Why Write about the Post-dictatorship Generation?

This generation, to which I belong, inherited a painful past that also contains the promises of social change. The last wave of Southern Cone dictatorships (mid-1970s to late 1980s) was an attempt to bring to an end a period of great politicisation that threatened economic, political, and military elites as well as U.S. hegemony in the region. The years of brutal repression deeply harmed societies and destroyed political projects, social bonds, and individual lives. The horror survivors had been subject to and conveyed to society at large was crucial to eliminating solidary and anti-establishment identities (Feierstein 2007). The military primarily targeted different kinds of political organisations: armed and unarmed movements but also the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile and the supporters and sympathisers of such groups.

For decades, officers from the region had trained in French and U.S. institutions to fight their own citizenry, understood as potential “internal enemies.” The Buenos Aires Chief of Police, Camps, “prided himself for synthesising both [the U.S. and French] perspectives, and, in the process, creating [a] unique brand of repression” (Arditti 1999, 11). The repression was coordinated between the countries through Operation Condor, a project facilitated by the United States through the Chilean intelligence agency CNI (Roniger 2010, 31). The military or paramilitary forces and police personnel (represores in Spanish) organised a regime of terror through systematic abduction, torture, rape, and murder. The practice of disappearing...
prisoners was a defining characteristic of the repression: after individuals were abducted, they were taken to a clandestine detention centre—of which there were hundreds throughout the region—and cut off from communication with the outside world. Many of them were sedated and thrown alive from planes into the sea or the Rio de la Plata while others were killed and buried in unmarked graves. Because their relatives were denied any information about their death or the location of their remains, these persons are referred to as desaparecidos (the “disappeared”). For those who remain behind, the loss of a loved one without a death confirmation is a catastrophe of meaning, as Gabriel Gatti (2008) observes. Disappearance defies comprehension, as it defies language: the armed forces turned the adjective desaparecido into a noun.

The disappeared women and men had parents, siblings, daughters and sons, spouses, friends, and fellow activists for whom disappearance was a tragic event that transformed their lives and confined them to the condition of victims. They responded to this condition by organising and demanding truth about and justice for the human rights violations. After the dictatorships, the governments of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay responded to these demands in different ways in a context still marked by the presence of the military in public life. The dynamics between these three actors—human rights associations, the governments, and armed forces—laid the basis for the subsequent development of collective memory in the three countries.

In this book, I reflect upon the ways in which the post-dictatorship generations in the Southern Cone have reshaped the collective memory of regimes and revolutionary projects through activism and different forms of artistic expression: cinema, literature, comics, and photography. Who are the members of this generation, and why write a book about them? My biography can provide the beginning of an answer.

I was born in Uruguay in 1976, the third year of the dictatorships in both my home country and in Chile, and the year of the military coup in Argentina. Being a child during those years meant taking part in a cultural project created by the dictatorship, which shaped not only the formal institutions of schooling but also our leisure readings (Guitelman 2006). However, the earliest events that stand out in my memory are connected to the first democratic elections in 1985. One of the televised campaign ads featured the image of a political prisoner who was carried away by soldiers. They held him by his arms and legs as he formed a “V” with his fingers while a chorus sang: