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EMBARRASSING MEMORIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE OF THE ELITE OF MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL

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The hectic rhythm of change and the globalization process, both typical features of this millennium, have brought a strong identity crisis in individuals as well as in communities. This crisis has triggered, in both communities and individuals, the need to revisit the past in search of elements that will allow them to restate their identities. Thus, history and memory have become part of the culture of today's societies.

This article presents the idea of embarrassing memories, suggested by an oral history project carried out with members of the political and economic elite of the state of Minas Gerais, in Brazil. The research inquired into the memories relating to significant events of the political and economic history of the state and of the country for which they were either witnesses or participants. For our purpose here, we will focus on their memories of the March 1964 movement that overthrew the President of the Republic and inaugurated the military era in Brazil.¹

In the last twenty years a trend of oral history studies has worked on what is known as the memory of trauma. The difficulty to have access to

public and private written sources has led researchers to collect oral narratives from survivors of the holocaust in Europe and from the underground cells that fought dictatorships in Latin America, mainly in Argentina.

The testimonies, a way to reach the memory of past time, are an alternative form of document as well as a very efficient way to access experiences that persons and communities have lived. As it is widely known, one of the most remarkable characteristics of oral history methodology is its possibility to access that which is subjectively lived by the individual. Thus, oral documents have factual interest and disclose the way those facts and events were experienced, felt and perceived by those who witnessed or took part in them. Therefore, those documents allow us to recover not only facts from the past but also their representation.

Needless to say, memory should be understood as a continuous process of reconstruction – thus, selective – and a revision of the past from a present perspective, which means that each memory belongs to both past and present and changes according to the latter. In other words, as stated by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Marquez, “life is not what we have lived but rather what we remember living and how we recall it in order to tell it.”

Questions about how groups and individuals

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at the Seventh European Social Science History Conference held in Lisbon, from February 26 to March 1, 2008. The testimonies were collected in the 1990s, within the Programa de História Oral – Centro de Estudos Mineiros/Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil. About 120 hours were recorded with members of the elite.

remember and what they remember are even more complex to answer when traumatic memories are involved. According to Dora Schwarzstein, traumatic facts cause the so-called “deep memory” to occur. That memory is made of experiences that are difficult to be told in words. Mistakes, blanks, subtle changes or silence indicate an effort to dominate the memory of a traumatic situation. Silence can be understood as self-censorship, a “political scar” caused by experiences which are unbearable.²

A particular social context is required for the traumatic memory to be conveyed to other people. That means facts have their own time and rhythm to be remembered: a time to be silent, a time to testify, a time to reconstruct and acknowledge. Recordings we collect today could not have been available earlier.

Studies about traumatic memories often focus on the point of view of those who suffered the trauma. We focus here on the point of view of those who have not been agents themselves of repression and torture during the military era in Brazil, but who supported those governments and transferred to the State the responsibility to protect their interests regardless the means the military president used in order to guarantee the necessary “social peace” for them to develop their business activities without much worry. If the memory of the elite about the military era has a traumatic component, it may be more appropriate to use the term “embarrassing memories”, considering the way its members dealt with that period during the interviews.

The coup that took military officers to power in Brazil caused a deep change in the pattern of development and in the correlation of political and economic forces. Repression disarticulated all the instruments for popular classes to defend themselves and to exert any kind of pressure on the government. Authoritarianism banished the previous political parties, thus abolishing the system of political representation for popular and urban working classes and old important dominant groups. The articulation between entrepreneurs and the State changed. The former gave up part of the traditional

political control in exchange for the government upholding the entrepreneurs’ interests as if they belonged to the nation.

In 1968 the opposition to the regime changed its dimension, when a broad movement came into existence – students and workers started their movements, terrorist activities started to happen. Rising conflicts led the regime to become harsher when, on 13th December, Institutional Act Number 5 closed the National Congress and abolished individual rights. That act guaranteed the conditions for social and political stability in the country, which, when put together with the orientation aiming at economic development that had been imposed by the federal government, gave rise to the so-called Brazilian economic miracle. Thus, the first years of the 1970s were acknowledged as the ones that had the highest rate of economic growth and, at the same time, as the ones that presented the highest level of repression of opponents to the regime, with a high number of tortured and missing people.

