

'Barbarity' and 'Civilization' according to perpetrators of State violence during the last dictatorship in Argentina

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Abstract

In this article, I would like to suggest permanencies in the frames of thought in terms of barbarity and civilization in the speeches of perpetrators of serious State violence in Argentina. This research is based on extensive testimonies such as autobiographical accounts (« memoirs ») and non-judiciary interviews, from soldiers and policemen who were active just before and during Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and spoke a posteriori about this past. To carry a necessary glance on the transhistorical and relevant connotations of this notional couple, I will refer to historical works of the political culture approach.

At first, through a genetical perspective, two key connotations of the barbarity / civilization dichotomy are located at its time of entry in the political language during the first part of the 19th century, in order to show under which form discourses produced 150 years later in the Argentinian context, are still impregnated from them. Then, specific persistencies of this notional couple are explored, from its moral to its identity-based dimension, when it is assimilated into the worldview of people who regularly transgressed the proscription of murder and torture.

Key words: Civilization; morality; mass murder; violence; dictatorship in Argentina; history of ideologies

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Sumario: Introduction. 1.Development. 2.Conclusion. References

Introduction

It is typical to speak about *barbarity* or *acts of barbarity*, certainly with good reason when one finds oneself commenting upon extreme State violence such as summary executions or acts of torture. This lexical field also has an official resonance on commemorative plaques in places where the acts of violence were committed as well as in reports which denounce them and render them public. The following article considers the paradox consisting in the fact that the same persons who commit such atrocities also think in these terms. It explores the forms and the meanings taken by the *barbarity / civilization* dichotomy when it is spoken by the perpetrators themselves and when we can show that they are referring to such a category of thought.

As the sociologist Norbert Elias (Elias, 2000) often does for the word *civilization*, the terms of *barbarity* and *civilization* are written here in italics. The reason for this lies in one of the great strengths of his approach to the social world. In fact, Elias does not apply his own concepts to describe the attitudes of the studied social actors, but rather he adopts an already existing and actually emerging term from the period in which he is writing. This is an experienced notion by the social actors he studies, from which he endeavours to clarify its very complex affective implications as well as the fundamental social changes to which it is linked.

In the same way, we make an empirical and descriptive use of the terms *barbarity* and *civilization*, which have an unquestionable normative power, trying to better understand their different connotation according to their contexts of use.

These two notions are going to be presented through extracts of three testimonies of State massviolence perpetrators during the last military dictatorship in Argentina. Moreover I am going to privilege the sociogenetic method consisting here of looking further back into the historical conditions of appearance of this antagonistic couple in the political discourses on society. This view should allow us to better grasp the characteristic signification of these terms which made their introduction so relevant to the political language in the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as to design a resulting pattern of thoughts in order to be able to recover 150 years later its traces in the speeches of Argentinean militaries and policemen. On the title of this essay, *barbarity* is placed before *civilization* notably because I will endeavour to do a more intensive study of the first term : the one not only for itself but as an indissociable pole to its moral contrary.

Using these nouns as markers in the context of Argentina, they clearly hint to the subtitle of the work *Facundo : civilización y barbarie* written in 1845 by Jose Sarmiento who was afterwards elected president of the country (Sarmiento, 2003). This political text used to play a significant reception and role in the discernment of political and social conflicts in Argentina during the nineteenth and twentieth century, an inheritance in the world of ideas which was recounted by Maristella Svampa in a PhD thesis on the subject, which turned into a book (Svampa, 1994). This dichotomy constantly occurs in the political discourses, even if it occurs less frequently nowadays. Through it their locutor, for instance politicians in election

campaigns, are willing to show that their project orient itself in the course of history, i.e. in the most adapted direction for the Nation. It is indeed with these notions, as legitimization (*civilization*) or as invective (*barbarity*), that the struggle for the appropriation of the orientation of political action was largely structured. Also, such a division in the frame of political struggle implies a very strong disqualification of the opponent.

1. Development

In a first socio-historical exploration, I would like to look into very specific and fundamental affective charges which infuse the two notions, the one directly and the other indirectly but indissociably. Although these aspects of the words come from a shared experience of feeling rather than from collective imagery, these connotations can also be historically discerned.

