

# Oral History, Memory, and Relief: Reflections on the Importance of Testimonies in Overcoming Contexts of Political Violence

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*In Latin America, over the past decades, many countries have gone through different political transitions, going from being military dictatorships to democracies. One question that has presented itself to society and government in all of these countries is this: how to deal with this authoritarian heritage? How to face this past, fit it into the new times, heal wounds, and remove the legacy of violence? One element has been identified as crucial in all of these political transition processes: the word. Revealing facts, making violations public, reporting arbitrariness, and remembering the struggles and resistance – all of this has played a great symbolic and political role in the construction of a new pact in post-conflict societies. Oral history deals with testimonies, memory, and life stories, and that is precisely why it has played a key role in this process of transition. This article is a reflection on the relationship between oral history, memory, and politics; it considers the role of testimony and words in the process of overcoming contexts of political violence. I will touch on some issues related to Argentina and South Africa, but my main focus is Brazil and the Amnesty Committee of the Justice Department, with whom we have developed a research partnership through the project “Memory Tracks: an oral history of amnesty in Brazil.”*

Since late 2010, I have worked on a nationwide research project called “Memory Tracks: an oral history of amnesty in Brazil,” carried out as a partnership between the Amnesty Committee of the Justice Department and three federal universities, namely Pernambuco (UFPE), Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), and Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). The goal of this study is to portray, at a national level, the theme of amnesty in Brazil, by gathering statements from people who were persecuted by the military dictatorship; people who have received amnesty or are applying for it; relatives of people killed and disappeared; people who have fought for amnesty since the 1970s and who took part in the creation and political action of the Women’s Movement for Amnesty and of the various Brazilian Pro Amnesty Committees (known as CBAs, which spread throughout Brazil between 1977 and 1979); activists of social and political movements that fought against the regime and of militant Human Rights movements. These statements, which are being collected in the Northeast, Southeast, and South of Brazil by teams from the three

universities mentioned above, are being recorded, filmed, and transcribed. This material will compose a comprehensive archive that will be deposited at the three universities, at the Amnesty Memorial, and will also be fully available online. This research has allowed for reflection on some theoretical and methodological aspects of Oral History, such as the articulation between memory and rhetoric, and the potential of the biographical method. The research has also brought to the surface important issues regarding the remembrance of the repressive period, such as disputes over its memory and the plurality of visions and experiences. Based on this research, we believe that it is possible to build a historical narrative of the military government in Brazil from the perspective of amnesty, focusing mainly on the many stories of citizens who were affected by repression or who fought against it.

### **The Right to Remembrance and Truth in Transitional Justice: The Importance of Bearing Witness**

In today's world, in recent decades, a number of societies went through important political transitions: they went from dictatorial and arbitrary regimes to democratic ones. One question that has presented itself to society and government in all of these countries is this: how to deal with this authoritarian heritage? How to face this past, fit it into the new times, heal wounds, and remove the legacy of violence? Governments must choose how to act: investigate crimes and responsibilities? Punish the culprits? Grant amnesty for political crimes? Make moral and material reparations for the harm caused? Reintegrate people who were formerly excluded? Dismantle the repressive apparatus? Reveal and disclose facts? All these questions concern legal and political procedures that are part of the transition into democracy. These procedures reveal how government and society deal with the authoritarian past and are part of what is known as "transitional justice." This concept has been discussed in recent years by Human Rights activists and organizations, making up an international network that monitors, debates, and intervenes in different cases. Each country adopts different "transitional justice" measures, according to its history, its political culture, and a correlation of forces at the time of the transition. Transitional justice implies several issues: the right to remembrance, national reconciliation, and reparations for victims. These are the three elements that will essentially be articulated in each country, in light of their critical moment and structural circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

At different moments in history, this process has included different countries, such as Portugal and Spain, which saw the end of the Salazar and the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Paloma Aguilar Fernandez and Carmen González Enriquez (eds), *Las políticas hacia el pasado: juicios, depuraciones, perdón y olvido em las nuevas democracias*" (Madrid. Ediciones Istmo, 2002).

Franco dictatorships (different types of endings: in Portugal, the April Captains overthrew the government in the Carnation Revolution and in Spain, the death of President Franco made way for a negotiated solution to end the dictatorship); almost all Latin American countries that experienced military dictatorships in the period from the 1960s to the '80s; South Africa, which overcame the apartheid racial segregation regime. Some authors add to this list the East European and Asian countries that also experienced dictatorial communist regimes. We can also include several African countries that are seeking to transition towards democracy. In sum, this is a quite diverse reality, not only in the type of dictatorship experienced by each country, but also in the type of transition, the political measures adopted and political results achieved. Our goal here is not to analyze the entire process, but, in fact, to point out the emergence and universality of the theme of transitional justice and the role of testimony in this context.<sup>2</sup> One element has been identified as crucial in all these cases: the word. Revealing facts, making the violations public, reporting arbitrariness, naming the people responsible, and remembering the struggles and resistance – all of this has played a great symbolic and political role in the construction of a new pact in post-conflict societies.

Argentina and South Africa have become two distinct paradigms, two different models of transitional justice. Argentinian society, Human Rights groups and activists in that country have emphasized the issue of justice – seeking to hold the government and its agents accountable for the crimes and violations committed during the dictatorship and punishing them. South Africa has emphasized remembrance, reporting, and revealing facts with the purpose of promoting national reconciliation. In both processes, testimony is a key element.

Argentina was a pioneer in this process: the effort to bring to surface the memory of repression, through statements, was conceived as a political fight. Human Rights supporters and relatives of political prisoners and missing people united around the motto: “remembering so as not to forget, so as not to repeat.” At that time, memory was fighting against oblivion. Recovering the memories of what had gone on in the years of dictatorship turned out to be a weapon to report the government’s repression and terrorism. Memory was used as a political instrument that prevented oblivion and demanded justice. Memory brought to the surface government crimes and also allowed the symbolic recovery for the families of thousands of missing people. The contribution by some Argentinian researchers in this field of reflection on the production of memories of repression is quite important: not only by recovering and disclosing such memories, but also because it leads to a critical reflection on the building process of social and political memories itself in Argentina at present. In the article “Memorias en

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<sup>2</sup> An in-depth analysis of the different kinds of transitional justice can be found in Barahona de Brito et al., *Las Políticas hacia el pasado*.

conflicto,” published in the magazine *Puentes*, Elizabeth Jelin points out the conflictive and plural nature of such remembrance: “It is impossible to find one sole memory, vision or interpretation of the past shared by all of society. What exists is a political fight and this fight is often conceived as one against oblivion.”<sup>3</sup>

In the fight against oblivion, testimony was a central element. Argentina was one of the first countries to organize, in a joint effort by public and private entities, files with statements from people affected by the repression: former political prisoners, families of missing people, human rights activists, intellectuals, and artists opposed to the regime that had suffered political persecution. The organization *Memoria Abierta* [Open Memory] was created in the 1990s, gathering hundreds of statements. These statements have been used in research on the history and on the memory of that period and have also served the political purpose of revealing crimes by the dictatorial regime.

Some researchers in Argentina have recently tried to make the relationship between remembrance and oblivion more complex. Historiography based on oral statements has been questioned by some intellectuals who say that the country is going through a boom of memories of the dictatorial regime and that such memories reify the experience of that time, without necessarily completely understanding it. Beatriz Sarlo proposes this discussion in her book *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo*.<sup>4</sup> Sarlo questions a historiography built mainly on testimony. In her opinion, testimonies and an appreciation of memories of the repressive period do not necessarily help in understanding the process experienced. Among other reasons, this is so because testimony production and social construction of memory are always informed by contingencies of the present and always marked by political use of the past. Beatriz Sarlo believes that “It is more important to understand than to remember.” And systematic reiteration of memory does not always lead us to an understanding of a historical process. However, despite these questions, or maybe precisely because of them, the political importance of testimony in the Argentinian transitional process is undeniable.

South Africa presents a different model. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission convened in that country after apartheid was over had a feature that set it apart from all other truth commissions. The goal of the South African commission, as the name itself says, was not so much to punish government crimes or investigate responsibilities, but to reveal what had happened and promote a new social pact. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was focused on victims reporting what they had suffered. The Commission did not

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, “Memorias en conflicto,” *Puentes* (Buenos Aires), Nr. 1 (August 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo Pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* (Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2007).

purport to *punish* the guilty, but to *declare* the crimes committed. It was a policy aimed at discovering the Truth, more so than one of seeking Justice. The Commission sought out to record the violence and excesses committed by both sides – not only apartheid crimes, but also the excesses by militants of the African National Congress (the armed political group that fought against the apartheid government). In other words, the Commission did not intend to investigate the crimes committed by the government, but rather the crimes and violations committed by different players in a society fraught with racial segregation. The goal was not to hold the government liable, but rather to reconcile society. This unique feature of the TRC was often pointed out as one of the elements that allowed for a “peaceful” transition from apartheid to democracy. However, it also created a lot of frustration among the young militants of the African National Congress, not only because they opposed what they deemed to be “an artificial equivalence of excesses,” but mainly because, from their point of view, their struggle against apartheid was not being appreciated. The Commission allowed victims to report the atrocities suffered by them, but did not allow young ANC militants to tell their tales of struggle and combat.

