

## From Transnational Activism to Transitional Politics, 1981-1984<sup>1</sup>

Vania Markarian

Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay

*Este artículo analiza el último tramo del exilio uruguayo en los años de autoritarismo en ese país. Se centra en las transformaciones resultantes del comienzo de la apertura política, a partir de 1980, que llevaron a los exiliados a trasladar el centro de su atención hacia los acontecimientos domésticos. Esto implicó una cierta revisión de sus formas de denunciar las violaciones de derechos humanos que ocurrían en su país, especialmente en relación al balance entre las exigencias de “verdad” y “justicia” sobre los hechos del pasado reciente. Se estudian también los cambiantes y complejos equilibrios que los exiliados fueron estableciendo entre su militancia política nacional y su activismo de denuncia transnacional en la etapa en que dentro de Uruguay se negociaba una salida democrática.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: historia, izquierda, exilio, derechos humanos, América Latina

*This article analyzes the positions of the Uruguayan exiles in the last years of authoritarianism in Uruguay. It focuses on the transformations that resulted from the opening up of political activity inside the country, starting in 1980, which forced the exiles to direct their attention to the domestic arena. This involved some adjustments in their transnational denouncing activity of human rights violations in their country, particularly regarding the balance between demands of “truth-telling” and “justice”. In addition, the article considers the complex and changing relationships between national and transnational activism in exile politics, in a time when military leaders and politicians negotiated a transition back to a democratic regime in Uruguay.*

KEYWORDS: history, leftist activism, exile, human rights, Latin America

In contrast to other Latin American countries, the authoritarian government installed in the early seventies was the first military-backed regime of the twentieth century in Uruguay. A century of civilian rule

<sup>1</sup> This article was written in 2004, while I was a post-doctoral fellow at the International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University. I thank Marilyn Young, Allen Hunter, and all my co-fellows in the “Project on the Cold War as a Global Conflict”. I am also grateful to my friends Eduardo Elena, Aldo Marchesi, and Gerardo Leibner for their insightful comments to my work. This project began at Columbia University, where I completed my PhD in 2003, and was eventually published as a book both in English (Routledge, 2005) and in Spanish (Correo del Maestro/CEIU, 2006).

based on the joint participation of the two major or “traditional” parties (Colorado and Nacional or Blanco) had shaped an indulgent national image, bolstered by the regularity of democratic procedures, a social welfare system, growing economic markets, and the development of a large urban population. In the sixties, both the Uruguayan economy and political institutions experienced a crisis, which led to increasing social and political polarization, including the outbreak of guerrilla actions. In June 1973, the Armed Forces overthrew democratic rule, while the majority of the political system was unable to respond. The new government targeted unions and several other organizations, intervened in the national university, and restricted freedom of the press and association as well as party political activity. Repression was intense. To the dead and disappeared were added thousands of persons who were accused of “political crimes” and jailed. Many were fired from their government jobs for political reasons. Large-scale emigration and exile were consequences of this situation. Since the late sixties (and increasingly after the coup), thousands of activists and leaders from Marxist and other leftist parties, including guerrillas and direct action groups, abandoned the country fearing for their lives and freedoms.

In the period immediately after the coup, Buenos Aires became a center of Uruguayan opposition to the military-backed regime, with the participation of many leftist leaders and activists, as well as some politicians from the traditional parties. From exile, they had to develop new strategies to confront the authoritarian government and cope with increasing repression, initially in their country and subsequently in Argentina. During their first period of exile (1973-1976), the Uruguayan leftists strove to understand their recent experiences and redefined the goals and means of political participation. Nevertheless, they were still sanguine about the prospects of changing the Uruguayan situation and maintained their revolutionary goals. The 1976 military coup in Argentina transformed Buenos Aires into a deadly trap for thousands of Latin American refugees, including not only Uruguayans but also Chileans who were escaping the Pinochet regime installed in late 1973. The realization that radical activism would no longer be tolerated in the Southern Cone led to a slow but clear change in leftist politics, with many doubting the possibility of short-term revolutionary social change in their country and the larger region.

Attempts to gain support at the international level and work with human rights groups in Europe and the United States played an important role in this evolution. These experiences contributed to the creation of a

transnational network devoted to denouncing human rights abuses in countries under repressive right-wing regimes. This type of cooperation had virtually no precedents among the Uruguayan leftist exiles, who had previously characterized their new allies as either “tools of U.S. imperialism” or irrelevant to their understanding of social change. In a similar vein, the human rights groups’ emphasis on the defense of the integrity of the body contrasted sharply with the Uruguayan leftists’ previous conceptions of activism, which made repression part of their anticipated political experience and exalted the militants who endured abuses. A quick look at the exiles’ activities between 1973 and 1976 shows that their belief in the necessity of personal sacrifice for the sake of higher revolutionary goals began to conflict with the ethics of human rights, which rejected any practice that damaged the body. It is worth noting that the Uruguayans, like other South American leftists who engaged in human rights work in these years, came from a country with long-lasting democratic traditions and a relatively integrated society. These educated, middle-class militants thought of themselves as possessors of both constitutionally and internationally protected rights. Although these issues had not so far centered their political activity, they were well-positioned to engage with human rights discourse.

While these changes were under way, a new and unprecedented wave of repression in the region forced most Uruguayan exiles to flee to other countries in the Americas and Europe. In their new surroundings, they soon began to participate in local committees and solidarity groups, as well as to re-establish the several parties, coalitions, and factions of the Uruguayan left. The leaders often voiced their desire to achieve the unification of the opposition, but divergent evaluations of their recent past, characterizations of the current regime, and ideas about what would happen after its much anticipated demise prevented the creation of a permanent political alliance. Leftist activists usually worked together locally, but the groups they belonged to could not bridge their discrepancies with each other or with other opposition groups both inside and outside Uruguay. At the same time, many exiles participated in the growing human rights transnational networks and skillfully used their language and procedures. But most of the exiles were more interested in debating tactics and strategies of political change in Uruguay than in transnational activism *per se*, which was usually thought of as a means to an end.

Exile politics changed dramatically in the years of transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in Uruguay, beginning in 1980 with the fai-

lure of the military to impose an authoritarian constitution and ending in the national elections of November 1984 with the triumph of the Partido Colorado. Although the Armed Forces still repressed the opposition and censured public debates, they were forced to open negotiations and sanction legal mechanisms to reorganize political participation. For the exiles, it was novel that political initiative moved back to Uruguay. While in previous years many relevant episodes in leftist politics had occurred abroad, after 1980 the main political developments took place inside the country. Although the exiles continued organizing meetings and lobbying activities, their chief concern became to support the growing opposition forces in Uruguay. Pivotal to understanding this process is what scholars of democratization call “transitional justice”: both “demands for an official recognition of the truth about human rights violations committed by the outgoing military regimes, and for the punishment of those guilty of committing and ordering these violations”.<sup>2</sup> In the final years of authoritarianism in Uruguay, powerful social movements placed these concerns at the center of their mobilization efforts, while political parties, including many leftist groups, tended to consider some human rights claims as restraining factors in their negotiations with the military authorities. The exiles had been pioneers among Uruguayan leftists in addressing these issues years before the creation of the first human rights group inside the country in 1981. Transitional politics brought a series of changes to their positions. These adjustments are the focus of this paper.

### **Transitional Human Rights**

On November 30, 1980, the Uruguayan government held a national plebiscite on a proposed new constitution to institutionalize the ruling authoritarian regime. In September, a similar attempt in Chile had given Pinochet another eight years in power and tight control over a future transition to democracy. In Uruguay, however, defeat in the plebiscite produced an “unexpected opening” of the political situation.<sup>3</sup> The military reconsidered their plans for future actions, reorganized the government, and sancio-

---

<sup>2</sup> Barahona de Brito, Alexandra: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America: Uruguay and Chile*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, page 1.

