

Imposing Identity against Social Catastrophes. The Strategies of (Re)Generation of Meaning of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Argentina)

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This article explores the processes of definition, construction and social management of collective identity in situations of social catastrophe such as that defined in the Southern Cone of Latin America following the grave human rights violations that occurred in the 1970s, especially those deriving from the forced disappearance of persons. This form of repression creates deep wounds in the social fabric affected and, besides this, produces what could be called a ‘catastrophe’, that is, a permanent confusion of the mechanisms of social construction of meaning and subjectivity within which one lives. In this case, the catastrophe affects several collective goods and, principally, the social bases of modern identity construction. In order to manage these catastrophes, the subjects that inhabit the social spaces formed around them – in this case those who live in the field of the detained–disappeared – develop very different strategies, with the most widespread in the Argentinean case being what I will call the ‘narrative of meaning’. This is a hard and conservative strategy that confronts the catastrophe of identity by employing identity constructions supported on old narratives of the family and biological heritage. This article is dedicated to an analysis of this socially successfully strategy and studies the form it adopts in the work of constructing identity of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.

Keywords: family heritage, forced disappearance, genetics, identity, narrative of meaning, social catastrophe.

In October 2009, ‘Chicha’ Mariani sent a desperate email over the Internet. Very old and feeling herself close to death, she launched a message in a bottle in the hope that it might be read by her granddaughter Clara Anahí, who she had last seen three months after her birth, in 1976. ‘Chicha’ Mariani is one of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo). Since 1976 her son and her daughter-in-law have been two of the 30,000 disappeared persons of the Argentinean dictatorship. She knows that her granddaughter was probably given for adoption to persons close to the political regime that was established in Argentina during the military dictatorship of

1976–1983. Clara Anahí is thus one of the approximately 500 children who are said to have an *appropriated identity*. In her moving message, ‘Chicha’ wrote:

I want to tell you that your paternal grandfather dedicated himself to music while my calling was the visual arts; that your maternal grandparents dedicated themselves to the sciences; that your mother loved literature and that your father was a graduate in economics [...] Some of all that will be present in just your own inclinations, because, in spite of your being brought up in a different home, one carries the genes of one’s forebears inside oneself.

In July 2005, two years after becoming one of the nearly 100 children with a *recovered identity*—that is, after recovering the name he was given at birth, different from the name he had following his appropriation—Horacio Pietragalla published a text, entitled ‘Reconstructions’, in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Página/12*, in which he tells the story of how he recovered his identity. The story is of a journey that began with a DNA analysis, which determined that he was the son of two of the disappeared, and continued with the search, in his words, ‘to reconstruct the identity of my parents in order to start to reconstruct my own’. In the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo that journey found the necessary support to give a foundation to his identity:

Today I lead my life without doubting, and for this I can only thank my biological parents, my only and genuine parents, and the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* [...]. The *Abuelas* [is] today an association that not only searches for grandchildren, but also carries out education in the right to identity. (Pietragalla, 2005)

Since 1993, promoted by the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, there has been a public body in Argentina, the Comisión Nacional por el Derecho a la Identidad (CONADI; National Commission for the Right to Identity) whose aim is to develop policies of reparation in cases where the identity of children was violated by the state itself. The CONADI coordinates an essential element in the practices of identifying appropriated children, the Genetic Data Bank, which contains the genetic maps of all the families that have disappeared children, so that it will be possible to identify children who are currently appropriated when they are finally found. Speaking of this Bank and the reading of identity that it transmits, the president of the CONADI told me, when I interviewed her in October 2005:

The basis of identity is the truth, knowledge of the truth, and the truth is unique. In fact, the truth is that one has an inescapable biological origin, with an inescapable genetic load, and later one has a history and a cultural and social development [...]. When the biological is disassociated from the cultural, a false contradiction is created. (Interview 1)

In September 2005, I visited the head office of the Abuelas. On entering I was received by a young woman; I later learned that she was the daughter of disappeared persons. Someone called by phone: ‘No, look, it’s better to call Human Rights for that. This is for people who have doubts about their identity’. There were posters decorating the hall that read ‘Do you know who you are?’, ‘Don’t remain in doubt’...

