Editorial

A present past: collective memories and social movements in Latin America*

Nicolás Ortiz Ruiz and Carolina Tavano

Looking back and forward, we can walk in the present future.

AYMARA APHORISM

Introduction

Fifty years after the civil-military coup in Chile and Uruguay and 40 years after the recovery of democracy in Argentina, the question of memory continues to be a relevant issue. This special issue of the journal Temas Sociológicos on Collective Memories and Social Movements in Latin America is an invitation to approach painful pasts relevant to our region but from a different perspective: understanding them as part of a heritage that allows us to build the struggles of the present and for the future.

The legacy of death, disappearance, and torture left by dictatorships in the Southern Cone had a profound social impact that disarticulated social networks and imposed a culture of fear, silence, and trauma (Jelin, 2021). With the arrival of democracies, memory became a central element in political disputes, as it became a matter of public interest for both states and citizens (Crenzel, 2010; Jelin, 2017, 2021; Lira y Loveman, 2002; Pérotin-Dumon, 2007; Piper et al., 2014; Stern, 2009).

Thus, in a Latin American context, keeping memories alive has been traversed by political and legal urgencies related to the search for truth and punishment of those guilty as part of a sustained struggle

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against impunity. Thus, the field of memory is a space for developing studies and research. An arena for political struggles over the debts of the past and the conditions of the present, which configures it as a true activism for (or of) memory, fundamentally linked to human rights movements. These two dimensions intertwine due to the circulation of actors and their participation in the debates in both spaces marked by internal controversies and tensions. The latter is one of the central axes addressed by the works in this particular issue.

Although the wave of dictatorships that swept Latin America in the second half of the 20th century ended, the processes of violence did not stop. In Colombia, the prolonged conflict that has ravaged the country for the past 50 years has given way to a fragile transition process. Similarly, Mexico still faces the consequences of the “War on Drug Trafficking,” a process that exacerbated both State and para-state violence. In El Salvador, Bukele’s inauguration and his policy of war against the Maras led to human rights violations against thousands of people. In these scenarios, the need for truth and justice implies a standard definition of the past, a process that, undoubtedly, gives way to controversies that put tension in present coexistence.

Both in the field of memory studies and in the field of social movements, in recent decades, there have been some experiences that seek to understand the importance of memory for political action, which opens a crossover (still incipient) between the two fields (Natalucci y Andújar, 2021; Ortiz Ruiz, 2021). In this line, some antecedents focus on the study and reflection on memory activisms in Latin America, especially in the Southern Cone (Andriotti Romanin, 2013; Cueto Rúa, 2008; Jelin & Sempol, 2006; Jelin, 2017; Tavano, 2019).

However, the role of memory has received less attention in activism, social movements, mobilizations, and citizen protests in general. In the last 30 years, Latin America has experienced intense mobilization processes in which memory has played a crucial role. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010a) points out that social mobilizations always invoke a memory. It can be a short memory about the last 30 years of neoliberal governments or the military dictatorships of the 1970s; or a long memory referring to the indigenous struggles against colonization and conquest. In various corners of the continent, those protesting situations of impunity, extreme inequality, abuses, and institutionalized
violence have turned to the past for appropriate slogans and action repertoires contributing to present struggles. For example, recent protests in Brazil invoked the memory of the dictatorship and its horrors to demand an end to the Bolsonaro government. At the same time, Peru uses The Shining Path or Sendero Luminoso violence as a reference to intimidate and criminalize citizen mobilization.

In Chile, since 2006, there has been a process called by the UNDP “the times of politicization,” a series of protests against the social and political system installed during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). The process appeals to social movements and their plea to the past as a source of inspiration and identity (Ortiz Ruiz, 2021). In October 2019, the protests reached their zenith with the largest mobilization since the return of democracy. The authorities’ violent response brought back the dictatorship’s memory with cases of torture, loss of eyes, and death. The protests gave way to a constituent process that remains open despite failing in its first form. The current situation gives rise to the emergence of an extreme right represented by the Republican Party, which achieved a historic vote and now has an absolute majority in the Constitutional Council. Thus, the new text -called to replace Pinochet’s Constitution- is drafted by a sector historically linked to his figure, which mainly defends his legacy.