<sup>3</sup> See González, Luis Eduardo: “Uruguay 1980-1981: An unexpected opening”, *Latin American Research Review*, 18:3, 1983.

ned some legal tools to allow for the parties' re-involvement in politics. Legislation was passed in 1982 to "regenerate" politics, calling for internal elections to appoint new leaders in the traditional parties. The leftist coalition Frente Amplio (FA), although officially banned, found ways to participate: some sectors followed the imprisoned leader LÍber Seregni and decided to cast blank ballots to show their enduring appeal among the citizenry, while others, especially the communists, were committed to their alliance in exile with the Blanco leader Wilson Ferreira Aldunate and called to support his group. The elections were another political set-back for the military, since opposition sectors obtained a large majority of the vote.

This forced the authorities to enter into formal discussions with the opposition. A sharp economic slump in late 1982 furthered this decision, since it resulted in the hostility of sectors of the elite and favored the development of powerful social movements. After some failed encounters between politicians and military leaders in 1983, long and arduous negotiations led to the "acuerdo del Club Naval", which opened the way for the November 1984 national election. Led by Seregni, the majority of the left approved of these negotiations and *ad hoc* legalized representatives took part in the agreement. The main reason why the military accepted the involvement of the left was the refusal of Ferreira Aldunate to let his party negotiate unless he was allowed to run for president. At the time of the negotiations, he and his son Juan Raúl had returned to Uruguay and been imprisoned upon arrival. In the absence of the Blancos, only the left could offer legitimacy to what would otherwise have been an agreement between the military and just one political party. This was also the reasoning of the Colorado leader and future president Julio María Sanguinetti, plus the chance of getting rid of his only real competitor. Many in the left took the opportunity to get back into the legal game of politics and decided to break with the radicalized Blancos. Although some leaders and parties were banned from the elections, including Ferreira Aldunate and Seregni, the new government took over in March 1985 with a complete acceptance by the political forces.

All these dramatic changes inside Uruguay led the exiles to reconsider their human rights activities in a new light. In previous years, leftist groups and parties acting abroad had devoted great efforts to protest human rights violations, alleging it was the best way of helping defeat the authoritarian regime in their country. The exiles did not abandon their lobbying efforts after 1980, but the transitional period (1980-1984) redefined the

overall meaning of their transnational activities in national leftist politics. Besides, the eighties were not a favorable time to protest abuses on a global scale. While in the seventies the U.S. government, the United Nations (UN), and the Organization of American States (OAS) had supported stronger international standards for human rights, concern about these matters declined in the following decade, mainly because of substantial changes in U.S. foreign policy.

Already familiar with the complex human rights mechanisms of the UN, the OAS, and other international organizations, leftist Uruguayan exiles kept presenting their cases and pressing claims before different committees and commissions in the early eighties. But they were no longer enthusiastic about the results of these already routine activities. Their journals and newsletters began to pay less and less attention to the decisions of the UN and the OAS.irate critiques of the Reagan administration and U.S. policies in Latin America instead flooded these publications, often referring to former president Carter's human rights approach as a short-lived respite from the uninterrupted support of the United States to oppressive right-wing governments. They protested the restoration of aid and assistance to the Uruguayan regime and rejected all attempts to portray the "unexpected opening" as an achievement of the new administration's "quiet diplomacy" and influence over the alleged "moderate factions" among the military.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many of the exiles' allies in the United States had shifted their attention towards the more pressing situation of Central America, somewhat weakening the Uruguayans' access to foreign policy makers in Washington.

It would be inaccurate however to attribute the exiles' diminished concern about the international human rights system solely to their perceptions of global politics. The main reason for redefining their activities was the political change in Uruguay after the 1980 plebiscite. Once political participation was more accessible inside the country, the exiles reoriented their efforts towards backing up internal mobilization against the regime. As explained in one of their periodicals,

---

4 For U.S. position on Uruguay, see, for instance, Senator Paul Laxalt's report in U.S. Congress, Senate, *Developing an American Consensus*, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., March 1982, pages 31-34. For the exiles' critique, see "Dialogue Nord (USA)-Sud (Uruguay)", *Uruguay Informations*, October 1981, pages 15-16, in *Uruguay: North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) Archive of Latin Americana*, Scholarly Resources, Wilmington, Del., 1998, reel 3 (hereafter cited as NACLA); and Rodney Arismendi, "La perra otra vez en celo: La política latinoamericana de Reagan a la luz de un documento del Consejo Interamericano de Seguridad", *Estudios*, 78, March 1981, pages 8-19.

“From now on, the task... [of the exiles] will not only be [related to] those who suffer repression. There is now...an advancing popular movement that, slowly but surely, regains initiative at the diverse levels of the political and social fight against the dictatorship. And thus the activities of the exiles should take into account these changes”.<sup>5</sup>

After some initial disagreements concerning the alliance of exiled communists and socialists with the Blanco leader Ferreira Aldunate, political initiative shifted back in the early eighties to the FA leadership inside Uruguay, which defined the chief task of the new period as regaining space in national politics and taking part in a negotiated way out of the authoritarian regime. Like all other negotiators, the leaders of the left deliberately avoided bringing human rights violations to the table, knowing that the issue would most likely elicit irreconcilable differences, since the military rejected any kind of “revisionism”.<sup>6</sup> According to the strategy advanced by Seregni (recently released after eight years in prison) and other leaders, positioning the FA as a credible political option meant embracing a conciliatory approach that precluded strong human rights claims from their immediate platform. Even before party delegates achieved the final agreement with the military in August 1984 (which paved the way for elections in November), this strategy led to an internal rift in the left. In one camp were those who favored negotiations to accelerate the recovery of basic civil and political rights. In the other, those who called for increasing popular mobilization to achieve more radical goals, including prosecuting alleged human rights violators.

In exile, the main representatives of the first position were the communists and the socialists, two core members of the FA who generally restrained from openly demanding penalizing actions against those accused of human rights abuses. In the early eighties, together with their Blanco allies in the *Convergencia Democrática en Uruguay* (CDU), they lobbied foreign governments and international organizations, particularly

---

5 “Una tarea de todos”, *Informaciones y Documentos*, June 1981, page 3, in Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios del Uruguay, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de la República, Montevideo (hereafter cited as CEIU).

6 In September 1982, for instance, president general Álvarez said he wanted to “discard any thought or attempt to proceed with a revision of the actions and of the difficult and painful contribution of the Armed Forces, be it now or in the future”. Cited in Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, page 95. Later in 1983 and 1984, efforts in Argentina to try those responsible of human rights abuses surely encouraged the Uruguayan military to seek guarantees as part of the transitional process.

in the United States, to get support for democratization in Uruguay at the highest possible level. They denounced repression against the opposition and worked to improve the situation of human rights in their country. But they did not propose any concrete formula to prosecute those allegedly responsible for these violations.<sup>7</sup> Party politics always framed their activities. The CDU, in particular, was a temporary alliance of political groups opposing the authoritarian regime with a moderate, short-term common platform, which privileged proposals for procedural democracy and eluded potentially divisive debates. Later in the eighties, once political participation broadened inside the country, each group began to advance its own strategy and their joint work became controversial. After the collapse of the CDU in April 1984, the communists and the socialists endorsed the negotiating approach of the FA, which did not marry well with the impulse toward punishing the accused of human rights violations. The Partido Comunista Uruguayo (PCU), a strong and well-organized party both in exile and underground in Uruguay, kept protesting political imprisonment and other forms of abuse, as well as publicizing the extreme repression endured during the authoritarian period. But it did not even mention the issue of transitional justice. In fact, they ended up joining Seregni and the majority of the left in tacitly relinquishing demands for an immediate and complete amnesty for political prisoners, which would have allegedly delayed a transitional agreement.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to this dominant position, other leftists both inside and outside Uruguay argued against participating in ongoing negotiations with the military, calling for increased popular mobilization, associating with the social movements, and insisting on discussions of what kind of democratic regime would substitute the authoritarian one prior to defining concrete transitional strategies. They believed that leftist groups should defend alternative social arrangements not only as long-term goals, but also as part of their current dealings with the rest of the opposition. Likewise, they demanded some kind of commitment on part of all the political parties to promo-

---

7 As the Blanco leader Juan Raúl Ferreira, president of the CDU, said in early 1982: "We are more interested in the question of democratic perspectives [for our country] than in denouncing [abuses]". Ferreira, J. R.: "Uruguay sabe lo que quiere", *Boletín Informativo CDU*, June 1982, page 5, in NACLA 4.