All these anecdotes have three things in common: they are moving; the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo appear in all of them; ‘identity’ is the key word. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, searching for their grandchildren, the children of their disappeared children, have developed a powerful machinery that is symbolic, institutional, juridical, linked

to the media and even artistic. The key factor in this machinery is the idea of identity: on the one hand, because it is understood that identity is what is attacked and violated by forced disappearance; on the other, because it is believed that by reconstructing that attacked and violated good, identity, it will be possible to compensate in part for the devastating effects of that repressive practice. We are not, however, talking of any identity whatsoever; it is identity associated to old nouns such as family, origin, truth, genetics, biology . . . , some of them with a conservative colouring. In any case, if it can be said that the forced disappearance of persons was a form of repression that devastated the symbolic and physical supports of our – modern western – concept of identity (Gatti, 2008: 96–100), it would seem that today, 40 years later, a significant part of the efforts aimed at compensating for its effects also take place on that same terrain, that of the modern interpretation of what it means ‘to have an identity’, that is, an understanding of the noun ‘identity’ that unequivocally associates it with the *semper idem*, with what is always identical to itself, with what depends on origin, with what undergoes no variation.

The most forceful of those efforts is that made by the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo: with them the rhetoric of the blood – that of the indissolubility of the tie imagined around it – assumes the leading role. Theirs are forms of narrating disappearance that sustain a policy of identity that is in many aspects a policy of conserving what is: against what deconstructs being, to reconstruct it. It is paradoxical – and disturbing – that facing the apparatus of disappearance (Calveiro, 1998: 13), aimed at the destruction of identity and resting on an imaginary that conceives of the latter in terms of ideas of biological heritage and genetics, authenticity or family, a strategy of resistance is developed – highly efficient to be sure – that makes these items into its points of support.

In this text I propose to analyse these tensions by approaching identity when it is used by the social actors as a foundation for collective strategies for managing situations where the elements that conventionally give shape to identity collapse. This proposal is based on the work I developed between 2005 and 2008 in Buenos Aires and Montevideo employing a range of qualitative research techniques, from those characteristic of participatory research to in-depth interviews and focus groups. In this text I will only be citing some of those interviews: those with representatives of institutions linked to the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Interviews 1, 2, 3), mothers of disappeared persons (Interviews 4, 5, 6), children of disappeared persons (Interviews 7, 8) and ex-disappeared persons (Interviews 9, 10). Following some brief notes on the most characteristic elements of the forced disappearance of persons, I will describe the fundamental aspects of those forms of managing the social consequences of that phenomenon that confront it by having recourse to two conservative tools for representing the identity that was devastated by forced disappearance: genetics and the family. In the Argentinean case, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo are the apotheosis of those forms of managing the forced disappearance of persons. Besides, in a more general way, they are an excellent illustration of the extent to which our interpretation of identity is severely handicapped by the rhetoric of biology and heritage.

The Particularity of the Southern Cone: Civilisatory Process, Catastrophe of Identity and ‘the Paradox of the Detained–Disappeared Person’

From my perspective, in order to speak of the phenomenon of forced disappearance in the Latin American Southern Cone, rather than a civilisatory collapse or a sudden

onset of barbarism, it is more correct to argue that what we witness is the paroxysm of rationality; that is to say, that the dictatorships of the 1970s, rather than forcing the local societies, rather than leading them into exceptional states in their history, revealed that within them there were many authorities 'prepared to serve with eagerness in the undertaking of extermination' (Vezzetti, 2002: 152). That's how it is: the landscape that provides a setting for forced disappearance is a society – Latin American society – founded from a rhetoric where the discourses of creation *ex nihilo* and of the elimination of what is superfluous are at work, where as much weight is held by the construction of what fits the project as by the disappearance of the dysfunctional and the conflictual. For that reason, I employ the hypothesis that the forced disappearance of persons is not barbarism but exacerbated modernity. It is a civilisatory process (Elias, 1978); it is the state developing population policies (Foucault, 2006), working as a gardener (Bauman, 1989), being vigilant so that Eden continues to be Eden, and if something is out of line, it is brought back into line and reorganised. As in the founding of Argentina and Uruguay, the aim is to die-cut civilisation onto the desert. This is in fact the proposal with which Bauman (1991) analyses the Holocaust, a further manifestation of modern rationality just as much as scientific rationality or the idea of citizenship are. The Holocaust, says Bauman, is not a return to pre-social barbarism but the opposite, a reflection of the 'hidden possibilities of modern society' (Bauman, 1991: 15). It was the apotheosis of the civilisatory dream: 'It was completely adapted to everything we know about our civilisation, about the spirit that guides it, about its orders of priority, about its immanent vision of the world and about the appropriate ways of achieving human happiness and a perfect society' (Bauman, 1991: 11).