At the time of the redaction of the work of Sarmiento – in 1845 – the lexical field of *barbarity* occupied an important position in the speeches on society in France and England, precisising semantical directions that had already started in the 18th century. The adjective *barbarian* was most frequently attributed to certain moral standards that could not be any more conceivable in the social space. The term conveys such a rate of indignation toward the considered attitude, that one cannot disregard it, but must actively and at any cost prevent it from happening. Concerning the social use of the term, it is quite remarkable that expressions like *barbarian practices* or *barbarian acts* almost exclusively referred – from that time until the present – to practices of violences. It could be rightfully expected that the term would be used in reference to other sensible thematics of that time such as lack of hygiene or *savoir-vivre*, but it is far from being the case. Thus, coming to this term leads us directly to issues related to representations of violence.

In many previous and parallel speeches to the one of Sarmiento, in France in particular, *barbarity* was strongly related to the presence of blood, and the *barbarian* was the one who had the hands literally or metaphorically stained by the secretion. This *barbarian*, when he paradoxically comes from the same society is a bloody figure, either represented by the executioner of death penalties whose practices are slowly and gradually occulted from the eyes of normal citizens, or by the tyrant, who corresponds to the antithesis of the 'enlightened despot' and therefore finds himself at the most distant position from the values of the Revolution.

For his part, Maurice Agulhon, the historian, who perhaps best examined French attitudes in the first half of the nineteenth century, pointed out this aversion to blood shared by members of the socio-cultural elite, which offers an atypical image of them compared to their usually availed love for Reason : « *Indeed, it is time to say it : since the Age of Enlightenment, the progress consisted in banishing bloody spectacles. (...) The enlightened citizen found that bloodshed was intrinsically barbaric.* » (Agulhon, 1988: 288).

Concerning the term *civilized*, one can recognize, reading Norbert Elias (Elias, 2000), that in the sixteenth century it already constitutes an important identity stake for Court-society elites in France and in Europe. The emphasis on the antagonism of the term *barbarity*, appears much later and in this first half of the nineteenth century tends to show a new identity promoted by parts of the bourgeoisie elite. The emergence of such an identification to a new kind of man can be better grasped with the help of the reflexion of François Furet about the legacy of the french Revolution when he says that « "modern" history ended in 1789 with what the Revolution called "Ancien Régime". (...) Although such a period didn't have any clear birth certificate, it received a death certificate in due form. » (Furet, 1978: 15). Indeed, it seems that these 'enlightened' social actors were confronted with a change in the consciousness of their own nature, which as opposed to « the man of the Ancien Régime », the latter was clearly from a revolved time with its *barbarities* referring to practices they could no longer stand.¹

In order to put these connotations in perspective with the political Argentinian language of the 1970s and before, it has to be recognized that poetic of blood within the second context awakes not only aversion, but other feelings such as a sense of belongings. However, allusions to a *barbarity* seems to be appropriately recognizable in the talks of Argentinian public order agents, a *barbarity* which is announced and depicted with the same associated emotional charge as in the first context. At no point in these State agents discourses blood have a special place but the stake consists definitely of denouncing certain modalities of « their » violence, violences of the enemy, violences that were scandalous, unlike their own violence. One can observe this when Miguel Etchebéatz, the General Police Commissary of Buenos Aires at the time of mass disappearances, found it necessary to present the « social mores » of his victims. In what was at the very least a risky exercise, he wanted to make them figures of *barbarity*, insisting on the way the latter practice violence and displaying how their acts of violence were deeply transgressive. Selecting a passage from a one of Montonero's² army manual, he explains that a Montonero came to kill his own wife and was awarded for it (source B, 1988: 41). These facts are terrible and one has to become aware that according to the same sources, this woman, an armed militant, was seriously injured, to the extent that she was captured by the police, and asked her husband to do so. There is no point here

¹ Speaking about this characteristic repugnance for blood in the socio-cultural elites, Agulhon mentions the invention of the « guillotine » by the *enlightened* citizen Guillotin, which could be used as an objection to his says. But it has to be remembered that this machine was complimented at that time for his « humanitarianism », compared to the former existing methods. Likewise, its omnipresence during the French Revolution and the Terror is part of the enigmas which make the period of rupture, while retrospectively and a bit later such spectacles of the execution will be always morally condemned by these same privileged classes.

