



# **Chronicle of a Childhood in Captivity: *Niños en Cautiverio Político* and the (Re)Construction of Memory in Contemporary Uruguay**

**Cara Levey<sup>1</sup>**

Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies  
University of Leeds, LS2 9JT  
United Kingdom  
C.L.Levey@leeds.ac.uk

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## **Abstract**

Impunity is a term that is all too familiar to the Uruguayan lexicon, often employed in relation to the gross human rights violations committed during the civil-military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the mid 1990s, Uruguayans have witnessed an upsurge in the societal mobilisation around past human rights violations, as actors voice their demands for truth, memory and justice. This paper focuses on one of the most recent additions to the Uruguayan human rights movement: *Niños en Cautiverio Político* (*Children in Political Captivity*), a group formed in 2007, and assesses the role it plays in reminding Uruguayans of their recent traumatic past and the ongoing legacy of state terror in a context of continuing cultural and legal impunity.

Keywords: Human Rights Violations; Impunity; Memory

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## Introduction

'It was almost a routine:  
Sundays, *Punta de Rieles* to see our mothers  
and Saturdays, *Libertad* to visit our fathers.'<sup>2</sup>

This was the reality for Uruguayan children whose parents were among the several thousand political prisoners held in detention centres and prisons such as *Punta de Rieles* and *Libertad*, from the late 1960s and throughout the civil-military dictatorship of 1973-1985. However, until recently it was not widely known both in and outside Uruguay, that a significant number of the sons and daughters of political prisoners had also been detained as babies and small children between 1972 and 1974. Over the last two years, a group of these sons and daughters, now adults in their thirties, have been reconstructing and recounting their experiences of recent periods of state terror, playing a significant role in contesting the impunity which has persisted into the post-transition<sup>3</sup> in Uruguay. Numerous doctoral fieldwork visits to Uruguay between 2007-2009, countless interviews and the attendance of a number of human rights events brought me into contact with a unique and inspiring group of young people who have become involved in and instigated their own commemorative initiatives in contemporary Uruguay.

On a visit to Montevideo to attend the annual *Marcha del Silencio*<sup>4</sup> in May 2009, I met Paloma and Micaela, members of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*, a group whose very formation attests to the pervasive and non-linear nature of memory pertaining to trauma. Significantly, my visit coincided with the high-profile campaign to collect signatories for a referendum on *Ley de Caducidad de la Pretensión Punitiva del Estado* (usually translated into English as the “Expiry Law”), which effectively limits judicial action for human rights violations committed during the the 1970s and 1980s. The campaign and subsequent

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Paloma, member of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*, Montevideo, 23 May 2009. All interviews cited in this paper were conducted by the author in Montevideo, 23 May 2009 with Paloma and Micaela, members of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*. Surnames have been omitted as requested.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘post-transition’ is used here to refer to a period that has some differences from the transition and is clearly not the transition, but contains characteristics that cannot be separated from it. In this way ‘post’ indicates a close tie or intimate relationship alongside a shift indicating *some* distance from the transition proper. In the case of transitions from dictatorship to democracy, the post-transitional phase is what may succeed survival and consolidation of the democratic government/regime. In this period, democracy is considered the norm, and actors have agreed to observe democratic norms. However, many of the issues of the transition, such as truth-seeking or judicial proceedings relating to crimes committed during the dictatorship, may remain outstanding, whilst the quality of democracy may be relatively low. The key is that the post-transition will exhibit characteristics which differentiate it from both the transition and authoritarian periods that precede the transition.

<sup>4</sup> The *Marcha del Silencio por Verdad y Justicia* (Silent March for Truth and Justice) held to commemorate Uruguay's *desaparecidos* (disappeared) and reiterate demands for truth and justice has taken place every year since 1996. The decision to begin the march at this juncture is significant, as 1996 marked the twentieth anniversary of the murder of the two exiled Uruguayan senators, Zelmar Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez in Buenos Aires.

referendum have undoubtedly brought the issue of historic human rights violations into the spotlight, not only in Uruguay, but regionally and internationally. In spite of a successful campaign for signatures in order for a plebiscite to annul the *Ley de Caducidad*, in October 2009, during the Uruguayan presidential elections, Uruguayans voted in support of upholding the law. Meanwhile, the results – 48 per cent in favour of annulling the law – reflect the deep divisions which continue in Uruguayan society vis-à-vis the recent past.