Contemporary Argentina is not immune to the advance of the (not so) new rightists, who find in the struggles for the meaning of the dictatorial past a broader field of political dispute from which to position themselves. Forty years after ending the most violent dictatorial regime in Argentine history, celebrating this long period of uninterrupted democracy coincides with a new electoral year. A political scenario reveals that the “past that does not pass” is more present than ever in the voice of pre-candidates, pre-candidates, and the public sphere in general. The latter translates into positions and readings about the recent past aligned around two main trends. One of them displays narratives recovering the memories of the political militancy of the seventies while vindicating and embracing the struggles for “memory, truth, and justice,” firmly pushed by the human rights movement since the eighties.

In contrast, another trend emerged, embodied by heterogeneous actors with diverse discourses, who nurture, through nuances, negationist readings about State terrorism, its magnitude, and scope. This
tendency includes interpretations that recover the “theory of the two
demons” and, in its most extreme form, even vindicate the repressive
actions. Beyond the electoral situation, the tension between both posi-
tions has become increasingly manifest in the political field; revitalized
humanitarian activists use memory to warn of the danger underlying
the advance of right-wingers who relativize, deny, or justify repressive
violence. Ultimately, they revamp the fear of continuing a democracy
with human rights as one of its pillars.

Social movements as *milieux de mémorie*

Inquiring into the relationship between social movements and me-
morey implies inquiring into the role played by memory in today’s so-
ciety. Since the publication in 1952 of Maurice Halbwachs’ *Collective
Memory* (2004), this concept has become a central analytical category
for understanding the processes of memory construction. Memory
studies exist around “collective memory” and its derivations. Its deve-
lopment began in post-World War II Europe and peaked in the 1970s
in the “memory boom.” However, 30 years later, the *boom* began to
weaken, and many publications, television series, and films produced
up to then ended in a “commodification” of nostalgia, transforming
memory into another consumer product (Olick et al., 2011).

The relevance acquired by new information technologies has given
way too many narratives that have become incrementally unfathom-
able. In his 1984 examination of the relationship between memory and
history in France, Pierre Nora (2009) diagnosed how contemporary so-
ciety had abandoned the centrality of memory to give way to immedia-
cy by locating reflections on the past in the controversies of history. In
this way, memory lives condemned in places or sanctuaries that rescue
it to avoid disappearing.

The places of memory are, above all, remains, the extreme form un-
der which a commemorative conscience subsists in a history that
requests it because it ignores it. It is the denaturalization of our
world that makes the notion appear. That which segregates, erects,
establishes, constructs, decrees, maintains through artifice or will a
collectivity fundamentally trained in its transformation and renova-
tion, valued by nature the new against the old, the young against the
old, the future against the past. (Nora, 2009, p. 24).
Thus, the existence of places of memory would account for the disappearance of the *milieux* of memory. "Milieux" refers to the spheres, spaces, and environments in which memory develops. Unlike places, *milieux* keep the memory alive, capable of articulating meanings and giving meaning in the present and for the future.

The preeminence of contentious politics in Latin America and its deep roots in the recent past shows how memory continues to play a fundamental role in the struggles of the present. As Jelin (2021) points out, social movements are fundamental actors in the elaboration and struggle for definitions of the past. In this sense, they play a fundamental role in that they constitute external voices to the official ones, often antagonistic, that question the official discourses; other times, they nourish them due to the struggles for their recognition. Social movements can be thought of as *milieux* of memory since they are spaces where memory is worked and articulated to give meaning to the struggles of the present.

Assuming this interpretative line enables a series of questions on which it seems interesting to reflect based on concrete mobilization experiences. What memories do the collective actors who are part of social movements or engage in protest or various forms of activism construct and offer to society? How do they contribute to processing the past and the intergenerational transmission of memories? What strategies and memorial repertoires, present in society or culture, capitalize on the political struggles of the present? What links are present between certain memorial undertakings and broader political struggles?

The papers in this special issue of *Temas Sociológicos* explore these questions from various perspectives. The concerns surrounding the six case studies gathered here allow us to organize three thematic nodes that emerge precisely from the intersection of analytical perspectives from social movement and memory studies. The first of these nodes focuses on the articulation between social movements, territories, and memories; the second on the relationship between social movements and political regimes to analyze, in particular, memory policies as a result of these interactions; and the third, on the analysis of memories of past mobilizations, as political legacies or reservoirs of repertoires of action, which serve as input for new processes of mobilization or collective action.
Social movements, territories, and memories

On the first of the proposed nodes, we intertwine perspectives that problematize the movement’s territorial anchors, the disputes around them, and the different temporalities regarding activist deployment, considering the role of memories in these processes.