In that context, the idea that the authoritarian regime was necessary for the economical development of the country spread in the economic elite. Simultaneously, techniques and technicians were worshiped and the latter were seen as idols full of rationality and universality, specially the military president Médici’s work group. Technocracy and authoritarianism came together.

Documents written at the time of the coup in 1964, as well as in the 1970s, reveal the unconditional support the economic elite gave to the regime. However, the testimony of members of the Minas Gerais elite, when collected almost forty years later, showed that their process of remembering facts presented some negotiation between their memories of that time and their identities at the time of the interview so that those memories became acceptable. On studying memories of Australian war veterans, Alistair Thomson says:

We compose our memories in order to make sense out of our past and present life. On the one hand, we compose or construct memories using the pub-

² Dora Schwarzstein, “Memorializing effervescence”, *Words and Silences / Palabras y Silencios*, Vol. 2, No. 1, June 2003.

lic language and meanings of our culture. On the other hand, we compose memories that help us to feel more comfortable with our lives and that allow us to feel composure. We rethink or repress memories of experiences that are still painful and dangerous because they do not fit our present identity or because their traumas and tensions have never been fully resolved. We search for linearity in our past, present, and future lives.

Thomson continues:

An important theoretical connection to link both meanings of *composure* is that the apparently personal process of composing safe memories is, in fact, a public process. Our memories are dangerous and painful if they do not follow the rules and public versions of the past.³

In order to illustrate the notion of embarrassing memories, let's take two interviewees. A short time before the 1964 coup, one of them held a prominent position in one of the most important upper-class entities of Minas Gerais. As written documents reveal, he used to ask for measures that would restore order. For instance:

Frequent strikes mostly caused by political reasons have been the most relevant facts nowadays. They disturb and hinder the economic development of the country as they disregard common sense and national laws. Attempts to disturb order and the regime are present in all these facts. It is time for measures to be taken. Incoherent and conformist people should not be heard nowadays. It is necessary to do away with the organized turbulence we live now. [...] At this time silence and omission are not to be tolerated.⁴

In 1997, almost a decade after the end of military rule, the same man tried to avoid the theme during his seven-hour interview. When he mentioned it, a negative evaluation of the military regime was evident as well as a total omission of his participation in the coup itself. At a certain point in the interview, he said:

The 1964 coup brought about an exclusive authoritarian regime. Repression prevented the whole gener-

ation I belong to from leading a political career. For example, I could have been elected a federal deputy/congressman in 1966, but due to the closing of the National Congress in Brasília, that plan became meaningless and others also gave up building up a classical political career. That was an important cornerstone of the military era: it abolished the political aspirations of a generation of citizens. That fact interfered in the values in a negative way.

The second interviewee, according to written documents, was one of the entrepreneurs who welcomed President General Médici, when he visited the capital city of Minas Gerais in 1972. Médici's government presented the highest levels of political repression and torture during the military regime. At that time he thanked the General for his actions aiming at national development. He said: "The revolutionary government has brought up and maintained the social tranquility that the country needed in order to develop."⁵ In 1974, he said:

Médici's government has guaranteed the continuity of the political and social stability Brazil has had since 1964, which allows the expansion of the national economy to levels that have never been reached.⁶

In his 1997 testimony, after attempting to avoid speaking on the military period, he criticized that visit of General Médici in 1972. He said:

I have a sad memory of Médici's visit to the Commercial Association members in Minas Gerais. We were asked if his lecture could be held in the auditorium of the Association building. Of course it could. But it was occupied in a military way and some former presidents of the Association were not allowed to enter the room. Those military people really occupied the space and I felt very disappointed.

Needless to say, in order to develop the notion of embarrassing memories it will be necessary to consider other subjects and situations.



3 Alistair Thomson, "Recompondo a memória: questões sobre a relação entre a história oral e as memórias", *Projeto História*, No. 15, abril de 1997, pp. 86-87 (São Paulo, Editora da PUC-SP).

4 Associação Comercial de Minas. Ata. Belo Horizonte, February 6, 1964.

5 *Estado de Minas*, August 17, 1972 (Belo Horizonte).

6 *Diário do Comércio*, March 14, 1974 (Belo Horizonte).