### **'De eso no se habla:' Repression and Impunity in Uruguay**

Uruguay's experience in state terror and human rights violation stands in contrast with its neighbour, Argentina. On the other side of the Rio de la Plata, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*) and their white head scarves embroidered with the names of their sons and daughters, have become iconic of the effects of repression and struggle for information pertaining to the country's thousands of *desaparecidos* (disappeared), and films such as Marco Bechis' *Garage Olimpo* (1999) have been widely distributed to much critical acclaim. However, the Uruguayan case is often under-explored and rarely the focus of either academic or media attention. This might suggest that repression was limited or on a relatively small scale. However, comparatively speaking, the experience of state terror and repression in Uruguay was no less effective and far-reaching. During the dictatorship approximately 200 Uruguayans were forcibly disappeared (and remain so), whilst thousands were subjected to torture and illegal detention (Broquetas, 2008, 200). Meanwhile, by the end of the dictatorship, Uruguay had the highest per-capita prison population in the world and a high number of exiles. Between 300,000 and 400,000 of Uruguay's three million inhabitants were forced into exile (Weschler, 1990, 85; SERPAJ, 1989). The extent of the violations should not be downplayed, nor should their legacy in the present.

Impunity in Uruguay is encapsulated in the *Ley de Caducidad* promulgated in 1986, through which the state renounced its duty to investigate crimes committed by military and police officers prior to 1 March 1985, with political motives or in compliance with orders. Article 3 allowed for the exemption of specific cases, however Article 4 gave the executive sole authority to rule on these cases. In Uruguay, justice was even more limited than in Argentina, and although in December 1986 over 700 cases of human rights violations were being investigated, the *Ley de Caducidad* was passed in 1987, which halted judicial proceedings for perpetrators of past human rights violations, granting them amnesty. The law was subsequently upheld by societal referendum in 1989.

However, *amnesty* did not bring with it *amnesia*, as the will to forget has been contested, predominantly by civil society, through truth seeking initiatives, and commemoration. However, since the mid 1990s, Uruguay has witnessed an upsurge of societal mobilisation, notably that of human rights, relatives' and survivors' organisations, who cannot or do not want to forget recent human rights

violations committed during this period. This is due to a variety of factors, among them the coming of age of a new generation of actors, the ongoing struggle for truth, memory and justice by a vocal human rights movement and their supporters and a shift in the political will at both national and local level during the last decade. However, events in Uruguay cannot be seen in isolation from developments in neighbouring Argentina, when in 1995, the armed forces began to speak out. In a widely disseminated radio interview, Colonel Adolfo Scilingo, admitted his involvement in death flights, in which prisoners were drugged and thrown out of planes into the Rio de la Plata. This was followed by Lieutenant General Balza, Chief of Staff of the Argentine Army's statement acknowledging the armed forces' role in repression, providing a compelling argument in favour of those who felt that the past remained unresolved and precipitating significant debate in Uruguay too.

Thus in a context of continuing impunity and limited justice, Uruguayan actors continue to demand that perpetrators are tried, and if convicted, sentenced accordingly, that the violations are explored fully and disseminated to Uruguayan society, and significantly, that Uruguay does not forget its past, be this through the construction of memorials, museums or other commemorative initiatives. In the last decade and a half, we have seen state and societal forces co-operate on truth, memory and justice initiatives related to past human rights violations. The context is certainly more favourable, not only for justice with the high profile government-supported referendum campaign on the *Ley de Caducidad*, but for commemoration, with both the national and local government offering degrees of support to the construction of the *Memorial a los Detenidos Desaparecidos* (Memorial to the Detained and Disappeared) in 2002 in Montevideo and the *Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria* (Museum of Memory Cultural Centre) also in Montevideo, inaugurated in 2007.

### **The Emergence of Niños en Cautiverio Político**

It was in a context of increasing willingness from state and societal actors to address the past, that *Niños en Cautiverio Político* formed in Montevideo in 2007. The seventy or so members are united by their shared experience: that whilst they were babies or very small children, they were detained with their mothers in prisons and military headquarters such as *Blandengues de Artigas* and the *Instituto Militar de Estudios Superiores* (*Superior Military Studies School*) where women with children were grouped together. They are, however, a diverse group. A number of them, such as Paloma and Micaela, were born in captivity when their pregnant mothers were detained, and the remainder were taken into captivity at ages ranging from ten days to two years old. The children spent different lengths of time in captivity and had different experiences after their release; some were released with their mothers, whilst others were sent to live with relatives. Micaela was released at the age of twenty-one months, but both her parents remained in

prison for a further two years. Paloma was ten months old when she was released whilst her mother remained in prison for a further eight years. Sadly, her father died within months of his release from *Libertad*; his captors had released him in order to avoid responsibility for his death.