This is quite an interesting debate, completely centered on the political potential of words and testimony. For some scholars, including Paul Ricoeur, this is precisely the merit of the TRC. The fact of revealing the truth, indicating the damages, and granting amnesty and forgiveness, may create a new political field other than vengeance. Ricoeur stresses that the word used in the African language is *ubuntu*, which is similar to the idea of forgiveness and amnesty, but slightly different. As the authors of the book *Verité, Réconciliation, Réparation* explain,<sup>5</sup> the term *ubuntu* requires interaction: someone complains of having been harmed, the community discusses the issue and agrees that the harm is real. Everyone agrees on who acted correctly and who acted wrongly. So the perpetrator is forced to acknowledge his/her guilt and then, due to such acknowledgment, request and obtain forgiveness. In this manner, the TRC reproduced age-old conflict resolution procedures that existed in the communities. In the opinion of Paul Ricoeur, one of the authors of that book, what was in question was the possibility of having non-violent justice.<sup>6</sup>

But this is not a unanimous opinion. Historian Jonatan Grossman has a different point of view. In an article published in the journal of the Brazilian Oral History Association, called “Violência e silêncio: reescrevendo o futuro” (Violence and silence: rewriting the future), he presents a different opinion and makes a different argument. He believes that focusing on the relationship

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<sup>5</sup> Bárbara Cassan, Olivier Cayla, and Philippe-Joseph Salazar (orgs.), *Verité, Réconciliation, Réparation* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Avant la justice non violente, la justice violente” in: Cassan et al. *Verité, Réconciliation, Réparation*

victim/tormentor; revelation/forgiveness depoliticizes. Here is a translated excerpt from his article:

I attended a TRC hearing that dealt with the experiences of a group of young people known for their unusually violent militancy, their courage and successes against Government forces. The activists came to hear their own story. Some of them left with their hearts broken, demoralized and desolate, because what they heard was the story of what they had suffered as victims, instead of what they had done as social players. (...) The result of what I saw is based on the structure of the TRC itself, which is in charge of dealing with the victims' history as individuals, in a process that puts suffering before and in place of political involvement and resistance.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy is far from being over, the points of view are quite divergent, but both positions base their reflections on the political potential of words and testimonies. It is no wonder that both authors – Ricoeur and Grossman – work with memory.

### **An Oral History of Amnesty in Brazil: The Centrality of the Issue of Amnesty in the Brazilian Political Process**

With regard to Brazil, it is important to situate the centrality of the amnesty issue in the Brazilian political transition process. This centrality is specific to Brazil. Amnesty had an important political role in the fight against the military government and went on to have a political and symbolic role in the reconstruction of democracy, culminating in its content being made equivalent to the notion of (political and material) restoration and galvanizing the theme of liability and punishment of those guilty of committing dictatorial crimes in the discussion of the Amnesty Act. Organizations traditionally connected to the fight for amnesty were also the main protagonists (often critics) of the process of creating and convening the Truth Commission that is still underway.<sup>8</sup>

Let us reconstruct some of this process. The fight for amnesty began in the mid-1970s and united and mobilized several political groups and social movements. Among these were: the Brazilian Democratic Movement, a.k.a MDB (an opposition party that initially consented to the dictatorial government, but, little by little, became an actual opposition party), the Catholic Church, the Student Movement, community and slum residents' movements, movements by

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Grossman, "Violência e silêncio: reescrevendo o futuro," *História Oral – Revista da Associação Brasileira de História Oral* Nr. 3 (June 2000), 7-24.

<sup>8</sup> The Truth Commission was passed by President Dilma Roussef on November 18, 2011. As of the date of this article, its composition had not yet been defined.

liberal professionals (such as lawyers, teachers, journalists), some movements of a new type that were being built (or rebuilt with new content) such as the women's movement and the black movement, Alternative Press (a new type of opposition press, very specific to that period), and, towards the end of the 70s, a new workers-union movement, arising mainly in the industrial region of São Paulo. The amnesty campaign was the first great national political campaign after AI-5 (the most repressive act of the dictatorial government) was passed. The year of 1977 was very important in this process. It marked the comeback of public political manifestations in Brazil's major capitals. The fuse was blown with the arrest of some young people connected to left-wing organizations, who were distributing pamphlets during a workers celebration of Labour Day (May 1<sup>st</sup>) in São Paulo. Shouting "Free our prisoners! Now!" students from all over Brazil held large public demonstrations in several universities and, along with other sectors of the opposition, used this movement to create the May 1<sup>st</sup> Committee for Amnesty: the first step for a public, offensive, street campaign for amnesty in Brazil. Right after that, at the beginning of 1978, the Brazilian Committee for Amnesty was created in Rio de Janeiro, joining other existing committees, such as the Women's Committee for Amnesty. The Brazilian Committee for Amnesty (a.k.a CBA) went on to open headquarters in several cities throughout the country.

