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Escraches: demonstrations, communication and political memory in post-dictatorial Argentina

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Alerta, Alerta, Alerta los vecinos, que al lado de su casa está viviendo un asesino
Alert! Alert! Alert all neighbors, there’s an assassin living next door to you!

Introduction

This article is about political impunity and communication in the era following a particularly savage dictatorship in late 20th-century Argentina. It looks at the social and cultural consequences of legalized impunity by exploring society’s attitudes toward hundreds of torturers and assassins, particularly the willingness to either ostracize or tolerate them. By focusing on the demonstrations – the escraches – against these criminals I explore the relationship between human rights activists and society at large, and the linkage between the human rights movement and the political memory of a traumatic past.

‘Escraches’ are a new form of public protest developed in Argentina during the 1990s and into the 21st century by children of people ‘disappeared’ during the dictatorship (1976–83). The word ‘escrachar’ is an Argentine slang term meaning ‘to uncover’. Escraches are campaigns of public condemnation through demonstrations that aim to expose the identities of hundreds of torturers and assassins benefiting from amnesty laws. Marchers invade the neighborhoods where torturers live, and walk around the streets carrying banners and singing slogans such as the one cited above or ‘Como a los nazis les va a pasar, a donde vayan los iremos a buscar’ (‘Just like the Nazis it will happen to you, wherever you go we’ll go after you’). They inform the community about the atrocities committed
by these people, giving away flyers with facts about the one being ‘escrachado’ – his photograph, name, address, what he was doing during the dictatorship, cases of human rights violations in which he is implicated, his current occupation and place of work. The demonstrations end in front of the torturers’ homes with a brief ‘ceremony’, some speeches, street theater performances, and music. Marchers then ‘mark’ the torturers’ homes by painting slogans on sidewalks and walls. Red paint – symbolizing blood – is usually thrown at the building. The practice is reminiscent of the way in which lepers were marked in medieval times.

As a communication strategy, escraches are more than traditional demonstrations. They present a new and dynamic twist in the public challenge to impunity and political amnesia. Their way of bringing back the past into the public sphere compels society to face specific effects of the failure to administer justice and to define its policy toward the original human rights violations as well as within ongoing struggles for accountability. The issues discussed here, thus, have direct implications for citizens’ preparedness for effective struggle against a dictatorship and its aftermath anywhere else in the world, in particular within the sphere of public culture. As an Argentinian resident in Argentina during the years of terror, it is hard to believe that civilian governments have rewarded with absolute ‘impunidad’ (impunity) those responsible for such a staggering volume of atrocious crimes, meaning by this the granting of immunity, the exemption from judicial review or sentence.3

In this article, I first describe the cultural scenario of impunity in late 1990s Argentina. ‘Public sphere status’ has been extended to represores, a generic term for previously state-licensed torturers, assassins, and their accomplices – a process that could be described as the ‘normalization’ of living with major criminals and human rights abusers. Specifically, this means they circulate in public places, are invited guests on television talkshows, have become ‘democratic’ politicians, and are even considered good parents of the children they kidnapped after ‘disappearing’ their biological parents. These are all patterns revealing a distortion of public values that has to be considered as a legacy of terror in the public sphere.

Second, I analyze what is being done to challenge this official cultural scenario by HIJOS (Daughters and Sons for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence), an organization formed by children of ‘disappeared’ people, political activists, and people forced into exile.4 I describe the escraches they have organized, analyzing how this communication strategy contests the legitimization of impunity and constitutes a new struggle over memory. Other researchers have explored the role of demonstrations and media in liberal democratic societies, such as Britain (Halloran et al., 1970), the USA (Gitlin, 1981), Canada (Hackett, 1991) and France (Favre, 1999; Siméant, 1999). This study addresses the subject in a
sharply different and politically pivotal setting, namely a society only gradually and uneasily consolidating a transition to democracy.

Third, I incorporate an analysis of how some young people I interviewed in depth ‘read’ the escraches, and evaluate the effectiveness of the demonstrations in the ongoing national struggle for accountability. My analysis is based on two sets of empirical data collected during 1998. One consists of extensive interviews with young people from Buenos Aires who were either small children during the dictatorship or born after the commencement of civilian rule, and therefore have a mediated knowledge of that historical period, based on the stories that they were told. Most participants in this study belong to a wide spectrum of the middle classes, were not directly affected by the repression and were not political activists. The second set of data consists of both extensive interviews and less formal conversations with human rights activists who are mothers and children of the ‘disappeared’. I also went to several escraches, conversing informally over a period of several hours on each occasion with the demonstrators physically nearest to me.5 (See Appendix for information on participants quoted).

