphasized his deep religious beliefs, devotion to his family, and austere personal habits (manifest in his spare physique). Videla looked every inch the gentleman; when out of uniform, he favored English tailoring and Scottish tweeds. (His wife's maiden name was Hartridge.) In a special, lavishly illustrated supplement, the women's weekly *Para Ti* described his public-

school background as "similar to that of any other child." This they accompanied with a photo of a typical public elementary school. "From his father, also a military man, he learned early the meaning of the words discipline, valor, and sacrifice." This phrase was glossed with a picture of Videla gracefully drawing his saber at a military parade. According to the press, Videla was at once elite and Everyman; modest and successful; a man of the missal and the sword.

In his first address to the nation, Videla stressed the theme of "subordination," which, he said, "is not submission, nor blind obedience to capricious orders. To be subordinate means to consciously obey in order to achieve a higher objective.... One historical cycle has ended," Videla proclaimed, "another one begins." In this new epoch, all citizens were being called to battle. "Your weapons are your eyes, your ears, and your intuition. Use them, exercise your right to familial and social defense," said a communique issued to the public by the Fifth Army Corps. "Defense is not only military, but [a matter for] all who want a prosperous country with a future.... Citizens, assume your obligations as Reserve Soldiers. Your information is always useful. Bring it to us." One was expected to denounce individuals whose appearance, actions, or presence seemed "inappropriate." The junta emphasized, "The enemy has no flag nor uniform ... nor even a face. Only he knows that he is the enemy." In a front-page article in *La Prensa*, the regime warned: "The people must learn to recognize the 'civilized' man who does not know how to live in society and who in spite of his appearance and behavior harbors atheist attitudes that leave no space for God." Using Mao's famous phrase, the Argentine generals held that "the guerrilla must not be allowed to circulate like fish in water."

As Colonel C. A. Castagno had declared even before the coup, "the delinquents (subversives) cannot live with us." As articulated by General Cristino Nicolaides, "an individual involved with subversion was irrecoverable." Yet Massera would still insist: "A government is an essentially moral entity ... [and] must never abdicate the metaphysical principles from which the grandeur of its power derives ... every citizen is unique and irreplaceable before God." To gain support for the nefarious Process, the admiral appealed to the goodness of Argentines, to the collective need to rally for a lofty cause.

The key word in the admiral's statement is "citizen," an echo of the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jews of their citizenship, officially designating

them as aliens. In Argentina nationality became a function of attitude. "The repression is directed against a minority we do not consider Argentine," said Videla, "... a terrorist is not only someone who plants bombs, but a person whose ideas are contrary to our Western, Christian civilization." In a ceremony marking the 123rd anniversary of the Rosario Police, Chief Augustin Feced took Videla's reasoning on citizenship a step further. Not only was the "subversive" not Argentine, "[he] should not even be considered our brother ... this conflict between us cannot be likened to that between Cain and Abel." This quote, and other highlights of the speech, were published the following day in the newspapers. Feced, himself a sadistic torturer, was known in the camps as El Cura, "The Priest." According to "The Priest," not only was the "subversive" excluded from the Argentine family but from the whole Judeo-Christian "family of man." For the director of the Military Academy, General Reynaldo Bignone, subversives were not merely "anti-fatherland," they were agents of the "antichrist." The missing and the dead were not victims, nor merely enemies; they were demons. And so was anyone who even thought otherwise.

Every day there were headlines like this: "Shootout With 21 Subversives," "Extremists Die in Cordoba," "Five Guerrillas Fall." The victims of these "shootouts"--the vast majority of whom were in fact unarmed and murdered as desaparecidos-- were invariably referred to as "seditious individuals," "subversive elements," "delinquents," and "criminals." Occasionally a supposed alias was provided; almost never were the individuals named. Sometimes the articles said,