One of these approaches revolves around the study of territorialized memories and processes of marking. We understand them as memory undertakings. These processes develop in places that concentrate senses about the past; they become territories that function as scenarios of political struggles and disputes for those senses (Da Silva Catela, 2001; Jelin, 2017, 2021; Jelin & Langland, 2003). Markings, which can be produced from limited collective actions or as a result of longer-term processes, have become a fundamental part of the repertoires and strategies of movements such as the human rights movement in Argentina to keep alive the memory of the past of repression and state terrorism. They materialize in projects of different sizes (ranging from the placement of commemorative plaques, monuments, and the marking of places that functioned as clandestine detention centers to the construction of sites or spaces for memory) built based on certain consensuses, but which, at the same time, are the subject of controversies and tensions between the intervening actors. Thus, territorial markings are spaces of struggle for power, legitimacy, and recognition (Jelin, 2021).

Another dimension of the link between memories and territories unfolds by analyzing conflicts over territory and the action frameworks of specific movements identified in a socio-territorial key. The latter arise from logics of resistance or struggles for the recognition of rights over territory, which can articulate environmental and ecological causes, resistance to neoliberalism, and the excessive exploitation of land (in contexts of privatization of communal or fiscal lands, concentration in the hands of foreign capital, excessive exploitation, clearing of green areas), as well as demands for recognition by native peoples (Svampa, 2008).

Within the framework of conflicts and mobilization processes, short, medium, and long memories come into play that can intervene in the production of meaning about the mobilization itself by linking it with resistance struggles of the recent past or with those that go back
to the times of conquest and colonialism (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010b). They can, in turn, nurture action repertoires and political strategies once they capitalize on previous learning. They contribute, on the other hand, to forge or consolidate collective identities in the heat of the conflict through the conformation of a “we” that is built on different temporalities and puts into action the cohesive character of social memories (Auyero, 2002; Melucci, 1989; Pollak, 2006; Svampa y Stefano, 2007; Tarrow, 1997).

Contributing to these debates, the text by Juan Fernández Labbé analyzes experiences of territorial struggle, focusing the analysis on the role played by memory in these processes. The author identifies six mechanisms in this regard: 1) memories of the social trauma of repression during the dictatorship; 2) territories memorable for historical events; 3) memories and people as inspiration for struggle; 4) repertoires and strategies for action; 5) territorial cultural heritage and identity; and 6) everyday places as a heritage worth defending. These mechanisms allow identification with a past and territory and function as a “toolbox” to confront the processes of struggle. In this sense, Fernández Labbé’s text shows the relevance that the mnemonic narrative plays, not only in the construction of collective identities -what Gongaware (2010) calls “collective memory anchors”-but also in collective action repertoires (Tilly, 2002). A noteworthy aspect is the relevance acquired by what Fernández Labbé calls “intimate memory”: places, moments, and people that are part of the activists’ past and remembered when validating the struggle.

In continuity with this thematic line, the work of Tatiana Francischini analyzes local memories related to a land occupation conflict in the city of Humahuaca, Argentina, in 2012. Observing the narratives and practices intertwined with marking processes, Francischini addresses the production of representations that shape the “omaguaca” memories due to controversies and agreements in tension with an official memory (of provincial and national scale) that promotes alternative readings of the conflict. The analysis and problematization proposed by the author illustrate the deployment of a type of memory work that links medium and long-term events of the past to update and resignify them according to the needs and controversies of the present. Francischini investigates how the elaboration of meanings about this significant conflict for the
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Local community is a continued territorial struggle, which goes back to the colonial past and the “Indigenous” resistance. At the same time, it renews the political contest. This case study is also a valuable prism to understand how memories intervene in the (re)configuration of collective identities in the heat of contentious actions and to delineate ways of interpreting and doing politics.

