
Left Unsettled

Confessions of Armed Revolutionaries

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On March 24, 1976, I was twenty years old. I belong to a generation that believed it possible to establish a truly just order. For the sake of that belief, many killed and many died. Many more died than killed.

(Hilb 2013, 9)

With these words, Argentine sociologist Claudia Hilb begins her set of partially autobiographical essays on her role in the armed left in the 1970s. She takes responsibility for the violence that the left carried out before and during the civil–military regime implanted with the 1976 coup. The confession set off something of a controversy. While Hilb was not the first to confess to past violence, her timing raised concerns about the impact of such admissions. Right-wing supporters of the past regime had begun to challenge the human rights trials aimed at their military colleagues, friends, and family for atrocities carried out during the regime. In their view, equal treatment was not meted out to the armed left who provoked the military coup and its authoritarian regime.

This chapter thus asks: What happens when armed left guerilla or revolutionary fighters confess to past violence? Can these admissions to wrongdoing contribute to building stronger democracies or human rights cultures by sharing blame – with the state repressive apparatus – for violent acts in the past? Or do they deepen polarized views about the past? This chapter focuses on one important factor in how such confessions are viewed: timing. It argues that how these confessions are made,

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heard, understood, and shape memory of the violent past depends on the political context in which they emerge. In this chapter, two confessional moments by the armed left to Argentina's violent past are analyzed, focusing on timing. The controversy regarding Claudia Hilb's confession to violence is the second moment.

10.1 The Confessional Framework

The project builds on an earlier work on confessions to past violence from authoritarian state perpetrators, *Unsettling Accounts* (Payne 2008). This chapter will contribute to a follow-up book called *Left Unsettled* that explores confessions made by the revolutionary left to their use of violence. Both types of perpetrators make confessions that are unsettling in content, specifically terrorist violence against civilians and even the use of violence against members of their own armed groups. Both types of confessions “unsettle, or break, the silence imposed over the past by forces within democratic societies that wish to leave the past behind, to close the book on it” (Payne 2008, 2). With this rupture, confessions by the right and left fail to settle accounts with the past; they unsettle them. They disrupt a narrative that has settled in about that past undermining strongly held beliefs about good and evil. “Conflict erupts over confessions as social actors dispute interpretations . . . and compete for power over whose interpretation will shape the political agenda, the terms of public debate, and the outcome of that debate” (Payne 2008, 2). When the left speaks out about its own use of violence, those who consider the left to be innocent victims, not perpetrators, of past atrocity become unsettled by these truths. The term “left” in the title of the new project refers to the stated ideology of the revolutionary groups – on the left-wing of the political spectrum. It also refers to what is “left out,” or silenced from memory politics, what remains or is “left behind,” in analyses of past violence. Strong pressure – on the left and the right – exists for “gag rules” (Holmes 1995, 202) to keep such narratives censored or silenced; to retain and protect existing settled narratives over the past.

Efforts to silence, or suppress, confessional narrative have not always succeeded. Instead, a deep dialogic conflict erupts that those promoting gag rules view as threatening to the fragile post-transition democracy. I argue in *Unsettling Accounts* that “contentious debate enhances democratic practices by provoking political participation, contestation, and competition. Through those processes it makes possible public challenges

to prevailing antidemocratic attitudes, behavior, and values in society. Contentious coexistence, in short, offers a more realistic understanding of dialogic practices in democracies, as well as a better alternative to reconciliation processes that suppress political talk” (Payne 2008, 3).

What does it mean, then, when those who are suppressing democratic debate, who are imposing gag rules, are those who have most fiercely defended democracy and human rights? In the *Left Unsettled* study, it is the human rights community and political figures on the left side of the democratic system who sometimes attempt to impose gag rules to safeguard the transition from authoritarian rule and armed conflict. Is there a way in which confessions on the armed left, like confessions by state perpetrators, can engage an audience to positively benefit democracy and human rights through “contentious coexistence”? *Unsettling Accounts* considered dialogic conflict over past violence as useful for putting into practice essential democratic values – participation, expression, and contestation (Dahl 1971) – that sharpen, refine, and promote widespread support for human rights norms. That positive effect is not a typical outcome for armed left confessions, however. Instead, fearful of how the right-wing might exploit these confessions to demonize the left, silencing and not contentious coexistence has resulted. Yet one factor that may contribute to a positive outcome is timing.

This article considers timing as a factor shaping the impact of left confessions on democracy and human rights. It looks at two different historical moments in which the armed left confessed in Argentina. The more recent set of confessions (Confessional Act II) – such as the one by Claudia Hilb – occurred during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Two former members of the armed left made public written confessions, followed up by televised interviews, about their past, condemning the acts of violence in which they had participated. Claudia Hilb was a former student militant who confessed after she had become a professor at the University of Buenos Aires. Another confession also took place in this era by Héctor Ricardo Leis (2012), a former Montonero leader. He confessed as a Philosophy professor in Brazil where he had fled as a political exile in the 1970s. An earlier set of confessions (Confessional Act I) began at the end of 2004 on the pages of the Córdoba political left magazine (*La Intemperie*), later published in part in a book called *No Matar* (2007). The dialogue began with reactions to an interview of the former member of the Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo (EGP), Héctor Juvé (2004). While both sets of violent events confessed to occurred at about the same time, in the late 1960s through the 1970s,

the confessions themselves occurred at different political moments. Those political moments – timing – shaped the engagement provoked by the confessional acts.

10.2 Confessional Act I

The earlier confessional moment did not engage the right-wing. Perhaps for that reason, these confessions to past violence did not provoke a call for gag orders on the left. There were few efforts to silence them. Instead, contentious coexistence emerged among the left in which different individuals, sometimes within the same armed left group, took positions on the past and openly – and sometimes harshly – entered in a dialogue about the violent past.

Jouvé (2004) explains that he joined the armed left due to an intellectual commitment to end poverty and injustice and his awareness that mainstream political parties lacked the will to bring about change. He expresses regrets about that past, however. In particular, he has misgivings about an acceptance on the armed left of a tendency toward authoritarian leadership and abuses of power. He uses as examples the executions ordered by the leaders of the movement of two rank and file members (Adolfo Rotblat a.k.a. “Pupi” and Bernardo Groswald). Jouvé takes responsibility for witnessing those acts and failing to speak out against them. He thus became, in his view, an accomplice to murder. His confessional text calls for language, speaking out and asking questions, as a political weapon: “culture is a web of conversations . . . more than defining ourselves, we need to ask good questions . . . if not, we will continue to repeat the same mistakes.”

His words begin a dialogue. Oscar del Barco (2004) wrote a letter stating that Jouvé’s interview “moved” him to become conscious, albeit very late, of the serious tragedy within the EGP. He says that “by supporting the activities of this group, I was as responsible as the murderers.” He goes on to say, “There is no explanation that makes us innocent.” There are no causes or ideas that remove our guilt. He calls on everyone to accept the commandment “thou shalt not kill,” to recognize that all human beings are sacred, that no one, no matter what they did, should be killed. He refers to the left around the world (Russia, Romania, Yugoslavia, China, Korea, Cuba) as failing to uphold this commandment and, as a result, becoming “serial assassins.” He calls for ending the silence about the left’s involvement in atrocities, “truth and justice should be for everyone.”

Barco is not silenced. His response to Jouvé's confession, moreover, provokes deep dialogic conflict. For some, the issues that Jouvé and Barco exposed were not new. As one commentator states, "Nothing said is new to me; but it has a particular intensity." For others what emerged was "previously silenced themes and problems." The aim of the magazine, and those who confessed, to generate debate and contention over the past within the left, succeeded on the pages of subsequent issues of the same magazine and in other news outlets.

On the positive side, those who supported Jouvé and Barco mentioned how their confessions played a role in presenting a more nuanced version of the past that fell in between the existing narratives of the left as in the "two-demons theory" or a devils–angels theory. By that "theory," they refer to the civil–military regime's recognition that it had used violent acts to suppress the violence of the armed left. In this sense, both the left and the right were "demons." The National Truth Commission's CONADEP's original report included the two-demons theory in its opening chapters. Later, under President Nestor Kirchner, this section of the report was removed. Some suggest that a "devils–angels" theory replaced it such that all criminal violence would be associated with state perpetrators against an innocent, or angelic, left. The debate over the Jouvé and Barco confessional texts emphasized the danger that occurs when the movements' goals and its actions are disconnected and inconsistent. Those supporters of the confessions endorsed a position that the left and the right should adhere to the commandment "thou shalt not kill," to halt the legacy in the country of using killing as a way to do politics, as an acceptable means to achieving political ends. As an alternative, these supporters of the confessional act proposed – and put into action in response to the confession – the value of talk, dialogue, and speaking out as the best weapon in the war against political injustice. They did not see the confessional act as needing to be suppressed, but quite the opposite.

Those who criticized these confessional acts concentrated on Barco's text. Some agreed that mistakes were made by the left, but they felt that Barco went too far in demonizing the whole left for those mistakes, particularly in his reference to "serial assassins." A common criticism was the view that Barco constructed a moral equivalency between the violence on the left and right. In particular, the confessional text emphasized a few terrible events on the left that created a distorted version of the past (*una moral distorsionada*), more likely to politically polarize society than find common ground. The criticisms also reflected on the

notion of “thou shalt not kill,” as on the surface unimpeachable but not sufficiently contextualized. It fails to recognize how, throughout history, violence and counter-violence was required to address gross injustices. The very independence of Latin America from Spain’s tyranny depended on a willingness to kill and be killed. To diminish the struggle of the armed left to the act of “serial assassins,” furthermore, takes away the dignity of those who sacrificed their lives for a better world, turning them instead into “senseless deaths” (*muertes sin sentido*).

This contentious debate could be seen as healthy for democracy, putting into practice its essential elements of political participation, expression, and contestation. It could be said that Juvé and Barco achieved their goal by stimulating dialogue, the art of doing politics through talk, speaking out, raising difficult questions, critical analysis, and overcoming authoritarian adherence to a single perspective.

10.3 Confessional Act II

When Claudia Hilb (2013) and Héctor Ricardo Leis (2012) made their confessional acts, they intended to have a positive impact on democracy. They hoped their words would spark national reflection on the past, critical thinking, dialogue, and a recognition that violent means do not lead to positive ends. Rather than putting these democratic values into action, Hilb’s and Leis’s confessions were met with rejection by the very communities they aimed to engage: the left, the human rights communities. The timing was inconvenient for this kind of dialogic discussion about the past.

Claudia Hilb (2013) contends that she was motivated by the search for Goodness when she joined the armed left. When she later reflects on her involvement in the armed left, she contends that she has to take responsibility and accept that taking up arms – however positive the intention and goal – led to catastrophe. By recognizing responsibility for that catastrophe, she feels the left will contribute to building a firmer foundation upon which human rights and democratic cultures in Argentina can be constructed. Instead of prompting that deep reflection on the past, Hilb faced severe criticism and efforts to silence her by the very groups she hoped to reach.

Hilb was wrongly accused of evoking the “two-demons theory” in her book on Argentine memory.¹ In fact she explicitly rejects the two-demons theory. To compare the two sides as equal misses the differentiation in the numbers of victims and the type of victimization, something Hilb clearly recognizes in her testimonial text. She mentions the widespread disappearances, systematic torture, baby kidnapping, and death carried out in the state’s torture and extermination camps (37). Hilb also states unequivocally that the violence by the state cannot be justified, even though the Argentine regime attempted to do so by pointing to the armed insurrection.

The elimination of any norms or types of restraint – judicial, civil and ethical – in the persecution of the enemy by the political power, whose function is precisely to guard over the existence of shared norms to control conflicts within a regulatory framework [as distinct from] an insurrectionary force, [and] whose violating actions can be judged within the framework of the law . . . State terrorism causes damage to the very possibility of political life and is therefore incomparable to the harm caused by insurrectionary action – which, I insist, can always be held accountable in the courts.

(Hilb 2013, 37)

While Hilb rejects the two-demons theory, she contends that the narrative that replaced it is equally problematic. The notions of innocent victims, devils, and angels, or good-versus-evil, ignore the role the left played in promoting violence as a political solution to national problems. Understanding the dynamics of past political violence also requires an understanding of the “ideology of violent action” that was promoted by the Montoneros and the ERP during the period before the dictatorship from 1969 to 1976 (26). To ignore that period gives a distorted view of the past. As she states:

A significant number of the victims of the Armed Forces’ criminal action were militants of armed organizations that were made illegal before 1976 who were often pursued not only for their mere alliances within these organizations, but also for their participation in specific actions – crimes, robberies, assaults on banks, takeovers of military installations, etc . . . Their previous opposition to a legal government makes it difficult to designate them exclusively as “innocent victims.”

(Hilb 2013, 18–19)

1 García (n.d.). For other critiques of Hilb, see Starcenbaum (2013) and Lynch (2013).

Hilb worries that the failure to expose and condemn left-wing violence perpetuates a 1970s view that such violence is justified in the name of obedience to implementing the “free expression of popular will” (20). She senses that the success that the left had in the 1970s in fomenting the revolutionary spirit has re-emerged in the aftermath of the dictatorship because of the absence of critical analysis of it.

[F]or some time, perhaps enflamed by the deepening of inequality and the rebirth of a more critical view of social injustice, many social sectors, particularly the youth, developed a favorable reinterpretation of the ideals and commitment of popular militance of that decade, which tends to crystallize into an interpretation of national historical values identified by “the good guys” against “the bad guys.”

(Hilb 2013, 18)

A careful analysis of past violence on the left would recognize, Hilb holds, the dangers of “the militarization of language, the exaltation . . . of the values of war – one’s own and those of the enemy – and [the adherence to unquestioning] discipline and sanctions (that could even lead to murder) (40). Hilb attributes these outcomes to “Argentina’s armed organizations’ [moral] decay” (40).

For Hilb, the lack of critical thinking about the left’s involvement in violence limits the possibilities for democracy. Exaltation of left-wing violence leads to a justification of violence and totalitarianism as necessary for “radical egalitarianism” (49) and any opponent of the political strategy – even if they support the objective – is censored (82–83). As she states, “Cuba, for the Argentine left, [is] almost a taboo subject, to the point that when I write ‘four decades of totalitarian rule’ I have to restrain myself from the impulse to soften that view” (47).

This kind of one-sided and uncritical assessment leads to the perpetuation of political violence itself. Hilb describes the era of state terror as

the culmination of a long period of trivializing and legitimating political violence and political assassination, of a long period of contempt for the value of political institutions in a republican democracy, for which the armed organizations of the left hold a responsibility that we cannot ignore. State terror was not an inevitable consequence . . . but trivializing violence created the conditions that made it possible.

(Hilb 2013, 102)

With the truth about left-wing violence, Hilb believes that Argentina can overcome “the cover-up [of violence] on the left and the repeated arrogance of [a form of] ‘epistemic moral elitism’” (102). She further

considers that the focus on trials of state perpetrators deepens the mis-conceptualization of the past in terms of good versus evil. The trials “impose a consensus behind what has become our legacy [in Argentina]: The recent dictatorship [el Proceso] perpetrated Evil, which must never happen again” (104). She suggests that the trials of state perpetrators give the left a pass; they enshrine the notion that the left is innocent of wrongdoing. A South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission style model would, in contrast, encourage individuals who committed violence “to assume responsibility for the future on the basis of individual recognition of past responsibility . . . to erect a new form of engaging the past [in which] those who participate become the founders of a new beginning” (104). Such a process could initiate a critical exploration of the past – the wrongness of the violence on the left and the right – a rejection of black and white, right and wrong, left and right, innocent and guilty, misinterpretations of that past. These truths, Hilb suggests, would lead not only to a greater understanding but also to specific knowledge. If individual perpetrators were encouraged to confess, families might find their missing children and grandchildren. The left might also begin to confront its past and condemn the violent path to social justice, and instead embrace democratic values of rights and expression. In this way the firm foundations will be built within society to find democratic and human rights pathways to economic, social, and political justice. Against criticism she has faced from the human rights community, Hilb says that she is in favor of “Never Again,” but she argues that there is a need for greater clarity on what should not occur ever again (*La Capital* 2013).² She is in that sense arguing for a national commitment to defend human rights and to condemn violations regardless of who carries them out and the conditions they claim justify those actions.

Very much like Hilb, Héctor Ricardo Leis (2012), an Argentine philosopher in exile in Brazil where he lived and taught until his death in 2014, began his *trabajo analítico y testimonial* with his background: “I was born in Avellaneda, Argentina, in 1943. In the 60s, I was a Communist and Peronist militant. This experience led me to participate in the armed struggle. I spent a year and a half in jail, [then] was granted amnesty in 1973. I was a Montonero combatant until the end of 1976.”

Leis’s confessional work explores what he sees as betrayal of the left’s collective project for social change and social justice and its replacement

2 See also a review of Hilb in Hernán Eduardo Confino (2014); Hilb (2013).

with terrorism. He contends: "The history of terrorism shows that it is not bound by an ideology. Violent action aimed at killing and terrorizing for political ends is a practice that spans the spectrum from the left and the right alike." His testimony unsettled the left and the human rights community. As in the case of Hilb's text, efforts were made to silence it rather than engage it in a thoughtful debate.

In his confessional text, Héctor Ricardo Leis does not use the language of "Never Again." Neither does he endorse an institutional alternative to the human rights trials for state perpetrators underway in Argentina. He does, however, recognize the importance of the left in taking responsibility for wrongdoing. As he says, "we all – and when I say all I mean all – did things we never imagined we would do."

About his own acts, he states: "Like my companions, I was a terrorist with a beautiful soul. The truth is difficult to accept not only for those who were guerillas, but for the majority of Argentines." The narrative of "innocent victims" on the left, he claims, ignores the guerilla terrorist attacks in the period between May 1973 and March 1976 when the country was under a democratic government. He admits to these terrorist acts in which he was involved. His testimony is interspersed with specific references to acts in which he participated, witnessed, or discovered. He summarizes the violent nature of the movement in this way: "The Montoneros emerged and consolidated their organization in a cult of violence. They were able to kill anyone who turned against their political will, regardless of who they were, whether Peronists or anti-Peronists, military, politicians, or trade unionists."

While in comparison with the dictatorship, the level of violence was lower, it was as high as the non-military right-wing violence prior to the coup: 1,000 by the Triple A, 1,000 by the revolutionary movements, and 8,000 by the military during the Videla dictatorship. The motivations behind left-wing violence were different, however:

I am a witness to our noble motivations. I still hold on to happy memories of my life in those years. There were somber times, but also moments full of compassion, joy, and love. I know that our intention was not to do evil for evil's sake, but the cunning of reason, ironic and perverse, turned even good men into bad, without enough time to realize that it was happening.

He explains the use of violence as a lack of effective leadership within the Montoneros: "Today I know that the leadership of the Montoneros did not know how to do politics; they only knew how to use violence for political ends – which is the best definition of terrorism that exists."

Indeed, he feels that with a different leadership, terrorist violence could have been avoided: “Che Guevara died in 1967. A shame. Although he encouraged the senseless guerilla wars in Latin America and the world, he might have been able to prevent the terrorist turn in our continent. He was the only one who had the moral authority to do so.”

According to Leis, the Montoneros lacked the leadership to restrain terrorist acts or even to listen and discuss alternative strategies to advance the movement’s goals. In this way, Leis recognizes the similarity in both left- and right-wing armed groups and their leaders that will not abide challenges to their authority. These leaders, he argues, order the soldiers to carry out atrocities, convincing them that such acts are necessary to achieve their political goals. The soldiers, and not the leaders, tend to pay a very high price for the acts, he suggests, since the leaders abandon soldiers when and if they are caught. Those soldiers who stand up to their commanders and attempt to resist committing violence, as he found out first-hand, will likely lose their positions within the movement and maybe their lives.

The character of the leadership of the Montoneros became evident in a program of assassinations that was not thought through from a political perspective, but rather from desire, transforming in the end into a game of Russian roulette. Deaths occurred not after political debate or rigorous analysis of reality, but from a calculus based on magical thinking . . . no public self-criticism was ever made for the strategic errors of this terrorist policy. They believed themselves infallible, like the Pope. They did not dwell on the innocent victims [of these tactics].

Leis sees the Montonero approach to violence as ends justifying the means. But he does not attribute this to a flaw of the organization alone. He instead recognizes in Argentina’s history of conflict the concept of violence as a political strategy that is shared by the left and the right: “I do not agree with the theory of the two demons, much less with that of a single demon . . . My thinking is that the nation was immersed in a civil war that became internalized in the collective unconscious. Argentines grew so used to living in a state of permanent war, whether declared or hidden, that peace bored them.” In the case of the left-wing, there was a, “romantic idealization of the Cuban revolution [that] extended to both models [rural and urban guerilla], when in reality the urban model is much more terroristic than [rural] guerilla [warfare]. Its members would pay dearly for this mistake.”

Leis attempts to promote an alternative to the national cultural and historical repetitive pattern of using violence to do politics. In his view, this involves understanding the responsibility for violence on all sides, rather than promoting one-sided justice. He argues that Argentines are resistant to looking back fully and acknowledging blame for the escalation of violence as political solution used by actors on different sides:

The “museums of memory” built during the Kirchner government only registered the victims on one side, but not on the other. And in an attempt to strengthen the claim of the military’s supposed crime against humanity, victims were transformed into innocents, without a guerrilla identity or any link to guerrilla organizations. In some cases, this link may not have existed. But when it does, the government is suppressing the revolutionary identity of “comrades” in the name of human rights. This does not do justice to history, nor to the comrades, who are remembered as students or workers, who might have died with the rank of Montonero leader.

As his use of statistics of violence show, Leis does not equate the level of violence on both sides of the ideological divide. But he does consider both sides equally responsible: “Although [guilty] to a lesser degree, all those who collaborated in one way or another became accomplices and, therefore, should also be tried in a court of law.” He calls the one-sided version of past violence “intellectual dishonesty and moral opportunism”:

The suppression of the “dark” side of the revolutionary past was complete. On the altars of the “democratic atrium,” it is now recorded that the guerrillas always fought against military dictatorships and in defense of democracy. In the same way, it is recorded that civil society never engaged in terrorism, only the State did. The construction of that memory was a fine piece of work, facilitated by the fact that the military is not as nihilistic as the revolutionaries in relation to their role in history.

He goes on to suggest that one-sided justice fails to put a stop to the use of violence as a political strategy:

If there is an amnesty, it must exist for everyone. If there are trials based on individual responsibility, they must exist for everyone equally. Historical memory that justifies the application of the Marxist-collectivist paradigm by excusing the revolutionaries and adopts liberal-individualism to blame the military is not innocent. It is intentionally perverse within the community as a whole.

He advocates a response something along the lines of Hilb, a process by which political violence is condemned and not only the political violence of ideological enemies. His proposed strategy is reaching an

understanding about political violence and attempting to end it through confessions and forgiveness. But he also suggests that such a strategy is unlikely to emerge because, “In Argentina, accusations and punitive justice are encouraged and rewarded, not confessions and restorative justice.” There is not, in his view, a desire to put the past behind and to move on without political violence. Instead, violence is accepted when used by the group you support ideologically and condemned when used by your enemies. His discussion of one of the founding members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo represents this view:

Hebe de Bonafini was a courageous mother who in difficult times knew how to advocate for the disappeared. But when the lights of democracy blinded her, she went on to defend terrorism in her country and in the world. A simple woman, though capable of doing the impossible, she subordinated the defense of human rights to the causes of various terrorist groups.³

Leis contends that without a national soul-searching about political violence that extends beyond who uses political violence and why, violence will continue. The motto of “Never Again” in this sense is only a condemnation of the use of violence by “the other side” and not a condemnation of the abuses of human rights by any group, including those with whom one sympathizes ideologically.

To condemn that violence on both sides, former combatants must admit to what they have done, Leis contends. He rejects the one-sided nature of the accountability process in Argentina. He does not advocate a formal judicial process against those on the left involved in the armed struggle since the movement paid the price with torture, disappearance, and execution. But, like Hilb, he opposes an approach that glorifies terrorism by the armed left and demonizes that carried out by state actors. Both uses of terrorist violence must be condemned to advance a moral and human rights agenda and to protect future generations.

3 Leis is referring to Hebe de Bonafini’s statements in support of the Basque Separatists group ETA (see www.infobae.com/2007/04/25/313242-hebe-bonafini-volvio-apoyar-terroristas-eta/, last accessed March 28, 2022), the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York on 9/11 and other comments (see www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/hebe-de-bonafini-y-sus-10-exabruptos-mas-recordados-nid1543174/, last accessed March 28, 2022).

10.4 Confessional Drama

These two confessional moments and confessional acts provoked a drama. Audiences responded as much to what was said (script) how it was said (acting), by whom (actor), and where (the institutional stage). But what distinguishes audience response to these two confessional acts is best explained by *when* the confessions occurred (timing), the political context at the moment of the confession.

10.4.1 Actor

Those who confessed (actors) in both moments were very similar. All established their credentials to confess to left-wing violence. Hilb implicitly takes responsibility for the acts she committed as part of the armed left movement (FAR and PRT): “What burden should we impose on those of us who participated in movements – Peronists, leftists – for which political violence was an acceptable and common practice?” (17).

Leis’s testimony was more explicit:

I thus conclude this text by confessing that I contributed to Argentina’s suffering with luminously blind thoughts and actions. I apologize to the victims of the events in which my participation was direct . . . I also apologize to the innocent and the generations after mine, who, even without being responsible for the events of Argentina’s recent history, continue to be punished by ignoring their common sense, preventing them ending the perpetual cycles (*yira-yira*) of our national karma.⁴

Jouvé and Barco also do not hide their involvement on the armed left or the responsibility they accept for their acts and the acts of others on the armed revolutionary left.

In addition to who they were in the past, the actors in both confessional moments could be seen as legitimate voices in the present. Jouvé and Barco, in addition to those who responded to their confessional acts, were writing on the pages of a literary magazine, as public intellectuals in that sense. As scholars who had previously participated in armed left movements and were not previously perceived as having betrayed it, Hilb and Leis may have felt that they had the appropriate background to be heard. They produced books that blended scholarly analysis, philosophy, and personal accounts. The staging of their testimony in book form offered an opportunity to elevate the public debate. Yet, in that endeavor,

⁴ “Yira,Yira” is a Carlos Gardel tango (1926).

they mainly failed. Even when they attempted to take a more public stage in the print media and in online videos, they could not fulfill their goal to engage in an in-depth discussion about the left's responsibility for violence.

10.4.2 *Script*

The script – what was said – certainly was the aspect of the confessional performances that brought silencing for Hilb and Leis. Yet silencing was not the response to the earlier confessional act, despite very similar scripts.

Script refers to the specific content of the confessions, the authors' interpretations of the past, not the type of confession. In *Unsettling Accounts*, I refer to eight different types of confessions.⁵ All of the confessional scripts by the armed left in Argentina analyzed here could be seen as remorseful, regretful of violent acts in which they participated or supported in the past. They could also be interpreted as betrayal confessions in which they condemn others in leadership positions, as well as themselves, for these acts of violence. In *Unsettling Accounts*, I analyze some heroic and denial confessions from members of the armed left who subsequently joined, voluntarily or under coercion, the armed forces on the right. Yet silence, the absence of confession, is the prevailing confessional form for the left and right. While the forms of confessions on the left resemble those from state perpetrators, audience responses to them are distinct. For Hilb and Leis, an active effort was made to silence their confessions, to refuse to hear them, to resist engagement with them, and, hence, to fail to generate the kind of contentious coexistence that puts democracy in practice that I observed in the reactions to state perpetrators' confessions. In the case of Jouvé and Barco, there was little effort at silencing them. The critical engagement of their confessional acts could be said to have prompted contentious coexistence, but only as an internal debate within the left. There was no engagement by the right-wing with the earlier confessional act.

The Hilb and Leis testimonial essays provide insights into why these confessions are silenced. They upset a particular narrative about the past that is perpetuated by truth commissions and trials. In these narratives, the tortured, disappeared, or killed are identified as victims, and not

5 These include remorseful, heroic, sadistic, denial, silent, fictional or untrue, amnesia, and betrayal confessions.

perpetrators of violence. Even if not “innocent” of acts of wrongdoing, crimes against humanity are never permissible. No one, regardless of who they are or what they did, should face torture, death, or disappearance carried out by state forces with impunity. In this narrative, what victims did is insignificant and irrelevant. When confessions on the armed left emerge in this context, they disrupt and unsettle the narrative over the past.

Although rare, when members of the armed left confess to violence, they tend to deem their acts as heroic. Violence is justified as the only effective way to bring social, political, and economic justice. The revolutionary left took up arms to defend the powerless against oppression using the only possible weapons to do so. Certain kinds of confessional texts, such as the remorseful and betrayal ones presented here, disrupt and unsettle a narrative about heroism and social justice, reducing the actions on the left to wrongdoing that must be addressed. As long as these discussions are kept within the left – as in the case of Jouvé and Barco – they do not need to be silenced. It is when they are exposed to a broader audience that efforts to silence them occur.

These unspoken truths about the past, therefore, could have a profound impact by unsettling accounts. But they do not. Their impact is ephemeral. When they are engaged, they tend to be discounted and silenced. They fail to have a transformative effect, to change beliefs about the past, to build a stronger democracy with full freedom of expression of political views, or to construct a human rights culture on a rejection of all forms of violence. These confessions are viewed, instead, as inconvenient, self-serving, and harmful to the justice culture evolving.

They present three main unsettling versions of the armed left. First, *the left committed terrorist acts*. There were fewer such acts, and they used different methods, than those carried out by the military, but the left nonetheless committed violence against unarmed citizens during the democratic period prior to the 1976 coup and the dictatorship it installed. The left paid a heavy price for these acts when the repressive apparatus kidnapped, tortured, killed, or disappeared them. But, the existence of the armed left and its terrorist acts provided a justification for the military coup and dictatorship to commit atrocities. And, in the effort to eliminate insurgent groups, others who had not committed violence faced state terror.

Second, *the left justified violence as the political means to achieve social justice*. Violence was not only defensive; it constituted a political path to bring about the revolution. Failing to condemn the violence on the left is

thus an acceptance that certain forms of political violence are acceptable and other forms are not. Violence in itself is not condemned, but rather the use of violence by political enemies is condemned.

Third, *one-sided justice – in which only one violent actor faces accountability – misses an opportunity to develop a stronger basis for rejecting political violence of any type.* This sort of justice system fails to recognize the importance of building a human rights and democratic culture that rejects all forms of violence and promotes tolerance for a range of views about the past. Criminal justice may not be the best mechanism for advancing these goals.

These three qualities of unsettling confessions on the left are interwoven in the texts offered by Hilb and Leis. These three features may reflect their timing and the efforts by the two former members of the armed left to distance themselves from the political uses of memory that perpetuate, rather than overcome, misunderstanding and the appeal of violence as political solution. As observed in the earlier confessional moment, a different response emerged.

10.4.3 *Timing*

Hilb contends that, in the immediate aftermath of state terror, a critical reflection on left-wing violence was not possible. As she states, “the horror of the National Reorganization Process dictatorship drowned in blood any possibility of critical reflection on what happened.” But she argues that, “Today, twenty-five years later, it is our responsibility to pass on to the generations that have succeeded us an uncompromising reflection on our past responsibility” (41), which she hopes will advance the values of “justice, liberty and equality” (41). Leis reflected on personal reasons for his delayed confession:

I know that my text is coming late. I needed a sign to write, and it finally arrived. As I neared 70 years of age, inertia was transformed into an urge to write my memoirs . . . I discovered that I was an active part of a historical dynamic that I could have avoided if I had found within me enough moral and intellectual reserves to face the dark side of the spirit of my generational moment.

Political reasons also motivated Leis from revealing the “dark side” of the past until Argentine democracy was sufficiently secure to think critically about it:

The new memory had to unite Argentines against the past dictatorship and against the armed forces of the time, which still felt empowered to threaten the future. At that time, there was no time or place for anything else. But the current moment should advance toward replacing instrumental memory, the product of circumstance, with memories that gradually approach the truth. In Argentina, the opposite seems to be occurring; as time goes by, historical memories become more instrumental and further from the truth.

The timing could also be said to have hinged on the Kirchner presidency. The Kirchners had succeeded in using political memory as political capital. This is perhaps best represented by the removal from the 1984 CONADEP report the “two-demons theory” prologue. The theory is seen to represent equivalency between the violence on the left and the violence on the right: “During the 1970s, Argentina was convulsed by a terror that came from both the extreme right and the extreme left.” In 2006, President Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) publicly rejected the theory by removing it from the CONADEP report: “It is necessary to clearly establish, because the construction of the future on firm foundations requires it, that it is unacceptable to try to justify State terrorism as a kind of game between two opposing violent groups, as if it were possible to find a symmetry between the action of individuals on one side and the sovereign Nation and State, with its own ends, on the other” (Galak 2006). Debate ensued with the head of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora, Hebe de Bonafini applauding the action of silencing the “two-demons theory” and members of the CONADEP challenging the view that the report had justified violence by the Proceso de Reconstrucción Nacional civil–military dictatorship, blamed the victims, and misrepresented the past.⁶ While few members of the human rights community supported the two-demons theory, an increasing uneasiness emerged with the politicization of memory by the Kirchner governments, their alliances with certain extreme views in society, and the absence of critical engagement with others.

6 A petition circulated in 2016 to remove Minister of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires, Dario Lopérvido, from the office due to his reference to the two-demons theory and mischaracterizing the motives of the human rights community in counting the disappeared. Available at: www.change.org/p/presidencia-de-la-nacion-argentina-loperfido-debe-renunciar-carta-abierta-al-presidente-mauricio-macri-y-a-larreta-a9d62b76-67bb-4313-b9d1-caf3b1e3e46d?recruiter=459642198&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=share_email_responsive, last accessed March 28, 2022.

Why was contentious debate over the left's violence possible in the past and not in recent years? One of the historians who participated in the earlier debate emphasized the political climate in 2004–2005 when the news media reported on these confessions. He argued that the period of time was less threatening than in the years following the transition. The climate was more conducive to open and public debate than in those earlier times. In addition, there was a catalyzing moment, a triggering event, that those on the left responded to in different ways. In the texts, references are made to a Mariano Grondona television program in which a widow of army captain Viola speaks of the cruelty of the People's Revolutionary Party (ERP) in killing her husband. Grondona evoked – “without any subtlety” – the image of the two devils. This highly contested view of the past promoted by the authoritarian regime was back in circulation. Rather than simply rejecting it out of hand, in this less polarized moment, those on the armed left who had engaged in or witnessed cruelty by their own forces were willing to take a moral stand against it.

Another part of the debate focused on a different aspect of the political moment. This debate followed the “*que se vayan todos*” (throw the bums out) protests in which large numbers of Argentines took to the streets against politicians. Argentines were claiming their voice, their citizenship, their right to have rights. In this context, the closed and unresponsive state was challenged. It is in this context that the authoritarian regime of the past is identified as a terrorist state, and not merely a dictatorship. Thinking critically, challenging top-down views, questioning authority, became part of the political climate of the time. A period of democracy in the streets that seemed to have a contagious effect among the left. In this context, some members of the armed left were willing to reflect on the hierarchies within their own movement that had lost touch with the base, the rank and file, and the goals of social justice, where ends justified means.

Despite this propitious political moment, there were still efforts at silencing these unsettling truths about the left. Some suggested that Barco himself had closed off the possibility of dialogue through his use of “unbridled violent language aimed at all protagonists” on the left. Because of this, some on the left called for censoring Barco.

Another form of silencing occurred with the publication of the book *No Matar* (2007). The book was meant to present the full contours of the debate triggered by Jouvé's and Barco's 2004 confessional texts. Certain positions in that debate were excluded from the publication, however. In

particular, those who agreed with Barco were left out. One had sided with Barco against his critics, referring to their positions as using “historical contingency” to excuse past violence by the left. Another text excluded from the book questioned the view of the left’s “mistakes,” contending instead that, “executions are not errors. They tend to follow a long period of planning.” A third excluded commentary shamed the left for “hiding in silence,” failing to address a moral duty to victims, because of fear of how the right might exploit the truth about left-wing violence.

10.5 In Defense of Gag Orders?

Hilb and Leis suggest that the left has not had to account for its wrongdoing and that it should. Anything short of a full accounting by the left will fail to fulfill the goals of peace, democracy, and human rights. The gag orders imposed on the left by a society attempting to create a single narrative of good versus evil have undermined the very goals they aimed to achieve: a rejection of human rights violations, a commitment to peaceful co-existence, and the promotion of democratic values of freedom of expression and debate. In the interest of democracy, human rights, and long-term peace, Hilb and Leis call for an end to gag orders and a full accounting on the left for its role in past violence. They have contributed to this goal by confessing to abuses they committed themselves, witnessed uncritically, and even supported at the time.

These confessional texts failed to catalyze a debate. They did not have the “Scilingo effect” (Feitlowitz 1998) of inspiring others to come forward and confess to their own engagement in left-wing violence. But even when former Naval officer Adolfo Scilingo began his confessional journey with journalist Horacio Verbitsky, there were voices of protest against letting the perpetrators of state crimes control the narrative about the past. Against this view, others called for “many more Scilingos” since for the first-time perpetrators were admitting to wrongdoing. The truths from the perpetrators not only provided evidence of wrongdoing but could even contribute to the discovery of the fate of the still disappeared victims and the stolen babies born in captivity (Payne 2008, 52).

What is the value of confessions to violence from the armed left? The gag orders have protected against the two-demons theory and its implicit equivalency between state terrorism and guerilla terrorism. They further countered the notion that circulated during the dictatorship that if individuals disappeared “*por algo será*” (there must be a reason), hinting that certain transgressions warranted a violent response. The gag orders

attempted to eliminate those misconceptions from national discourse. Hilb and Leis could be seen in this context as re-stigmatizing victims as perpetrators of aggression, blaming the victims.

Both Hilb and Leis recognize that at an earlier phase of democracy, truths about the armed left could not be exposed. But they suggest that now is the time to deal with this past. They argue that the failure to examine the left's violence perpetuates political dogmatism and thwarts critical thinking. To promote analysis is to begin to erode the beliefs in violence as a solution to injustice and not an injustice itself.

Arguing against that view is the notion that the dignity of victims is prior to critical analysis of the past. Arguments in favor of gag orders and democracy have been made by Stephen Holmes and others. Certain deeply contentious issues can trap democracies, making it impossible to move forward. These issues may need to be put "off the conversational agenda of the liberal state," to deepen democracy through "conversational constraint" (Ackerman 1989, 16). When Hilb and Leis violated this constraint, they opened up an old wound in society that had not fully healed. The danger in allowing such speech is to resurrect old views of the victims as responsible for the violence against them, stigmatizing them and justifying political violence. An argument could be made that such a view damages the progress made on advancing human rights norms and accountability for states' human rights violations: a setback for democracy.

In my earlier work, I have argued the opposite: "Contentious coexistence . . . is stimulated by dramatic stories, acts, or images that provoke widespread participation, contestation over prevailing political viewpoints, and competition over ideas. Contentious coexistence, in other words, is democracy in practice" (281). The confessions by Hilb and Leis have presented two challenges to my argument.

First, these confessions failed to catalyze debate. This might have resulted from the particular timing of the confessions. Perhaps it is still too soon to hear and discuss these dramatic stories and political viewpoints, to allow competition over certain ideas. It was not unwarranted to fear that the right could use these confessions to resurrect old myths and halt the human rights trials. It may also be that the form that the confessions took – as semi-scholarly books – might have failed to trigger a broad debate in society. When Scilingo confessed to death flights, he provoked widespread reaction in Argentine society. Neither Hilb nor Leis evoked similar imagery of left-wing violence that might have catalyzed widespread debate.

Second, Hilb and Leis assume that confessions on the left – like theirs – would express remorse, thereby contributing to a rejection of the uses of political violence in Argentine history and culture. Comparative analysis suggests that confessions on the left, like confessions on the right, may justify violence rather than condemn it. Such justification may reinforce, rather than reject, violence as a political solution. Consider South Africa. The military wing of the ANC, the MK, mainly testified in the Amnesty Commission as victims, and not as perpetrators. And yet in my interviews with them, and in some cases in the TRC hearings, they invoked their view of themselves not as victims, but as heroic fighters against the injustices of the Apartheid state. Many of these interviews revealed a resistance to be seen as victims, because such a label robbed soldiers of their protagonism in a legitimate struggle. Some even equated their behavior with those who had tortured them:

I was trained to kill. It was my job. I had to really think through whether this was something I could do or should do. I decided that I needed to do it and so it became my job. He [the apartheid policeman who tortured] also had a job . . . he was doing his job. And I survived it. He did his best to do what he had to do. And I did what I had to do.

(Payne 2008, 138)

Various commissioners struggled to get anti-apartheid liberation fighters to confess to wrongdoing, and when they succeeded to do so it did not come easily. The well-known exchange between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in the TRC reflects efforts to convince the left to accept responsibility for their own wrongdoing. Against Madikizela-Mandela's "denial, defensiveness, and evasion" to take responsibility for a killing, Tutu entreated her to apologize. He received a canned apology; one in which she merely repeated the words he gave her without sincerity.

Tutu: There are people out there who want to embrace you. I . . . I still embrace you because I love you and I love you very deeply. There are many out there who would have wanted to do so, if you were able to bring yourself to say: "something went wrong." And to say: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for my part in what went wrong." I beg you! I beg you! I beg you! Please! You are a great person and you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you had to say: "Sorry. Things went wrong. Forgive me." I beg you.

Madikizela-Mandela: I am saying it is true. Things went horribly wrong. For that, I am deeply sorry.

(Payne 2008, 70)

Already divided opinion of Winnie Mdikizela-Mandela and her football club remained and perhaps the schism further deepened. This did not affect the quality of the debate over the past. Yet Tutu remained disappointed that so few ANC were willing to come forward and accept responsibility for their acts. When they did, they seemed to deliver apologetic scripts provided to them, simultaneously defending their decision to take up arms. This can be seen in the encounter between the husband of a woman shot in St Andrews Church and her Pan African Congress (PAC) killers.

Dawie Ackerman: I would like to hear from each one of you, as you look me in the face, that you are sorry for what you've done. That you regret it and that you want to be personally reconciled.

Amnesty Applicant: We are sorry for what we have done. Although people died during that struggle, we didn't do that out of our own will. It's the situation that we were living under. We are asking from you, please do forgive us.

(Payne 2008, 72)

In these cases, the armed left was able to explain to South Africans that they were fighting a just war, yet they could still apologize for the civilian deaths in that war. Why was that possible in the earlier confessional moment in Argentina and not in the later one?

Hilb and Leis suggest that – in contrast to the ANC – the armed left in Argentina is not democratic; they do not play by the democratic rules of the game. Violence is still a political strategy used by the right and the left. The logic of their argument, however, suggests that if those on the armed left were to come forward, they, like their right-wing counterparts, would justify their use of violence as heroic and necessary, rather than condemn and express remorse for it. Moreover, Hilb and Leis recognize that the social justice objectives of the armed struggle continue to have broad appeal in Argentine society. This claim suggests that, within the left, such a contentious debate can occur – as it did in the earlier confessional moment. But exposing such a truth to a broader public, particularly at the moment in which the right-wing was gaining leverage within the political system, prompts the demand to silence debate over the role of the left in the past.

In the later period, as the right increases its political power again, a confessional process from the Argentine armed left might reinforce, rather than undermine violence as a solution. The urgency of a radical redistribution of wealth and resources, the absence of responsible and

representative political leaders with a social justice agenda, the nostalgia for a more egalitarian society or political agenda, might mean that the confessional processes would backfire. This is particularly the case, as demonstrated in *Unsettling Accounts*, if audiences fail to contest the confessional script and its meaning and instead accept uncritically the heroic notion of armed struggle. In this context, are gag orders justified?

10.6 Conclusion

Political timing is important, even crucial, to contentious coexistence. The other elements of the confessional performance did not vary much between the two historical moments. Hilb's and Leis's confessional scripts resembled the earlier ones by exposing unsettling aspects of the armed left's past violence. They were similar kinds of actors, having been members of the armed left who had witnessed atrocity. Their confessional stage was not significantly different. They too had published their texts and were interviewed in the media. The audience – the right and the left – were similar in each set of confessions. The main difference that helps us explain the possibility of opening up debate is the timing of the confessions. The earlier period was a safer moment for the left to admit to these atrocities without the same level of fear about backlash.

But even in the most propitious moments, as in the earlier confessional era, there is still too much polarization to freely debate the left's violent past. As one of the commentary's states about the confessions, "They unsettled me." Yet one of the most unsettling parts of the confessional performance for him was the failure on the left to hear. As he stated, "We have opted not to listen." Thus, even when a debate is opened up, there is an effort to shut it down. In this, the left has failed to live up to its own ideals and theories, to think critically, to reflect, to condemn those parts of the left's past that deserve condemnation.

If it is the case that even in the best of times, left confessions to violence face silence, what does this mean for contentious coexistence? If, even during the periods of broad consensus to reject violence as a way to do politics, the left cannot reflect on its own role in the past, then what are the possibilities of building a strong, democratic, peaceful future that respects human rights? More poignantly, during the current period, as the right-wing and former supporters of state violence become empowered again, can debates render the kind of contentious coexistence that is positive to democratic dialogue and building a stronger human rights culture? Or will they provoke a further rollback of rights and the

delegitimization of the left? Is there a way in which the left can play a constructive role, in these unpropitious and propitious political environments, in building stronger human rights regimes?

Timing does not do all of the work of turning confessional performances into contentious coexistence and democratic practice. How timing affects audience responses is significant. Until audiences on the left feel it is safe to talk freely about the past – without fueling political polarization and playing into the right's efforts to demonize the left – it is unlikely that these confessions will have their intended effect of rejecting violence as a political strategy. And yet, without broad consensus against the use of violence by the right or the left, it is uncertain whether countries can emerge from the legacies of the past and build democratic and human rights futures.

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