But with the forced disappearance of persons not everything is history repeating itself. In the Latin American Southern Cone there is an enormous novelty: the disappeared person, the paradox that constitutes them and the uncertainty provoked by that paradox. In the 1970s, power was exercised as it always has been: against those entities that upset order. And this was not an exception. But there was something immensely novel: the entities that were the object of forced disappearance, that is, the object of civilisatory force, were the most refined products of the civilisatory work itself, individuals with full rights of citizenship, clean (or dirty by choice), rational and enlightened. The perfect products of modernity were the ones who were going to be torn apart by the machinery that was their condition of possibility.

That enormous civilisatory force created this landscape and then deployed itself against its own product – the modern and rational individual, whose identity was guaranteed with civic and administrative credentials – against the individual of liberal citizenship; against the subject for whom the psychoanalyst's couch has meaning; and destroyed him. That is the paradox of the detained – disappeared person: (a) forced disappearance is one of the tools of population construction and management characteristic of the civilisatory/modern order; and (b) forced disappearance is applied to the most highly finished products of the civilisatory/modern order.

The civilisatory routine was applied to the most highly finished products of the civilisation. It was an inverted civilisatory machine, which is not the same thing as barbarism; a dis-civilisation. That unresolvable paradox explains – this is my hypothesis – why in this historical-social context the disappeared person is a figure that constitutes an authentic catastrophe for the societies and individuals affected. The concept of catastrophe is proposed in order to think the social space that is constructed where there is a breakdown in the relation between social facts and the structures of meaning that give them plausibility. In this social space we witness a permanent confusion for the

apparatuses of construction of meaning and subjectivity. In the relationship between the two instances – social facts and the structures of signification that make it plausible to represent and live them – there are different possibilities: stable and lasting relations or different forms and intensities of disassociation, some momentary, others permanent, some light, others intense. The catastrophe is an intense and permanent disassociation of the relationship between a fact and its representation. This is, to be sure, a difficult context to deal with: it is a space of normalisation of the anomic, a space where no new norm arises following the breakdown of normative consensuses, but instead social life is installed on that breakdown. Thinking it is not easy, although it is true to say that the concept of catastrophe has been extensively developed in the history of the social sciences (e.g. Morin, 1976 or Thom, 1976; or more recently, Dupuy, 2002, 2005; Lewkowicz, 2002; Mercier-Faivre and Thomas, 2008). In the case of my formulation, the concept rests on the ideas of Steiner and Rosenfeld's linguistic catastrophe, Kaes's psychic catastrophe and Veena Das's event. For the first two authors, linguistic catastrophe can be understood in relation to the effects that extreme phenomena produce on language; thus Auschwitz, which for Steiner subjects language to a crisis of such depth that it leads him to affirm that it is a phenomenon 'outside language' (Steiner, 1967), or which for Rosenfeld constitutes a 'linguicide', a case of 'death of language' (in Grierson, 1999). In the case of Kaes, psychic catastrophe is produced 'when the habitual modalities employed for treating the [...] traumatic experience show themselves to be insufficient' (Kaes, 1991: 86); that is to say: when a situation cannot be understood from the mechanisms of understanding of the structure that is wrecked by that situation. And, finally, the proposal by Veena Das, for whom an event is '[an] event that institutes a new form of historical action that was not inscribed in the inventory of the previous situation' (Das, 2008: 28). In short, a catastrophe is something that in operative terms can be defined in the following way: a disassociation that produces social situations that, although their representation and habitability are problematic, are represented and lived.