² Montoneros are the members of the most important peronist guerillero movement.

to discuss the veracity of these pronouncements, since the interest is placed on the social showed perceptions of this public order agent. Etchecólatz presents here what must be for him a triple transgression : « guerilleros were killing each others » ; « guerilleros associated women to their fight and ended up killing some of them » ; « this endo-groupal murder, far from being sanctioned by the movement, was awarded ».

This denunciation of the « barbarity of the subversive » seems to have similar functions and uses to rumors on the atrocities committed by the enemy in time of war, especially since policemen and military considered wrongly - because it suited them much better - that their State Terror was part of a war situation. In the present case, it permits to focalize on the violence of the guerillero in order to not be confronted to the intolerable nature of one's own extreme violence. Presenting the violence of the so-called enemy as transgressives, and through this, as anomalous and against all values and senses, gives respectively as much reasons to act efficiently against them - and paradoxically - at any cost.

Conversely, it is worth to find in the more reserved and barely more subtle testimonies of the Commandant Astiz the same principles in their non-transgressed version, when the latter valorizes the former members of public order's activities in the violence : « *In the same way, we learn, as subordinated, not to discuss the orders and, as superiors, to take care of their own people. The worst thing that can happen in life is when one of your own people is killed. And I can't tell you if he is following your orders.* » (source A, 1998: 8). These two extracts of testimonies confirm one other and make apparent a persistence of moral norms, even when one shattered proscription of murder and committed torture, as both of them did. But moral principles are shifting beyond the critical threshold (to not kill) in order to channel the tensions of the agents on the prohibition of endogroupal murders, on the « good » and « bad » rules of conduct in the practice of murder.

In this second part of the development, I will try to scrutinize another dimension of the connotation of *barbarity*, not when it derives from a behaviour, but when it is more personified. This time, I will first focus on the testimonies of military and then come back to our longer term socio-historical paradigm.

Reading the pamphlet of Etchecólatz, one can be surprised by the unannounced presence of very long lists which break off with the rest of the text which is otherwise written in a narrative style. In this way, it is presented first « *the list of violent deeds produced by the Montoneros* » and then the list of « *victims of terrorist attacks* » (source B, 1988: 86-98), gathering the names of dead policemen, among others, during this period. This second list is followed by a third one, entitled « *cadavers of subversives non identified and non recovered by their relatives* » (source B, 1988: 105-108). Looking closely at these lists, they don't have to be left apart, but constitute from a qualitative point of view (and particularly quantitative, paradoxically) highly instructive sources. One can wonder, without getting an answer, how former military and people from the same political side as Miguel Etchecólatz who should be the first destinatary of these « memoirs », apprehend these lists. The long series of names of « victims of terrorists attacks »

could be subject to public readings which extend cohesion and conviction of those who are clearly in favour of the last military dictatorship and its agents. When one approach such a list with the viewpoint of another cultural context, in which usual names and surnames are pretty different, such a list will be considered as long, redundant and won't gain in interest. On the contrary, these names will sound familiar – especially of course when some of the mentioned individuals are known – they will be appreciated in their unicity and find an echoe in such an audience.

Regarding the extract of a list of deceased members of the police (fig. 1), one will notice that big attention was furnished in the classification of the latter according to their situation (according to the region in which they were serving) and their rank. For the police of Córdoba, there are categories of listing, such as « general commissary », « principal commissary », « under-commissary », « first sergeant », « sergeant », « caporal », « agent » and also « aspiring agent ». This layout in term of organization charts makes really sense for people who served as or are familiar with this profession. In this « harmony » every one has his place and appears as an indispensable member of an united body. Replaced in the writing's context of this document, in 1988, just after that the amnesty laws towards agents of the military dictatorship took effect, this list of « policemen victims of the subversion » serves a better cohesion of people who are able to sustain members of the former regim in the hate of their actual political oponents, militants of the human right who keep willing to pursue them into justice for torture and killing.