8 In order to facilitate the participation of the left in the negotiations, though, the military agreed to release 411 prisoners who had served more than half of their sentences. For this and other provisos intended to "create conditions for dialogue", see Gillespie, C.: *Negotiating Democracy...*, pages 171-175.



te justice and “truth-telling”. In their view, Seregni, the communists, and other pro-negotiating sectors of the FA had tacitly given up not only on prosecuting those accused of human rights violations during the authoritarian period, but also on their call for total and immediate amnesty. In the words of exiled leader Enrique Erro, the pact was a “total capitulation”: “The Frente Amplio should not have accepted negotiations with thousands of proscribed citizens, including political parties which compose the FA, and political prisoners”.<sup>9</sup> In Uruguay, the majority of the FA had a hard time trying to prove both to the more radical leftists and to the public at large that participation in the pact did not imply an abdication of principle. They denied acquiescing to an alleged “private understanding” between the Colorados and the military, in which the Colorado leader (and future president) Julio María Sanguinetti supposedly assured general Hugo Medina that he would personally see to it that the military would be protected. The more radical factions of the left, however, thought that the transitional pact had indeed involved some kind of tacit commitment to lay aside claims for “truth” and punishment of human rights violators. The main representatives of this position in exile were the Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo (PVP) and Erro’s group, which in 1984 adhered to the newly created Izquierda Democrática Independiente, becoming part of the FA but not ratifying participation in the agreement.

In previous years, Erro, the PVP, and other smaller groups had repeatedly expressed their opposition to granting any kind of reciprocal amnesty to the accused of human rights abuses. The PVP had been particularly active in calling for “justice and punishment” since the late seventies, insistently demanding investigation and prosecution of both civilian and military personnel accused of abuses. In the transitional period, the documents of this group often charged the “tolerated opposition” with acquiescing to not exposing the situation of “the political prisoners, the hostages, the dead, and the disappeared”.<sup>10</sup> The PVP had long called for investigation on the

---

9 Erro’s manuscript, September 29, 1984, reproduced in Caula, Nelson: *El diario de Enrique Erro: La cárcel, el exilio y la transición*, Rosebud, Montevideo, 1998, page 201. At this point, there were still 3,000 citizens banned from political participation and some 300 political prisoners, but some steps had been taken to allow for the controlled rehabilitation of the FA. See Gillespie, C.: *Negotiating Democracy...*, pages 171-175.

10 See “El voto en blanco en las elecciones internas”, September 1982, in PVP, *La lucha contra la dictadura: Documentos 1977-1984*, Compañero, Montevideo, 1992, page 177. For Erro’s position, see his letter to “Gómez y Flía...,” reproduced in Caula, N.: *El diario de Enrique Erro...*, page 140, and interview in journal *Aportes*, December 1982, reproduced in *Ibíd.*, page 148.

cases of Uruguayans disappeared in Buenos Aires and was an early demander of amnesty for all political prisoners. The group upheld a broad coalition for amnesty, welcoming those who pressed the issue for humanitarian and juridical reasons, though stating that its own reasons were “principally political,” and articulating a radical proposal which excluded any form of mutual “pardon”.<sup>11</sup> As part of this effort, the PVP gave substantial support to the Secrétariat International de Juristes pour l’Amnistie en Uruguay (SIJAU), a pioneer organization in framing the struggle against the Uruguayan regime in the language and methods of human rights transnational activism. Founded in Paris in 1977, the SIJAU had issued a call for amnesty which had been publicly endorsed by all the major leftist parties and groups acting in exile.<sup>12</sup>

In the early eighties, the SIJAU continued to play a pivotal role, opening up debate on the far-reaching effects of authoritarianism and calling for concrete solutions for a series of central issues in transitional politics. Once in São Paulo in 1983 and again in Buenos Aires in 1984, European and Latin American jurists, lawyers, and human rights activists were convened to discuss current political developments in Uruguay. In both occasions, they demanded the integral restoration of democratic conditions, called for amnesty for political prisoners, and urged debate on the future role of the Armed Forces. The São Paulo meeting was remarkable since it advanced the first detailed proposal for amnesty according to both international human rights law and Uruguayan legal provisions prior to the authoritarian regime. The exiled Uruguayan lawyers Alejandro and Mercedes Artucio delivered a paper on the juridical foundations and predictable effects of promulgating an amnesty in Uruguay. After stressing the comprehensive character of the proposal, which involved the complete restoration of civil and political rights as well as reparations to the victims of abuses, the two lawyers specified its precise meaning for political prisoners, whom they deemed the most pressing human rights concern in Uruguay, the Latin American country with the highest rate of such prisoners. They differentiated amnesty from “pardon”, opposed involvement by

---

11 See “Por la amnistía general e irrestricta para todos los presos y perseguidos por el régimen,” May 1983, in PVP, *La lucha contra la dictadura...*, pages 199-216. See also Cores, Hugo: “Un desafío para la izquierda,” June 1983, in *Ibidem*, pages 217-239.

12 For endorsements of amnesty proposal, see replies to survey in Federatie Uruguay Komitees, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter cited as FUK-IISH).

the military justice, and called for the restitution of all powers to ordinary judges to prosecute human rights violations.<sup>13</sup>

A year after the São Paulo meeting, the SIJAU organized another conference in Buenos Aires, where a group of lawyers, jurists, and activists again got together to debate the implications of the transitional processes to democracy in Uruguay and Paraguay. The recently reinstalled democratic regime in Argentina offered a hospitable arena for those opposing authoritarianism in the region to debate strategies, seek mutual support, and compare experiences in a climate of optimism. In the case of Uruguay, this environment allowed for fruitful exchange among those fighting for human rights inside and outside the country. The Buenos Aires meeting clearly showed that the exiles were no longer alone in their denouncing activities. Before 1980, they had been the chief disseminators of information on abuses, since the small groups of relatives who were active in Uruguay had weak ties to the transnational human rights networks. The Servicio de Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ, Service for Peace and Justice) came to fill this gap in 1981, when the Jesuit priest Luis Pérez Aguirre gathered a group of Christians to protest abuses. They embraced a rather vehement approach to remind other social and political actors that “Jesus’ pardon did never banish the fight for justice [and] never feared speaking out the truth and taking sides”.<sup>14</sup> They used this language to call for popular mobilization, linking up with other social movements instead of establishing substantial ties with the political parties.<sup>15</sup> They also tried to reach outside Uruguay, taking advantage of the exiles’ previous transnational activism.<sup>16</sup> Inside the country, they promoted the organization of groups of relatives of political prisoners and disappeared persons. SERPAJ was declared illegal in 1983 after organizing a hunger strike to end the stalemate in the talks between

13 See Artucio, Alejandro and Mercedes: “La amnistía en el Uruguay: Efectos jurídicos, fundamentos, alcance y aplicación”, in SIJAU, *Coloquio sobre Uruguay y Paraguay: La transición del estado de excepción a la democracia*, EBO, Montevideo, 1985, pages 213-225. For the São Paulo event, see SIJAU, *Colloque sur les fondements juridiques d’une véritable ouverture démocratique en Uruguay - São Paulo, 17, 18 et 19 juin 1982*, SIJAU, Paris, 1983.

14 *Amnistía y reconciliación nacional: Propuesta del Servicio de Paz y Justicia*, SERPAJ, Montevideo, 1983, page 14, in *Princeton University Latin American Pamphlet Collection: Human and Civil Rights in Uruguay, 1983-1988*, Scholarly Resources, Wilmington, Del., 1989.

15 For social movements and human rights claims in the Southern Cone, see Jelin, Elizabeth: “Los sentidos de la conmemoración”, in Jelin, E. (ed.): *Las conmemoraciones: Las disputas en las fechas “in-felices”*, Siglo XXI, Madrid, 2002, page 247.