To be sure, forced disappearance is a catastrophe: it produces a vulnerable, helpless being, a 'body that things happen to' (Interview 8), in the words of the daughter of a disappeared person. It creates a disconcerting figure, one of those whom Arendt called 'desolated' (according to Gómez Mango, 2006: 101), that is, a subject radically expelled from the human, who escapes from every known taxon: neither living nor dead; neither subject nor object. Like an occupant of the concentration camps '[he/she is an inhabitant of the] non-place where all the barriers between the disciplines are ruined and all the dykes are overwhelmed' (Agamben, 2002: 49). Certainly, the novelty of the figure is important: an entity who had the status of individual-citizen is expelled to the territory outside, where previously vagabonds and rabble were placed. This individual ceases to be a citizen and becomes a disappeared person.

It is true that the forced disappearance of persons has occurred in other periods of history: the Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog) decree of 1941 (Amnesty International, 1983), episodes of the Spanish Civil War or today in detention centres such as Guantanamo. In these cases a strategy of forced disappearance of persons and bodies was applied that was, apart from sinister, efficient. But it was not the same, not because of the dimension of the destruction, but because of what was imagined about what was destroyed and because of the terrain on which, in the minds of both victims and killers, the problem was situated, that of identity. Thus what collapses in the Southern Cone of Latin America in the 1970s is the pillar of our way of understanding identity, the individual is what is devastated: individuals lose their names, they are left without

territory, they are split from their history. Such is the catastrophe: what is attacked with disappearance is on such a qualitative scale that there are no words to give it consistency and those that exist do not serve. It is necessary to invent new words that capture the fact that one is facing a figure that is represented as without place: 'The disappeared person leaves no traces, he/she creates a vacuum' [Interview 9], that does not fit into any recognisable entity, at the same time absent and present: '[With them] absence becomes presence' [Interview 10], without logic: 'Disappearance is an attack on logic. It provokes a sense of absurdity' [Interview 9], without body: 'It is a body without identity and identity without a body' [Interview 7]. With what occurred there, meaning and subjectivity lose their foundation.

Forced Disappearance 40 Years on: Social Field, Struggles for Identity and Narratives of Meaning

Beyond the figure of the disappeared person themselves, there are social consequences, protracted over time, which have lasted until today, 40 years after that 'foundational disaster', with a multitude of agents installed in the catastrophe throughout that time. These consequences are structured in the form of a social field (Bourdieu, 1980), in the form of a *social universe* that is dense, that shows a significant degree of institutionalisation and that finds one of its structuring elements in the term 'identity'.

In sociology, as we know, a social field can be defined, *grosso modo*, as a social space crystallised around a phenomenon or a type of phenomenon. It is a section of reality where what is important is not so much its facticity – 'it's like that' – as that it exists in the imaginary of the agents who intervene in it and who place their stakes on it. There are fields so widely extended that we have naturalised them to the point of considering them universal: the political, economic, religious, cultural fields. There are others less widely extended, but that are very generalised today, because social resources (actors, routines, institutions ...) are organised around the phenomena that give them their name, that singularise them as an arena of action: the fields of sports, art ... All of them have a datum in common: they exist because the agents act as if they existed and develop practices adjusted to that supposition. It is on this basis that different vectors of force are concentrated in them: social relations, life trajectories of individual and collective agents, cultural representations, routines, more or less consensual narratives, scientific objectifications, institutional realisations ... That is sufficient for the emergence of a reality, the field itself, where – as much in the representation of the analyst as in that of the very agents who inhabit and administer it – a social life is developed that has its centre in the phenomenon that gives it name and form.

Throughout the years that run from the 1970s to the present day, a field of the detained–disappeared person has been consolidated (Gatti, 2008: 18–26). Like every field, it has its genealogy, which is that of the history of the figure of the disappeared person themselves (see da Silva Catela, 2001, for the Argentinean case, and Demasi and Yaffé, 2005 for Uruguay). At first that figure did not exist – in the early 1970s, not even the relatives of those who would later be known as such used the term, which began to be employed when certain elements led to the understanding that what was happening was not 'the same as always'. It was later deployed in the context of recently created fields that had been previously institutionalised, such as the struggles for human rights (Jelin, 2003). It was only with time that it received sufficient definition to authorise the construction of a universe around it. Today that field is consolidated, and although it