**The relationship between social movements and the political regime: the politics of memory because of cooperation or conflict**

The second thematic axis takes memory policies as a starting point. The latter is another interesting prism to observe the social and political frameworks that underlie the production and circulation of public or “official” memories (Jelin, 2021; Zamponi, 2018) about significant events of the past. Following Groppo (2014), memory policies are a set of initiatives and decisions taken by public authorities to transmit a vision of the past, which, like any memory, implies a cut that operates from the selection and valorization of certain aspects. Jelin’s pioneering works have contributed to the analysis of this dimension of memories in a sociopolitical key; in the Argentine case, they focus on the perspective of the actors that integrated the human rights movement, conceived as active agents of the political process with the capacity to generate and build new political opportunities (Jelin, 2017, 2021). The gestation of memory policies is understood not only as a state project but as a result of the demands, pressures, or cooperation exerted by civil society through mobilization. Similarly, the work of Stern (2013) reveals how, in Chile, memory policies after the conquest of democracy developed in a relationship of “conflicting cooperation” (2013, p. 25), marked by moments of alliances and others of conflict between the State and civil society.

From this perspective, the research reviewed these policies to problematize the relations between the State, governments, and social movements. Based on the different Latin American experiences that had to face the recomposition of their democracies after authoritarian periods and, at the same time, socially deal with that traumatic past marked by repressive violence, interpretations with different nuances were developed: particularly when characterizing the relationship between the political regime of Government (Nun, 1987) and the social movements for the definition of memory policies.
In the case of some countries, during certain moments of their history (mainly in the early stages of democratic “transition”), there is a predominance of conflict (delineated in a relationship defined instead in the key of confrontation). Such is the case of the mobilizations for democratization and human rights in the Southern Cone between the 1980s and 1990s (Jelin, 2003, 2017; Joignant et al., 2013; Pereyra, 2005; Sempol, 2006; Stern, 2009), when activists initially questioned dictatorial regimes and then to sustain demands for justice and reparations concerning their crimes, with defiant and confrontational positioning. On the other hand, in countries such as Mexico, where political violence permeates the democratic regime, victims’ organizations and human rights activists maintain a repertoire of protests based on protest and resistance to state action. In this case, an interpretative framework of anger and distrust weighs on the State, which produces distancing and conflicts (Gravante, 2018; Gravante & Poma, 2019).

In other contexts, this linkage emerges more complexly: the development of memory policies results from struggles and conflicts and as instances of negotiation and cooperation. Many of the studies on the Argentine case focused on the trajectory of the human rights movement, making it possible to reconstruct this phenomenon. Some works have contributed to understanding the transition from a relationship with States, governments, and political parties, defined fundamentally in terms of confrontation, towards a new modality that, in a progressive and heterogeneous way, moved towards forms of cooperation that contributed to the expansion of State memory policies from 2003 onwards (Andriotti Romanin, 2012; Tavano, 2021). It is clear from these analyses that the redefinition of political ties allowed the human rights movement to advance in the resolution of many of its historical demands. At the same time, it contributes to reconstructing public memory of the dictatorial past that incorporated new voices and readings (mainly of the victims and their relatives) (Andriotti Romanin & Tavano, 2019). The latter resulted in a new memory regime (Crenzel, 2008).

Recovering these concerns based on the Argentine experience, the works of Eliana Funes and Juliana Santos Ibáñez investigate the processes underlying the creation and implementation of two national public policies and the actors that promote and intervene in them. These case studies analyze, in different ways, the particularities and
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challenges presented by some public memory policies in very different historical contexts in post-dictatorial Argentina over the last four decades.

On the one hand, at the intersection of public policy studies and memory pedagogies, Santos Ibáñez explores the implementation of the television program “Seguimos Educando” in its guidelines for the teaching of State terrorism in the recent past in Argentina, observing the audiovisual productions broadcast by the state-owned Canal Encuentro. The author starts from an understanding of school environments as a privileged scenario for the intergenerational transmission of memories and shows how education is a field where the struggles for transmitting and producing meanings about the dictatorial past, driven by various actors, converge. Within this framework, the tensions and affinities that shape the construction of a dynamic official/state memory, which progressively tends to be a vindication of politics in its various forms, are problematized. Santos Ibáñez’s work contributes, at the same time, to the reflection on the future of memory policies and the production/transmission of memories in contexts of virtuality, because of the restrictions derived from the containment of the pandemic COVID-19 between 2020 and 2021.

On the other hand, Funes’ article problematizes implementing a national public policy on a local scale (the city of Bahía Blanca). It looks at the functioning of one of the delegations of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) in 1984. The author focuses on historicizing the creation and implementation of this delegation, reconstructing the network of local actors who worked in the undertaking, and the alignments and divergences forged with other delegations. At the same time, the article describes the pressures the commission had to face during its work, particularly those imposed by the local media power (concentrated in the newspaper *La Nueva Provincia*). Concerning the processes of constructing memories implied in the delegation’s work, Funes approaches this axis by analyzing the continuities and differences in how the recent past appears in its final report about the one published by the national CONADEP. At the same time, the work makes visible the relevance of the delegation’s functioning in fostering the creation and maintenance of human rights organizations in the city, bringing together activists committed to the struggle
for truth and justice. In sum, the study of this case contributes to the understanding of the modalities adopted by transitional justice in the country.

