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DISSIDENCES

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From Shopping Malls to Memory Museums: Reconciling the Recent Past in the Uruguayan Neoliberal State

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During my first visit to Montevideo, I asked a close friend what he thought about the radical transformation of Punta Carretas from a prison that housed political dissidents in the 70s to an upscale, ultra-modern shopping center in the early 90s. The response was delivered in a matter-of-fact way: "The building was crumbling and an eyesore; besides the mall provides jobs." I was shocked, if not a bit saddened, by this response. His reasoning, I believed, was at the core of contemporary right-wing Uruguayan politics, a politics that had staunchly refused to come to terms with a legacy of state-sponsored torture, as practiced by the military during its twelve-year rule

(1973-1985). Indeed, the transformation of this “lieu de memoire,” formed part of a larger project of cultural amnesia instituted by the conservative Colorado and Blanco governments during the 80s and 90s, inducing Uruguayan citizens to systematically forget past human rights abuses in order to advance a neoliberal orthodoxy. But as the country shifts from right-wing to left-wing rule, and as the leftist coalition Frente Amplio (Broad Front) sets out to construct new memory spaces in order to recover this history of repression, I have had time to reflect and reconsider my way of thinking. What I now believe—and what this essay sets out to argue—is that it is not the erasure of these sites of memory that advances the Uruguayan neoliberal agenda, but rather the commitment to a politics of memory through which the Left increasingly comes to disarticulate its past commitment to economic equality that does so.

This essay argues that the dominant form of memory politics today, insofar as it reframes the critique of capitalism into a critique of authoritarianism, functions as a primary mechanism by which the Left contributes to the expansion of neoliberalism. To briefly set up the argument that follows, what I focus on is the spacialization of memory and how it informs and constructs the emerging Uruguayan citizen in the post-authoritarian period. Specifically, my interest lies in the “neoliberal city” (Remedi 353) of Montevideo and what several scholars have described as the cultural amnesia that is constitutive of its foundation. My analysis, first, retraces criticism surrounding the construction of the “neoliberal city,” a criticism made most forcefully in the 80s and 90s and directed more often than not against the construction of the Punta Carretas mall. In recent years, however, the spacialization of memory, according to scholars, has taken a radical turn leftward toward a politics of remembering, as the emergence of memory sites, such as the recent construction of the Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria (MUME), set out to redesign and redefine the Montevidean cityscape in the name of truth, justice and political reconciliation. The second section of this essay examines the political meaning of this intervention in cityscape, whose complex

contours now gesture toward democracy and safeguarding universal human rights. What is the post-authoritarian discourse of memory accomplishing when it remembers state-sponsored terror? What is achieved when the city reconfigures its past through the lens of human rights politics? In short, what does it mean when citizens of amnesia are transformed into "citizens of memory"? [i]

The Neoliberal City and the Regime of Forgetting

Of course, my original concerns about Punta Carretas as an absent "lieu de memoire" have been echoed by many scholars since the mall's inauguration in 1994. [ii] What these scholars point to is the postmodern "presentness" of the shopping center with its global fast-food chains, megaplex movie theatres and unblemished, glistening floors, where citizens can consume—or at least, wish to consume—in a perpetual present with no recourse to history. The Uruguayan critic Hugo Achugar notes that the mall reflects "a scenario where history has been erased, demolished and reconstructed in an efficient way" (226). [iii] Indeed, beyond the original prison façade, which only serves to intensify the mall's Disneyesque sense of "pastness," there is no indication whatsoever that the site was once a prison. There is no monument to commemorate the 105 Tupamaro men who escaped from the prison in 1971, much less a plaque dedicated to the many who didn't. [iv] Drawing our attention to this "obliteration of temporality," Achugar asserts that the mall makes evident "the way in which Uruguayan society processed the theme of political violence and human rights violations during these years" (224). The Uruguayan critic's idea of a process is an important one since it not only addresses a means by which Uruguayan society has disremembered these abuses, but also points to the mechanism through which the mall, and the Uruguayan capital more generally, come to reflect, inform and influence the way one does (or does not) think about the past. The latter point is made more explicitly by Gustavo Remedi when he declares that the "architecture of the city is really a mechanism to store concepts, values, norms, instructions and memories as well as a cognitive mechanism that orients us and takes us by the hand, automatically, without having to be aware of

this storage space" (349). Following Achugar's logic, then, what is crucial here is how cityscape aims at interpellating a new type of consumer-citizen as constitutive of the city's forgetting of the recent past.