is not closed – rather, like all fields, it is precarious and changing – *it now exists as a singularity*: it has its centre in a strange figure – the disappeared person who does not fit into any known taxon. The field also has consensual rhetorics around that figure (that of absence, that of silence, that of emptiness . . .), its own languages (such as the peculiar categories for naming the relatives of detained–disappeared persons), singular artistic and cultural productions and, above all, it articulates a powerful, peculiar ensemble of agents, institutions and social movements (for example Mothers, Grandmothers, Children, Brothers and Sisters of disappeared persons, associations of ex-disappeared persons, public bodies, research centres . . .) all with a common denominator, that they develop patterns of action that gravitate around a key theme, identity.

I would affirm that the figure of the detained–disappeared person has been consolidated; it is imagined as a phenomenon that affects identity, making it impossible for the latter to be represented and lived as it is normally lived and represented in the West. Indeed, the figure is read as a catastrophe that alters and convulses the interpretation of the ‘we’, that transforms the interpretation of identity, that upsets the language we use when we talk of it. Everything related to it is, at the very least, disturbed: I, we, my name, places, histories, my circle, community . . .

But that it devastates identity is not necessarily to say that it makes it impossible; it means to say that it makes identity complicated, making it into a central issue; that is, it means that the forced disappearance of persons sets identity to work, making it an object of interest (Schlanger, 1983: 129) both socially and sociologically. Based on my fieldwork in Argentina and Uruguay, I have identified two different narratives through which that work is realised: that of meaning and that of the absence of meaning. The latter, which I shall not be dealing with in this text, represents forms of understanding identity that are characteristic of the younger generations, who aspire to inhabit an absence that has occurred unexpectedly and that has already been institutionalised, to manage that awkward figure, the disappeared person, to invent languages for a reality that is assumed as catastrophic, accepted as such. It could be said that for this narrative the question is how is one to manage a life that is developed within a situation in which, *a priori*, life itself is impossible? (Gatti, 2008: 134–155).

The narrative of meaning is associated with discourses that are more heavily loaded with militancy, which make identity into a political weapon. Its vocation is to provide meaning and to explain the radical novelty of a figure of uncertain and unknown language and identity, the disappeared person. It manages the catastrophe by trying to replace what this undoes, procuring to return what was subjected to an aggression to its *ex ante* state. This narrative is conservative: it seeks to introduce imaginary order into the chaos of the imaginary that forced disappearance provokes. If the latter tore apart the modern alliances we had thought unbreakable – it tore apart what we interpret as the *ontological unity* of the human being, the stable union of a body with a name; it tore apart the ties of a subject with their history, with their family history; and it also tore apart the meeting of that subject with a space of social relations that is materialised, here, in the state – this narrative seeks, in order to ward off that danger, to stitch up those rents.

In order to do so the term ‘identity’ is the material. This is not the flexible, mobile, changing, liquid and unstable identity of the present times, but one that is hard, rocky, firm. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is the organisation that, with greater and greater strength, has had recourse to it, giving form to a strategy of resistance that has its alibi in ‘identity’ and that even finds in it the basis for its institutional framework, as is reflected in the names of some of the centres of that network: Centre of Attention

for the Right to Identity, National Commission for the Right to Identity, Network for Identity, Theatre for Identity.

The protagonists, grandmothers and grandchildren – the former mothers of disappeared persons, the latter the children of the disappeared – have constant recourse to this term to speak of themselves and of their work against the effects of disappearance; the strategy of both is also centred on this term and involves no less than remaking the bodies and the lives of the disappeared through their reconnection to the old chains of providing meaning. This reading of identity – that of the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, that of the narrative of meaning – is constructed from two materials, two of the hardest: (a) the biological tie, that is, the genetic basis of identity; (b) the family.

Elements of the Narrative of Meaning, 1: Genetics

Inspired by the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the debate over the forced disappearance of persons has moved identity into the foreground. But that does not mean to say onto a new plane; on the contrary, it has been moved onto an almost pre-modern plane, that of the biological roots of being: with the *Abuelas*, identity is equivalent to nature, and nature is equivalent to genetics.