Figura 1

VICTIMAS DE ATENTADOS TERRORISTAS	
Inspector General: Sirnio, Juan	POLICIA PROVINCIA DE FORMOSA
Comisario Inspector: Marcial, Timoteo	Sargento: Benítez, Casimiro Efraín
Sargento 1º: Fagioli, Pedro Oscar	Cabo: Alegre, Nori Argentino
Cabos: Lazarte, Vicente Marcelo Vallejo, Juan Carlos Mansilla, Casimiro Reyes Vargas, Gumersindo Verónico Ibarra, Eudoro Giménez, Ramón Valentín	POLICIA PROVINCIA DE CORRIENTES Cabo: González, Raúl Narciso
Agentes: Santiago, Pedro Oscar Silvetti, Juan Carlos Gerardo Maltez, Carlos Eduardo	POLICIA PROVINCIA DE CORDOBA Comisario General: Paz, Simeón Alejandro Douglas Comisario Principal: Robles, José Elios

Figura 2

CADÁVERES DE SUBVERSIVOS NO IDENTIFICADOS NI RETIRADOS POR FAMILIARES						
Año	Cantidad	Total	Año	Cantidad	Total	
Gral. Pueyrredón			Tandil			
1976	35	165	1973	6	23	
1977	58		1974	2		
1978	40		1975	4		
1979	32		1976	2		
Gral. Paz			1977	2		
1976	7	17	1978	3		
1977	5		1979	4		
1979	4		Salto			
1980	1		1975	1		
Gral. Rodríguez			1976	3		
1976	6	.6	1978	1		
1977	12		1979	1		

Next to that, Etchecólatz proposes a list of what he certainly won't call « victims of the repression », but « *unidentified cadavers of subversives* » as if their corpses were recovered in the public place while they were staged; as if their death resulted from armed confrontations with public order's agents while most of the time resulted from tortures coupled with a prolonged detention under unlivable conditions.³ This negationist title makes also believe that these thousands of people – he enumerates 2303 people – were not identified and not identifiable. Such an assumption goes with his fantasma, shared by the yesteryear institution which conceived these statistics on which he reworked, of eradicating all possible feeling of identification towards their victims.

With a level of dehumanisation which goes maybe further than one could have towards members of his own society around the years 1830, I can recover in the form of the latter list (Fig. 2) the permanence of another connotation of *barbarity* related with a feeling of ungraspability and dissolution related to the conceived ones.

Concerning popular classes that were seen as the incarnation of such *barbarity*, the sociologist Maristella Svampa sees in the position of members of French elites of that time a fear of an overthrow which corresponded to the idea that « barbarian

³ On the stages of armed confrontations, we can refer on the subchapter « simulacros de enfrentamientos » in the official final report of the CONADEP, *Nunca más*. www.desaparecidos.org/arg/conadep/nuncamas/nuncamas.html

invasions » and the « ruin of civilization » wouldn't occur from the outside of the territory but from within (Svampa, 1992: 21-27). In order to give an expression of these representations of the people as a figure of barbarity, she quotes the synthetic and telegraphical viewpoint of the historian Rosanvallon about this precise subject : « *In this fear of the number take root all the evocations of social decomposition. Image of an ungraspable society, pure human magma. (...) Vision of an uncontrollable and revolutionnary crowd, faceless monster without outline, fundamentally unrecognizable because it is the zero degree of organicity.* » (Rosanvallon, 1985, cited in Svampa, 1992 : 29)

One can recover many aspects of this image of *barbarity* on the lastly presented extract of source (Fig.2) that I am going to comment. It is a *barbarity* not applied anymore to the people, which becomes part of the same side as the authorities, but to the « subversive », the political enemy. This felt *barbarity* is not named as such in the listing, but appears as a product of a frame of thought that keeps conceiving social conflicts as a struggle between *civilization* and *barbarity*. Setting the listing up, Etchecólatz and his peers give to it a strong impression of incompleteness, suggesting the idea of an « uncontrollable subversion ». The present listing concerns only the one they have « recovered » and not all the others, implying that there is an uncertainty whether they are dead, alive, active, living underground or disappeared. Secondly, in the case of this listing, it is not possible to truly speak about a count or an enumeration of « subversives », because in order to count people or even things, at least should every unit be considered in its individuality. In the present case, according to the mention « quantity » that the author or his statisticians place without other precisions, one can esteem that he is measuring « subversion », as if the latter was really consisting in a « *pure evasive human magma* ». He doesn't see the interest to mention « what » he measures, since they are anyway non-identifiable corpses, presented here as the materialization of a « *faceless [phenomenon] without outline, and fundamentally unrecognizable* ».

