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DEEP WOUND. PIQUETEROS: A VIEW FROM HISTORY

María Marta Aversa and
Graciela Browarnik*

Many questions arise about the process of reconstructing the recent history of Argentina, more so when as historians we extend our look backwards from a present filled with political, social and economic tensions and conflicts. This context renders it vitally important that we should risk incorporating into our analysis of the past the recollections and narratives of historical individuals who represent new and unknown social phenomena in Argentine society.

In recent years, the Movements of Unemployed Workers (MUW) have entered the political stage. A process of economic exclusion coupled with the dismantling of the Welfare State, brought the upsurge of new social subjects: the long-term unemployed. Neoliberal programs applied firmly since the 1990s eroded the State's style of social control while sharply increasing and extending

poverty, even among wage earning and middle sectors. The marginal poor were denied social representation in the early 1990s. They were not a social class but were seen rather as a painful failing of society. There was talk of pauperism but not of the poor, of unemployment but not of the unemployed, of exclusion but not of the excluded. Today, amidst the ruins of the Welfare State, shadowy citizens scarred by pain and poverty succeed in transcending individual tragedies and form a community, sharing not only material conditions but also the daily experience of marginal lives.

This is the context for the rise of the Movement of Unemployed Workers of Quilmes, an organization encompassing over ten neighborhoods. Their everyday form of struggle is the picket line that blocks important streets and thoroughfares. The members participate in neighborhood meetings and work with other social organizations on small projects (material improvements, community shopping and eating halls, people's libraries). Although identifying their movement with the collective revolutionary actions of the 70s, the unemployed organizations paradoxically bet on occupying and regenerating the social spaces and networks hardest hit by the military repression of 1976-1983.

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Those in Quilmes MUW mark a difference between their social struggle and the political violence of the 1970s. What role then does the social imaginary of dictatorship play in their collective practice and mentality?

In the stories shared by members of MUW and of the aboriginal community of Kilmes, also involved in the pickets, two main notions establish a relation to dictatorship and a history of dependency: genocide and ever-present State violence. Under these terms, the meaning of the past is reworked from the present: hatred of police and the military stems from their everlasting control of the streets, a terrain claimed by the unemployed as their own. The present seems to determine how the past is remembered. Is it possible to think that the transmission of the past is obstructed by everyday struggles for subsistence?

The stories begin and end in violence: dictatorship at one end, unemployed workers' protests at the other. Violence, however, acquires different dimensions for those who have lived through the traumatic situations that flood the field of our research. Everyday confrontations, juvenile detention centers, hunger and poverty color these stories, making of dictatorship one more episode—not the worst, by the way—in the life cycles of those interviewed. Pickets then become a cry for attention from a society unable to see beyond individual misery; a tool to make visible what is invisible. Pickets establish a frontier in the difficult relationship between past and present.

Dismantling the Welfare State leaves behind functional voids that are filled only with repression or impotence. But voices and faces rise above the landscape of poverty and exclusion, unwilling to lose it all. Maybe their political demands and actions account for the engulfing uncertainty and

desolation. Is it then correct to insist on bringing the past into the urgent conjunctions of the present?

We think so because it enables us to reflect on our collective future. And yet, the way society views the pickets warns of a deeper wound. The silence surrounding the years of dictatorship, and the troublesome elaboration of that past, shapes the association between the pickets and the armed struggle of the 1970s.

The unemployed are perceived as socially vanished persons. Picket lines are, however, an apparition, a performance of daily suffering before a public undisturbed by the progressive disappearance of what we knew as work. The *piqueteros* engage in a ritual to expel the causes of their misery and imagine solutions based on the communion of those who lost all. Car tires, hoods, sticks and pots, a space to share hunger and neighborhood banners—all come together in a celebration of having nothing but control of the streets. Covered faces lit by bon-fires give away the lie of belonging to a technologically globalized world. Picket lines are the space for those denied milk and honey and forced to resist in the most primitive of ways, by exhibiting their poverty on the side of the road.