16 See, for instance, letters from SERPAJ and Luis Pérez Aguirre to Federatie Uruguay Komitees, November 15, 1983, and June 10, 1984, in FUK-IISH.

the parties and the military and was only reorganized in 1984 during the electoral campaign. In September, a representative of the still-illegal SERPAJ addressed the SIJAU meeting in Buenos Aires with a plea for amnesty and a demand to the eventual winner of the November elections to make the armed forces accountable for their actions.<sup>17</sup>

Besides SERPAJ, other groups acting in Uruguay sent spokespersons to the meeting, among them the Bar Association and the relatives of political prisoners and disappeared, as well as representatives of the FA and the unions.<sup>18</sup> Although they had all protested abuses inside the country to the best of their abilities, they had little experience in human rights activism as such. In Uruguay, the first petition by relatives of political prisoners was submitted to the government in 1982, and the first list of disappeared people was publicized in November 1983. It was not until June 1983 that SERPAJ first publicly denounced torture and demanded justice in relation to the abduction of twenty-five members of the youth branch of the PCU. No legal defense organization emerged until 1981, when the anti-regime sectors won the internal elections of the Bar Association for the first time since the coup. The National Commission for Human Rights and the Uruguayan Institute of Legal and Social Studies, two other organizations that took human rights cases, were founded in 1983 and 1984 respectively. Moreover, the coordination of the human rights movement was only institutionalized in 1984 with the creation of a “coordinadora” composed of all the human rights organizations, the three major parties, and the key organizations of the social movement. This “coordinadora”, however, did not reach beyond Montevideo.<sup>19</sup> The first case to really catch the attention of the media and produce widespread condemnation against human rights violations in the country was the death of a detainee while being tortured in a military facility in April 1984.<sup>20</sup> Beyond a generalized call to end repression and release political prisoners, human rights were not chief concerns for many political actors in the transitional period and most parties did not have much contact with

---

17 See Bustamente, Francisco: “Amnistía y lucha contra el terrorismo de Estado: Condiciones para la transición democrática”, in SIJAU, *Coloquio sobre Uruguay y Paraguay...*, pages 86-95.

18 See list of participants in *Ibidem*, pages 191-196.

19 See Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...* pages 84-87.

20 See Perelli, Carina, and Rial, Juan: “La estrategia de las apariencias: Transición a la democracia y derechos humanos”, in Perelli, C., and Rial, J.: *De mitos y memorias políticas: La represión, el miedo y después...*, EBO, Montevideo, 1986, pages 74-79.

human rights groups.<sup>21</sup> The social movements were fervent defenders of radical human rights claims and constantly mobilized for amnesty, but remained relatively isolated from the main steps of the negotiated transition. Coordinating organizations like the Intersectorial and later the Multipartidaria avoided open statements and tried to preserve the minimal level of shared commitment reached by political parties and social organizations.<sup>22</sup>

This situation contrasted with Argentina and Chile, where human rights groups emerged soon after the installation of the authoritarian regimes in the seventies and played a main role in the transitional periods. In Chile, these groups took advantage of preexisting social and political networks, most of them face-to-face, linking religious leaders, some leftists, and intellectuals. Trust and personal connections could not have developed without the Catholic Church acting as a shield of legitimacy in the face of repression, and channeling international support and funds for this early human rights work. Initially, these groups had not formal ties to political parties and carried out a purely humanitarian agenda, but they soon embarked on efforts to reconstitute social spaces fragmented by repression and fear. Their activities had a “demonstration effect” and in the late seventies human rights groups proliferated and linked with parties and intellectual circles. The Catholic Vicaría de la Solidaridad was especially important in the creation of a national opposition movement, preparing the ground for larger social and political forces to press for democratization in the eighties.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Chile, the Argentine Catholic church failed to offer any kind of support to the human rights groups, which nevertheless organized in the worst years of repression. Some had been working before the 1976

---

21 According to interviews with seventy politicians in 1984 and 1985, only 38% of the FA leaders, 21% of the Blancos, and 11% of the Colorados had “frequent” contacts with human rights organizations. Gillespie, C.: *Negotiating Democracy...*, page 64.

22 The Intersectorial was created in August 1983 by all the major parties and social movements. The Multipartidaria was composed of the major parties. In late 1984, another coordinating organization was founded, Concertación Nacional Programática (CONAPRO), with representatives of all the parties and social movements and the aim of reaching minimal agreements in preparation for the democratic period. It was within CONAPRO that the first joint commitment about human rights violations was reached in August 1984. See Barahona de Brito, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, page 80.

23 See Loveman, Mara: “High-Risk Collective Action: Defending Human Rights in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 104:2, September 1998, pages 488-498; and Fruhling, Hugo: “Resistance to Fear in Chile: The Experience of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad”, in Corradi, Juan E., et al. (eds.): *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1992, pages 121-141.

coup and the most important one, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, appeared soon after and proved very effective in getting international attention and support. Their denouncing efforts were central during the Argentine transition to democracy in 1982 and 1983, after the debacle of the Malvinas war and ensuing collapse of the military regime.<sup>24</sup>

According to the literature on democratization processes in the Southern Cone, several reasons account for the late development of the Uruguayan human rights movement. When comparing Uruguay to other South American countries, these studies stress that the Uruguayan Catholic Church was traditionally weak, had little influence outside a limited “religious” sphere, and lacked strong historical connections to the major political parties or labor organizations. Throughout the authoritarian period, the Church hierarchy maintained an “official silence”, going as far as to deny support to SERPAJ in 1981. Besides the poor role of the Church, scholars dealing with social movements in authoritarian contexts explain that actors embedded in diverse secular social networks also failed to coordinate and sustain human rights groups prior to 1981 because of the nature and extent of repression in Uruguay. They point to both geography and demography as factors that made it easier for the monitoring and repressive apparatus of the military government to persecute and paralyze all opposition. The foundations of this apparatus—including severe legal restrictions of individual freedoms passed by the parliament in the late sixties and early seventies—were already in place when the military came to power in 1973. Many potential spaces for organized resistance were restricted or eliminated before the coup. Ensuing repression was also severe and did not wane until the very end of the regime; this included massive arrests, generalized torture, prolonged imprisonment, and intervention in all spheres of life, public and private.<sup>25</sup>

Later, in the transitional period, other factors collaborated to weakening human rights claims inside the country and ended up hindering the implementation of policies of “truth” and justice in the democratic period. First, party politics were part of the entire transitional process: the 1982 primaries and the 1984 national elections encouraged competitive differen-

---

24 See Loveman, M.: “High-Risk Collective Action”, pages 507-516.

25 See *Ibidem*, pages 498-506; and Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, pages 86-87. For patterns of repression, see Roniger, Luis, and Sznajder, Mario: *The Legacy of Human-Rights Violations in the Southern-Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pages 20-28.

tiation among the parties and militated against the undertaking of broad consensus-building initiatives. The decline of the alliance between the Blanco leader Ferreira Aldunate and sectors of the left also hampered the consolidation of a common opposition front behind human rights claims. Second, the transition was characterized by the increasing importance of secret elite negotiations between party delegates and the military, coupled with the decrease in the importance of popular mobilization. Since human rights groups, particularly SERPAJ, were most strongly linked to the social movements and emphasized mobilization, the predominance of private elite talks furthered their isolation from the decisive steps of the transition. The Partido Colorado, which won the 1984 elections, had almost no links with the social movements and established an associative relationship with the military command. Third, the transition was agreed between equals: the military did not succeed in getting the guarantees they initially sought, but the party representatives were in turn unable to impose a strong break with the authoritarian institutions. Although the final agreement did not guarantee impunity, it implied the tacit recognition of the military's institutional autonomy. Moreover, the pact represented the restoration of the pre-authoritarian political system, including an elaborate electoral arrangement that exacerbated intra-party fragmentation and promoted programmatic compromise to accommodate the different factions inside the same grouping.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars studying the role of human rights in transitions to democracy usually add "lack of international attention" as another factor to explain the weak development of a human rights movement inside Uruguay and the ensuing failure to implement policies of "truth" and justice. One of these studies notes that, contrasting with other South American countries under authoritarian rule in this same period, few missions visited Uruguay to monitor human rights.<sup>27</sup> Another scholar stresses that the traditional parties' lack of international counterparts, together with the ineffective role of the Church, severely limited access to external funding for human rights projects.<sup>28</sup> Both observations are partly right and the first comparison identifies the hostility with which Uruguayan authorities greeted international pressure. It overlooks, however, the importance of missions sent by the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International (AI) in

---

26 See Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America*..., pages 80-97.

27 See *Ibídem*, pages 87-88.

28 See Loveman, M.: "High-Risk Collective Action"..., pages 506-507.

1974 and 1975, the U.S. Bar Association in 1977, and the Red Cross and the OAS in 1979, among others. In addition, there were several pronouncements by international organizations and foreign governments, the most important being the 1976 decision by the U.S. Congress to suspend all military aid to Uruguay because of its human rights standards. A small and not very prominent member of the international community, Uruguay did get a fair deal of attention, looming high on the agenda of chief human rights groups like AI in the seventies. It may be true that the “slow motion coup was eclipsed by the violent coup in Chile” and that “the relative absence of disappearances...may also have made Uruguay seem less worthy of...attention”.<sup>29</sup> But it is undeniable that the exiles managed to disseminate human rights abuses to large international audiences, pointing to the specificity of repression in their country.