On the contrary, when I come back to the list of policemen « victims of terrorists attacks » (Fig. 1), they are presented, as I already pointed out, according to the region where they are working with their precise professional status, mentioning their first and last name, and if necessary some second and third names. Each identity is recognized as well as the place of each one in the Argentinean society, constantly precised and, by doing so, justified. This big commitment to set up organization chart structures is literally inverted into a total opacity of presentation and information which characterizes the list of « subversives ». One can find represented there this « *zero degree of organicity* » from which the president Perón claimed to have brought out the Argentinean people, taking them as « masses » and making them « people ». This « *zero degree of organicity* » is nevertheless here not reattributed to popular classes but to « subversives », a so designated group by the politico-judiciary system which aggregates individuals who would share one or many of the following distinctiveness : being young, politically engaged, marxist or left-winger, armed or non-armed activist, having a high cultural

capital, producing thoughts which are considered by members of the authorities to go against christian values and liberal capitalism.

As a third exploration of these perpetrators' testimonies with the help of the *barbarity / civilization* dichotomy, I would like to come back to these questions relating identity stakes and modalities of the violence in use, focusing this time on the side of *civilization*. One could previously see that not all but only certain forms of violence were effectively considered and felt as *barbarian*. Such a conception enables to legitimate one's own violence, producing a diversion of the look towards the particularly transgressive aspect of other types of violence, of the supposed violence of the others. Forcing this logic of thought, one would like to perceive somewhere in the text a mention to *civilized violence* in contrast to the *barbarian violence*. Would it be nevertheless possible to hear one of these militaries literally speaking about *civilized violence*? I consider not, because the term *violence* often shares, and rather clearly in this context, a meaning of denunciation. *Civilized violence* would be, in this way, an unpronounceable oxymoron from them.

I could be however surprised to find an expression, which goes in such a way, but using a different register, in the testimonies of the Captian Adolfo Scilingo. According to his says, the chaplain in the ESMA⁴ often declared to him and other militaries that their action offered a « Christian Death » to the one who were subjected to it. These statements were specifically referring to the so-called practices of death flights, in which militaries were throwing out from a plane still alive « subversives » into the sea, after having drugged them. According to Scilingo who actively participated in two death flights in killing thirty people, the expression « Christian Death » was explained at that time by the fact that « *they were not suffering, that it was not traumatic, that we had to eliminate them, that war was war, and that even in the Bible was announced a separation of the wheat from the chaff.* » (Verbitsky, 2004: 38). It is possible to see how, changing the expression of this moral dichotomy to a similar one, one can not only denounce the murderous violence of the enemy but also manage to « dignify » murderous violence of his own institution. But such reassuring conceptions of the realities of his own violence could only take place in the closed corporation of the State institution. Indeed, such violence - because of their deeply asymmetrical and systematical characteristics - took the shape of the slaughter and couldn't be revealed, as « christian » or « not », to the public space.

In a relative unusual way, the executioner Scilingo tries to think about the violence he committed on a reflexive and a tangible way. His interest will however retrospectively not focus on the sense of these violence or on their accumulation,

⁴ ESMA : *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*. Center for the formation of sub-officers in the Argentinean army, which was used during the last dictatorship as one of the most important center of detention and torture.

but it will get stocked in the hyper-obtuse space of modalities, in which morality, civilization or, in the present case « christian values » are at stake.

This strict attention towards modalities of killing finds itself in the practices of participants of the death flights, according to what Scilingo relates about them to the Argentine journalist Horacio Verbitsky. Militaries would have indeed observed a very precise ritual, consisting of taking off all the clothes of their victims before throwing them from the plane into the River Plate. The importance of such ritual elements comes out when the journalist Verbitsky told Scilingo that some of the corpses were dressed up when they were recovered on the Uruguayan coasts. The reaction of the executioner to this sentence is very heated, and certainly surprises. He exclaimed: « *That was the worst barbarity. The man who did this Flight was crazy like. He didn't support it and asked to be discharged from the army.* » (source C, 2004 [1996]: 126). In the course of the dialog, and this time without willing it, the journalist Verbitsky pushed the convictions and the attitude of Scilingo to a real degree of absurdity. The word *barbarity*, said by Scilingo in this precise context, let us see an aspect of the big traumatical confusion in his personality of repentant perpetrator. His reaction seems to show that the moral dimension that this word assumes as involving a strong feeling of indignation against scandalous situations could have been heavily softened, and overtaken by the modal and identity dimension of the same word. In this way, undressing the victims had the propriety to remove from the point of view of Scilingo all the horror that contains his murderous action and if not, he could recognize the crude *barbarity* of his acts.