At this time, newspapers from the Alternative Press played quite an important role. They helped to disseminate and nationalize some broad political campaigns, among which was the amnesty campaign. The theme was debated and published on the pages of the newspapers "*Movimento*," "*Em Tempo*," and "*Versus*." With the support of this press and of social movements, CBA led a national campaign for "full, broad, and unrestricted amnesty." This was the flag carried and the slogan that marked the Brazilian political transition.

But the amnesty that was the subject of the 1979 Amnesty Act was not the same amnesty desired by society's most combative sectors: CBA, the student movement, groups of family members of deceased and missing people, and left-wing newspapers from the alternative press. It was a partial, restricted amnesty which, even worse, allowed for a certain understanding of "reciprocity," that is, it protected the military and others that perpetrated government violence.

Amnesty in Brazil, therefore, has a complex character, as the President of the Amnesty Commission, Mr. Paulo Abrão, insists on saying. On one hand, it represented a partial victory by society and by the groups that fought for "general and unrestricted amnesty" (and that saw amnesty as a result, albeit an imperfect one, of this struggle); but on the other hand, it was also a partial victory for the military and governing class, who managed to pass a limited amnesty and avoided the responsibility for having to investigate liabilities and crimes committed under the dictatorial regime.

The Amnesty Act was received as a partial victory by the movements that opposed the regime. The summer of 1979/1980 went into history as the “*amnesty summer*”; people returned from exile and were received festively at the Rio de Janeiro airport. On the other hand, the families of the deceased and of missing political prisoners had nothing to celebrate, as the law did not relieve their pain nor did it examine the issue of those deaths and forced disappearances. Many of these people, in their statements, say that at this time, they felt “abandoned and left at the margin of the country’s party.”<sup>9</sup>

But the return of those in exile did not close the issue of amnesty in Brazil. Gradually, through supplementary laws and orders, all political prisoners were freed, overcoming the initial barriers set by the 1979 Amnesty Act. Amnesty was the subject of new laws in the years 1985, 1988, 1992, 2001 and 2002.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, these laws aimed to broaden the benefits and beneficiaries of amnesty, seeking to redress the violence practiced by the Brazilian government during the dictatorship. And through this historic process, the term “amnesty” in Brazil slowly became equal to the term “compensation.” The government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso began this compensation process. The idea was for citizens not only to be granted *amnesty* for political crimes of which they had been accused, but *compensated* for harm suffered. The Amnesty Commission, created in August 2001, along with the Justice Department, has had the function to compensate, indemnify, and restore to public office and former job posts; that is, to play the role of restoring and compensating harm caused by the military government to those who suffered political persecution. So the term “amnesty” gained a broader meaning, which includes, above all, *compensation*. This is specific to the Brazilian political process, to the Brazilian model of transitional justice: focus on compensation (in detriment to other aspects, for example, revealing the truth, investigating liabilities and punishing the guilty); and identifying the difference between “amnesty” and “compensation”.<sup>11</sup>

Amnesty has recently come under discussion in society. Human Rights movements have tried to cancel the perverse effect of the Amnesty Act that inhibits the investigation and punishment of crimes committed by the Government during the dictatorship. The 1979 Amnesty Act has been invoked to bar truth and justice policies in Brazil. The Brazilian Supreme court recently ruled that the law also applies to Government agents who committed crimes of torture, murder, and disappearance of political prisoners during the military dictatorship. This point of

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<sup>9</sup> Statement by Jessie Jane Vieira de Souza, File “Memory marks: oral history of amnesty in Brazil.”

<sup>10</sup> Carla Rodeghero, Gabriel Diestman, and Tatiana Trindade, *Anistia ampla, geral e irrestrita. História de uma luta inconclusa* (Santa Cruz do Sul, EDUNISC, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> This text was written and presented before the Truth Commission was convened. The work of that Commission may end up redefining the terms of this affirmation.

view of is opposed by some eminent Brazilian jurists, such as Dalmo Dallari, Fabio Comparato, and Márcio Thomaz Bastos. In their opinion, the law granted amnesty to the *political* crimes committed during the military regime. It did not grant amnesty to torturers, because torture is not a political crime, it's a crime against humanity. Therefore, the Amnesty Act does not prevent investigation of responsibility or prosecution and punishment of torturers. This issue has not yet been resolved and is currently under debate in the Truth Commission.

### **A Compilation of Oral History of Amnesty**

We consider amnesty a key issue, both politically and symbolically, to understand the dictatorial period and comprehend the political struggles of that time, the disputes regarding the memories of that time, the transition process underwent by the country, the compensation policies that Brazil has been implementing, the controversies arising from such policies, the challenges concerning democratic consolidation and controversies related to the demand for truth and justice. Based on this premise, we began to compile statements from people who were politically persecuted, families of the deceased and missing people, activists from human rights movements, political militants that fought against the military regime and who took part in the campaign for amnesty. Our goal is to understand Brazil's recent political history beginning with the issue of amnesty and analyzing the importance of words and testimony in individually and collectively overcoming the post-traumatic political contexts.