A society that yesterday disavowed vanished persons and believed in a present seasoned by jobless others finds itself surprised today by unemployed workers unwilling to give up their right to dignifying work. Those joining the picket lines decide to forget the teachings of past repression and leave behind the safety of fear to recover the streets. The question stands: what does society expect from pickets? Perhaps a revolution they are not expecting to make. They have other premises: food for their children and self-respecting employment.

ORAL HISTORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Mario Camarena Ocampo*

In 1998, after 167 years of operation, the old textile factory, La Fama Montañesa, closed its doors permanently. Since then, the residents of the neighborhood named after the factory have been feeling nostalgic and believing that bygone days were better. The link between factory and neighborhood is an important part of the residents' identity. Even though the factory has been shut, old-workers' recollections keep it alive as a symbolic space. The transmission of their remembrances to their offspring aims at developing and conserving their pride on being descendants of workers. Young people incorporate the idea of belonging to working-class families in their identity, being conscious at the same time that the neighborhood was born together with the factory in 1831.

In the summer of 1999 several young residents of the neighborhood asked me to impart a course on oral history. I have since worked with them on weekends. Why did they want a course on oral history?

These youths grew up listening to stories of labor struggles fought by their grandfathers and fathers since the start of the 20th century. On dark nights, filled with fear and emotion, they heard legends about ghosts and apparitions that lurked about the factory building. There were also stories of sundry celebrations and religious festivities. And yet, these young people realized, such tales of memory would disappear with the tellers while the

spatial transformation of the neighborhood would obliterate memory and hence their working-class identity.

The young residents intended to justify their political struggle to preserve physical spaces through their own historical memory, the richness of which was contained in the reminiscences of their elders. The need to record the history of the neighborhood emerged from the urgencies of the present. Thus, reminiscences from grandparents, parents and neighbors justify and further their political activism. When people order their experience, they justify their actions according to the political needs of the present moment. Knowledge is power.

It is not strange that people in the neighborhood propitiate the permanent resort to memory and bring forth their own chroniclers, since otherwise they would cease to exist. The neighborhood's history is a question of pride for the residents while at the same time it has an immediate use in their struggles. There is no neighborhood without history. Thus neighborhood history creates a framework of legitimacy for the struggles they engage.

After three years of uninterrupted work, the residents of La Fama Montañesa have taken the knowledge of oral history techniques into their own hands. They have carried out many hours of interviewing and have carefully analyzed the results under a certain conception of history. What is that conception?

The influence of public education is evident in the concept of history held by the neighborhood residents. They understand history just as they learned it in school, as the "science which studies the past", that is, the register of "important" facts which are gone and done with in an attempt to salvage what has been lost in time. The

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identity symbols in the neighborhood, such as the factory, the square, the spring, the streets for collective use, have changed their character, swept away by an urban way of life which strips those symbols of their old meanings. Thus they also recover the epical moments of the community, like the strike of 1939-41—the neighborhood's classic epical narrative—or the day a priest exorcised the factory. The historical past is then understood in the present perfect tense.

The research carried out by the residents has the purpose of retrieving what has been lost. Their use of oral history records is geared to an analysis based on a concept of history that is different from that of an academic historian. They, I have observed, conceive the facts appearing in the interviews as a chain of past events in which they are not actors. They do not conceive this set of events as a process of which they are a part, both as products and producers of events. My work as advisor in the gathering of oral histories is to foster a consciousness of history as process, in which the residents as interviewers and I as advisor are involved. In this way oral history is an element of sorts in gaining consciousness that ordinary people are subjects of history.

THE REACH OF ORAL HISTORY, THE CASE OF SAN PEDRO DE LOS PINOS

María Patricia Pensado Leglise*

Historians think that history explains something about the acts of individuals, the how and why of

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certain ways and not others. It contributes, that is, to a rational understanding of the facts and relations which “determine that human beings do what they do and be what they are” (Isaiah Berlin, *El sentido de la realidad. Sobre las ideas y su historia*, Madrid, Taurus, 1996, p. 45). Likewise, those who in the present decide to be makers of their own history, going from an individual to a collective plane, explicitly or implicitly seek out historical knowledge.