The cultural scenario of impunity

On 24 March 1976, a military coup installed a repressive dictatorship in Argentina. Over seven years (1976–1983), in a program of state terrorism aimed to eliminate political dissidents, the military utilized kidappings, torture, killings and disappearances to impose a reign of terror and a culture of fear.6 It is estimated that 30,000 persons from that era remain ‘disappeared’.7 The commencement of civilian rule in 1983 was a moment of great expectation. The first elected president appointed a commission to investigate disappearances and, in 1985, the military juntas were put on trial.8 Unfortunately, politicians’ promises to re-establish justice were never fulfilled. A combination of factors influenced this failure, ranging from political opportunism to military pressure. Different steps in the legalization of impunity marked the years of civilian rule: carefully limited investigations, amnesty laws, and pardons to the few criminals who actually ended up in prison.9

But the book is not closed and events are unfolding as I write. Amnesty laws did not cover the stealing of babies born in captivity. The search for these children, now in their early twenties, continues and some of those responsible are now in prison.10 Parallel to local initiatives in Argentina, developments in the globalization of justice have resulted in international campaigns to bring represores to face trials in other countries.11 Torturers
and assassins can no longer be confident that they will continue to avoid prosecution and punishment. The Pinochet case is undoubtedly a warning of what might happen to them and very few risk leaving the country, which has been compared to an ‘aguantadero’ (mafia hideout) for those accused of human rights violations and whose capture is requested by other countries.

Impunity is not only a legal matter. In the late 1990s, Argentina seemed to be in a transition between a culture of fear and what might be called a culture of impunity, which permeated all layers of society and was a component of the still-contested consolidation of democracy (Mainwaring, 1992; O’Donnell, 1999). It was manifest in a certain apathy and an amazing degree of tolerance for crimes known to have been committed. I do not mean that people did not care, but there was a generalized feeling of impotence manifest in comments such as ‘it is over’, ‘what could you do now?’ or ‘it is too late’ I heard during the interviews. These reveal a belief that there is not much to be gained by pursuing investigations. The tolerance for such gross criminality has been a direct consequence, I would propose, of the legalization of impunity.

Of particular concern is what I perceive as the ‘normalization’ of living with represores, meaning by this the development of an unhealthy tolerance for criminality. Essentially, this translates into society’s apparent adaptation, conscious or unconscious, to the reality that torturers, assassins, and ‘disappearers’ (of people) have a place within streets, restaurants, coffee-shops, television screens, magazines, holiday resorts, official ceremonies, and even significant public office, as is the case with represores democratically elected as mayors or provincial governors. Some are also being ‘recycled’ as businessmen.

This co-existence has resulted in situations where former victims have met the perpetrators of crimes against them face to face, either in public places or in television talkshows. But there is a focused iconization of evil and only a few faces and names are well known – i.e. members of the military juntas like Videla and Massera, or individuals with a particularly atrocious record, such as the naval officer Astiz, the ‘blond angel’ [of death]. These few have become symbols of terror but hundreds of represores are unknown to the majority of the population. They have been exposed in little-read testimonies and, at best, they are names without faces. Thus it is difficult to evaluate public reactions to their everyday presence in the urban landscape. So far, those who are recognized are increasingly facing harassment, insults, and physical assaults, mostly by young people.

One feature of this process of ‘normalization’ is the media presence that represores have secured, their access to press articles and television or radio programs. Certain journalists’ definition of objectivity as presenting
‘all sides’, or more simply the search for higher ratings by turning human rights crimes into a ‘hot topic’, may explain the presence of former victims and their torturers in the same television talkshow.\textsuperscript{18} This often translates into individuals known to be guilty of bestial crimes being given at least momentarily – but with immensely disturbing potential influence – an equivalent moral stature to other participants. Some of the young people I interviewed defended the represores’ right to free speech, implying that their criminal record did not constitute grounds to curtail this right. As ‘Jorge’ reasoned: ‘Whatever the guy was in the past is his problem. [. . .] But now you have to let him voice his opinion because you cannot refuse this right to anybody’. However, the issue is not that the represores receive media coverage but how they receive it. Their parts in the talkshows should be clearly defined as those of assassins and torturers, not as contributions to liberal democracy.