Our list of interviewees was not created out of isolated names; we sought groups of people articulated in “communities of meaning” – groups of people that were integrated in an organic unit: a party, a movement, a political organization, etc. We guided ourselves not only by Halbwachs' idea of affective community, which is a unit from which people share and build their memories on,<sup>12</sup> but also by Franco Ferrarotti's concept of collective biographies. In his pioneering book on biographical studies, called *On the Science of Uncertainty: The Biographical Method in Social Research*, Ferrarotti emphasizes the relationship between history and the many individual stories, and the possibility arising therefrom to *read a society through one or many biographies*. Ferrarotti proposed to give a theoretical ground to the biographical method, using it in a plural manner. He states that the biographical method is generally used for one individual, for writing individual biographies. However, he believes that this choice – the idea of the individual as a social atom, as the basic fundamental unit of sociology – is a mistake. In fact, the individual is not the simplest element. Much to the contrary, the individual is a complex synthesis of several relationships. The most basic unit of sociology is the

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<sup>12</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *A memória coletiva* (São Paulo: Vértice, 1990).

social group, a basic group that establishes among itself relationships of sociability, exchange, and interaction. Therefore, his perspective on life stories is aimed at building group biographies. Ferraroti believes that this is how the biographical method can present its greatest richness and highest potential: by showing that the many stories of private lives of a time, of a generation, of a place, are inscribed within the limits and possibilities of a more general History, and that each one of these multiple private stories interprets, in their own way, History and their relationship to it.<sup>13</sup> This perspective guided our compilation. We prepared our lists of interviewees based on the affiliation of people to certain groups or communities of meaning.

The interviews were conducted in the “life story” form but focused on the political trajectory of the person giving their statement and their militancy against the dictatorship, their conflicts, political persecution suffered, and their insertion in the new democratization process and in the transitional justice implemented in Brazil. The interviewee’s relationship with the theme of amnesty and political compensations was particularly stressed.

The interviews allow us to note the different constructions of memory of the military government, the different and conflicting versions on facts and themes; the disputes for memory, as well as the controversies that surround the amnesty and compensation process itself. The authors that have most helped us in dealing with these issues are Michel Pollak and Andreas Huysen.

Michael Pollak, in the text “*Memory, Oblivion, Silence*,”<sup>14</sup> noted the domination and submission processes of the different versions and memories, indicating the gap between the official, dominant memory and “underground memories,” marked by silence, by the unsaid, by resentment. This gap may appear not only in the relationship between a dominating Government and civil society, but also among minority groups and the encompassing society, and even among different lines of thought within the same group. These are “forbidden,” “unutterable,” or “shameful” memories that often oppose the most legitimate and powerful collective memory: national memory;<sup>15</sup> sometimes, they also confront the “official” memory of a group. Huysen added more data to this conflictive dimension: the dynamism and mutative capacity of the versions and conflicts, showing that the relationship between what is remembered and what is forgotten changes according to the conjecture and to the political possibilities and needs of a time.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Franco Ferraroti, *Histoire et Histoires de Vie - la méthode biographique dans les sciences sociales* (Paris: Librairie des Meridiens, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Pollak, “Memória, esquecimento e silêncio,” *Estudos Históricos* (1989).

<sup>15</sup> Maria Paula Araujo and Myrian Sepúlveda, “História, memória e esquecimento: implicações políticas,” *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* Nr. 79 (Dec. 2007); 95-111.

<sup>16</sup> Andrés Huysen, *Resistência à memória: os usos e abusos do esquecimento público*. (mimeo),

Therefore, our compilation of statements has three investigative lines:

- conflicts and disputes around the memory of that time; controversial themes, taboos, the “underground memories.”
- the life experiences told in the interviews, that allow us to see the horizon of possibilities of choices, of values, of paths, of projects, of utopia, of losses, of frustration and of pain of a certain period.
- the role of testimony and words for individuals and also society to overcome periods of political violence.

It would be impossible to deal in depth with all three themes in this text. Actually, this work is the first theoretical, methodological, and analytical approach to this compilation of forty statements taped and filmed in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais during 2011. However, I would like to explore each theme a little, even if superficially.