Disappeared persons were sought of whom no trace remained: children who were kidnapped leaving hardly any signs behind. In the absence of clues that might lead to them, they could only be located by having recourse to the marks they bore, their genetic print, and the doubt about identity that hung, and hangs, over the generation of children born in the period of the repression. Both questions were an invitation to follow a route that led to one place, the origin. Tactical justification: this was the easiest to explain. Practical justification: this was what was available for locating them. But the tactical and practical necessity – finding elements that would serve to establish a link between a detained–disappeared person and an individual, today an adult, about whom nothing is known, neither face, nor sex, nor location, nor name – became an ontological definition that has ended up colonising not only the field of the detained–disappeared persons but even the most usual definitions of identity. Since then, genes and genetics have ended up defining being:

Because the concept of identity [...] has a biological foundation, on whose basis we have eyes of a certain colour, skin, certain tendencies, heights, etc., due to a make-up that is already determined genetically [...]. During years of sociologism [sic] we have forgotten [that genetic determination]. (Zanotti, 2005: 166)

Identity [is] the right of every human being to know their own genesis, their own origin. It is based on the biological, but transcends this; it is founded on the need to find the roots that give meaning to the present, in the light of a past that, when found, makes it possible to reencounter a unique and unrepeatable history. (Sánchez, 1997: 37).

The policy of searching for the disappeared, in which the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* play the leading role, became identity policy, articulated around the most conservative definition possible of the latter: identity is the preservation of what is. From there, every definition of identity susceptible to weakness such as that of the game with genders, flexibility of names, ambiguity of territories, paradox and change is expelled to the territory of ideas that are mistaken or foreign ('I have noticed in practice how the

discourse of some European psychologists and sociologists was altered from observing the experience of the Abuelas, the reencounter with their grandchildren and the grandchildren with their identity. They had a vision that was very... let's say... cultural and social... sociological... of identity, [while] what was related to biology and genetics compared unfavourably' [Interview 2]). Hence the invitation for clear and conclusive definitions to enter the territory of identity, definitions made in the *flesh* ('Intrauterine memory, how those kids recognise, it's not known how, what they are' [Interview 2]), in the *genes* ('[The DNA] shapes [our] essential characteristics as persons' (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, undated a)). When genes become the basis of the name and, thus, for thinking about identity, the modern fictions of unity and belonging re-emerge: 'The question about identity is therefore the question about "what remains" [...] while everything is changing, about continuity' (Rinesi, 2004: 130); 'The concept of identity proposes that something or someone are the same as themselves' (Corach, 1997: 76).

Strong identities that can be imagined after the catastrophe are firm names, immutable, indubitable, solid supports. Would identities be as strong if this catastrophe had not intervened? Surely not, as they would be imagined in a different way.

From that catastrophe emerged devastated bodies, destroyed names, broken identities. In order to exorcise it, certain forms of working socially on the phenomenon of forced disappearance established a synonym between identity and biological load, a synonym that, paradoxically, also supported the logic of the apparatus of disappearance. What is potentially changeable in the former is annulled when read from the presumed invariability of the latter, the DNA, which is proof of the 'essence of each person', something that nothing, not even the most spectacular of catastrophes – the forced disappearance of persons – can modify.

It is possible to speculate and wonder whether such positioning on identity made by the agents of the field of detained–disappeared persons could have been realised using other paths. And that is in fact the case: there are forms of thinking about it other than those reflected in this article. But the stakes inscribed on the narrative of meaning are clear: if the forced disappearance of persons destroyed identities, it is resisted by reconstructing them. These *policies of reconstruction of what the catastrophe devastated* confront forced disappearance by marking what remains. They go straight to the point, without ambiguities, without leaving room for absurdity; they are implacable with the paradoxes with which, as we know, the processes of social construction of identity are replete.

