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# Political memories and feminist resistance

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## Abstract

This paper presents the criteria, methodology, and main results of a recently published research that surveyed and analyzed testimonies made by women who fought against the military dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina, in a time frame that begins with the enactment of the Amnesty Law (1979) and ends with the release of the final report by the National Truth Commission (2014).<sup>◇</sup>

Keywords: memory, military dictatorship, testimony, gender, feminism.

## *Memórias políticas e resistências feministas*

### Resumo

Esta comunicação apresenta os critérios, a metodologia e os principais resultados de uma pesquisa recém-publicada que fez o levantamento e a análise de testemunhos produzidos por mulheres que lutaram contra as ditaduras militares do Brasil e da Argentina, num recorte temporal que se inicia com a promulgação da Lei da Anistia (1979) e finaliza com a entrega do relatório final da Comissão Nacional da Verdade (2014).

*Palavras-chave:* memória, ditadura militar, testemunho, gênero, feminismo.

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Among so many concerns for understanding Brazil today, the social and political events of recent years offer fertile ground for sociological analysis. For example, we could go back to the June Journeys of 2013, as the demonstrations held in numerous Brazilian cities became known. Driven by the Free Fare Movement (MPL – Movimento Passe Livre) against increase in bus fares in São Paulo, these protests were initially made up of left-wing youths, who autonomously and non-hierarchically got organized (Judensnaider *et al.*, 2013). Soon, other groups joined the demonstrations, adding up other demands and generating disputes over their direction. Following repression by the São Paulo police, demonstrations have grown massive and huge protests took place in twelve capitals, which enjoyed almost 80% of public support. As demands for better health, wages, education, housing, civil rights etc. were introduced into the protests, a part of the population with no previous activism experience joined the protests, triggering a patriotic and moralistic repertoire that rejected participation of political parties and brought back anti-corruption rallying cries. Unlike autonomous or socialist militants from the left of the Workers' Party (PT)<sup>1</sup>, that of President Dilma Rousseff, this third kind of demonstrations attracted individual protesters – and their rejection of political parties in general turned into aversion to PT (*antipetismo*), which was undeniably linked to the polarization experienced by Brazilian society during the 2014 elections (Alonso, 2017). Disappointed with the result of the presidential re-election, this sector received support from PSDB<sup>2</sup>, party of Aécio Neves, candidate who, after losing the election, alleged fraud in the counting process and demanded the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. Sponsored by the media and business sectors, new demonstrations took place in 2015, calling for the impeachment of the president and leading, the following year, to her deposition. Demonstrations against an imminent coup in that period and, after consummation, against the government of Michel Temer (PMDB)<sup>3</sup> did not achieve similar social strength.

<sup>1</sup> *Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT.

<sup>2</sup> *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* – Brazilian Social Democracy Party.

<sup>3</sup> *Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro* – Brazilian Democratic Movement Party. Michel Temer was Dilma Rousseff's vice-president and took office after her impeachment.

Those were intense years whose consequences are still being felt in various spheres of Brazilian social life. That same time saw a powerful feminist spring that took the streets of several countries in Latin America. In Brazil, women mobilized in 2015 against a bill by the then congressman Eduardo Cunha (PMDB), which would hinder access to morning-after pill. In 2016, acts in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo gathered thousands of women against rape culture. In 2017, women took part in the general strike called for March 8, and again took the streets the following year to denounce the murder of councilor Marielle Franco (PSOL)<sup>4</sup> and clamor for democracy crying out “Not Him!” (popularized in social media as *#elenão*).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the attacks on women that marked 2018 Brazilian elections and consolidated the extreme right rise to power with the victory of Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)<sup>6</sup> were not incidental. When still a federal deputy, Bolsonaro’s vote in favor of Rousseff’s impeachment was dedicated “to the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the dread of Dilma Rousseff”.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, during his candidacy, he would reveal that his bedside book was authored by that same colonel and well-known torturer he had paid homage to. These events highlight the relevance of a gender approach to the chronicles of current political struggles. The research now published as *Tempos de dizer, tempos de escutar: testemunhos de mulheres no Brasil e na Argentina*<sup>8</sup> (Tega, 2019) offers key elements to reflect on these issues.