### **Disputes About Memory**

The statements have pointed out the disputes about the memory of that time; controversial issues, controversies, and taboos. Among these, one of the most striking refers to the pre-1964 memory, that is, the years in which Brazil was governed by João Goulart and the military coup itself. There is a clear dispute of versions in the statements on this period and theme. For the elderly interviewees, who had lost public office, were arrested or exiled in ‘64, such as some old union members who are still alive, that period is remembered as a moment of glory, the golden period of Brazilian democracy: the union movement, the campaign for basic reforms, actions by the National Student Union (a.k.a UNE) and its Center for Popular Culture (a.k.a CPC). Clodesmidt Riani, former president of the General Labor Confederation (a.k.a CGT), and right hand of President João Goulart, was in charge of the Government’s union and labor department and who now, at the age of 93, is one of the main representatives of this line of thought. Riani was one of the first citizens to lose his public office and to be arrested right after the coup. To the military, he was the live incarnation of the threat of a “red, unionist republic.” Riani, a descendant of Italian immigrants, refers to João Goulart in his statement in a complimentary manner, filled with emotion and admiration. To him, the President was “close to the workers” and “fully accessible”; Riani remembers that he had direct access to the president’s quarters: “a simple and modest man.”<sup>17</sup>

But it is not only union members; student militants connected to the

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<sup>17</sup> Statement by Clodesmidt Riani, compilation “Oral History of Amnesty in Brazil.”

Maria Paula Araújo, “Oral History, Memory, and Relief: Reflections on the Importance of testimonies in overcoming contexts of political violence,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue “Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America”

Brazilian Communist Party and to the Center for Popular Culture of the National Student Union also praise the moment of pre-1964 in their statements. Ferreira Gullart narrates the artistic experiences and the creativity of the generation involved in the political and artistic proposals of that time.

The Historian Dulce Pandolfi, who was a high school student in Pernambuco in the beginning of the 1960s, situates the politicization of the State government of Miguel Arraes:

I think that Pernambuco was the tensest state in Brazil, with the issue of the Northeast in focus, the situation of farm workers. So I believe it was a very rich moment and that it produced many effects on me: this social concern, this desire to participate, I remember the elections, the campaigns, how that mobilized me, as well as the Arraes government itself. Can you imagine it? I walked around with his pin, while going to a very traditional, reactionary catholic school.”<sup>18</sup>

However, other interviewees, especially militants from armed leftist groups, do not value that period in the same way. Much to the contrary, many identify it as populist or reformist. This whole other segment of the Brazilian left-wing after the ‘64 coup built a negative memory of the Goulart government, of the campaign for base reforms and of the President himself. This segment believes that the pre-‘64 experience was essentially *reformist* and *not revolutionary*, and, due to this incorrect direction, it perverted and weakened the popular movement that was its political framework.

This is one of the main controversies that appear in the narratives of our interviewees: framing 1964 and the political movement before the military coup that overthrew the João Goulart government. This is a controversy that shows a political dispute between different left-wing parties and organizations and remembrance not only of the dictatorship and the ‘64 coup, but also of Brazil’s political struggles.

### **Sharing Life Experiences: History, Memory and Rhetoric**

The experiences that may be lived by a person are dated. A horizon of possibilities, choices, paths, and concrete experiences is historically built. Working with biographies and oral history allows us to investigate how this horizon of possibilities presented itself concretely in the life of a few people. This is one way to, quoting Ferraroti “comprehend history from one or several life stories.” Oral history, through the collection, organization, and dissemination of

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<sup>18</sup> Statement by Dulce Pandolfi, compilation “Oral History of Amnesty in Brazil.”

statements, has helped us learn about human experience in times of crisis and contexts of political violence.

But the life statements from our interviewees question not only memory, but also rhetoric. The statements go beyond a mere relationship between memory and oblivion. It is not just about selecting what to remember and what to forget, but also about how things should be told to the interviewer. In other words, rhetoric is essential. How can a life be narrated in a manner that makes sense, in spite (or because) of the arrests, exiles, tortures, losses, deaths, etc.? Almost all testimonies seek to have a meaning, something to justify the trajectory of that life that was sometimes entirely disturbed due to political persecution.

Many of the people we interviewed presented their life stories as exemplary trajectories, whether as an example for future generations, or as an example (representation) of their own generation. Others, however, present what is essentially a tale of pain and of a life torn apart by political repression. Generally speaking, the difference between the former and the latter is tied to the existence or lack of a social network, especially a political one, around the interviewee. The survivor, as Primo Levi wrote, is the one who did not die, who escaped, who did not experience the worst.<sup>19</sup> For him to accept himself as a survivor, he must have a support network to justify, explain, and transform this survival into political action. Simply put: the trauma brought on by political violence is easier to overcome when worked collectively within a politically invested environment and with political partners.

