
The Discursive Memory of Argentina's Last Dictatorship in an Intelligence Archive

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Abstract

This essay examines the discursive memory of Argentina's Last Dictatorship identified in documents produced by the Intelligence Directorate of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police (DIPPBA) during the democratic period. It explains its theoretical-methodological framework and outlines some lines of thought to compare the discursive memory notion with public memory.

Keywords: DIPPBA, discursive memory, military dictatorship, democratic period, public memory.

This essay examines the discursive memory identified in documents produced by the Intelligence Directorate of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police (DIPPBA).¹ This police organization was created in 1956, during the Cold War and a year after the military coup that overthrew President Juan Domingo Perón in 1955. It was closed in 1998, amid a reform of the Buenos Aires police and during Argentina's democracy, which was regained in 1983 after the brutal military dictatorship that had begun in 1976. In 2000, the archive of the DIPPBA and the building that housed it were handed over to the Provincial Commission for Memory. In 2003, its contents became publicly accessible. Thus, using Pierre Nora's term, it can be referred to as a *lieu de mémoire* or site of memory.²

The DIPPBA archive has primarily drawn interest from history, sociology, and social and cultural anthropology. However, the documentation produced by the DIPPBA during its operation within the democratic system (from 1983 to 1998) has been largely ignored. Similarly, there have been few rhetorical-discursive studies on the role of memory within the discursivity produced by the DIPPBA. In fact, rhetorical and discourse studies conducted in Argentina explore memory by focusing on a discursive series: the return and reformulation, in a new context, of statements and ways of expression previously produced. The notion of discursive memory accounts for this mechanism.

I will now explain the theoretical-methodological framework on which I rely; then, I will address the discursive memory related to the military dictatorship that can be identified in institutional documents produced by the DIPPBA during the democratic period. Finally, I will outline some lines of thought to compare the notion of discursive memory with that of public memory.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This work takes a rhetorical approach to discourse analysis.³ I view discourse analysis as an interdisciplinary field that sees discourse as the interaction of texts with social contexts,⁴ combining knowledge from linguistics and the humanities.

In this sense, I view the group responsible for the DIPPBA archive as a discourse community. By discourse community I mean a group that produces discourses inseparable from their practices, organization, and existence as a group. A discourse community includes enunciators who share values, opinions, and an enunciative identity that implies the interaction of a specific type of social organization with a specific type of textual organization.⁵ It is important to note that the discursive genres used by a community tend to provide cohesion and identity. However, discourse communities are not homogeneous, nor do they have a predefined essential identity; rather, they configure themselves through what I call inter-community relationships, including the potential antagonism between the DIPPBA and the communities under surveillance.⁶

It is also important to consider that a discourse community revolves around memory. This is discursive memory, understood as the repetition, reformulation, or forgetting of statements and forms of expression in a new context.⁷ In the study of discursive memory, the recurrence of certain phrases is of interest, such as “final solution,” “ethnic purification,” “never again,” or “subversion.” These phrases often migrate from one discourse to another, encapsulate ideologies or political positions, and generate controversies in the public sphere. In discourse analysis these phrases are known as “formulas.”⁸ The circulation of formulas can be across languages, as with the term “Lo stato totalitario” (The totalitarian state) which shifted from Italian to German as “Der totale Staat,” and to the Spanish Falange as “El Estado totalitario.” It can also involve a center-periphery movement, either between different languages or within a single language.⁹ Finally, it is worth clarifying that discursive memory functions not only in verbal signs or discourses but also in non-verbal signs, thus encompassing semiotic memory, which holds great power in certain political collectives.

Central to a discourse community are its communicative routines, which contribute to its enunciative identity while forming part of the community’s characteristic discursive memory. In this sense, I draw on the proposals of organizational rhetoric, which study the strategic use of symbols to generate meanings or communicative processes through which organizations seek to influence a specific audience, whether internal or external.¹⁰ Within this framework, it is crucial to consider how communicative norms generate collective identities, promote or reinforce values and objectives of an organization, and exert control. Regulations that aim to unify communicative practices within an organization play a significant role, with bureaucratic rhetoric particularly prominent in organizations like the DIPPBA. This is a discourse that emphasizes (supposed) value neutrality, universality, standardization, and fixed roles, all of which create an aura of impartiality.¹¹

Discursive Memory in the DIPPBA

1) Generic Memory and Writing Norms

A first issue to consider is that of writing norms and what I call genre memory, which are crucial for shaping the identity and cohesion of a discursive community. In this regard, it should be noted that within the DIPPBA, we are dealing with specific genres tied to a hierarchical community whose socio-historical conditions are highly conventionalized, especially the purpose, the status of the legitimate speakers and recipients, and a rigid textual structure.