The latter was the case when a community group found out that the Oral History Program at the Instituto Mora had undertaken a project to write the history of their neighborhood, San Pedro de los Pinos, a middle-class area in Mexico City. They contacted us and requested support for their citizens' movement.

They specifically wanted to see if our work offered scientific data to back their struggle to impede the anarchic residential and commercial building caused by a municipal decree. The decree of December 2000 assigned city officials responsibility for urban planning. From then on real estate companies scouted the neighborhood for building sites, manipulated legal loopholes to obtain permits, and disregarded construction norms.

We at first were not clear on how we could help but did offer access to our research. We explained we were not employing conventional historical methodology but rather creating oral sources through interviews, which would be the base for later telling how the area's space and social life had been shaped and transformed in the course of the 20th century. Besides, we were then finishing our work, having to meet institutional deadlines—the Instituto Mora and the Chroniclers Council of Mexico City sponsored the research.

After several meetings we decided to interview the women who led this neighborhood group. We would add a new chapter to the book, describing the neighbors' struggle. This way their collective experience of social participation would be registered in the local history.

It is interesting to note how individuals legitimate action. One way is by turning to history, with a feeling that they must first learn it to then find arguments to justify present actions. They seem unaware that they come out of that history and in some cases know it by way of oral transmission.

It is also important to observe that local citizens' social participation in the last few years has either pursued improving, preserving or modifying their living space or opposed institutional actions threatening to affect it. From this has come the preoccupation evinced by some city residents to plow academic history to find theoretical backing for the defense of their heritage. Sometimes, for instance, they will argue for the preservation of a certain architectural style prevalent in the area. Other times they claim to represent a part of modern urban culture threatened with extinction due to new ways of life.

The social spectrum feeding these urban movements is quite diverse and often contradictory. Their demands do not always represent higher consciousness about the problems facing city dwellers. Their proposals do not reveal clarity about new options to solve problems. Their focus on single communities isolated from the rest of the city, reproduces urban fragmentation.

It is becoming clear to us, as oral historians devoted to urban research, that regardless of our intentions, we are prone to be involved in the problems affecting those communities. This is an outgrowth, at least in part, of social bonds arising from interaction in the work of interviewing.

WORKING-CLASS BIOGRAPHIES: ORAL SOURCES AND TRADE UNION MILITANCY

Javier Tébar*

The Working-class Biographies Collection at the Historical Archives of the Workers' Committees (Comisiones Obreras) of Cataluña, begun in 1995, has today 154 interviews. This documentary project will conclude in 2004, after completing approximately 200 interviews. The important problems and solutions, beyond those normally encountered given the focus and use of interview techniques, were connected to finding a model archives management, appropriately easing access to potential users (release forms, literal transcription, indexing, detailed profiles and biographical trajectory) while insuring conservation (choices of support and reproduction criteria).

Our starting point was the descriptive nature of oral sources and our interest in a topic, militancy, as a central axis for structuring a number of aspects (family, education, sex, culture, work, politics) shaping the lives of working people. The questions behind our premise are: how did Catalan workers, men and women, live between 1939-1978? What drove them to commit themselves to fight against dictatorship when their activism would mainly get them into trouble? Posing the "needs" but not forgetting the "norms" was our theoretical proposal, even if often the results of the interviews were disappointing in this respect. It may be that, especially when it comes to norms, many of the practices, values and wishes ex-

* Historical Archives of the Workers' Committees of Cataluña, Spain.

pressed in the testimonies, have been strongly affected by time and the personal and social changes which have occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century.

It is thus possible to find discourses containing idealized elements, strongly epical components or reworking marked by present concerns. That it should happen does not diminish the heuristic value of these sources, as they often cannot be substituted by other historical documents (regarding migration, the ways of the underground, motivations for social protest and so on). What could be seen as a problem has in fact led to an unforeseen outcome based in a common and remarkable element: the ethical meaning given to the stories told. The development of the project has unfolded a meaning for "working-class biographies" as "civic memory" of the struggle for civil liberties in our country, sometimes obscured by ideological discourses and stereotypes of the most actively militant minorities.