Scilingo, who unlike Astíz or Etchecólatz tries to reflect about his own acts, still uses at other times the expresión « *barbaridad* », this time to designate exactions he committed as well as the ones of Rolón, one of his hierarchical superiors, convinced of torture. This term helps him at the moment he is saying it to persuade himself of the unacceptable nature of his actions and the one of his institution. He is therefore prevented from going in search of justifications, because this word allows him to desinvest from his past belonging and opinion.

2. Conclusion

The title of this paper seems to present a paradox, because I am questioning about moral criterias of those who committed *barbarities*. However, it is more and more demonstrated within the researches on violence that such actors acted also according to a moral frame (Welzer, 2005 ; Konitzer and Gross, 2009), and these notions of *civilization* and *barbarity* corresponded sufficiently well to the context of ideas of the last dictatorship in Argentine to make part of the frame of mind of his executioners, in this case in their retrospective testimonies. It is worth to remind here that all the analysed testimonies were produced after the dictatorship, in a period of democratical transition and of political amnesty towards these people. Although these documents can give us some significant clues in this direction, it is

still another big matter to evaluate whether the perpetrators would have thought and said the same during their period of extreme violences.

In order to come back to our couple of adjectives, I can say that their moral and identity dimension are inextricably tied. A dominant trend of its moral qualities is present in the use of the word *barbarity* to designate, for example, the violences committed during the nazism. This trend with a moral dominance can be found when Scilingo tries to convince himself about the unacceptable character of his own violences, calling them «*barbaridades*», word which could prevent from getting used to a climate of horror. But, considering the substance of this article, it is possible to point out that the notion of *barbarity*, in its possibilities to be thought and in its lexical fields, exerts in fact a very deficient power of violence's conjuration.

In these three explorations of perpetrator's testimonies are shown indeed three other uses of the conceptual couple which alimets the most extreme violence, or at least allows it. There is at first Etchecólatz, who presents - in the same register as war rumors - the *non-civilized* violences of political oponents in order to legitimize his own violences from which he doesn't say a word. Then, with a personified identity dominance in the use of these terms, the former chief of the police of Buenos Aires presented *civilian* and people from his hierarchy on a very harmonious and *organized* list, when the «subversives» appeared under the form of a nameless piling up, «*at the zero degree of organicity*». At last, with the former naval officer Scilingo, it is notably with a putting to death ritualization that he manages to stifle his moral capacity to say what is *barbarian* and what is not, capacity which comes out virulently since the ritual is abandoned.

2.1. Discussion with the Theory of Norbert Elias

In order to expand the debate into the relation between violence and the fundamental research of Norbert Elias on the Civilizing Process, we can see through the presented examples within this article to what extent persons who committed extreme violence so massively and routinely can be at the same time carriers, to some extent, of a *civilized habitus*. If the civilizing process undoubtedly tended over the centuries to make life more peaceful between individuals within the society, with a drastic decrease of blood crimes (Spierenburg, 2008), we notice here how violence and *civilization* are not necessarily in opposition to one another. Within the case of the last military dictatorship in Argentina, the long process of monopolization of the legitimate violence nevertheless enables unprecedented outbreaks of violence, since they are the fact of State officials and are committed away from the public space and the admitted opinion.

These former members of the State organization chart convey a discourse, which clearly falls into this monopolistic logic. Immersed into the political culture of a country accustomed to the numerous military takeovers that took place every decade from 1930 to 1970, they consider according to a conception named

pretorianism by some researchers⁵, that «*military interventions do not imply a rupture of the political system but a valid possibility inherent within it.*» (Catoggio, 2010: 2).