No doubt Punta Carretas is informed by a larger project to transform Montevideo into what Remedi calls a "neoliberal city," a project that was set in motion by the military regime during the 70s and took a more definitive form in the period of democratization after the 1985 presidential election of Juan María Sanguinetti of the conservative Colorado Party. Indeed, as Sanguinetti implemented the structural alignment policies of the IMF that would result in deregulated labor markets, the city began to transform itself in order to better accommodate the free flow of capital and the exchange of commodities across national boundaries. The urban transformation of Montevideo involved the deliberate demolition of historic buildings and the neglectful deterioration of patrimonial monuments, ultimately making space for the material and symbolic structures of the neoliberal city, such as skyscrapers, shopping centers and peripheral slums (Remedi 353). For Remedi, the aim of this "postmodern" (346) turn in architecture was to produce "a city without memory" that guaranteed the dissemination and success of neoliberal orthodoxy. By the time Punta Carretas Shopping was inaugurated in 1994, Uruguay was well on its way to becoming a new "financial center" in Latin America, a "future Hong Kong or Singapore" (Weschler 16).

To the extent that the 80s and 90s saw the radical transformation of Montevideo into a neoliberal city, this transformation was constitutive of a narrative that rejected all public memorials honoring victims of state terrorism. Silencing this historical narrative in cityscape reflected a systematic campaign by the conservative government that refused not only to release public records about the years of State terror, but also to prosecute the State's most brutal perpetrators. Indeed, Sanguinetti—who criticized Uruguayans for having "los ojos en la nuca"—approved in 1986 the Ley de Caducidad, which granted full immunity to military officers and politicians for past human rights

abuses. Many Uruguayans denounced the amnesty law since it not only guaranteed that no military official or politician would be prosecuted for past crimes, but also suggested that many citizens would continue to mourn privately, without State recognition, for years to come.

Memory Museums and Citizens of Memory

But if the neoliberal city sets out to silence and impede what might be thought of as the "labor of mourning," it is the duty of the "oppositional critic," according to Idelber Avelar, to search out ways of "digging" up past "ruins" that will "stand in the way of the accumulation of capital in the present" (9). [v] In recent years, the idea of digging up the past and the "labor of mourning" have informed several projects in the heart of Montevideo, projects that seek to undermine the regime of forgetting introduced and enforced by both the Colorado and the Blanco parties. Indeed, if the consumer-citizen is at the center of anti-memory projects like Punta Carretas and the neoliberal city of the 80s and 90s more generally, the recently constructed Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria announces a shift in cityscape and inaugurates another type of citizen. Opened in 2007, three years after Frente Amplio's Tabaré Vázquez's 2004 presidential victory, the Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria not only openly acknowledges the State's responsibility for these years of terror, but also symbolically breaks with the "obliteration of temporality" of the postmodern city by creating "a space destined to foment memory of the events that took place during the last civil-military dictatorship" (La república).

The idea of space is crucial to the memory museum, beginning with the structure, which, like Punta Carretas, is linked to a narrative of repression: the museum was once the residence of the nineteenth-century Uruguayan dictator General Máximo Santos. But unlike Punta Carretas, this space sets out to indelibly mark rather than persistently obscure the recent past. As a sort of historical and political antithesis of Punta Carretas, the museum's objective is to create a "space dedicated to the recuperation of memory of the horror of state terrorism and the determination of

the Uruguayan people in their fight against the dictatorship" ("Cultura"). Entering the museum, the visitor is met with the photos of the ex-Uruguayan parliamentarians Zelmar Michelini y Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, two "martyrs of democracy" killed in Argentina in 1974 as part of Operation Condor. In other rooms, visitors find numerous artifacts that shed light on the recent past including written testimonies, audiovisual archives, art objects, and copies of letters and documents, which stand in stark contrast to the temporal disconnect experienced in the mall. There is also an exhibit dedicated to a prison break of a group of female militants in Punta Rieles, which sets out not only to recuperate a lesser-known event than the escape of a 105 Tupamaro men in Punta Carretas, but also to incorporate a more gender inclusive narrative of the recent past. As such, if Punta Carretas Shopping suggests, according to Achugar, a sort of implicit exclusion of the recent past, then the museum constitutes "a symbol of peace, democracy and liberty," ("símbolo") indicative of a more pluralistic society.

