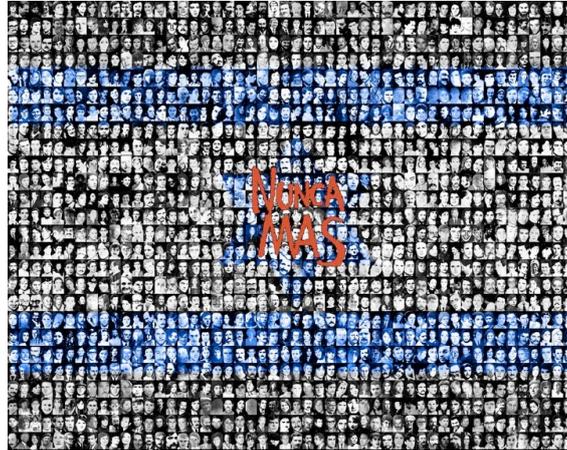


# A whiplash concerning the effects of State terrorism



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On Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> and Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2013, the LECTURA-MUNDI programme of the National University of San Martín organized the series *Narratives of the real* at the National Library. Within this context, I was invited to participate in a panel together with a writer, a philosopher, a historian, a sociologist and a neurobiologist<sup>1</sup> in order to discuss what each one of us could contribute from his or her discipline to the theme of *memory*.

What was special about this event and why has it inspired me to offer it to the bulletin *Latigazo*?

Its special feature was that the dialogue to which we were invited was framed in a very precise context: that of novels published by Argentinean writers whose common denominator was being children of people missing during the previous military dictatorship in Argentina. In their novels, these authors, invited specially to the event, address in different ways a particularly traumatic fragment of the History of the country of which they were directly victims.

In this context we had to read at least one of these novels as a basis for saying something about what we thought regarding the specific theme of memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Raquel Robles (Literature), Ricardo Ibarlucía (Philosophy), Claudio Ingerflom (History), Micaela Cuesta (Sociology) and Diana Jerusalinsky (Neurobiology)

On board and full of enthusiasm for the proposal, I set about reading the novels. I observed that in some of them the authors dealt with the *trauma* of their own life in a displaced or fictionalised way, in some cases with a certain amount of humour and even with a touch of science fiction, resources that they surely used to deal with the topic with a certain distance. The first observation I made, then, was that in these novels too reality has the structure of fiction. So far, nothing that surprised me too much.

This until I came across the novel – if you can call it that – *Who do you think you are?* By one of the invited writers, Ángela Urondo. And then everything was thrown in the balance: my relative interest in what I had been reading and my more or less feasible psychoanalytic ideas concerning the theme of the memory and what I could contribute to it on the basis of my formation.

It seemed to me that what I presented in that talk, which I will summarize below, could well be referred to this bulletin. Why? Because, in the first place, reading *Who do you think you are?* was a real *Latigazo*<sup>2</sup>, a first whiplash that struck and shook my ideas about a fragment of the History of my country, which although it was not at all unknown to me, I now have to admit that I also profoundly ignored.

I profoundly ignored the depths to which human beings can attain and which they did attain in that black period of our recent history. In my childhood, which was contemporaneous with that of these writers, I could at most sometimes glimpse my parent's fear and, on occasions, a state in them close to terror. For my part there was a question: how could the military, the police, inspire in my parents the very opposite of a feeling of security? I was between eight and ten years old when I asked myself this question.

What Ángela Urondo recounts in her book about her early childhood is something very different.

This book is the testimony of what the will to want to know can be, the will to want to recover one's own history, the will to rectify one's own name, which in her case is her family name, which also implies recovering in that act the name of her father<sup>3</sup>. This book is also the testimony of the will to pursue justice to its final consequences and to send to hell any commiseration with the Other and its stammering of justification.