They would be then the only appointed group to use the force without restriction against those who are not identified anymore as citizens but as «terrorists» or «subversives», would jeopardize this monopole of violence, as well as the fundamentals of *civil* life in Argentina. Far from the idea of a collapse of civilization («Zusammenbruch der Zivilisation») or *decivilization* (Elias, 1996 [1989]), these State violences seem at the contrary to fit very well the pattern of a process of *dyscivilization* proposed by a disciple of Norbert Elias, the sociologist Abram de Swaan, who describes it as follows: «*Under [certain] conditions of state-monopolized violence, a high level of civilization is maintained in almost all respects and for the vast majority of the population; however, the regime creates and maintains compartments of destruction and barbarism, in meticulous isolation, almost invisible and well-nigh unmentionable.*» (De Swaan, 1998: 269).

Organizing the spaces of the most extreme violence under the form of illegal detention centers (Centros Clandestinos de Detención) matches such a logic consisting in maintaining the civilization on the surface: it becomes inadmissible for «civilized individuals» or «civilians» to evoke in public the possibility of such deeds, as these spaces of *dyscivilization* are kept secret from them and the existence of these detainees is fully denied. We shall notice in the Argentinean case this strange position, where much of this violence didn't take place on peripheral locations, but in the city centers: in basements, hangars or warehouses - sometimes a few meters away from pedestrians.

Coming back to a micro-sociological level and the developments of this article, we show in which way perpetrators of State violence within the Argentinian context also think in terms of *civilization* and of *barbarity*. Beyond these paradoxes, to work on these discourses emphasize the complexity of the notion, between its uses of research and those of the most controversial social actors, the counter-examples of civilization as it is perceived by the reader.

Within the testimonies analyzed in this article, the term of civilization can take three different values.

There is first a descriptive value of such a word, close to the conception by Norbert Elias: led by the feeling of the locutors, their *civilized habitus*. This

⁵ Cf. Perlmutter, A. (1982). *The Military and Politics in Modern Times: On professional, praetorians and revolutionary soldiers*. New Heaven-Londres, Yale University Press.

Irwin, D. (2001) Usos y Abusos del Militarismo y el Pretorianismo, in *Tiempo y Espacio*. Vol. 18-35, Centro de Investigaciones Mario Briceño Iragorry, IPC-UPEL, Caracas.

QUIROGA, H. (2004) : *El tiempo del «Proceso»*. *Conflictos y Coincidencias entre políticos y militares 1976-1983*, Santa Fe : Homo Sapiens/Fundación Ross.

connotation finds itself within many forms of justification of committed/inflicted violence, which would become acceptable since it would have been produced « with manners », at the contrary of those of the enemies. On the basis of criteria related with transnational history of sensibilities and the political culture of the country, we showed how these persons are the products of the civilizing process in spite of the atrocities they've committed.

In its normative value, civilization is included into an ideological project within the modernity and works as an orientation and prospect of action. This conception appears quite often within the analysed documents, particularly in a phrase such as to « save the civilization », in which the meaning is empty enough to make it entirely interchangeable with *nation* or *constitution*.

When this normative value has a really defined meaning, it will explicitly include this violence against members of the population in a socially integrative and civilizing project, as we can find it in colonial practices, as the sociologist Robert van Krieken (1999) analyzed it in his understanding of exactions against Aborigines in Australia.

Finally, there is a designative value of the terms *civilization* and *civilized* who refers to its identity dimension, to the fact that these words are a way to define oneself as well as the group to which one is belonging. Of course, as he chooses to dedicate his work to the thematic of civilization, Norbert Elias takes into account the definitional aspect of the word in that it is the term used by individuals, themselves, the one most representative of the socio-historical dynamics in which they are involved.

As we analyzed here lists of dead people exposed by the chief of the Buenos Aires police at the time of the mass disappearances, we could establish at what point the victims of his institution corresponded to figures of barbarity and were defined as elements alien to the civilized world and its order.

In conclusion, the analyses of this article are exploration areas of violence within civilization and demonstrate the relevance and richness of the perspective of Norbert Elias to better understand violence in late modernity societies. But also, working with Elias while being confronted with far more radical discourses than books of etiquette (Elias, 2000 [1939]) raises awareness about the importance, in these types of studies on violence, of distinguishing between descriptive, normative or designative values of the notion of civilization.

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Images :

Two cropped extracts of a source were coming from the following document:
ETCHECÓLATZ, M., (1988), *La Otra campana del nunca más*, self-editing, Buenos Aires. *Fig. 1* : « title» p. 86, « listing » p. 92-93 ; *Fig. 2*: « title» p. 105, « listing» p.106-107.