We also considered that the question about where these people came from, largely answered, had to be complemented by another: who were they? Only then could we contribute to an *anthropology of militancy*, as yet not extant for the period we are interested in. The emphasis on a collective profile was well served by our focus on biography. The risk inherent in such a focus, in so far as ending up with coherent and exemplary lives, did not seem an argument to discourage its use but rather appealed to us as a possible object for analysis.

The phenomenon of militancy requires a kaleidoscopic view that allows comprehending its evolution in distinct contexts, rank-and-file networks on the shop floor and the neighborhoods for instance, and the magnitude of its social base. A step in that direction will be to analyze recollections of people who carried out labor and political protests in the face of *franquismo*, simultaneously contributing to "create" a "memory" of the labor movement in which they participated. An activist "is made" in the course of life, which is seldom a linear trajectory and obeys motivations far more diverse than those initially considered. The interviews would then show a plurality of paths leading to militancy and a vast array of forms of being in it, something we were not aware of when we started.

Working-class Biographies has had specific undertakings parallel to the project. We mounted an exhibit in an industrial city of Catalonia, in 2001, entitled "Democratic Memory of Sabadell, 1939-1976" (see www.memoriademocratica.org). More importantly, we began analytical research work, under the title "Between factory and neighborhood: memory, subjectivity and social networks. Cultures within working-class militancy in the suburbs of Barcelona's Metropolitan Area, Cornellá de Llobregat, Sabadell (1939-1988)," which has obtained support from the Center for the Promotion of Traditional and Popular Catalan Culture, of the Generalitat de Catalonia, and will be included in the Catalog of Catalan Ethnological Heritage.

ORAL HISTORY AND *PERONISTA* RESISTANCE

Liliana Garulli*

"At night we dreamed but during daylight we made politics."

Miguel Gazzera, union leader

The following brief comments are some reflections on our first experience in the field of oral history, the result of which was the book *Nomeolvides. Memoria de la resistencia peronista. 1955-1972* (*Forget-me-not. Memories of the Peronista resistance, 1955-1972*, Liliana Garulli, Liliana Caraballo, Noemí Charlier and Mercedes Cafiero, Editorial Biblos, 2000). The purpose of the research was to reconstruct the vast process of resistance carried out by the *peronista* popular sector from after the overthrow of Juan D. Peron's second government in Argentina, in September 1955, to the return from exile of the aging leader in November 1972.

Given the persistence of *peronismo* as the political option of Argentine workers despite the banning enacted by the ruling elite after the military coup of 1955, we were convinced that the topic under study was exceptional. Consequently we set out to make "resistance actions," whether individual or collective, spontaneous or union organized, the leading thread of the story. Such criteria demanded enlarging the heuristic horizon. If the specific literature on this period seemed quite thorough, we must acknowledge today that guided more by historical "intuition"

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than well-founded knowledge, oral history interviews appeared as absolutely necessary. They seemed an ideal strategy to provoke a dialogue with the past and the best shortcut to get inside the practice of the *peronista* sectors struggling to maintain their political identity and advance the return of Perón and of the Welfare State.

We first interviewed union leaders and rank-and-filers involved in some of the key moments in the process of resistance, as much for the symbolic relevance of such moments as for the advanced age of such leaders. Then we interviewed young militants, *peronista* intellectuals and members of the party hierarchy. We generally opted for semi-structured interviews, pursuing not only information on the whole process but certain specific questions depending on whether the interviewee was involved in the early phases of resistance or an advocate of the revolutionary line or a union leader.

The flexibility adopted for the interviews gave the interviewee a good measure of leeway to decide his or her stance and point of departure, rather than being strapped by a rigid scheme that would block recollections from surfacing to the present. What to us seemed basic respect for our interviewee turned out to be quite fruitful for the research and established the framework for one of our first chapters. In it we explain the powerful mechanisms of attraction which brought our interviewees into the orbit of *peronismo* and to the new militancy—quite often as a shift from other political positions. Such stories describe in detail the correlation between the needs of the popular sectors and the process of change undertaken from the State. A new perception as "political subjects" explains to a large degree why, after the overthrow of September 1955, they chose confrontation as a way to reestablish the social model with which they identified.