Among the stories told, some of those most interesting to historians are those that narrate the prison routine: the pain, the laughter, the victories and defeats, the organization, and community life in prison. In this sense, the testimonies given by women are quite significant. The Italian historian Sílvia Salvatici pointed out the richness of women's statements, in a beautiful text called "Gendered Memories: Reflections on Women's Oral History."<sup>20</sup> The text is about the research she did with statements from women in the Kosovo concentration camps. The historian leads us to realize that through statements from women who were in concentration camps or who lived through civil wars, it is possible to contribute to history a side of the human experience during war times that had remained uncovered: episodes and experiences involving rapes, clandestine childbirth, abortions, tending to the sick, protecting children, storing food, making clothes, improvising in order to deal with famine and cold in times of severe scarcity. This represents a range of experiences and manners of facing wars and tyranny that was not known, that did not appear in historic reports and records, or in men's statements. To corroborate this vision, the statements of women that

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<sup>19</sup> Primo Levi, "É isto um homem?" (RJ, Rocco, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Silvia Salvatici, "Memórias de gênero: reflexões sobre a história oral de mulheres," *História Oral – Revista da Associação Brasileira de História Oral*, vol. 8, nr. 1 (2005): 29-42.

went to prison have a very unique and meaningful point of view. In this case, the statements by Jessie Jane and Flávia Schilling are particularly expressive.

Jessie Jane Vieira de Souza, currently a history professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), was arrested in 1970 when she was 19 years old, after a frustrated attempt to hijack a plane to Cuba. Jessie spent almost ten years at Talavera Bruce prison in Bangu, State of Rio de Janeiro. In her testimony, Jessie tells of female solidarity in the prison, even though it was a mixed prison, with common and political prisoners. In fact, it was more than that. The institution was both prison and judicial mental hospital.

At that time, there were no women's mental hospitals, so there were two wards at Talavera: one was the ward of the "subversive" prisoners, as they called it, and the other was the "crazy" ward, of those who had been judged under article 121 of the Penal Code.<sup>7</sup> And when I arrived, I was sent to the crazy ward.<sup>21</sup>

But these women, who were stigmatized as crazy and accused of murder, established a relationship of solidarity with Jessie. "One of them, Nilze, shouted 'Shut up, everybody!' ... and then she asked me: 'You're a subversive, aren't you? Your gang is on the other side. You shouldn't be here, those guys are jerking you off!'"<sup>22</sup> Jessie notes the difference in the relationships in a women's prison and in a male prison. In the male prison, prisoners establish a hierarchical relationship; there is usually a "sheriff." In a female prison, the inmates establish networks; relationships are more horizontal.

One of the most moving episodes in her testimony is the birth of her daughter, Letta. Jessie was taken to the hospital, in labour already, in a police vehicle.

They took me to the room and Doctor Jefferson Carneiro Leão delivered the baby. He had delivered almost everybody's baby. He was from the "partidão"<sup>23</sup> you know? And then Letta was born, by C-section (...) I stayed there the first night, everything was ok. I called my parents in Sweden the second night, I cried a lot. I slept. When I woke up, there were armed guards in my room, around my bed.<sup>24</sup>

Jessi managed to call some friends, who removed the soldiers from her

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7 Article 121 of the Brazilian Penal Code refers to the crime of homicide.

<sup>21</sup> Statement by Jessie Jane.

<sup>22</sup> Statement by Jessie Jane.

<sup>23</sup> "Partidão" was the nickname of the Brazilian Communist Party.

<sup>24</sup> Statement by Jessie Jane.

room. But right after that the climate of terror escalated.

(...) I think I fell asleep. I woke up with shouts at my window: “let’s kill her”, “lets kidnap her”. I woke up feeling scared, reached for the phone, it was dead. I called for the nurse, she didn’t come. That went on for the rest of the night.<sup>25</sup>

And then Jessie was taken back to the prison. Going back to that episode, Jessie says that only years later she understood what had gone on. Bishop Adriano Hipólito, of Volta Redonda, had been kidnapped and beaten that week by right-wing, supremacist paramilitary groups, the same groups and the same people that were at the hospital door, threatening her. Her return to prison served, in a certain manner, to save her life.

Jessie Jane left prison at the end of 1978, when the National Security Act was amended; she was 29. A few years later, in 1982, she began her History course in the Federal Fluminense University (UFF). She is currently a professor of History of America in the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Flávia Shilling went into exile with her family right after the 1964 coup. Her father was a politician in the south of Brazil, tied to Brizola and João Goulart, left-wing politicians. The family went into exile in Uruguay. Flávia was eleven. The life of adults in exile is always connected to their country of origin; but children and teenagers that live in exile connect to the routine of the country that fosters them. Flávia went to school in Uruguay and got caught up in the student movement of that county; while still very young, she entered the Tupamaro guerrilla organization. Flávia began to study medicine but interrupted her studies because of the political fight. In 1972 she quit college and went into clandestineness.