She was torn from her parents in the first year of life in an ambush perpetrated by paramilitary forces, during which her father was murdered. The daughter was separated from her mother – although both were taken to the same detention center, the latter suffered the fate of torture and is still listed as missing today. The daughter, after a short time at the detention centre, was transferred to Casa Cuna<sup>4</sup>, finally to be “adopted” by close relatives who obscured and distorted her true origin and the true fate of her parents.

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<sup>2</sup> NT. “Latigazo” means “whipping”.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco ‘Paco’ Urondo writer, journalist, poet, militant in politics, was murdered in Mendoza on June 17, 1976, by the Argentinian State terrorism.

<sup>4</sup>NT. Hospital Pedro de Elizalde in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Originally hosted abandoned children.

The book relates how, after spending her first twenty years as if in a kind of limbo, one day Ángela suddenly woke up... she woke up and set about searching for what she did not have and was decided to recover. She was unable to count on the most minimal memory of her own about her origins, having instead only the indications conveyed in the reiterated nightmares she had always had about something presented as obscure and confused but undoubtedly accurate. The jigsaw puzzle of her history was finally put together by resorting to the facts made available by the different forms of the new Other of democracy on the basis of the lost, thanks to the archives, the documents, the letters, the newspaper clippings, the testimonies, the witnesses, the survivors, the return to the scene of the crime, the trial, its judgment and the sentencing. The fact that the jigsaw puzzle of her history is always missing a piece that would allow it to be complete is something that she constantly accounts for throughout the book.

This is what makes for the whiplash [*latigazo*] obtained in the reading of the recovery of a personal memory whose testimony I found invaluable.

The event *Narratives of the real* allowed me to reflect from a different angle and to better understand why not all human beings seek the same thing. Some seek knowledge, others prefer to ignore; some want to remember, others would rather forget; some fight for justice, others for vengeance; some insist on vindication, others on forgiveness; some form associations of denunciation, others become active in politics; some make artworks, others do not manage to recover from the misfortune that they have lived through.

A second whiplash inflicted on me by Urondo's book destroyed what until then I had thought I could contribute about memory in general. That is to say, in this reading the idea that "reality has the structure of fiction", which had served me in the other readings, no longer functioned. I could therefore no longer translate, a bit unilaterally, what I extract from psychoanalytical practice to a more "social" sphere. Although of course I was not unaware of the precisions that Freud gave about the subjective consequences of the war trauma, here it is not the same thing. The traumas of that war still had their virtues; they occurred in a framework of "legality". When the trauma is outside of the legal, when the war is dirty, when terrorism comes from the State, it produces what we know as civil war. On the basis of this simple fact, I could thus no longer assert that with regards to the last military dictatorship in Argentina it is a question of the effects of war trauma.

Of course I also took my orientation from a general idea in dealing with and differentiating the theme: psychoanalysis deals with a form of memory that is unconscious; it deals with it on the basis of little details, those most disregarded in common discourse. Psychoanalysis recovers, restores, reconstructs or simply constructs, invents, creates one's history from that form of memory. It nonetheless does not ignore the point of real in it, that is, the limit which any fiction encounters. The real of trauma, its impossibility of complete assimilation by speech, its possibility or impossibility of demonstration, its search for formalization, are part of the fundamental ideas of psychoanalysis and the treatment it proposes.

I could thus differentiate this individual memory from the collective memory. I could know that one of the functions of this memory is to remember in order not to repeat.

Although we know that psychoanalysis demonstrates that retrieving a memory does not completely put an end to repetition, we also know that it considerably lightens its mad frenzy. But this concerns individual memory; I could not assert the same regarding collective memory.

I do not know whether collective memory impedes the repetition of evil. Evil is part of the human, as psychoanalysis knows well.

Perhaps a work like that of Ángela Urondo can serve to give a whiplash every so often, a whiplash whose crack resounds for a while and reminds us what only the human being is capable of, both for the best and for the worst. This book as artistic expression and what its content makes known are a clear example of what I am saying.

*Translated by : Ana Tello*  
*Reviewed by: Roger Litten*



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