Being flexible and adaptable to each interview situation seemed essential, especially because the stories referred more to the intersection between history and the interviewee's personal life than to historical facts verifiable in other sources.

Some of our encounters with intellectuals or leaders considered as ideological "cadre" inside the union movement were quite difficult. We had to exercise utmost care to keep control of the interview and not become mere passive collectors of testimonies. We became aware that there was a direct relation between the interviewee's high intellectual makeup and highly reflexive and carefully assessed answers, a "crystallized" story as it were. These cases in a way revealed an underlying tension with knowledge being the contested terrain between the interviewee and the nosy historian. We found the shaping of the narrative more interesting and enriching than the information itself. We noted a previous and progressive refining and reworking of information as it surfaced from the labyrinths of memory. Our theoretical readings on "places of memory", the relationship between memory and forgetting or the "uses of forgetting" converged on these interviews, which seemed to confirm that what is set on a canvas is not the product of oblivion but the shreds of reminiscences intentionally preserved. Undoubtedly the narrator's need to take into account changes in values in the surrounding world explains some of the pauses or suggestive silences in the narrative, as when describing clandestine political practices often colored by violence.

A feature common to all interviews was the genuine willingness to speak, to describe the mechanisms of transgression implemented to negate their own negation within a system that had not only cut off social gains but pretended to

snatch away elements constitutive of their identity. The 1955 decree prohibiting political *peronismo* also intended to eliminate cultural manifestations and symbols of belonging and identification of the excluded masses. No wonder that the impersonal and abstract number of the decree, appears in the stories as a given name, acquiring body and personality.

Most interviews contain passages structured episodically, detailing actions that are "metaphors" for the individual's story and his or her own justification in the face of history. This history, after Peron's return in 1972, bestowed legitimacy upon clandestine operations outside constitutional sanctions and gave recognition to a movement of resistance excluded from the system of political parties.

Often times, after publishing *Nomeolvides*, we the authors have thought about this experience and about what motivated interviewees to highlight their stories, to tell repeatedly certain episodes, to reiterate details as if enunciating Homeric formulae of oral cultures. We are inclined to pin responsibility on the vortex of political timing. First came the years marked by prohibition and clandestine violence: unlike anarchists, revolutionary syndicalists and communists, few *peronista* militants have spoken about the period of resistance. History rushed as Perón returned and antagonistic currents within the movement clashed: the fast rhythm of the period did not lend itself to reflection and much less to consideration of the experience that propitiated the return. At last came the murderous military assault of 24 March 1976: what time there was then was used exclusively to stay alive or endure imprisonment.

Maybe—just maybe—our questions about the resistance came at a time of relative institutional

calm, when one could afford to bring back memories and give in to the temptation of carefully recounting the part played in an epic struggle, so this once the story would fly from ephemeral orality to a place among the codes of writing. Maybe –just maybe– as a legacy.

Such an explanation, we realize, is not conclusive but rather absolutely provisional. What we do know, as do all interested in contemporary Argentine history, is that *peronismo* –as an object of knowledge– is attractive precisely because it hides and displays only a part of its essence.

ORAL HISTORY, A POLITICAL RESOURCE FOR PUBLIC ACTION

María Concepción Martínez Omaña*

During the 1990s, oral history traveled the paths laid out by other disciplines in the vast field of the social sciences. There were a succession of methodological encounters between oral history and sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology and political science, mainly in terms of common analytical methods and techniques. In the theoretical arena oral history also borrowed certain approaches from the social sciences, which, in turn, valued the use of oral sources to confront and integrate a holistic explanation of phenomena and processes in social reality. One may ask, in this context, what is the contribution of oral history to other fields of knowledge such as political science? More specifically, what is the role of oral history in institutional research projects that pursue a given political intention, closely related to the im-

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plementation of public policies which shape concrete public action and are aimed at understanding and solving problems evident in the social reality of our times?