One of the most disturbing forms of this ‘normalization’ has been the legitimacy as parents that represores have gained. In most societies, only those considered to be potentially good and kind parents are granted the privilege of taking care of its most vulnerable creatures. Children are taken away from bad parents. Allowing torturers custody of the babies they seized from the very parents they had tortured, executed without trial, and ‘disappeared’ is another major sign of their acceptance as respectable individuals.\textsuperscript{19} What should be done with these children was an extremely controversial issue that stirred up fierce debates. These debates centered on how to spare the children suffering and revealed a quite generalized acceptance that torturers can reinvent themselves as kind parents. Opinions were mainly based on generic emotive arguments about the psychological factors in child rearing, but, inexplicably, did not take account of the political dimension – that these were no regular ‘adoption’ cases but children of political activists whom the dictatorship eliminated during its savage campaign to crush dissent.\textsuperscript{20}

The media were influential actors in these debates because their coverage usually framed the issue by emphasizing the suffering of the adoptive parents and avoiding mentioning why these children ended up with an adoptive family in the first place.\textsuperscript{21} Many of my respondents echoed this disregard for the horrific genesis of those ‘custody’ cases. As I was told: ‘If he [the torturer] took care of them and the children are fine and happy I would not tell them the truth because I will damage them’ (‘Juan’); ‘You were raised by this person who gave you love. In spite of how he got you, he treated you well’ (‘Luciana’) (my emphasis).

However, in spite of the apparent indifference toward this process of ‘normalization’, and the tolerance revealed by treating major criminals as respectable citizens, some campaigns were disturbing the represores’ quality of life.
**Escraches: challenging impunity**

_Escraches_ were a communication strategy based on public exposure and humiliation, whose goal was to eliminate or limit the societal spaces that _represores_ have gained. They were a metaphorical repossession of the streets by freeing them from these criminals' presence. The strategy was a move to tear off the protective shield of anonymity behind which hundreds of torturers hid. For HIJOS, ‘escrachar’ is ‘to reveal, to make public the face of a person that wants to go unnoticed.’ In the absence of sentencing, they want to curtail the ‘peaceful impunity’ enjoyed by _represores_ by ensuring that their colleagues and neighbors and passers-by know their faces and their crimes as they meet them daily.

_Escraches_ were publicized demonstrations, well covered by the media. HIJOS utilized newspaper advertisements and flyers to invite the community to participate. Paradoxically, the criminals under siege requested, and received, police protection. Hence, some _escraches_ themselves were violently suppressed, an unmistakable sign of both their impact and the continuing loyalties and connections the _represores_ could rely upon within the police force.

The _escrache_ was a very creative and powerful communication form, which was quickly adopted by groups struggling for other causes and even portrayed in a television serial. I took part in three, and was able to observe the interaction between the marchers and the neighbors, many of whom joined the demonstration, celebrated its presence, and thanked the demonstrators for opening their eyes to those living next door to them. I had a few neighbors telling me how critical they were of the crimes committed by the _escrachados_. A woman even confided me that she knew the whereabouts of a _represor_ and was considering contacting HIJOS with this information. Others, to be sure, closed their windows, turned off the lights and stayed away but they did not defend the torturers.

HIJOS had a striking visual presence. I first saw them at a march commemorating 1,000 Thursdays of weekly marches by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in June 1996. Behind the Mothers came the daughters and sons with their big HIJOS banner. The image suggested that the ‘disappeared’ were marching in-between, behind their Mothers and followed by their children – that the missing generation was present. I saw the re-enactment of this powerful scene every time they marched together. There was also a symbolic confrontation that I first observed at that march. When demonstrators arrived at the Senate building, guarded by dozens of police, HIJOS stood shouting to the police: ‘Asesinos, Asesinos’, accusing those who ‘disappeared’ their parents, embodied in those men in uniform, many of them probably around their own age. It was an extraordinary image of a generation of victims and victimizers, confronting one another through their descendants.
Escraches are an example of the creativity in developing communication strategies that has characterized the Argentine human rights movement since it emerged in the midst of the repression. The mothers of the ‘disappeared’ were the first, and for a while the only people to take to the streets in 1977 and are still doing it every single Thursday to demand the reappearance of their children. By turning motherhood into a public activity, they were crucial in setting new boundaries of what politics or political spaces are. Although the political environment had changed, battles for human rights continued to take place in public spaces and were characterized by a strong street presence, in spite of the danger of repression.

Furthermore, we need to see escraches within the context of the memory battles taking place in Argentina. The democratization process was marked by struggles between different, often polarized, positions toward the past. The military wanted recognition for winning their ‘war against subversion’, the human rights movement persisted with its demands for accountability, and in-between positions recognized the dictatorship’s crimes but advocated reconciliation through the encouragement of forgiving and forgetting. We know that battles for the control of the past take place in a variety of cultural realms and through many media that include historical accounts, intergenerational talk, television programs, memorials, or demonstrations. It is to this latter group that escraches belong. They have become, to use Pierre Nora’s (1996: xvii) words, ‘lieux de mémoire’ of this past. Escraches remind society of the 30,000 missing persons through the visible presence of their children. They contest denial and ignorance by making people realize that those responsible for the atrocities committed might be their friendly neighbor or the father of their daughter’s best friend. In short, they challenge discourses that encourage artificial and premature reconciliation and disregard the equally necessary realities of truth and justice.

Evaluating escraches: public reactions of non-participants

Whatever the objectives of their organizers or my comments on their symbolic charge as communication strategies, the ultimate issue is how the public at large evaluates them. None of the young people I interviewed had participated in an escrache, so their knowledge was mainly based on what they had heard or seen about them in the media. I was interested in their approval or disapproval of the campaigns, and their evaluations of their effectiveness. Furthermore, attitudes toward escraches provide hints on how people experience living in a culture of impunity and on their willingness to participate in ongoing human rights campaigns.

Although most interviewees rejected impunity, and there was a generalized sympathy for HIJOS, escraches were very controversial. Some
believed that the crimes committed by the dictatorship did not justify harassing these represores. It is important to pause a moment here to remember that the dictatorship’s ‘counterinsurgency’ operations included children witnessing the torture of their parents or being tortured themselves to make their parents ‘speak’, the design of special torments for pregnant women, or prisoners being thrown from airplanes into the sea – and that this information had been widely circulated. Overall, there was inconsistency between the anger against the torturers versus the level of tolerance for them. The discussions I had about escraches revealed the many issues at play when evaluating these demonstrations: whose interests they serve, their objectives, the impact on the torturers’ families and their neighbors, the style of the demonstrators who were often perceived as overtly aggressive, concerns over the damage to private property, and the relationship between demonstrators and the wider public.

The attribution of purely personal motives to the demonstrators

One pattern that emerged was the perception that escraches were motivated by the HIJOS members’ pain, anger and indignation. From this perspective, the strategy was often seen as a purely personal healing therapy, with the various implications that personalizing the issue entails. For example, ‘Analia’ understood HIJOS’s actions but was concerned by their level of hostility that she perceived, and argued that the personal motivations of the desaparecidos’ descendants conflicted with the personal interests of the torturer and those around him. For her:

The guy who was a torturer obviously is a vicious person, a son of a bitch. I cannot justify a person who was torturing another. But [the demonstration] is very aggressive [. . .] That person has children, neighbors, it seems to me very harsh that they would go and write ‘your neighbor is a torturer.’ I cannot tell you if I agree or not. Evidently, it is way of showing the hate that they [HIJOS] have. And although they are not killing him [the torturer] they are killing him socially.

Other comments focusing on individual motivations showed how the struggle for accountability is often seen simply as the victims’ job. Even some respondents who saw the broader scope and relevance of the strategy played down society’s responsibility. For instance, ‘Silvia’ linked escraches with their role as prods to social memory but her analysis avoided mentioning how society might support HIJOS’s efforts. In her words:

It has to do with memory, so people know [. . .] I don’t know what to think, that the guy had killed this child’s mother [. . .] really it is the least they [HIJOS] can do, what is available to them. Because they won’t be able to kill them [the torturers]. If they do so they will go to jail, they will be the ones to go and not the ones who killed their mothers.
However, some comments that highlighted the strictly personal motivations of HIJOS indicated that their actions were also a desperate appeal for society’s support for their struggle, therefore noting human rights activists’ isolation and frustration. For ‘Elena’:

It is their way of doing justice [. . .] It is not wrong what they do [. . .] Since they [HIJOS] cannot act, it is a way of writing what they feel, the pain that remains in them seeing that there are people who disappeared and there is nothing they can do. Because they are struggling to do something and no one pays attention to them.

Positive assessments of the strategy

Many interviewees who supported escraches gave concrete reasons for their relevance and were very knowledgeable about their goals – informing people, exposing the torturers’ faces, limiting their societal space, showing society’s condemnation of their crimes. Uncovering represores was one of the major arguments supporting the strategy. Once their faces are known they are restricted to the spaces where they can circulate without being harassed. ‘Lucia’ argued that ‘street justice’ was the only possible approach:

It is street justice. I believe that according to the law they won’t ever be jailed, so for as long as they live, let them live like this. Besides, maybe you had him upstairs and you didn’t know; so find out and move. [. . .] I believe that those against whom they do escraches would have to move. [. . .] In the escrache against Galtieri27 [. . .] people from his neighborhood said that he was a respected man, that he helped out and that kind of thing. Now, I don’t know, maybe he would have to move. They are going to look at him in a different way. It is going to be harder for him to leave his house.

Several respondents praised the creativity and political effectiveness of the strategy. They categorized this campaign for identification as a battle fought with the weapon of information, a successful tool to curtail societal spaces. ‘Diego’ noted how once represores are recognized by the community they become prisoners in their own homes:

I endorse the originality of their struggle [. . .] I think that, from a political point of view, it is positive. [. . .] For me it is the new form of struggle against the represores from those times. It became evident that you cannot put them on trial because then they get a government pardon. They send them to prison and the jail is like a luxury condominium. So now the efforts are in trying to exclude them from society, to deny them any social life. [. . .] This is the aim of the escraches. To know that if you leave your house you have to watch out because a stone might hit your head. So the guy is not in jail but is in his house.

Other participants considered that the represores must be uncovered not only for society but that their families should also know which crimes they had committed. For ‘Alicia’:
It is good, so you know who is the neighbor next door, and that in spite of having the face of a saint he was an assassin. [...] Maybe his family will find out. But it is good to know with whom one is living. It really sucks to find out that your father was a killer [during the dictatorship] [...] You have to seriously rethink if you would continue to live in the same house.

Debate over impact on torturers’ families

As I have noted, however, many respondents believed that the HIJOS were overly aggressive. While families should not pay for these crimes, accepting torturers’ families as protective shields is an individualization of the issue, of being more concerned for a particular wife and child than for the debt the criminals owe to society. Concern for the torturers’ families also revealed divisions in how interviewees saw them – either as accomplices, or as totally ignorant.

There seemed to be a generalized belief among interviewees that it was quite difficult for families, especially wives, to have ignored their husbands’ activities during the dictatorship. Some participants pointed to the troubled mental health among torturers’ wives. ‘Eugenia’ reasoned that they must have known and condoned what their husbands did:

To say that his children and wife have nothing to do with it, for me they are all the same shit. [...] I put myself in the position of saying ‘I marry this person, this person gets to a certain political position in a military government’ and I know what is going on. Because it is not true that they didn’t know. [...] Their circle knew. I am pretty sure that was the case. So, if I live with this person, if I sleep in the same bed and share my life with a person who does that, obviously I have to think the same and be like him. And it is the same being his daughter. [...] It is like saying that the Germans were not aware of what the Nazis were doing. No one can be ignorant of such an event.

Debate over impact on torturers’ neighbors

One of the topics that generated disagreement was how escraches might affect the torturers’ neighbors and how neighbors should react – active support, indifference, or rejection. This latter point deserves special attention. Neighbors’ attitudes toward these demonstrations should not be seen in isolation but rather as hints as to how society at large is processing its sharing of societal spaces with torturers. Some young people questioned a strategy that affected others who were not targets of the protest. The issue of protecting public and private property was a recurrent argument, mainly related to the painting of graffiti on sidewalks and buildings. But one of the organizers’ goals was precisely that neighbors would isolate the represores and force them to move. And the staining of walls had a role to
play here. As a member of HIJOS told me ‘We hope that those in the building who do not want to keep paying for a paint job would tell the torturer that he should move’. Most interviewees, however, seemed to disagree with this particular aspect of the strategy.

Many of the comments that I heard suggested that the media were playing an important role in portraying how the community was reacting to *escraches*. Television broadcasts of neighbors’ reactions to the demonstrations apparently indicated that many people were more bothered by the noise than by having a torturer next door and showed a belief that it is neither their responsibility that torturers live there nor their duty to isolate them. Ironically, at the time of my fieldwork many people were protesting against the visible presence of transvestites in certain neighborhoods. Their indignation was based on the scandals produced by their presence and on the risk that their children would be exposed to these ‘immoral’ people. This indignation seems paradoxical when compared with the lack of a similar public outrage for sharing their neighborhoods with and exposing their children to torturers and assassins.

For example, ‘Laura’ supported *escraches* and thought that the whole society should participate in them. But she was critical of damaging property shared by others. Her criticism, based on media coverage of demonstrations at the house of the former dictator Videla, illustrates well the indignation of neighbours. In her words:

Neighbors are not to blame for what Videla did. They cannot throw him out of the neighborhood; these are not private neighborhoods that you can say ‘leave.’ [. . .] I think they have the right to ‘escrachearlo’, kick him, everything you want. But, what about the rest? [. . .] We don’t live each one in a house in the middle of the countryside. That would be different, you burn his house and damage only him. But if you go, like they did the other day, at 3 am to a neighborhood to scream and throw stones at the building, you don’t just wake up Videla. I think it was when he was given house arrest and the Mothers and the HIJOS went to make an *escrache*, with screams, drums, and all what this implies. And Videla and his family were not the only ones who were woken up. There were tons of people who had to work the next day. [. . .] ‘It is OK, it is fair’ is what people said on television. ‘It is fair but it is not my fault that the guy lives here.’

Other comments indicated that, for some people, the atrocity of the crimes did not justify staining walls. Thus, aggressions against private property were compared with the dictatorship’s unpunished crimes, putting the right to private property at the same level as the right to life. As ‘Liliana’ explained: ‘I don’t agree with what was done, it is wrong, obviously. But nor is what they are doing right. Besides, they write on the walls.’ And ‘Eugenia’ described what she saw on television:

I saw once on the news that someone’s neighbors were complaining. They did not defend the guy’s political position. But they were complaining that they no
longer have their own place. [. . .] People said ‘if it were his house and his sidewalk and they do that it is fine but not in a building where I pay the same maintenance fees as this person.’

However, there were respondents who noted the absurdity of comparing torture and disappearance with ‘damaging’ private property – a painter can fix the walls of a stained building but nothing can bring back a parent who has disappeared. Some participants considered that different attitudes toward escraches were based on class and that certain upper class neighborhoods support represores while people from working class districts condemn them and are grateful to, rather than upset by, the demonstrators. Some praise for the escraches was based on media coverage of neighbors’ support of them. According to ‘Natalia’:

They did not obtain justice but at least they go and warn the neighbors. You may live next to someone who is an assassin without knowing it. It is like a warning. The other day, I saw on television that one woman who lives in the building went downstairs and joined the demonstrators because she did not know she had a dictator living next door. I think it is great. [. . .] It is like ‘marking’ and humiliating them.

I made sure to ask respondents how they would react to an escrache against one of their own neighbors. By personalizing the situation, I aimed to assess their attitudes toward current human rights activism, specifically regarding campaigns in which they could take part. Some said that they would join the demonstrators and would not be bothered by the noise or the painting of walls. But I also heard comments revealing how a legacy of fear might be affecting people’s participation in these demonstrations. Although the years of terror were over, several interviewees referred to fear when speculating on what they would do. This fear was founded on their perception that represores still have the power to repress those who protest against them. As ‘Alberto’ explained, his fear was based on the risk that for being identified as one of the demonstrators he could suffer some retaliation in the future:

Honestly, I don’t know if I would shout at them, I don’t know. [There is] fear, one thing is what I would like to do and another what I would actually do. I am not afraid of him [the represor], I am afraid that he would say ‘look, this one knows, he did this to me’.

These fears are quite understandable. For example, on the eve of the escrache at the house of an infamous torturer, the torturer issued an open letter to his neighbors saying that the police would protect him from the demonstrators – implying that those who dared to remind society of his crimes would be repressed, which is exactly what happened. This was not the only occasion where former represores had gone on the attack, with police support. Taking to the streets continues to be risky in ‘democratic’
Argentina. Fear often deters political participation. We cannot underestimate this factor when evaluating communication campaigns such as the *escraches*, especially when considering the larger public’s support of them.

**Concluding remarks**

The normalization of living with major criminals was a post-dictatorial syndrome, a cultural and social consequence of impunity in contemporary Argentina. People shared societal spaces with hundreds of torturers and assassins. *Represores*’ right to free speech was respected, they were recognized as good parents, qualified for public office, and were, until the *escraches*, enjoying the good quality of life that amnesties have granted them. But events were unfolding that threatened the *represeores*’ peaceful impunity. And *escraches*, the communication strategy developed by HIJOS, have certainly contributed to this process.

*Escraches* have brought back the past into the public sphere, illustrating the multiple languages and forms of participation that the debate on human rights takes. *Escraches* are disruptive, noisy, provocative, and therefore hard to ignore. They are a powerful and loud message telling society ‘I won’t let you forget’. Because of their originality and creativity, *escraches* have secured excellent coverage by the mainstream media, which has undoubtedly helped to broaden the spheres for the discussion of human rights issues. And they have shown that in these times of ‘cyber encounters’ it is still effective to take to the streets.

*Escraches* have served to inform people. Many Argentineans were accustomed to saying that they did not know what had gone on during the dictatorship, a recurrent justification for society’s bystander role. Now they know, and every day new details of the crimes committed become available. HIJOS has asked society: Now that you know, what are you going to do? *Escraches* have disrupted the process of ‘normalization’ of living with major criminals by telling people: ‘Torturers and assassins surround you. How are you going to react to this horror? This is not past history but history unfolding. How will you insert yourself into this historical process?’ HIJOS, thus, has forced people to publicly define their positions. If people know details of their crimes yet still consider that the *represeores* may be vicious monsters but have the right to free speech and can be good parents, we are faced with crucial but troubling alternatives. Either people do not care, which means that impunity has generated apathy and distortion of values, or they implicitly condone what the *represeores* did, which reinforces the hypothesis that the military were not alone in their campaign of extermination of political dissidents. Or, a crucial issue, that the persistence of fear is so strong even 20 years later that people are still afraid of confronting these torturers.
Finally, many Argentinean officers would not be afraid to leave the country and be caught by Interpol – or leave their homes and be insulted and beaten by passers by – if it were not for the unyielding efforts of human rights activists like the members of HIJOS. Escraches have confronted civilian governments’ ongoing refusal to deliver justice and reminded society that the book on the past is still open. Escraches have trapped torturers and assassins by building metaphorical jails in neighborhoods throughout Argentina. Escraches, thus, have been an effective communication strategy playing a key role in challenging impunity and political amnesia in post-dictatorial Argentina.

Appendix

Participants quoted
Alberto (participant #23) 21 years, studying for teacher certification.  
Alicia (#25) 19 years, studying for teacher certification. Her parents are police officers. 
Analia (#1) 20 years, college student at public university, communication major. 
Diego (#28) 21 years, very active in religious organizations. 
Elena (#19) 15 years, high school student at public school. 
Eugenia (#34) 22 years, studying pre-medical. 
Jorge (#42) 18 years, high school student at public school, co-produced a community radio program. 
Juan (#35) 23 years, college student at public university, communication major. 
Laura (#26) 19 years, was pregnant, wants to be a history teacher. 
Leo (#47) 15 years, high school student at public school. 
Liliana (#18) 15 years, high school student at public school. 
Lucia (#6) 15 years, high school student at one of the two elite public schools in Buenos Aires. 
Mariana (#36) 24 years, is studying to be a history teacher. 
Natalia (#52) 15 years, high school student at public school. 
Nelida (#30) 22 years, is studying to be a history teacher. 
Nora (#29) 18 years, high school student at public school. 
Pablo (#21) 16 years, high school student at public school. 
Ricardo (#27) 18 years, high school student at public school, Laura’s (#26) companion and father of her baby. 
Silvia (#24), 20 years, studying for teacher certification.