And it is primarily in the name of peace, democracy and liberty that other memory spaces are now being built throughout the city. Against the backdrop of malls and skyscrapers, new memorials, street names and plaques dedicated to human rights victims have appeared, altering the cultural landscape in such a way as to produce a new narrative. [vi] These "vehículos para la memoria" (Jelin 11) not only constitute a space dedicated to commemorating victims of state violence, but also and equally important, bear witness to the historical formation of a liberal democratic citizen. Indeed, the "neoliberal city" of the 80s and 90s is giving way to a new phase in the development of cityscape and citizenship, committed to human rights, justice and democracy; in short, we are witnessing the rise of "citizens of memory."

Perhaps the most important event that contributes to the formation of this "citizen of memory" and to the reconfiguration of the relationship between the symbolic cityscape and the transitioning political landscape is the rise and presidential victory of the former Tupamaro and

Frente Amplio leader, José "Pepe" Mujica. After having been imprisoned for over fifteen years—nine of which surviving under subhuman conditions in undisclosed military barracks as a "hostage" of the State—Mujica was released in 1985 and went on to create the Movimiento de Participación Popular (MPP), a political party that would eventually become the largest faction in the Frente Amplio coalition. In the ensuing years, his popularity continued to grow, and during the presidential elections, Mujica received more votes than any other presidential candidate in Uruguayan history. In his short time in office, Mujica has shown himself to be as committed to the pillars of human rights as his predecessor, Vázquez, who successfully prosecuted military violators, including the ex-president of the republic, Juan María Bordaberry. For many Uruguayans, Mujica's victory represents the triumph not only of "citizens of memory" and human rights more generally, but also of the human rights politics that Frente Amplio has endorsed since it came to power in 2004. This is why, as Stephen Gregory notes, the commitment to human rights is considered to be the Left's most successful project since it came to power (118). [vii] Yet, if the Left has set out and mostly succeeded in overcoming the cultural amnesia instituted by conservative rule, it is just as clear that this success has also borne witness to a reconfiguration of the past as an opposition between human rights victims and authoritarian rule. In other words, if the central project of the Left today aims at producing spaces and citizens of memory, it does so at the expense of another project that functions to eliminate class inequality.

Human Rights and Its Discontents

What is important about the politics of memory is that it takes one type of conflict (between capitalism and communism) and re-describes it as another type of conflict (between human rights and authoritarianism). To put the point more generally, the predominant form of human rights discourse in Uruguay today provides a vision of the past divided into victims and perpetrators rather than into rich and poor. And we can begin to understand the pervasiveness of this vision if we

consider the fact that it allows not only for the transformation of cityscape and the formation of "citizens of memory," but also for the radical redescription of Mujica as a "martyr of democracy" rather than as a Tupamaro revolutionary. For to remember Mujica as a "martyr of democracy" turns his presidency into a victory over authoritarianism for human rights, while remembering Mujica as a Tupamaro revolutionary turns his presidency into a victory over communism for capitalism; that is, remembering him as a Tupamaro makes clear that his presidency is not about the elimination of class inequality. What was important about Mujica as a Tupamaro—that is, what is important about the MLN-Tupamaros—is that their vision of society centered on a difference between social classes. Indeed, during the 60s and 70s the Tupamaros aimed at not only eradicating the division between rich and poor, but also eliminating the liberal state that functioned to maintain this class division. The idea is that the Tupamaros wanted to overthrow the system, not belong to it. By the end of the 1960s, the Tupamaros were well on their way to achieving this objective. Or at least the Uruguayan state believed so. Beginning in 1967 with the "Medidas de seguridad," the government unleashed a repressive campaign against the Tupamaros that sought to "eradicate Marxism." From this perspective, then, what is crucial about remembering the Tupamaros is not that they were tortured and imprisoned, but rather that their torture and imprisonment was a consequence of the military dictatorship's desire to eradicate Marxism. [viii]

But if the military's objective beginning in the 1960s was to destroy Marxism, the Left today has completed the military's objective by abandoning its commitment to class equality. Indeed, the Left in power today might be understood best as the culmination of a shift that began in the 1980s, a shift that, first, staunchly opposed and then slowly came to accept and now uncompromisingly celebrates neoliberal policies. Frente Amplio not only continues to uphold past IMF agreements to manage debt payment, which includes cuts in sensitive areas of state public spending, but also actively seeks out free market agreements. In 2006 they endorsed a Trade and Investment

Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the United States, hoping to increase exports of Uruguayan beef and software in order to gain a stronger foothold in the international market. Indeed, since Vázquez's 2004 victory—and continuing with Mujica— there has not been a substantial shift away from the neoliberal policies first introduced by the conservatives in the 1980s, policies that have greatly increased levels of inequality. [ix] Frederic Leicht sums up the Uruguayan government's commitment to finance capital in this way, "After 15 years of experiences within the free market laboratory, poverty has increased 108 percent, affecting more than 40 percent of the population. Unemployment has reached figures that were once never imagined, salaries have dropped and emigration has reached the same level as during the military dictatorship" (190). In other words, what is wrong with the neoliberal city today is not that it doesn't provide enough spaces of memory for mourning human rights victims, but rather that the space it provides is occupied by an increasing number of the country's poor. [x]

The argument of this essay has not been to suggest a return to the 60s, much less a celebration of Tupamaro-styled guerrilla warfare. Rather, the argument has been that if the commitment to memory and mourning flourishes in the neoliberal city, remembering these past abuses in no way stands in the way of the "accumulation of capital in the present." Against Avelar and Achugar, we might say that insofar as the commitment to remembering and mourning human rights abuses has come to define the Left, human rights has become a primary mechanism by which neoliberalism flourishes throughout Uruguay. Said differently, the commitment to human rights functions as the privileged position from which the Left masks its complicity with neoliberal policies.

Of course, the argument can be made as the critic Victoria Ruetalo does, that it is up to the "critic/observer/allegorist" (43) to recuperate these "ruins" or map out another project that points to this economic and ideological exclusion that is at the heart of the neoliberal city; but the

contemporary critic, like the architect and the politician, has provided little space—both intellectually and physically—for a project that seeks to undermine neoliberal orthodoxy. Even as class inequality grows greater, the Left continues to think, much as I once did, that remembering human rights violations serves as a critique of capitalism. In other words, what I have attempted to argue is not simply that the foundation of the "neoliberal city" fully embraces citizens of memory, but also and more importantly, that the emergence of this citizen has proven central to the consolidation of the neoliberal city and neoliberalism more generally.

[i] This term is borrowed from Silvia Tandeciarz who argues that the emergence of "citizens of memory" in post-authoritarian Argentina will be governed by a "new mantra" "grounded in the inalienable human rights of each of its people" (167).

[ii] Beyond the critics discussed in this essay, see, for example, Guillermo D. Fernández's essay, "Libertad, el shopping y la sociedad de los dos tercios" ([Brecha](#)).

[iii] Unless otherwise noted, translations from Spanish to English are mine.

[iv] Punta Carretas had maintained a long history of repression and political resistance during its 80 years of existence, including the escape of a group of anarchists in 1931. For more information on the Tupamaro prison escape, see, for example, Samuel Blixen's [Sendic](#) (2000) and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro's [La fuga de Punta Carretas](#) (1990).

[v] Due to limits of space, this essay cannot provide a more detailed analysis of Avelar's text or engage with other critics who approach post-dictatorial cultural manifestations in a similar fashion. For important works like Avelar's, see Nelly Richard's [Residuos y metáforas: ensayos de crítica cultural sobre el Chile de la transición](#) (1998) and Francine Masiello's [The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neo-liberal Crisis](#) (2001).

[vi] For a more comprehensive list of Uruguayan projects that symbolize "los valores democráticos republicanos"(229), see Magdalena Broquetas San Martián's "Memoria del terrorismo de Estado en la ciudad de Montevideo" (2008).

[vii] Despite these recent changes in Uruguayan political culture, many citizens believe that there is still much human rights work to be done. Indeed, along with Mujica's win, came the second defeat (the first was in 1989) of a referendum to overturn the [Ley de caducidad](#). For Mujica and

the Left more generally, this loss confirms not only that the process of mourning and remembrance is still incomplete, but also that the fight for human rights justice will continue for some years to come. Indeed, as I write, the Uruguayan senate is in the process of passing legislation to call an end to this amnesty.

[viii] I have written elsewhere about this redescription of the recent past in Uruguayan literature. See my essay, "From Revolution to Human Rights in Mario Benedetti's *Pedro y el Capitán*" in the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies. For a more sustained engagement with the development of a human rights discourse in Uruguay, see Vania Markarian's excellent book The Left in Transformation (2005).

[ix] Undoubtedly, Mujica is still early in his administration. Nevertheless, he has been quite clear about his commitment to neoliberalism. In an interview made before the elections, Mujica stated that with regard to the "the economy," he plans on entering "as far right as possible" (Brecha 'Patear').

[x] For an important analysis on the ongoing effects of neoliberalism in cities across the globe, see Mike Davis's Planet of Slums (2006). For a strong criticism of the Left that goes beyond the Uruguayan case, see James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer's What's Left in Latin America (2009).

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