Elements of the Narrative of Meaning, 2: The Family

The family is the second foundation of the narrative of meaning. Ludmila da Silva has discerned the key place it occupies in the stories of the relatives of disappeared persons. With the bursting onto the scene of an uncomfortable, unmanageable presence ('Homes were invaded, people disappeared, brothers and sisters were separated, grandmothers became mothers and cousins became siblings' [da Silva Catela, 2001: 75]), there were very grave consequences:

Families were divided, people changed their home, city, country. The ground formed by the sentimental world of references began to split apart. Everyday life was divided, with a before and an after being marked out, whose dividing line was the kidnapping of relatives. (da Silva Catela, 2001: 75)

Normality was truncated: genealogies were ruptured; there was a breakage of the possibility of those things that were taken for granted, of the materials thanks to which we represent, order and administer the world, its joys and its tragedies, the inherited or invented uses and customs, the routines, in short, with which we fill time with meaning. With forced disappearance all of that became impossible, including the conventional administration of death: there are no bodies here, no remains, no tombs. Nothing. In what places is death to be situated? How is mourning to be carried out without the materiality of the presence of the body?

Without the body it is impossible to carry out mourning. We are left with the mystery of that body which we are denied. Without it, we cannot elaborate the death and give it the burial it deserves. It is being and not being [...] The questions do not close and nor does the tragedy. One is permanently asking oneself questions. Our children are not dead. They are disappeared. (Nora Cortiñas, president of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (línea fundadora), in Bellucci (2000))

According to Da Silva's interpretation, the category of disappeared person upset the atonal rhythm of normality and 'advanced a different system of classifications' (da Silva Catela, 2001: 116), that of a world where a dead person who is not dead organises an everyday life that cannot be sustained: there is no way of doing so because there is nothing on which to support it. I believe that the question is even more far reaching: in some subjects, more than bringing classifications of replacement into play, the forced disappearance of persons disqualified those existing, without permitting any others to be mobilised that would restore balance to what had been upset. Order did not return after the catastrophe, nor did anything new arise: those who suffered that hecatomb were left in a brutally unsettled state, in a universe in which the old categories, although available, no longer worked.

Mourning or normality? Waiting or grief? Widowers and widows? Orphans? Dead or living? 'The disappeared person, that living-dead, that dead person stolen from death' (Gómez Mango, 2006: 17) complicates things. Nothing makes sense:

The child stolen in captivity, the corpse of the disappeared person stolen from the relatives, indeed constitute grave attacks on the systems that regulate the social and cultural functioning of human societies [...]. They rend not only the flesh of the victims but also the symbolic schemes of kinship and relationship. (Gómez Mango, 2004: 23)

Deprived of death, the relatives have nowhere to fix the absence: they lack the body, they cannot carry out mourning, they do not know where the body is buried. (da Silva Catela, 2001: 121)

There is perpetual mourning. In the words of different mothers of disappeared persons: 'It is a lie that the years lessen the pain. One gets used to living with the pain, which is something different'. (Interview 5)

In the former head office of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo one of their latest projects is functioning, the Biographical Family Archive. This is a singular project, set underway to prepare the legacy they will leave to those of their grandchildren who might be recovered in the future and who, alone, will have no one to turn to in order to remake the history of those who gave birth to them and their family, the history of which they

were stripped. If they are lucky, or if along the way they manage to learn who those people were, they will be able, according to the project's promoters, to learn who they are. There, in the archive, they will find a box with the recordings, the photographs, the histories that make their history. Its aims are clear, as are the terms in which this project is articulated – *to reconstruct, to recover*:

What is sought through the Archive is to reconstruct the life history of the disappeared persons [who were] members of the family groups of the children who were kidnapped and/or born in captivity during the last military dictatorship, both those who are still appropriated and those who have already recovered their identity. (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, undated b)

Those boxes, jealously guarded in the Biographical Family Archive, contain a record of the disappeared person during their life. They are curious contrivances: each box contains tapes with recordings, accompanied by their respective transcriptions, of the interviews that the group of volunteers working in the archive has collected on the life history of the disappeared persons who had a child that was later appropriated: interviews with friends of the biological parents, their schoolmates, their comrades in political work. And, above all, interviews with their family: mothers, brothers, fathers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, cousins. It is a legacy that the grandmothers are leaving for the grandchild who has not yet appeared, that is woven with the solid thread of the family history, with what is considered the true family history. A fabric that leaves no doubts about what, in the eyes of the organiser of the Archive, is their true identity: 'Now [thanks to the information contained in the archive] it's her, not another person. [Before] she wasn't the person she had to be' (Interview 3).