It is puzzling that, despite succeeding in getting international attention, the exiles’ commitment to human rights activism did not substantially affect politics inside Uruguay in the transitional period. The literature on transitions to democracy in the Southern Cone addresses this point when it relates exile politics to domestic disregard for human rights and suggests that the breakdown of the alliance in exile between Blancos and leftists hindered the promotion of a unified human rights agenda. Equally important was the reorientation of the leftist exiles towards transitional politics in Uruguay, somewhat diminishing their concern for transnational human rights activism. Both inside and outside the country, the groups committed to strong human rights agendas lost terrain to the negotiating sectors.<sup>30</sup> The only consensual motto in this period was freedom for political prisoners, probably because they were too many to be disregarded.<sup>31</sup> However, transitional dynamics led the majority of the left to endorse the August 1984 agreement between party representatives and the military when there were still hundreds of prisoners. It was not until early 1985, after the end of the authoritarian regime, that a “National Pacification Project” provided for

---

29 Barahona de Brito, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, page 87.

30 The plenum of the FA voted in favor of the terms of the agreement with the military 31 to 14 (with 6 abstentions). See Gillespie, C.: *Negotiating Democracy...*, page 178. Electoral results in November 1984 confirmed the appeal of the negotiating stance. The IDI got 1.4% of the total vote (6.7% of the FA), while the pro-pact sectors got 19.9% (93.1% of the FA). Caetano, Gerardo, et al.: *La izquierda uruguaya: Tradición, innovación y política*, Trilce, Montevideo, 1995, pages 150-151.

31 According to interviews conducted in 1984 and 1985 with Uruguayan politicians, 68% of the FA leaders, 57% of the Blancos, and 48% of the Colorados reported having been detained for political reasons. Gillespie, C.: *Negotiating Democracy...*, page 34.



their rapid release. Moreover, the pact eluded any commitment to punishing the accused of human rights abuses. The very decision to avoid the matter showed that finding a rapid way out of the current situation was considered more important than demanding “truth” and justice for human rights violations committed by the outgoing regime. For the left, this was a weighty decision, since leftist activists and leaders had been the main targets during the authoritarian period. How did the different leftist groups and parties talk about these issues, which were central to their political identity, in a time when the majority of the left decided to tone down concrete human rights claims?

### **Heroism Revisited**

Starting in the mid-seventies, as human rights arose as a central factor in international politics, the exiles became pioneers in adopting this language to talk about repression and abuses in Uruguay. Contrasting to the left’s previous way of referring to these matters, the new language was aimed at denouncing the methods of the state rather than at praising the attributes of the affected militants, who were usually presented as “victims” rather than as political or social combatants. The leftist exiles never dropped references to the heroism of their fallen comrades, but they began to talk about abuses not so much as part of their expected political experience but as proofs of their ability to resist a brutally repressive regime. They also learned how to adapt their language according to the audience they were addressing. There were some attempts at actually marrying leftist heroism and human rights talk in a more articulate discourse, but none of them was really successful in the pre-transitional period. Human rights activism was usually kept separate from partisan politics. The early eighties brought an interesting change, since the exiles further directed their attention to domestic politics where human rights claims had not been previously important and soon began to collide with the negotiating strategies of the majority of the left acting inside the country. Human rights had represented a moderate language useful to seek support from international organizations, foreign governments, and transnational actors when the exiled leftists had no capacity to strike in their domestic arena. Now this language was often deemed too radical to fit the leftist coalition’s negotiating approach to transitional politics in Uruguay.

The key controversy in using human rights language in this period was not so much the denouncing of abuses as the attempt to confront the repressive, legal, and political legacies of the military regime. A basic distinction between claims for punishing the accused of human rights violations (justice) and the wish to know what happened and spread this knowledge to the society at large (“truth-telling”) is useful to understand how the leftists dealt with these matters.<sup>32</sup> According to this analytical distinction, the left split in two camps defined by the same partisan attachments that determined general strategies in the transitional period. Both inside and outside the country, the more radical leftists demanded not only “truth-telling” but also justice, while the negotiating sectors focused on protesting violations rather than on demanding the punishment of those guilty of committing and ordering abuses. The former directed their claims to the political parties, which would eventually take control of the government in the impending democratic period. Together with the emerging human rights groups and social movements, they wanted all the major parties to commit to investigating and penalizing human rights violators, revealing the institutional and systematic nature of repression. The negotiating sectors—the majority of the left—preferred to avoid a strong position on these matters: they referred to the competence of the judicial system to prosecute all alleged criminals once it recovered its autonomy, but did not outline any concrete government policy to enforce successful prosecution. The main points distinguishing these leftists’ agenda from the timid human rights proposals of the traditional parties were an explicit demand to clear up the situation of the disappeared and their support for an unrestricted amnesty for political prisoners.<sup>33</sup>

While differing in their positions on how to bring about justice for human rights violations, these two roughly defined camps converged in wanting to publicize what their activists had endured in the past decade. In the last years of the authoritarian regime, all the leftist groups and parties intensified their testimonial exercises as part of their overall political statements. In some cases, as in this document by the PVP, “truth-telling” and justice came together:

---

32 “Truth-telling” refers to the efforts by different social and political actors to ascertain thoroughly and confront the knowledge of what happened in the past, rather than to the actual accuracy of one particular version. See Roniger, L., and Sznajder, M.: *The Legacy of Human-Rights Violations in the Southern-Cone...*, page 1.

33 For further analysis of individual party platforms on this matter, see Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, pages 92-95.

“In order to be able to judge militarism, the Uruguayan people should know what happened in all these years in the jails of the regime. They should know about the prisoners who died while being tortured; they should know what happened with the political prisoners who disappeared; they should know how the OCOA [Organismo Coordinador de Operaciones Antisubversivas, Coordination of Anti-Subversive Operations] and other services were devoted to political repression”.<sup>34</sup>

In other cases, the leftists’ urge to talk about imprisonment, torture, disappearances and other similar experiences was not directly commensurate with their concern about concrete policies to achieve successful prosecution against those allegedly responsible for these abuses, which was often deemed a matter of complex political transactions. A clear example can be found in the communist journal *Estudios*, which included a section “Testimonios del horror y el heroísmo” for party members who had been in jail to recount their experiences. They detailed prison conditions and methods of torture but did not specify the implications of their testimonies to the promotion of justice. In 1983, as the transitional period advanced, the section disappeared altogether.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the leftists’ testimonies did not identify those responsible for the alleged crimes but pursued two goals somewhat independent from the issue of criminal prosecution. First, they aimed at communicating their experiences to wide audiences and making the society at large acknowledge what they had gone through. Second, they tried to explain the purpose of extreme experiences in leftist politics. Heroic appeals permeated these debates. Like the language of human rights, these appeals presented repression as a systematic practice of the authoritarian regime. They differed from this language, though, in highlighting the ideological and political attachments of those who committed and those who endured abuses, as well as in connecting human rights claims with their fight for further political and social change. Different sectors of the left agreed in that almost a decade of repression and abuses uttered evidence of their own resilience and continuous strength to resist the brutality of the right-wing authoritarian regime. Likewise, successive series of leaders and militants imprisoned, tortured, and murdered by the military were listed to show the extent

<sup>34</sup> “Por la amnistía general e irrestricta para todos los presos y perseguidos por el régimen”, May 1983, in PVP, *La lucha contra la dictadura...*, page 212.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance “Vicisitudes, horrores y triunfo de Alcides Lanza”, *Estudios*, 76-77, December 1980, pages 128-140, and Sacchi, Hugo: “No hay que ser un héroe, solamente ser humano”, *Estudios*, 84, October-December 1982, pages 60-71.

of repression against those willing to defend their principles. The more casualties of the left, the stronger the opposition to the government, seemed to be the rationale at work.

