

## Research Brief

# Silences, Visibility and Agency: Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Public Memorialization

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**Elizabeth Jelin**

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After periods of extended political conflict and of repression or state terrorism, there is an active political struggle about the meaning of what occurred. Alternative and even rival interpretations of the recent past and its memories take center stage in cultural and political debates. This paper illustrates some processes through which silenced or hidden ethnic, cultural or gender dimensions come to light during the unfolding of violent conflicts and factor into remembrance in the aftermath of conflict. Yet not all recent political conflicts and mass atrocities have been defined in these terms. In Argentina and Peru, the actors in the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s identified neither ethnicity nor race as salient categories in their struggles. In these and other cases, violence and conflict were interpreted as ideological or political confrontations, although there are often strong underlying structural injustices and oppression that can be conceived as cultural or ethnic.

Making visible the ethnic, cultural or gender dimensions of conflict seldom if ever results in demands for specific memorialization policies. At times, external actors may foster such policies in recognition of victimhood (via monuments, memorials, museums and the like). Such initiatives may clash with the way communities deal with their recent past, since communities tend to follow their usual practices for handling conflict and pain, struggling to improve quality of life and searching for empowerment.

## Memory in Argentina and Peru

The cases in Argentina and Peru show the complex ways in which identity criteria (ethnicity, race, class and gender) of broadly defined “victims” become significant in understanding memorialization processes—by their visibility, being silenced or becoming the defining feature of specific policies—and the way in which memories and meanings of the recent past are woven into historically grounded cultural practices.

At first sight, Argentina and Peru offer very different pictures regarding the salience of ethnically and culturally grounded classifications. Peru is a country with considerable ethnic diversity, with significant parts of its population speaking Quechua and

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**Research Project**

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**Identities in Transition**

In post conflict societies, histories of exclusion, racism and nationalist violence often create divisions so deep that finding a way to agree on the atrocities of the past seems near-impossible. This project seeks, first, to ensure that transitional justice measures are sensitive to the ways in which targeting people on the basis of their ethnic or religious identity may cause distinctive harms and, second, to clarify the difficult political challenges that arise in societies where communities are not ready to cooperate, or even agree on a definition of who the victims are. If transitional justice can find ways to act as a means of political learning across communities, foster trust and recognition, and if it can serve to breakdown harmful myths and stereotypes, then this will be at least a small step toward meeting the challenges for transitional justice in divided societies. The project is managed by Paige Arthur, Deputy Director of the Research Unit at the ICTJ.

other indigenous languages. Argentina is a country where presumably cultural homogeneity is much greater, since the great majority of its population is Spanish speaking, and European immigration has been very significant. Yet in both countries, the cases selected for analysis show the gaps between national narratives and interpretations of the conflict on one hand, and local, group-based, “underground” narratives and silences on the other.

In Argentina, the cases treat memories of the military repression in the peripheral, northwestern region of Jujuy, as well as Jewish memories of special maltreatment under the dictatorship. In Peru, the cases look at the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s memory work, as well as local memories of Quechua-speaking peoples, represented in song, festivals and museums. Gender, class and ethnic power relations are at play in each case.

Special attention is placed on victimized communities’ and collectivities’ agency (or lack of it), the way these groups acted in the aftermath of violence and the presence (or absence) of claims for memory based on a shared sense of community belonging (“identity”). Attention to these matters highlights the underlying ethical question about the role in transitional processes of well-meaning outsiders, including the community of transitional justice political actors, researchers and practitioners. It is local actors who give meaning to their own actions and that of others. Outsiders must be cognizant and respectful of local conditions and belief systems and the needs and desires of the actors themselves. Yet tensions often emerge between localized meanings and the universal ethics of human rights.

The way in which “short” memories fit into “long” group memories is key to understanding identity dynamics. In all the cases presented, the short term is understood and placed into the longer historical time. “Recent” repressive events and memorialization patterns in their aftermath are couched by each group in the framework of longer-term historical processes, through community musical expressions or the understanding of local industry power or in entrenched patterns of anti-Semitism. In that sense, short-term proposals and ideas linked to transitional periods cannot be conceived unless placed in historical context.

## **Analysis**

There are several points to be drawn regarding the social and political dynamics of memory work and the recognition of various actors involved in transitional processes.

First, when dealing with historically constructed identities that express themselves through collective action, it is clear that no community is homogeneous, acting in a cohesive and unified way. There are internal differentiations and often controversies among individuals and groups, based on economic and social standing, gender,

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political ideology, age or standpoints vis-à-vis their position in relation to other communities and the larger society. There is no single, unified view about the past, nor is there consensus about how to deal with that past among the Argentine Jewish community, people in the Northern Argentine towns of Calilegua and Libertador, or the Peruvian Ayacucho and Asháninkas communities. It is therefore difficult if not impossible to imagine memorialization claims or processes that can be made “in the name of” a given identity-based group or category. Identities have to be conceived as historical constructs, with blurred and changing boundaries. Groups come together and define themselves as belonging to the same category or community in the process of dealing with and often confronting “others.” There is nothing in “indigenouness” or “Jewishness” that will make for collective action; “indigenouness” or “Jewishness” will emerge (or not) as a defining trait in demands and conflicts according to specific social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of power relations.

Second, very poor material resources and historically entrenched cultural domination by other groups result in a lack of autonomous capacity to act in the public sphere. In such cases, spokespersons or cultural mediators may carry group interests and demands into the wider political arena. Thus, differences in social and cultural capital, as well as the degree of access (or lack thereof) to national and international resources and opportunities, lead to differences in representation in the public sphere. The most disadvantaged and subordinate groups fall into silences, creating “underground” memories that seldom reach the public arena. Perhaps the greatest empty political and symbolic space is that of the Asháninka in Peru.

Third, representations and narratives emerge in specific historical circumstances, and in dialogue or confrontation with other narratives or interpretations. In Argentina, victims’ relatives have been the legitimate voice, while in Peru it is “sympathetic others” who produce the dominant interpretations. These voices possess the authority to legitimize “correct” ways to remember. The presence of more powerful (and usually international) agents leads to a certain degree of “standardization” and “universal homogenization” of the definitions of suffering and victimhood, which blur or erase the specificity of each cultural milieu. This phenomenon contrasts with specific processes for incorporating memories of the recent past within longer-term and ongoing cultural practices.

In this respect, a disquieting issue is that public exposure of victimization, fostered at times by well-meaning outsiders, is not certain to have a positive effect on the road to empowerment and autonomous agency, at least in the short-term period that “transitional justice” involves. Therefore, the role of outsiders in fostering discourse, practices and interpretive frameworks has to be assessed in each case. In the short run, exposure may entail a further violation of the victims. On the other hand, once a human rights discourse is in place, various marginalized groups may “piggy-back” and express their claims—which often precede dictatorship and/or the recent political conflict—in the language and discourse of human rights. In such cases, the new framework is appropriated by the communities and used as a tool for their empowerment.

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#### About the Author

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Finally, explicit policies regarding “settling accounts with the past” are usually made at the national level. Yet specific identity issues usually manifest themselves at local and regional levels. Gaps and misunderstandings are then the rule. Memories and meaning are territorialized and localized. What the cases presented show are the nuances in meanings and interpretations that emerge in specific local conditions. Undoubtedly, there is a need to combine national policies with local understandings. This is not an easy task. Yet perhaps the main result of analyzing the links between memorialization processes and historical communities of belonging is that, as the Preface of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation report states, the biggest challenge the nation faces, and the way to look towards the future, is to establish policies that will reverse the deep disdain towards a country’s disadvantaged population.

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