Clandestineness is your social death, it’s a situation that even now I don’t like to recollect, because it’s a time without social life, it’s a blank period, an empty space. It is so useless, so brutal...clandestineness is really a terrible moment, because you don’t do anything, all you do is hide, you don’t exist.<sup>26</sup>

Flávia was arrested on the street on November 1972. She tried to escape, she ran, and the officer shot at her head. The bullet went into her neck. Her first prison was a military hospital. They operated on her, she survived, but for a long time her photos showed the bandage and, then, the scar on her neck. Flávia was released at the end of 1979, by the action of the Brazilian Committee for Amnesty

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<sup>25</sup> Statement by Jessie Jane.

<sup>26</sup> Statement by Flávia Schilling.

that pressured the Brazilian government to ask Uruguay to extradite her. But, a little before she was to be freed, Flávia went through a dramatic situation, a type of blackmail that can only be done to a woman. She was diagnosed with a myoma in her uterus and needed urgent surgery to save her womb. In exchange for the surgery, the Uruguayan government demanded that she give a public statement affirming that she was in excellent condition and was very well treated in prison.

I had a myoma in my uterus at the time, it's a dramatic situation, because I was already 25, of course I wanted to leave and have children. They blackmailed me, in the sense that I would only be operated if I gave a statement, since there was already pressure from Brazil. (...) But it's impossible for you to say that you're doing great when you weigh 50 kilos, and look that way, we wore uniforms, really short hair, anyway, you weren't great.<sup>27</sup>

Flávia was released, returned to Brazil, got involved with the Workers Party ("PT"), got a degree in Education, got her Masters and had a son, who is now 20 years old. She teaches Education at the University of São Paulo (USP) and studies the issue of violence in schools.

### **The Power of Words**

In conclusion, I would like to point out a certain aspect in the process of amnesty and compensation that Brazil has gone through in the past years, starting with the "Amnesty Caravans." At the beginning of this article, it was noted that transitional justice in Brazil has emphasized the issue of compensation. The main goal is to redress the damages caused by Government. With this in mind, the Amnesty Commission has been passing through several Brazilian states, holding public hearings in which different amnesty processes are tried. This procedure is called the "Amnesty Caravan." During the trials, the key element is the file sent to the Amnesty Commission, which bases its decision on that file. But the most important moments of the solemnity have to do with words: the first is the statement of the person requesting amnesty. For ten minutes, the floor is his; he may speak his mind, reveal, report, and acclaim. And, after the trial, if the request is granted, the president of the Amnesty Commissions asks, on behalf of the Brazilian Government, for forgiveness for the harm caused to the claimant during the military dictatorship. All of the people that we interviewed and were granted amnesty, having passed through this ritual, speak of this official request for forgiveness. To them, the Government's request for forgiveness is the key

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<sup>27</sup> Statement by Flávia Schilling.

element for redressing the harm. Once again, I return to the statement given by Dulce Pandolfi. Dulce was arrested in August of 1979 due to her connection with the organization National Liberating Alliance (“ALN”) and remained in prison for a year and a half, and passed through the facilities of the Army Police, of the Department of Social and Political Order (“DOPS”), of Talavera Bruce prison and, in Recife, the Bom Pastor prison. Her testimony is one that reports with greater detail, candor, and courage the torture and cruelty to which she was subjected. At the end of her testimony, she stresses the importance of the official request for forgiveness by the Government:

The government is now before me, bowing to me and treating me this way, how wonderful! (...) that was when I crumbled, I felt very compensated, it was really something beautiful! Even though we know, of course, that this does not erase the past, but you feel that finally citizenship has arrived in Brazil. I really do believe that everyone should file a request [for compensation]. It was a truly beautiful moment in my life.”

In the recent Latin American context, historians that work with Oral History, with testimonies, have played a great role. They have helped recompose and problematize history and the memory of dictatorial periods. They have organized compilations of testimonies, disseminated obscure facts and episodes, brought different experiences to light, and helped redress injustices. Oral History is playing an effective role in the democratic transition of Latin America. Besides being human rights militants, political activists, and jurists, historians have also been people who were victims of arbitrariness and political persecution – registering, interviewing, collecting statements and impressions, organizing archives, disseminating, recomposing memories, and problematizing memories. But we must keep the warning of Beatriz Sarlo in mind. We must remember that when dealing with testimony, the historian must be careful with the “seductive” effect of the statement and always seek to apply critical thought to their sources. Oral History must step back from the terrain of mere exaltation of subjectivity, by seeking not to “stick” to the words of the interviewee, to avoid being subjugated by an (imaginary) “absolute truth” of words in the first person. They must be capable, no matter how hard it may be, especially with statements that refer to moments of great political violence, to exercise critique and reflection. I believe that this is one of the challenges that we face at this time.