An attempt to dissociate themselves from any form of weakness and an emphatic denial of cases of “treason” and collaboration among their ranks highlighted the depth of their commitment to fight the regime. This was particularly important for the communists, who had engaged in underground activity and endured the bulk of repression, especially imprisonment, all along the years of authoritarianism. They concocted a sort of “code of honor”, according to which the PCU had been the “backbone of popular resistance in Uruguay,” with new generations taking their place as soon as leaders and cadres were jailed, tortured, or killed. In addition, the communist leaders pleaded that none of their cadres had “misbehaved” while being tortured. Acknowledging that other leftists had also endured torture without acquiescing to collaborating with the military, they would show their appreciation saying that they had “behaved like communists”. Other leftists understandably resented this talk, rather because they claimed that most of them had paid a high toll in confronting the regime than because they were ready to acknowledge the existence of “traitors” among their ranks.<sup>36</sup>

When compared to the political language of the late sixties and early seventies, the ultimate meaning of sacrifice in the new heroic appeals had somewhat changed. First, in agreement with a basic feature of human rights discourse, abuses were not so much something to be expected in the political experience of an activist as they were the manifestation of a brutal system that aimed at curbing all dissent. In the new heroic language, the underlying idea was that the leftists had been up to their standards of self-sacrifice, but denouncing what they had endured was more important than describing their remarkable attributes. Second, now the higher goal deserving total devotion was not so much revolution and socialist change, but to recover democracy and defend the civil and political rights suppressed by the regime.<sup>37</sup> Zelmar Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, two parliamen-

36 For the PCU, see Arismendi, R.: “En el 61 aniversario del PCU: Forja y temple para la victoria sobre el fascismo”, *Estudios*, 80, Octubre 1981, pages 2-15, and Saxlund, Ricardo: “Estos jóvenes 63 de nuestro partido”, *Estudios*, 87, July 1983, page 51. For debate with other leftists, see *Aportes*, December 1984, in FUK-IISH.

37 Discussions about current developments in Poland showed that some leftist groups had adopted a similar discourse to talk about events other than repression and abuse in Uruguay. See for instance “La crisis en Polonia”, January 1982, in PVP, *La lucha contra la dictadura...*, pages 165-171, and “Por una democracia verdadera en Uruguay”, *Diálogo*, July 1983, pages 98-101, in Uruguay Koordinatie Komitee, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

tarians assassinated in Buenos Aires in 1976, were probably the first “martyrs of democracy” to be anointed by the exiled left in the late seventies.<sup>38</sup> Although not all the leftist groups and parties embraced this “democratic martyrdom” with equal passion and at the same time, traces of it were present in most of their statements during the last days of the authoritarian regime.<sup>39</sup> This was an operation bound to elicit sympathy outside the membership of these groups and parties, in agreement with the presentation of the left as a reliable political actor.<sup>40</sup>

More generally, these new ways of talking about the recent past indicated an ongoing reconsideration of leftist conceptions of politics and social change. This revision had its roots in previous efforts to redirect political activities, exemplified in their involvement in transnational human rights activism since the second half of the seventies. At approximately the same time, an important group of South American exiled intellectuals, most of them from Argentina and Chile, began to search for new conceptual tools to understand authoritarianism in the region. Besides drawing on their own political experiences, the intellectuals participated in current debates among Marxist thinkers, which involved theoretical rumination and critical examination of recent developments in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, as well as the pitfalls of European welfare states and Latin American populisms. In brief, this search led them to exalt political democracy as a desirable goal and advocate peaceful transitions out of the current situation in their countries. This new credo expressed not only their opposition to the “new authoritarianisms” in South America, but also fundamental departure from previous notions of revolutionary actions and socialist transformation.<sup>41</sup>

Although there were no such systematic efforts to reconsider ideological foundations among Uruguayan exiles, intellectuals or otherwise, it is

38 See Markarian, Vania: “Uruguayan Exiles and the Latin American Human Rights Networks, 1967-1984”, Columbia University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2003, pages 191-193.

39 The PCU, for instance, justified its claim for amnesty noting that “The Uruguayan democracy cannot lay aside...those who have paid with imprisonment, torture, sacrifice, and effort the conquering of these very same [democratic] perspectives”. See Arismendi, R.: “Con la acción de las masas y la concertación de todas las fuerzas hacia una democracia avanzada”, *Estudios*, 89, January 1984, page 24. See also the analysis of the “Roslik case” in Perelli, C., and Rial, J.: “La estrategia de las apariencias...”, pages 75-77.

40 For the relationship between “martyrology”, democracy, and presentation of the left as a legitimate political player, see also de Sierra, Gerónimo: “La izquierda de la transición”, in Gillespie, Charles, et al. (eds.): *Uruguay y la democracia*, 3 vols., EBO, Montevideo, 1984, pages 3:156.

41 For extensive analysis of these debates, see Lesgart, Cecilia: *Usos de la transición a la democracia: Ensayo, ciencia y política en la década del 80*, Homo Sapiens, Rosario, 2003.

clear that these debates permeated their politics. Together with the magnitude of repression in their country, which surpassed any previous experience, a newfound interest in the ideas of Antonio Gramsci affected the reconsideration of their role in the promotion of social and political change. Rather than part of a sophisticated theoretical revision, Gramscian references to “hegemony” were loosely used to moderate the idea of politics as confrontation, which had been of main importance before the dictatorship, differentiating between political and social conflicts and encouraging the perception of politics as the joint creation of a sphere for peaceful participation and debate. These ideas, in turn, eroded the importance of traditional Leninist notions of “vanguard”, despite some willful efforts to marry the view of the two Marxist thinkers. Beyond ideological nuances and theoretical speculation, the new heroic discourse, with its emphasis on exposing abuses and exalting democracy, mean a clear departure from former understandings of the left as a conscious vanguard, which would enlighten the otherwise dormant masses.<sup>42</sup>

Another important novelty in the heroic appeals of the leftists was that exile was now presented as an evidence of their sacrifice. In previous years, exile was not stressed as a particularly traumatic experience, probably because it was deemed mild if compared to what other leftists were enduring inside the country. Exile was included in the SIJAU’s amnesty proposal and there had been some interest on the topic by writers and intellectuals, but political leaders and activists did not analyze their expatriation until the political opening in Uruguay suggested that it was bound to end soon.<sup>43</sup> This new concern was in tune with the proliferation of personal testimonies on the different forms of government repression in the country, evidencing the need to share a series of experiences that could not be publicized in the authoritarian period. All these narratives stressed the political meaning of individual trajectories. In the case of the exiles, their testimonies embraced “exile identity” as a condition forced upon them, yet another

42 For an example of Leninist approach to Gramscian views, see Arismendi, R.: “La poblada soledad de Antonio Gramsci”, in Arismendi, R.: *Vigencia del marxismo-leninismo*, Grijalbo, Mexico City, 1984, pages 163-179. For further analysis of this matter, See Rico, Álvaro: “¿Por qué Gramsci?”, in *Vigencia y actualización en el pensamiento de Rodney Arismendi*, Fundación Rodney Arismendi, Montevideo, 2001, pages 177-190. For Gramsci’s impact on the South American left, see Lesgart, C.: “El tránsito teórico de la izquierda intelectual en el Cono Sur de América Latina: ¿Reforma moral e intelectual o liberalismo político?”, *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 16, December 2000, pages 28-31.