The intelligence tasks of the DIPBA community were closely related to discursive genres inherent to its practices, used both during the military dictatorship and the democratic period. For example, the discursive genre known as an “Information Acquisition Plan” is required to include what intelligence

terms “Essential Intelligence Elements,” which formulate the questions to be answered, and “Other Intelligence Elements.” Another genre, the “Information Diary,” includes the date and time of information entry to the DIPPBA, a summary of the information, the source of origin, and internal recipients.¹²

The discursive genre known as the “intelligence report,” through which the DIPPBA community disseminated intelligence for decision-makers, whether military or civilian political authorities during democracy, was subject to detailed regulation aimed at standardizing and unifying its writing. Notably, a document from the dictatorship titled “Guidelines for Structuring and Writing Police Intelligence Reports or Messages” resurfaced as discursive memory in the DIPPBA’s Internal Regulations, effective in 1991, during democracy.¹³ The only indication that these guidelines were issued in a democratic context is the substitution of the example illustrating the need to first write out a name in full and then provide its abbreviation for clarity. In the “Guidelines” from the dictatorship era, the example is “Argentine Communist Party (ACP is its abbreviation),” while in the democratic context, this abbreviation is replaced with “Argentine Automobile Club (AAC).”

Another trace of dictatorial discursive memory in the democratic era’s 1991 Regulations is the use of the term “psychological action,” a phrase tinged with the National Security Doctrine associated with the dictatorship. This occurs when referring to an intelligence agent attending a conference and needing to guard against being influenced by the speaker being monitored.

2) Discursive Memory around “Subversion”

The second aspect of dictatorial discursive memory within the DIPPBA during democracy revolves around the term “subversion.” It is important to note that the term “subversion” was recurrently used in the DIPPBA from the early 1960s onwards. It served to unify the internal enemy, encompassing various sectors of Peronism, communism, and even far-right organizations like Tacuara.

In the subject “Intelligence V” of the Intelligence School’s 1981 Plan and Curriculum, drawn up during the military dictatorship, the term “subversion” is associated with words like “Revolutionary War,” “Terrorism,” “Activists,” and “Agitators.” This is an instance of what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call the extension of concepts, as the meaning of “subversion” expands to encompass political and oratorical activities.¹⁴ This legitimized repression against anyone opposing the dictatorship. Additionally, the Intelligence V subject includes the economic and religious dimensions of subversion, including “Third World political and religious groups” and “the [Catholic] Church’s social doctrine and Liberation Theology.”

The DIPPBA, as mentioned earlier, was closed in 1998, and Argentina regained democracy in 1983. What happened to the term “subversion”? Interestingly, the 1991 DIPPBA Internal Regulations still retain, albeit marginally and in just one article, the term “subversion.” Article 2172 states:

Within the framework of operations against subversion, all personnel will seek and report on people, issues, events, and any relevant information” (unnumbered DIPPBA File, titled “Intelligence Directorate Regulations,” Doctrine Desk, p. 13).

In a context where “operations against subversion” were no longer a factual reality in Argentina, this phrase appears as a remnant of the DIPBA’s “internal enemy.” It results from the inertia characteristic of what is called “wooden language,”¹⁵ a language inherent to what has been termed “the bureaucracy of evil.”¹⁶ The 1991 DIPPBA Regulations were, in fact, reformulated in 1993, and the article where the term “subversion” had resurfaced was removed.

Here, it should be remembered that during the democratic period, another group of dangerous people to be monitored was referred to by the DIPPBA as “delinquents or opponents.” This raises the question of “opponents” of what. The answer is implied but not explicitly stated in DIPPBA documents and is open to political interpretation because of its ambiguity. Notably, during democracy, an Intelligence and Counterintelligence Manual from 1992 only mentions searching for information and surveillance of foreigners, their clandestine settlements, inhabitants of emergency shantytowns (social factor), dropout and illiteracy rates (educational factor), and unemployment rates (labor factor). All these factors suggest that these so-called delinquents or opponents were discursively constructed, within the neoliberal context of Carlos Menem’s Peronist government, as social activists drawn from among shantytown dwellers, poor immigrants, and the unemployed.¹⁷

Discursive Memory and Public Memory

In this final section, I return to the notion of discursive memory to outline a relationship with the notion of public memory. Firstly, I would like to stress that the notion of discursive memory can be applied to communities based on secrecy, such as intelligence services, where the notion of public memory would not be relevant. Furthermore, the focus of discursive memory lies in how past discourses or forms of expression return in the present, whereas the notion of public memory investigates how the past is constructed, represented, or remembered in the present. Both discursive memory and public memory can be manifested in various significant forms, not just verbal. It is also important to note that the notion of public memory, encompassing commemorations, museums, or memorials, is broader than the notion of discursive memory.