A partial answer to these questions comes from the experience of participating in the Integral Cleansing Program for the Valle de Bravo Waterways, in the state of Mexico, carried out by the National Waters Commission and the Regional Waters Management in the Valley of Mexico. The program encompasses undertaking public works and setting policies directed toward the preservation of the quality of water, and attending to the causes and effects of water degradation over the whole area. Those responsible for the program sought the participation of oral historians once they realized the importance of knowing the history of the people in Valle de Bravo, in order to gain insight into their social perceptions and views on environmental issues and problems. For this reason we did an oral history of the community, having in mind the needs of the Program and moved at first by an academic interest. We also saw a chance to play a role in furthering the preservation of the natural environment, a key concern at the end of the millenium, especially when it concerns near extinct resources such as water.

What did we find at the bottom of the institutional and political pretension of doing an oral history of Valle de Bravo? The Program called for the construction of a water treatment plant. The heads of hydraulic policies wanted simultaneously to initiate a set of actions to induce participation in preservation practices among the population. Their goal required gaining the approval of the largest users who are also key actors in the locality enjoying economic, political and social leadership: town officials, shopkeepers, professionals and members of NGOs. It is important to point out

that in recent years the water question has been complicated by political disputes concerning the use and control of this resource. They are disputes which will no doubt define this century's agenda.

It became crucial to know the locality's history in order to identify divergent perceptions and points of view held by the population. This knowledge would enable the Regional Management agency to design future policies and actions as well as defend certain interests. It is in this sense that oral history begins to attract attention in political and institutional quarters, much as it occurred in academia a decade ago, when social-science disciplines encountered oral history.

POLITICS AND THE COLLECTION OF MEMORIES IN CONGO

Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu*

Our intention is to show the role which politics plays in the collection of memories. Concern for historical truth has led researchers to turn to memories, among other things, as they are an important historical source without which the past can only be partially reconstructed.

Digging up memories in the various domains of urban daily life enables the analysis of the perceptions, the behavior, the attitudes, the feelings, and the judgments of a particular human population at a particular moment of its past and in its particular circumstances. The larger purpose is to reconstruct the larger past of multiple popula-

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tions and thus arrive at the creation of a more conceptualized memory, of a global understanding. The success of such a project requires both a suitable situation and opportunities for exchange.

The National Museum of Lubumashi has been chosen as an ideal space for the reconstruction of urban memory and for the reconstitution of Lubumbashi's history. Therefore, we organize our exhibits at the museum with two purposes in mind: to develop memories and to foster dialogue between the local population who owns the cultural heritage of the city and university-trained researchers who seek to put these memories in their historical context.

Each exhibit involves a time for listening and a time for critical analysis of the memory, of the collection and of reactions from the general public who find themselves faced not only with the objects and with the commentaries that accompany them, but also with life-histories that talk of urban life through the eyes of various participants.

The recording of these life histories and of oral witness among the target population is the way that memory is collected. The political situation in Congo is such that many people are distrustful of any kind of investigation or inquiry and of any researcher. Often researchers are forced to choose their informants in terms of those who will have faith in them. For example, during the period of conflict between Katangese whose ancestors lived in Katanga and those whose ancestors came from Kasai province, researchers were forced to ask questions only of their "brothers" and "sisters" of similar regional origins or ethnicity, then share their harvest with colleagues with differing identities.

The veracity of the narrator's story varies depending on the identity of the researcher and on

the type of relationship which he has with the investigator. It also depends on the place in time and space where the narrator stands. For example, because freedom of expression is not guaranteed, it is currently much easier for Congolese to share their impressions and thoughts on the former Mobutu regime than on the present regime of Kabila Jr. (who succeeded his father as president in 2001). They could be arrested if they spoke critically of either Kabila Sr. or Kabila Jr.