"Efforts to identify these delinquents have proven fruitless," implying that the whole issue of the missing was an invention of the "subversives" themselves who, after abandoning their loved ones, had wiped away all of their own traces ("the enemy has no face"). Some articles justified the shootings by saying the dead had tried to escape from prison (intenta de fuga). The victims were vilified as both "aggressive" and "cowardly." A not uncommon story in this vein (appearing as early as three days after the coup in La Prensa) involved a military ambush on the secret hiding place of a band of "terrorists": Immediately seeing the superiority of the "legal forces," the male subversive ignominiously attempts to flee, using his children as a human shield. So according to the official reading, the "subversive" is worse than merely "aggressive" and "cowardly": In trying to save his own objectionable life, he shows himself as essentially alien by violating the defining human pact, that of parents protecting their children. On a single page of La Prensa (April 2, 1976), there were three

related articles (stories of this type were commonly clustered). Two formed a symmetrical pair: "A Policeman Dies After Trying to Question an Unidentified Person," which warned readers about strangers, and "A Terrorist Dies After Aggressing a Policeman," in the largest, boldest print on the page, which reassured the public that in spite of the attacks, the police would prevail. The message was reinforced by a third news brief on this page about the army's discovery of an arms cache at a farm in the province of Tucuman: No individuals were found at the site, but their (supposed) reading material--"magazines and books of Marxist ideology"--rounded out the incriminating picture. In but the first sixteen days of the new de facto government, 152 individuals died in political violence: 19 policemen, two members of the military, 68 "presumed guerrillas," nine civilians whose corpses were later identified, and 54 civilians whose identities remained unknown. According to a judicial source who spoke to the underground press on condition of anonymity, by September 1976, the Process was conducting an average of 30 kidnappings a day; the whereabouts of only 1 percent of these victims had been verified: "The other 99 percent," he said, "had to be given up for dead."

As evidence of atrocities accumulated--bodies, tortured and dismembered, were washing up along the Plate River--official denial became harder to maintain, and explanations grew increasingly bizarre. "We will not allow death to roam unconstrained in Argentina," intoned Massera in his famous "Dead for the Fatherland" speech of November 2, 1976. "We who believe in a pluralistic democracy are fighting a war against the idolators of totalitarianism ... a war for freedom and against tyranny ... here and now, a war against those who favor death and by those of us who favor life." Following Massera's logic, exclusion equals pluralism; repression equals freedom; carnage leads to life.

Massera delivered this speech to his subordinates in the Navy Mechanics School, where the year before he had created the regime's largest and perhaps most brutal concentration camp. Known as the ESMA, its Spanish acronym, it has come to be called the Argentine Auschwitz. Even as he spoke, prisoners in the complex were being tortured. Until about 1978, almost no desaparecido survived the ESMA.

The speech is a Dirty War classic, a dramatic weaving of myth, magic, lyricism, and lies, delivered like a sermon. It offers a history lesson in the form of a fairy tale:

Slowly, almost without our noticing, a machine of horror was unleashed on the unsuspecting and on the innocent, before the incredulity of some, the complicity of others, and the stupor of many more.

A war had begun, an oblique and different kind of war, primitive in its ways but sophisticated in its cruelty, a war to which we gradually became accustomed, because it was not easy to admit that the entire country was being forced into a monstrous intimacy with blood.

Then the battle began....

Surmounting all obstacles ... the Armed Forces went on the offensive. And there, in the northwest [referring to Tucuman, the 1975 defeat of ERP], our valiant comrades of the Army began a risky and patient war ... the most moving in our memory.

Then, the Armed Forces began the Republic's process of reorganization and now with political [as well as military] responsibility, the offensive became more integral, efficacious--the Air Force and the Army have also suffered the wounds of this shameless war, they have contributed with their heroism to the enemy's defeat. ...

[T]his is a war between dialectic materialism and idealistic humanism.... We are fighting against nihilists, against agents of destruction whose only objective is destruction itself, although they disguise this with social crusades. That is why we see their inexplicable alliance, their inexplicable victims....

Just as centuries before the world was attacked by plagues, we today are seeing a new and hallucinatory epidemic: the desire to kill....

We are not going to fight unto death, we are going to fight beyond death, unto victory.

For love of life, for respect of those who have fallen and will fall ... for those who are being born, for those who are afraid and even for those

who are confused after such torment and wish to be reborn as free men, for all of them I say: death will not triumph here....

Because all of our dead ... each and every one died for the triumph of life.

(C) 1998 Marguerite Feitlowitz All rights reserved. ISBN: 0-19-510635-0