The notion of discursive memory emerged in France in 1981, with a publication by Jean-Jacques Courtine linked to the study of ideology from an Althusserian perspective.¹⁸ The triple temporality proposed by the Annales School influenced the interest in investigating discourses beyond the fleeting temporality of events. This led to the recognition that the return and reformulation of statements and ways of expression revealed an unconscious process of ideological subjection. On the other hand, the notion of public memory, more closely related to the “memory turn,” allows for better understanding of strategic or manipulative uses of the past.

Matthew Houdek and Kendall Phillips discuss various approaches to the notion of public memory and emphasize that public memory provides elements for what rhetoric calls *Inventio*.¹⁹ In a similar vein, I believe that the same can be said for discursive memory. For instance, I have studied recurring *topoi* and integrated discursive memories justifying military coups in Argentina between 1930 and 1976.²⁰ It could be added that both discursive memory and public memory offer elements for *Elocutio*, providing communicative resources or figures of speech that become memorable in the public sphere, such as certain medical-biological metaphors designating communism as a “cancer,” or bureaucratic writing routines based on regulations that have been repeated over time, as exemplified in the secret sphere of the DIPPBA.

Matthew Houdek and Kendall Phillips also discuss the controversies and tensions that run through public memory. As far as discursive memory is concerned, I can confirm that it allows for the study of how past controversies return and are reformulated in present controversies, which I have also explored in coup-related discourses from 1930 to 1976.²¹ Moreover, both the notion of public memory and discursive memory can refer to the notion of forgetting.²²

Lastly, it should be made clear that both the notion of discursive memory and that of public memory highlight the importance of memory in constructing national, political, or community identities. In the context I have explored here, intelligence communities like the DIPPBA are a prime example.

Endnotes

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2. Pierre Nora *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).
3. María Alejandra Vitale, “Enfoque retórico del análisis del discurso”, in *Métodos del análisis del discurso. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, ed. Oscar I. Londoño Zapata (Buenos Aires: Biblos, forthcoming).
4. Dominique Maingueneau, *Discours et analyse du discours: Une introduction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014).
5. Dominique Maingueneau, *L'Analyse du discours. Introduction aux lectures de l'archive*. (Paris : Hachette, 1991).
6. María Alejandra Vitale, “Comunidad discursiva e ironía en un servicio de inteligencia”, in *Rutinas del mal. Estudios discursivos sobre archivos de la represión* (Bs. As.: EUDEBA, 2022), 67-84.
7. Jean-Jacques Courtine, « Analyse du discours politique (le discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens) », *Langages* 62 (1981) :19; “Le tissu de la mémoire : quelques perspectives de travail historique dans les sciences du langage”, *Langages* 114 (1994) : 5-12 ; *Metamorfoses do discurso político: derivas da vida pública* (São Carlos: Claraluz, 2006).
8. Alice Krieg-Planque, *La notion de “formule” en analyse du discours. Cadre théorique et méthodologique*, (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2009).
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10. Mary Hoffman & Debra Ford, *Organizational rhetoric: Situations and strategies*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).
11. George Cheney, Lars Thøger Christensen, Charles Conrad and Daniel J. Lair, “Corporate rhetoric as Organizational Discourse”, in D. Grant; C. Hardy; C. Osrick and L. Putnam, *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, (SAGE Publications, 2004), 79-103.
12. Another genre is, for example, the situation chart, which is the graphic record of the activity in progress.
13. From Article 2143 to Article 2159.
14. Perelman Chaïm et Olbrechts-Tyteca Lucie, *Traité de l'argumentation. La Nouvelle rhétorique*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1976 [1958].
15. Ruth Amossy et Anne Herschberg Pierrot, *Stéréotypes et clichés. Langue, discours, société*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2021).

16. Patricia Funes “Desarchivar lo archivado. Hermenéutica y censura en las ciencias sociales latinoamericanas”, *Iconos. Revista de ciencias sociales* 30 (2008): 27-39.
17. Carlos Menem was President of Argentina for two consecutive mandates, from 1989 to 1999.
18. Jean-Jacques Courtine, « Analyse du discours politique (le discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens).
19. Matthew Houdek & Kendall Phillips, “Public Memory”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Communication* (communication.oxfordre.com). USA: Oxford University Press.
20. María Alejandra Vitale, *¿Cómo pudo suceder? Prensa escrita y golpismo en la Argentina (1930-1976)*. (Bs. AS.: EUDEBA, 2015).
21. María Alejandra Vitale, *¿Cómo pudo suceder? Prensa escrita y golpismo en la Argentina (1930-1976)*.
22. Matthew Houdek & Kendall Phillips, “Public Memory”; Jean-Jacques Courtine, « Analyse du discours politique (le discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens) ».

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