Firstly, for its focus – the book gathers an unprecedented survey of testimonies from women who fought against military dictatorships in Brazil (1964-1985) and Argentina (1976-1983) and who had their lives affected, in

<sup>4</sup> *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* – Socialism and Liberty Party.

<sup>5</sup> Translator’s note: *#elenão* was widely used during the presidential election campaign of 2018, against the rise of then candidate Jair Bolsonaro in the polls, as he was seen by many as the worst possible choice due to his views on social justice issues.

<sup>6</sup> *Partido Social Liberal* – Social Liberal Party.

<sup>7</sup> T/N: Brilhante Ustra was a military official and head of the intelligence and political repression agency during the Brazilian military dictatorship. He was found guilty in 2008 of kidnapping and torture and is widely recognized as being responsible for Dilma Rousseff’s imprisonment and torture during her time as a resistance agent.

<sup>8</sup> *Times to tell, times to listen: testimonies of women in Brazil and Argentina.*

various ways, by the horrors of repression. Such testimonies were collected from several publicly available media in which these women recorded their memories, such as films, books, and interviews. This research, thus, challenges previous studies that indicate scant writings by women who fought against dictatorships (Tega, 2010). Furthermore, without belittling oral reports collected by valuable research (Silva; Pedro; Wolff, 2018, among others), the work delves into the meaning of public manifestations of these memories carried out by the women themselves.

Secondly, for the methodological approach of the study, which comprised two stages. Initially, resorting to a gender dimension in memory works, it draws on a traditional feminist approach that seeks to unveil what has been socially concealed. Based on research that explored libraries and memory preservation centers, theses and dissertations repositories, internet sources, debates, and conference papers, the book presents a compilation of media produced by women about their militancy, traumas, and resistance experienced during the two military dictatorships in question. The discovery of this content made it possible to include different narrative styles, such as novels, short stories, letters, plays, interviews, autobiographies, in addition to different narrative languages, such as cinema. Once it has taken shape, this assortment of testimonies reveals something remarkable: many women had opted for the public mediation process to broadcast their experiences.

Thus, after extensive bibliographic and documentary research, more than 30 works from Brazil and around 20 from Argentina are listed in the book that meet at least one of the following criteria:

- a) Works written or produced by women who fought in armed groups against the military dictatorships of Brazil and Argentina, even those who were not at the forefront of armed operations and made other types of contributions to guerrilla organizations.
- b) Works written or produced by women who have suffered political persecution when working with clandestine movements, parties, or groups, even if they have not joined the armed struggle.

c) Works written or produced by women who were political prisoners or, at some point, were politically disappeared, and who survived the traumatic experiences of imprisonment.

d) Works written or organized by people or institutions that give preference to texts, testimonies or interviews by militant and/or political prisoner women.

The endeavor to do an inventory of these productions can be useful as a source for further researches on the subject, while making room for new works to be included in the list. To moderate the presented comparative framework, the book lists the works drawing on the memory policies adopted by each of the two countries, within a time frame that begins in 1979, with the enactment of the Brazilian Amnesty Law, and ends in 2014, with the release of the National Truth Commission (CNV) Report.<sup>9</sup> These two historical moments entailed disputes. The Brazilian society, notably family members of political prisoners and human rights groups involved in the Brazilian Committees for Amnesty and the Women's Committee for Amnesty, did struggle for a "broad, general, and unrestricted amnesty". Demands included locating missing persons, investigating deaths, ensuring the return of those who were in banishment or exile, releasing political prisoners, and punishing torturers, the military, and others responsible for such acts. However, Law No. 6,683, passed on August 28, 1979, was interpreted so as to safeguard the interests of the military government and ensure the impunity of members of the repressive regime. The CNV, formed almost 30 years after the end of the dictatorship, aimed to investigate the serious human rights violations occurred between 1946 and 1988, and its goals did not include bringing torturers and military officials responsible for the uncovered crimes to justice.