Notes

1. I am very grateful to John Downing for his helpful comments on an earlier draft. This article was completed while the author was a Rockefeller Post-doctoral Fellow in the Humanities at the Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley.
2. Desaparecidos, people taken away by the dictatorship and never seen again.
3. The English word ‘impunity’ does not have as strong a sense as impunidad, which was commonly used in public discourse at this time.
4. The acronym stands for Hijos Por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio. The Spanish word ‘hijos’ means ‘daughters and sons’.
5. A preliminary version of this article was presented at the International Communication Association Conference, Acapulco, June 2000. It is part of the author’s doctoral dissertation ‘De Eso No Se Habla (We Don’t Talk About That): Transmission of Silences and Fragmented [Hi]stories in Young Argentineans’ Memories of Terror’, University of Texas at Austin, 2000. The study identifies patterns of memory construction through answers to the questions of what young people knew about this period, how they learned what they knew, and how they were processing this information. Sixty-three participants were interviewed. Transcripts of the interviews number 400 single-spaced pages.
6. For essays on the culture of fear and living under terror, see Corradi et al., 1992.
7. 30,000 is the number estimated by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and main human rights organizations. Figures vary considerably. For example, the ‘official’ figure of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) is 8961 (Nunca Más, 1984).
8. CONADEP had limited powers and investigations were based on voluntary testimonies by victims and military personnel.
9. Law No. 23493 (12/23/86), known as ‘Full Stop’, established deadlines for prosecutions. ‘Due Obedience’ Law No. 23521, (6/4/87), provided that torturers and assassins – except top generals – were exempt from punishment by virtue of having followed orders from their superiors. President Menem’s Decrees of Pardon Nos. 1002–05 (10/7/89) ordered the end to any proceedings against those officers not covered by the amnesty laws, and Decrees Nos. 2741–43 (12/30/90) pardoned the few represores still in prison and some political prisoners.
10. Dictator Videla was jailed while I was conducting fieldwork.
11. Naval officer Astiz was condemned in absentia in France for the disappearance of two French nuns. In Spain, Judge Garzón was prosecuting those responsible for the disappearance of Spanish citizens. Italy had also initiated proceedings.
12. Chilean dictator Pinochet was placed under house arrest in London in 1999 during extradition procedures requested by Spain.
13. An interviewee provided this information saying that it appeared in a 1998 article in the Argentinean magazine Tres Puntos. She did not specify the date, page, or name of the author.
14. Represor Bussi was elected Governor of Tucumán. His term ended in 1999. Torturer Patti was mayor of Escobar borough in Buenos Aires and ran for Province Governor in 1999.
15. There is also an international angle to this process. In August 2000, torturer Cavallo was captured in Mexico, where he was the director of the National Registry of Vehicles. How and why did the Mexican government appoint him to this post? The episode certainly raises many questions regarding the ‘laundring’ of assassins.
17. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission succeeded in making public the faces of some perpetrators and their crimes. CONADEP never printed the names.

18. To my knowledge, only a couple of studies are beginning to address this issue. For the presence of represores in television programs see Feld (1997) and Feitlowitz (1998).

19. 30 percent of those who disappeared are women, of whom 10 percent (3% of the total) were pregnant. Of an estimated 400 babies kidnapped or born in captivity, 50 were later identified, of whom 7 had been murdered, 25 had been returned to their biological families, 13 remained with their adoptive parents by mutual agreement of both families, and 5 cases were in court (Arditti and Lykes, 1997).

20. For psychological, political, and legal issues related to kidnapped children see Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (1997).

21. For the media coverage of this issue see Giberti (1997) and Lo Giudice (1994).

22. HIJOS website http://www.hijos.org/espanol/index.html

23. Creditors from a financial institution have carried out escraches against its executives. One episode of the weekly television soap-opera Verdad y Consecuencia had an escrache against the vicious mafia boss character, an example of how the cultural industries appropriate alternative media strategies.

24. During May–August 1998 I participated in escraches against general Riveros, torturer Peyón, and one organized by The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo against the priest Graselli, a former navy chaplain accused as an informer, who is now the confessor at a private high school for girls.

25. Elsewhere (Kaiser, 1997), I have analyzed the Mothers’ communication campaigns. For alternative media studies, see, among others: Downing, 2000; Festa et al., 1988; Mattelart and Siegelaub, 1983; Ryan, 1991.


27. Galtieri was the de facto military president in 1982, during the conflict with Great Britain over the sovereignty of the Malvinas or Falkland Islands.

28. This increased visibility was due to a more permissive but short-lived regulation under Buenos Aires city constitution.

29. Escrache against Fernando Peyón on July 15, 1998. The author took part in it and many demonstrators were brutally repressed. Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were beaten. Several members of HIJOS were beaten and jailed.

30. For example, Etchecolatz, a famous torturer and former chief of police had a trial pending for threatening with a gun a group of young people who insulted him.

References


Birmingham: Hutchinson for the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.


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