43 For the treatment of exile in the work of Uruguayan writers, see Kaminsky, Amy K.: *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1999.

expression of the determination of the left before the brutality of the authoritarian regime.<sup>44</sup>

The consolidation of this “exile identity,” however, did not result in any specific “exile voice” in transitional politics in Uruguay. Partisan attachments continued to define the positions of the leftists, both inside and outside the country. There was a conscious effort by leftist groups and parties to emphasize their internal unity, despite the fact that their activists had endured totally different experiences in the past ten years. Once again, the communists were probably the ones to give this idea the rawest formulation: “We were one party in exile, in prison, or underground”.<sup>45</sup> But the will to underscore continuity over disruption, even when talking about extreme experiences, was of main importance for all leftists at this point. It expressed a common concern about rebuilding spaces for social and political mobilization harshly repressed and systematically dismantled in previous years. The main challenge was to bring together activists who had engaged in very disparate and often disconnected ways of resistance to authoritarianism. There were many debates on how to achieve this goal, but all the left strove to merge the new and powerful social movements that burst in the public scene during the transitional period with those smaller but fervent groups who had been acting underground and abroad.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of the exiles, an interesting aspect of this emphasis on unity was the reaffirmation of national origins. As soon as it was clear that their expatriation was ending, references to returning to Uruguay as the political duty of every exile began to flood speeches, journals, and newsletters. Leaders of the PCU were particularly worried about this matter, insisting on the differences between emigrants and exiles, in which the latter were not only defined in political terms but also attributed an intense desire to go back to work for the well-being of their homeland.<sup>47</sup> In fact, most of

44 For a preliminary list of testimonies, see Coraza de los Santos, Enrique: “El Uruguay del exilio: La memoria, el recuerdo y el olvido a través de la bibliografía”, *Scripta Nova*, 94:1, August 2001, <http://www.ub.es/geocrit/sn-94-46.htm>.

45 See, for instance, Arismendi, R.: “A votar por el Frente Amplio y por una democracia avanzada”, *Estudios*, 92, December 1984, pages 61-63.

46 There were complex, and ultimately successful, consultations to rebuild the Frente Amplio, which had suffered many defections both inside Uruguay and abroad. Likewise, leftists strove to keep the unity of the labor and the student movements, bringing together the younger generation acting inside the country since 1983 and the older activists who had lived in exile or been in jail in previous years. For the labor movement, see my interview with Ricardo Vilaró, Montevideo, December 26, 2001. For the student movement, see recent debates posted on the website [www.semana83.com](http://www.semana83.com).

47 See, for instance, Arismendi, R.: *Marx y los desafíos de la época y cinco trabajos más*, La Hora, Montevideo, 1985, page 24.

the exiled leftists began to talk about their imminent return, to depict Uruguay with increasingly nostalgic overtones, and to instill the idea that the “reconstruction of our fatherland” was the most immediate responsibility of each exile. Likewise, the death of one of them was presented as a remarkably tragic event, not only because of what their fellow Uruguayans would miss in terms of their contributions during the approaching democratic period, but also because of a concern about giving them a proper burial in “our soil”. Lamentations for the death of Enrique Erro in Paris in October 1984, for instance, elaborated on the customary connection between national identity and the land where “our ancestors are buried”.<sup>48</sup>

In a similar vein, there were efforts to set up some actual channels to return, such as the organization of a group of children of exiles to visit Uruguay. With the help of several Spanish political and social organizations, 154 children aged one to fifteen left Madrid on December 25, 1983. An enthusiastic crowd welcomed them in Montevideo and several social organizations planned tours and other activities to show them a country most of them knew only through the tales of their parents and the letters from their relatives.<sup>49</sup> Keeping alive in their children the sense of being Uruguayan was an important concern for the exiles, expressed in the several “weekend schools” and other cultural activities they launched all over the world. After 1980, when the possibility of returning seemed closer, they intensified these efforts to make their children share their will to go back. These initiatives showed to what extent the political was intertwined in the personal lives of the exiles, both in their decisions to go back to their country in the mid-eighties as in their reasons to leave throughout the seventies.<sup>50</sup>

The rally that welcomed the “children of exile” in 1983 was the first of a series of demonstrations that cheered returning exiles in the streets of

---

48 See obituaries for Erro reproduced in Caula, N.: *El diario de Enrique Erro...*, pages 202-209. See also “Ante la desaparición del Dr. Carlos Quijano”, *Estudios*, 91, July 1984, page 59. For the idea of “proper burial”, see Venderly, Katherine: *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, pages 41-50.

49 See, for instance, Scherzer, Alejandro, and Saavedra, Carlos: “154 niños: De la efervescencia popular a la implicación institucional”, *Boletín del Centre International de Recherche*, 8, 1986.

50 For “weekend schools”, see “Emigración, educación y retorno”, *Estudios*, 82, October-December 1982, pages 72-83. On the impact of both personal and political factors in the decision to return, see Martínez Moreno, Carlos: “Marco político para un retorno del exilio”, in Martínez Moreno, C.: *Ensayos*, 2 vols. Cámara de Senadores, Montevideo, 1994, pages 2:63-73. For other initiatives to go back, see “La campagne pour le retour des exiles au pays”, *Uruguay Informations*, April 1984, pages 21-23, in NACLA 3.



Montevideo between mid 1984 and early 1985. Some political leaders and other personalities were warmly received in these months, including the Blanco leader Wilson Ferreira Aldunate and his son Juan Raúl, communist leaders Enrique Rodríguez and Rodney Arismendi, and folksingers Daniel Viglietti, Alfredo Zitarrosa, and Los Olimareños. Some of them had already been welcomed by fellow exiles in Buenos Aires, which after the recovery of democracy in Argentina in late 1983 became once again a bridge between Uruguay and the larger world, mirroring its role in the early seventies. In addition to popular demonstrations, a series of other undertakings expressed a systematic effort to bring back the thousands of Uruguayans who had been sent into exile in the past decade. A Comisión Nacional del Reencuentro (CNR, National Commission for the Re-Encounter) was founded in December 1983 with representatives of the major parties. The CNR devised a series of programs to help the exiles readapt to their country, including some legal matters such as recovering their jobs in the public sector, transferring credits from foreign universities, and helping their children adjust to the Uruguayan educational system.<sup>51</sup> The Servicio Ecuménico de Reinserción was also founded in 1983 to help returning exiles, and in 1984 a group of psychologists and social workers received international funds to launch the Servicio de Rehabilitación Social, a support organization for former prisoners and exiles.<sup>52</sup>

These undertakings expressed a growing concern about the extent and consequences of the different forms of repression in Uruguay, as well as a determination to help the exiles return and settle down in their country. Aid from international organizations was of main importance in providing the exiles with financial means to accomplish these goals. It also paid for several projects aimed at understanding the phenomenon of exile from an academic perspective. In the eighties, organizations from countries that had received Uruguayan exiles supported studies on this matter. Many of these projects were carried out by Uruguayan exiles working at research institutions in Europe and the United States. Ties with transnational human rights groups also continued well into the democratic period, both as ongoing aid for victims of abuses and as efforts to spur human rights activism in the

---

51 This CNR was the antecedent to the Comisión Nacional de Repatriación (National Commission of Repatriation) created by the Colorado government in April 1985. It provided aid to 16,000 returning exiles, including jobs, medical insurance, and housing. See Barahona, A.: *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America...*, page 125.

52 See Coraza de los Santos, E.: "El Uruguay del exilio...".

country. AI, for instance, kept giving financial aid to ex-prisoners, and lobbied politicians and upcoming civilian authorities to set up AI chapters in Uruguay.<sup>53</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

All these initiatives constituted the outcome of more than a decade of transnational activities by the exiles with the aim of making the Uruguayan situation known to the world. In the transitional period, instead of intensifying their previous human rights activism, the majority of the leftist exiles reoriented their efforts towards supporting the new political developments in Uruguay and organizing their return to the country. For the exiles, as for the rest of the leftists (and for other political and social actors in these years), the early eighties were a period of reworking their strategies within the new context of transitional politics. In terms of human rights, this involved toning down radical claims and accommodating their demands for accountability to the predominant negotiating strategy. The leftists kept denouncing abuses, but many of them often stopped short of promoting concrete measures to punish the accused of these violations. The will to find a rapid way out of the authoritarian regime was more powerful than any other goal in these years. In this context, their main purpose of using human rights language was often testimonial, a means of bearing witness of what thousands of leftist militants had endured in the past decade. This also meant revisiting earlier heroic appeals in order to make the society at large know and understand the extent of their fight against the regime. This new combination of human rights language and heroic references reflected the leftists' attempts to understand their political experiences in the past decade and make sense of them in the new political situation. Because of this, other political actors often accused them of trying to cleanse their role in political violence in the late sixties and avoid their share of responsibility in the events leading to the 1973 coup.