While bringing the testimonies of those women to light was a necessary step in the research, the book *Tempos de dizer, tempos de escutar* notes that it was not the only one to accomplish. It thus goes into the second

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<sup>9</sup> T/N: *Comissão Nacional da Verdade*. Established in 2011 to investigate gross violations of human rights carried out between 1946 to 1988 in Brazil.

methodological stage, namely pointing out that feminist thought consists also of denouncing the authoritarian and hierarchical traits of historical gender relations, politicizing issues previously perceived as private, questioning the conventions of masculinity and femininity, and revealing other ways of thinking about body, subjectivity, and experience. Given the significant number of works listed, each one providing different forms of reading and interpretation, the research established a *corpus*, which is examined in the last three chapters of the book. Such analysis strives to avert certain “sacralization of the *victims’* memory” (Traverso, 2018) – which would neglect the political commitments of historical subjects – and rather follows a path that takes the testimonies as vestiges of *defeated* projects, thus focusing on the issues of repression, militancy, and resistance.

Such approach to the testimonies of these women reveals a strong denouncement of how they were subjected to forced nudity, individual and collective rapes, the insertion of objects and animals into their vaginas, witnessing masturbation by their torturers, to specific tortures while menstruating or pregnant, to abortions due to torture, kidnapping of their newborn children, to having their bodies used as an instrument of manipulation or salvation. Far from being perpetrated by few tormentors who had “crossed the line”, gender violence was part of the structure of repressive systems in both dictatorships (Tega; Teles, 2019).

The works listed in the book also criticize the militancy itself and the organizations to which those women belonged. They emphasize the sexism and authoritarianism of parties, revolutionary groups and leaders. They highlight the arduous conditions they faced by choosing clandestinity within a quite specific repressive context. They point out the importance of affective bonds and friendships. Resistance assumes several forms in these testimonies, as in the very act of writing or filmic creation, in which the authors recover agency. But also, in the remembrance of traumatic experiences deeply marked by and in the body, since their later experiences allow them to reexamine those events from a new perspective, in which gender relations take central stage. Resistance can be found, likewise, in the silences and

gaps in speech and writing, which reveal how hard it is to recount their torments and their very need to denounce the sexual violences suffered. Or even in the reports of solidarity and comfort received during imprisonment, which allowed them to begin subjectively rebuilding themselves.

A third element present in the book is the way it links themes such as memory, gender, sexuality, human rights, and education, while not overlooking the temporalities adopted in the narrations, examining how events are reinterpreted and incorporated into the experiences. In this sense, the women's testimonies reconstruct their subjectivities and, at the same time, destabilize the traditional perception of both the recent past and the present, as they make room for new perspectives – both for those who narrate and for those who listen.

Furthermore, the survey endeavor was based on the premise that the act of disclosing historically hidden experiences and struggles is a fundamental step in memory work (Kehl, 2010). It is not hard to note that societies tend to repeat what they are incapable of explain. In Brazil, unlike what happened in other South American countries, state violations of human rights increased in comparison to the period of the military dictatorship. Studies have shown that this persistent violence is closely related to the weak transitional justice process carried out in the country (Teles; Safatle, 2010), especially considering that it was the only country in the region where torturers were never brought to justice and where a truth commission was created too late. Everyday violence displays social traumas that were not appeased by forced reconciliation, and which hinder the advancement of democratic experience, as it is well demonstrated by research on genocide of black youth (Waiselfisz, 2014), murders of women, specifically femicides (Waiselfisz, 2015), violence against LGBTQI+ population (IPEA/FBSP, 2020), and aggressions against indigenous populations (Cimi, 2019).

In many ways, the consequences of the 2018 elections represent an affront to what the study here presented proposes. The memories of women who fought against dictatorship and the trajectories of those who still fight for social justice today have been vilified. At the same time, such

consequences reinforce the political and academic importance of *Tempos de dizer, tempos de escutar*. The struggles for memory, truth, and justice endure and get fiercer.

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Full reference of the abridged work

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