The memories of the mobilization as an input for political action in the present

The third thematic line recovers those “short” or medium-term social memories mentioned above, whose relevance for the study of mobilization and collective action is evident in some of the papers included in this issue. Within the great breadth that can present the approach to these memories, the line of research we are interested in highlighting here focuses on the memories of mobilization, protest events, and contentious collective actions. On this subject, still little explored in the intersection of the fields of study that summon us, some lines of inquiry have been proposed that we consider fruitful to advance in understanding the features of mobilization in our time. Some of them, present in the papers included in this edition but not exhausting the multiplicity of possible approaches, are introduced below.

One approach illuminates the question of the incidence of memories in the forms of mobilization and protest, the configuration of demands, and the repertoires of action put into play; it understands memories as an integral part of political practice (Natalucci & Andújar, 2021; Zamponi, 2018). The remembrance of collective actors, trajectories, and mobilization practices can translate into accumulated learnings that nurture the continuity of struggles or lay the foundations of new movements based on appropriating and resignifying past events. It can also foster the constitution of new political articulations (or confrontations). In this way, by investigating the bridges built between mobilization experiences, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the historicity of the most recent events and the appropriation of legacies and grasp their innovative character.

Another approach explores the memorial conflicts that emerge from mobilization processes or protest events, in particular, between hegemonic or “official” memories and those “subaltern” produced among activists (Auyero, 2002; Badilla y Aguilera, 2021; Jelin, 2021; Ortiz Ruiz, 2021), in the tensions set to remember events, giving them meaning, and using these interpretations in present politics, dia-
logues, negotiations, and confrontations crossed by power relations and resistances. As Auyero (2002) points out, observing these dynamics can be a productive way to analyze the ways of doing politics in our time.

In line with these reflections, the work of Roberto Fernández Droguett, Angie Redel Vásquez, and Guillermo Tejeda Zúñiga focuses on the memories of activists involved in the student movement of 2011, one of the most important cycles of contentious action since the end of the dictatorship in Chile. The text emphasizes the concept of “political memories” to understand this process, which it defines as a type of mnemonic narrative that has political content, is articulated in the process of struggle, and aims at social transformation. The results show the 2011 mobilization as part of a cycle of protests in which contentious politics appears as a valid political strategy and an effective way to conduct social change. According to the analysis, the 2006 and 2011 mobilizations laid the foundations for the 2019 social revolt. In particular, in terms of repertoires of contentious action in three areas: 1) protests of a playful nature, which managed to resonate with broad sectors of the population; 2) takeovers as a vehicle for building a critical mass of organization; 3) violence as a way of highlighting demands and as a strategy of resistance against state repression. In addition, Fernandez, Redel, and Tejeda describe a process of politization of society in general, which began with student demands and culminated in a demand for change to the social and political system inherited from the dictatorship.

Finally, the work of Elisa Niño Vázquez invites us to observe the problem of memory and social movements from a different place. The author uses a digital ethnography based on the hashtag “#NoNosCuidanNosViolan,” a digital protest repertoire that denounces police violence against women in Mexico. Through this hashtag, women worldwide circulated images that memorize violence and linked past/present political struggles. In this sense, Niño’s work allows us to glimpse how memories serve as vehicles for articulating struggles on the web, where images allow us to establish assemblages of meaning that connect experiences of struggle and resistance. Emotional evocation is central to this context since it connects people’s experiences across different places, times, and events.
By way of balance

This special issue of the journal Temas Sociológicos seeks to contribute to the field of the study of contentious politics, social movements, and memories through their intersection. In this sense, three thematic nodes were proposed: 1) social movements, territory, and memory; 2) relations between social movements and political regimes; and 3) memories of mobilization as an input for the present. Throughout these nodes, it was possible to inquire into how memories articulate new meanings concerning the present and the future. In this sense, social movements challenge Nora's diagnosis and become true milieux of memory, where memory flourishes and reproduces itself for struggles throughout Latin America.

References


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