The case of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, shows that memory is at once homogenous and heterogeneous, objective and subjective, according to the individuals, the periods, the preoccupations, and the interests of the political regime at the time of the investigation harvesting the memories. In particular, the case of Lumumba shows the effects of politics upon memory. While in office and for some time after his murder in 1961, Lumumba was considered by many as the national hero liberating the Congolese people from colonial servitude. But he was later demonized by the Katangese of Moïse Tshombé (who was first president of Katanga State, a Congolese province which seceded in 1960, and in 1964 became Prime Minister, after Katanga rejoined the Republic of Congo) and the Baluba of Kasai supporting Albert Kalonji (president of South Kasi, another province which seceded in 1960); they respectively saw him as a representative of foreign communism and as the executioner of the Baluba people. In yet another twist of politics, Prime Minister Mobutu rehabilitated the figure of Lumumba only to safely pack his memory away in the archives. When Laurent Désiré Kabila succeeded Mobutu as president, in 1997, one again saw the resurgence of the memory of Lumumba as liberator.

ANOTHER TURN OF SCREW

Graciela de Garay*

An interview on an architect's practice and views on architecture—one of the Arts with capital A—does not seem to entail the risk of politics. More so when one shares in the common view defining true knowledge as fundamentally not political, and inversely, all untrue knowledge as blatantly political.

When an architect discusses the handling of spaces, the effects of light on volumes and the various uses of scale, color, materials, textures no one really bothers to ask about the political implications of such aesthetic meditations. It would appear that translating creative thought into physical objects does not affect in evident and immediate ways the interests of political society. An architect's political ideology may occasionally prompt a few orthodox colleagues to raise an eyebrow, but most will put aside such failing and concentrate on the aesthetic qualities of his or her work.

Quite the opposite occurs with the ideology of individuals involved in tasks of a political nature. Their theoretical positions then have relevance and are immediately subjected to public scrutiny in order to assess their impact on everyday reality. The fact is that professionals engaging in work touching upon the political find that ideology comes with the turf.

Despite the grouping of social practices into political and non-political, the dividing line is fragile. It may vanish when a non-political practice comes near or even trespasses structures of power properly considered political. It may be

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then said that issues and values of civil society have jumped the barrier and entered the political field. At that point, professionals and lay-people in civil society critically gesture and reorient attention to call upon political society to settle accounts.

What will it be then? Does an interview with an architect fall within or without politics? To my surprise, the oral history interview I did in July 1990 with Mario Pani, one of the more important Mexican architects of the 20th century, showed me that barriers separating architecture—an eminently aesthetic activity—from politics were not impassable. There is an unavoidable meeting of aesthetics and politics when history requires an individual to own up his deeds.

The tone of the interview certainly changed when my interviewee expressed his desire to clarify responsibilities regarding loss of human lives and material damages resulting from the September 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. Several buildings in the large housing project of Tlatelolco fell as a result of the catastrophe and hundreds of people died and more were left homeless.

Mario Pani, architect of the Tlatelolco Housing Unit which was inaugurated in 1964, admitted his partial responsibility in the tragedy, to the extent that he had not pressured the federal government, co-owner of the project, to carry out two indispensable tasks. On the one hand, insure basic maintenance to counter the effects of time; on the other, carry out structural repairs required of all tall buildings standing on top of faults and muddy subsoil. From this perspective, Pani laid responsi-

bility on the State for failing to fulfil its commitment to social welfare while declaring his own guilt for neglecting his professional commitment to watch permanently over his work.

Mario Pani did admit to mistakes in structural calculations but felt greater pain to recognize that an architect's responsibility does not end when the building is concluded. On the contrary, for Pani, an architect's professional commitment extends throughout the lifetime of a building, since his trade affects everyday life for the residents.

Pani authorized me to publish his edited interview in *Excelsior*, one of Mexico's largest newspapers in the 1990s. A response came swiftly from a judge in the nation's Supreme Court. The justice asked the director of the Instituto Mora—my home institution—for a copy of the original interview. We became alarmed. Why should the magistrate want the document? I regained serenity after speaking to Mario Pani, no doubt a veteran of political skirmishes. He suggested recommending the justice to follow the interview in the weekly installments the newspaper would publish. I then assumed the role of professional oral historian and refused to deliver the transcription, arguing that the release agreement forced me to respect the confidentiality protecting the informant.

Fortunately the nosy judge did not insist. I do wonder, still now, what would have happened if things got so tangled that, from architecture, we had passed to politics? This is undoubtedly an issue to reflect upon by all of us who study subjectivity and its historical, social, political and unconscious implications.