There is no room in this scheme for ambiguities nor for exercises of relativising the idea of identity, which is converted through the effect of this narrative into a solid, essential and forceful weapon for combating the absence of meaning. Consider the terrible texture of the following phrases: outside true identity, vacuum, nothing, the non-identity of anyone lacking in name, territory or history:

The grandchildren [appropriated children of disappeared persons] have a 'non-identity'. (Estela Carlotto, president of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, in Gelman and La Madrid (1997)

By lacking roots, family or social history, nor a name that identifies one, one ceases to be who one is. (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, undated a)

Those young people live in a state of exception without knowing it, their situation is falsified, as well as their documentation, relationship and identity. (Lo Gúdice, 2004: 48)

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Philip K. Dick (1968), proposed a powerful image: the androids – disturbingly and threateningly similar to their human creators, the latter beings with complete identities, the former monsters and simulations – had the recollections of others installed in their artificial, incomplete, false and monstrous memories. Integrated into a coherent whole, these recollections gave consistency to the identity of these entities who, following this implant, possessed a clean time and space, those of the family. Thanks to that ordered memory, each android gained consistency, solidity, because through its inscription in the family saga *it was*; it had identity. Dick's

proposal was disturbing because it raised uncomfortable questions: Can one be without origins? Do those origins necessarily require a unique family history? Can one be with an origin that is inconsistent from the viewpoint of genetics or family history? Can one have identity without name, territory or history? To all of these questions, the answer of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is no.

Conclusion

According to its self-definition the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has as its aim to locate and restore to their legitimate families all the children who were kidnapped–disappeared by the political repression, and to create conditions in which such a terrible violation of the human rights of children can never be repeated, demanding punishment for all of those responsible. It was created in 1977 and is formed of mothers of disappeared persons whose children were appropriated by the repressors during the military regime that devastated Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Its work to date has had a significant quantitative success (the Abuelas have managed to identify 100 children), but what is really impressive is their qualitative incidence in the political debate, in the construction of the limits and contents of the field of detained–disappeared persons and, above all, in the successful construction of a socially legitimated concept of identity. The organisational framework of the Abuelas is present throughout the state, its leaders are significant referents for the definition of human rights, they have contributed very directly to the incorporation of the Articles 7, 8 and 11 in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ‘Argentinean Articles’, inspired by their work. These three are the articles of maximum relevance for specifying adoption policies, and establish the importance of the relations constructed around biological ties for determining the identity of a child, indicating the need to preserve the right to be in accordance with those ties or, at least, to have knowledge of them. Besides, with other groups of relatives –the Madres of Plaza de Mayo (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo), HIJOS, which means children and is also the acronym for Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence) – they have helped to place the question of the disappeared in the political debate and to develop it on the terrain where it is now located, that of identity. In the words of Alicia Lo Giudice, Coordinator of the Psychological Team of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo:

What happened –the dismantling of the right of persons through disappearance and murder and the appropriation of children, today youths and still disappeared – led to a rupture of the human system of relationship; it is a massacre of links and a fracture of memory. (Lo Giudice, n.d.)

Her words reflect the verb around which the political action of the Abuelas is conjugated – *restore* – and the term that makes its articulation possible – *identity*. Thus, for the Abuelas, for their interpretation of identity, those affected by the forced disappearance of persons are devastated subjects and the way to compensate for that devastation is by reincorporating that subject into the social fabric to which they belonged before the catastrophe: their family, their heritage, and so on. In this way, social life and identity are reconstructed in all their forceful unity. Balance is imposed: the family, the lineage, the saga, in short, the powerful rhetoric of authenticity, win the battle. The catastrophe appears to be cancelled.

But the effects of that policy on the interpretations of what 'identity' means are enormous. In the first place, these interpretations are today dominant and are highly legitimated socially and institutionally. But, in the second place, the establishment of these policies of identity has forced the debates on this question to be situated within a profoundly essentialist stage. Without doubt in the Southern Cone of Latin America, in the worlds of the detained-disappeared persons, which radiates out towards the ensemble of social places where identity is a question, the issues of being, identity and the subject cannot escape from the untouchable, unmovable, unquestionable, determined places of the biological. Identity, converted into a weapon for regenerating meaning when catastrophe has undone it, has certainly had unintentional consequences.

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