---

53 For "aftercare" for former prisoners, see letter from Val Milk to "AIUSA adoption groups, AIUSA members interested in Uruguay, and Uruguay Co-groups in other sections", May 23, 1985, in AIUSA-Uruguay Collection, University of Colorado Archives, Boulder, CO. For all other matters, see "AI works on Uruguay following the return to civilian rule", AMR 52/04/85, April 1, 1985; and "Uruguay relief work 1985 (summary)", AMR 52/05/85, July 1, 1985, AI Indexed Documents, Microfilm 371, in International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

Between 1980 and 1984, all the relevant actors discussed what had happened in the country during the last ten to fifteen years, confronting their memories while looking for a way out. Like the rest of the political spectrum, the different groups and parties of the left acted as “agents of memory”, shaping the “collective remembrance” processes.<sup>54</sup> The military government’s versions of the pre-coup period and the dictatorship had been the only ones allowed publicly during the years of authoritarianism. Since 1973, the Armed Forces asserted the “historical role” of the military, shaping the urban landscape with monuments and public works that represented their version of the past.<sup>55</sup> Most of the opposition groups had not even the chance to publicly mourn and pay homage to their fellow party members. Therefore, the unexpected opening of the early eighties meant also the possibility of talking about events that had not been openly discussed for a decade. The undeniable link between these issues and the very possibility of the transition to democracy often led to the negotiation of memories in political terms. In this sense, human rights language, once toned down and bereft of radical claims for accountability, became a useful tool for presenting the left as a reliable political actor—one that had not only endured the bulk of repression by the military but that was also willing to give up on revenge and embrace democratic politics.

This last shift in the Uruguayan left’s use of human rights language shows that the articulation between local and global issues in the promotion of political change is more complex than the picture offered by the existing literature on international human rights and transnational networks. While the importance of shared ideas and norms is stressed in this scholarship, closer analysis often makes clear that the networks are not only the expression of common values and goals, but also sites where different actors can advance their own political objectives. Concerned primarily with the creation of international norms, their internalization into domestic practices, and the role of advocacy networks in promoting moral principles for international relations, this approach often disregards the varied interests implicated in promoting human rights on a global scale.

---

54 For the concepts of “agents of memory” and “collective remembrance” see Sivan, Emmanuel, and Winter, Jay (eds.): *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, page 6.

55 See Cosse, Isabella, and Markarian, Vania: *1975, Año de la Orientalidad: Identidad, memoria e historia en una dictadura*, Trilce, Montevideo, 1996; and Marchesi, Aldo: “¿Guerra o terrorismo de estado? Recuerdos enfrentados sobre el pasado reciente uruguayo”, in Jelin, E. (ed.): *Las conmemoraciones...*, pages 108-124.

While certainly adding an important dimension to earlier analyses of transitions to democracy in the Southern Cone, which focused on internal politics, this scholarship offers a quite simplistic description of the receptivity to the international discourse of human rights at the local level.<sup>56</sup> According to Thomas Risse and Stephen C. Ropp, for instance, the processes leading to the internalization of human rights into domestic practice are “truly universal and generalizable across regions and domestic structures”.<sup>57</sup> These and other authors pay special attention to the initial phases of these processes, which would follow a “boomerang pattern”: actors repressed at the local level activate networks, whose members pressure their own states and third-party organizations, which in turn pressure the state that violates human rights.<sup>58</sup>

My work moves in a different direction, analyzing how perceptions of national politics affected the use of human rights language by Uruguayan exiles. In the mid-seventies, acknowledging that space for radical activism was closing up in their country and the larger region, the exiles became main human rights advocates. Starting in 1980, the “unexpected political opening” occurred in Uruguay led to a new transformation in their use of human rights language. More concerned about national politics than about transnational activism, they adapted to the complex dealings of the transitional period and toned down radical claims for justice. A new heroic rhetoric permeated the use of human rights language as a denouncing tool in the transitional years.

After the end of the dictatorship, the FA leaders did not outline concrete policies to deal with violations by the outgoing military regime and instead promoted the action of the courts, although the matter clearly surpassed the conventional duties of the judicial system. In April 1985, human rights organizations presented charges. The military leadership refused to

---

56 For the disregard of international factors in the transition to democracy in Uruguay, see for instance González, L.E.: “Transición y restauración democrática”, in Gillespie, C., et al. (eds.): *Uruguay y la democracia...*

57 To that end, they devise a complex “spiral model” heavily reliant on a series of contingent variables: “If the transnational advocacy network is sufficiently mobilized to keep the norm-violating government on the international agenda and if that government is vulnerable to such international pressure, the third phase [tactical concessions to the international human rights community] of our ‘spiral model’ is eventually reached”. Risse, Thomas; Ropp, Stephen C., and Sikkink, Kathryn (eds.): *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999, page 238. My emphasis.

58 Keck, Margaret E., and Sikkink, Kathryn: *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1998, pages 12-13.

appear in court. In December 1986, facing increasing resistance by the military, Blancos and Colorados alleged that the Club Naval agreement had indeed “implied” a compromise to avoid investigation of human rights violations. Frente Amplio leaders denied this accusation, but Blancos and Colorados nevertheless managed to pass a law that waived the right of the courts to investigate crimes committed by military and police personnel before March 1, 1985. The failure to promote “truth-telling” and justice “from above” led to major initiatives “from below”. Non-governmental organizations, leftist parties, and other political and social actors exercised their constitutional right to request a national referendum on that legislation, amidst a wave of popular mobilization. As part of this campaign, SERPAJ released a “Nunca Más” report, supported by the United Nations Fund for Victims, religious groups, and the Mac Arthur Foundation.<sup>59</sup> This report was the human rights movement’s response to the failure of the government to offer substantial information about repression by the authoritarian regime. In the referendum, conducted in April 1989, the forces interested in annulling the law were defeated by a narrow margin. Although there have not been many significant developments in the achievement of either justice or “truth” in the last fifteen years, the matter of human rights violations in the past dictatorship has repeatedly surfaced in the form of both legal confrontations and heated discussions about historical memory.

In comparative perspective, the legacy of human rights violations in Uruguay is similar to the Chilean and Argentine cases in that the matter was not closed after the transitional period, mainly because the new democratic governments failed to satisfy demands for justice. In the three countries, the “trope of national reconciliation” was the main justification for this failure, but both in Chile and Argentina it also substantiated some mechanisms of reparation to the victims, the promotion of “truth-telling” initiatives by the state, and even some tardy efforts to take legal action against a number of human rights violators. In contrast to its neighbors, in Uruguay there were neither official truth-telling policies nor state-promoted gestures of reparation.<sup>60</sup> The main distinctive feature of the Uruguayan process is the late formation of human rights groups inside the country, which left the exiles as almost the only reliable sources of information

<sup>59</sup> See SERPAJ, *Uruguay Nunca Más: Human Rights Violations, 1972-1985*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992.

<sup>60</sup> The main official measure was the restitution of government jobs to those who had been fired for political reasons.

VANIA MARKARIAN

before international organizations and foreign governments until the eighties. This situation not only points to the extent of internal repression in Uruguay, which effectively brought political life to a halt for many years, but also to the difficulties of civil society to generate effective opposition through channels other than the political system. The strong role of the political parties, including the left, and their recovered centrality in the transitional period, together with the secretive and exclusive character of the negotiated transition and the isolation of the often uncompromising social movements explain why human rights became a matter of partisan politics. Even the exiles ended up privileging national party strategies over transnational human rights work, although they had been pioneers of this type of activism in previous years.

Recibido el 5 de diciembre de 2006  
Aceptado el 19 de febrero de 2007