The children were released into a Uruguayan society under dictatorship, which was characterised by fear, censorship and silences; hence it was not until 2007 that they began to meet and speak publicly about their experiences. In a context of continuing impunity for the perpetrators of human rights abuses, they came to be reunited as adults in March 2007 when accompanying their mothers to a meeting of ex-prisoners. They began to share experiences and started to meet independently and came to view themselves and each other as ex-prisoners, rather than the *children* of ex political prisoners (Photographs 1 and 2 show of some of them as babies in captivity and later on reunited as adults)

Figure 1: Babies in captivity



Source: Photograph taken by a 'grandmother' visiting the prison and shown at an Exhibition at the National Library in 2008. Courtesy of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*

Figure 2: Reunion of Niños en Cautiverio Político



Source: Photograph shown at an Exhibition at the National Library in 2008. Courtesy of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*

For Micaela, the promulgation of Law No. 18033 giving retirement benefits to ex political prisoners who had been detained for at least a year had a specific impact:

At that point I realised that if interpreted literally, that law protected me, because I was held with my mother...that is to say my mother was taken prisoner when she was three months pregnant, remained there for the rest of her pregnancy; I was born and remained with her until I was a year and nine months old. I actually realised from that day on that I had been a prisoner ... Obviously I knew this, but I had never really incorporated it, and that day I thought “I was a prisoner. My parents were political prisoners and so was I.”

The formation of *Niños en Cautiverio Político* marks a change of consciousness. Their construction of a common identity for members is encapsulated in their name and marks a departure from other organisations such as *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio - H.I.J.O.S.*, (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence) formed in

Uruguay in the mid 1990s<sup>5</sup>. As Micaela explains, ‘we identify ourselves as *victims*’ as opposed to solely sons and daughters or relatives of victims.

### **(Re)Constructing Memory? *Niños en Cautiverio Político* and Postmemory**

From 2007 onwards, the group began meeting regularly and making contact with others who had had similar experiences, using, for example, other relatives and victims’ organisations to locate women who were in captivity along with their children. Paloma had some reservations when she joined the group two months after their inception:

I didn’t know whether I wanted to return to the past...I didn’t know if I would feel comfortable, and if I didn’t feel comfortable, I’d leave. That was the plan. But it was incredible because it was like arriving and finding a place where you belonged, the fact that you could talk without needing to explain anything in order to be understood.

Over time, the organisation has grown and now not only has members throughout Uruguay, but also in neighbouring Argentina and as far afield as Spain, Canada and even Israel.

According to Paloma, *Niños en Cautiverio Político*'s primary goal is the reconstruction of memory in order to ‘show, raise awareness, construct collective memory, in order that the past be known, that it can’t be ignored and so that certain things are not repeated.’ However, this raises a delicate question. How does one reconstruct memory of a period of which one remembers very little, if anything, as both Micaela and Paloma admit? As Paloma explains: ‘Memory is one thing and remembering quite another.’

Indeed, the memories that *Niños en Cautiverio Político* are reconstructing and working through are not necessarily of events that they remember. In this case, rather than memory, we may speak of ‘postmemory.’ Hirsch employs the term ‘postmemory’ to

describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents experiences that they “remember” only as stories and images with which they grew up; but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch, 1999, 8).

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<sup>5</sup> *H.I.J.O.S* was originally formed in Argentina towards the end of 1994 and appeared in Uruguay in 1996, as well as throughout Latin America, as far afield as Mexico and Guatemala. According to Diego Sempol, *H.I.J.O.S*' emergence in Uruguay can be attributed to the group's appearance in Argentina (Sempol, 2006, 187).

Therefore, the potency of this 'memory' of memories does not diminish over time, but intensifies. Meanwhile attention paid to certain memories fluctuates over time, in different political, economic and social contexts. Recollection and recall are not so prevalent in post-memory, but rather empathy and identification.

For memory is not an exact representation of the past, but is reconstructed, shaped by the present, therefore, it is possible that memory appears in a form that lacks its basis in primary experience or - in the case of *Niños en Cautiverio Político* - remembering. As well as reflecting memory's evasion of linear time, the concept of postmemory reminds us that memory is not only tied strongly to the present, but in some cases shaped almost entirely by, and in, the present. In other words, *memory* is not dependent on *remembering*. As Paloma asserts, 'the construction of memory involves various actors, it is an exercise ... I believe that memory is constructed collectively; the more collective this construction is and the more actors involved, the richer this is.'

To this end, the group does not confine itself to any one tactic or use of media, but employs a variety of innovative strategies. Often drawing on the diverse personal and professional expertise of its members, activities range from holding press conferences and seminars to producing documentaries and organising exhibitions, such as the one held at the *Biblioteca Nacional* (National Library) in 2008 to mark the group's first anniversary. Mementos such as letters, clothing and toys made by the children's parents whilst in captivity, were carefully and artistically exhibited. This point marked a surge in public awareness of the group as the exhibition, supported by the local and national governments, generated huge publicity and captivated the media as television and radio stations, as well as the press, took an interest in *Niños en Cautiverio Político's* campaign.

Alongside supporting the struggles for truth, justice and memory, one of the group's current projects is a reconstruction of personal histories to be compiled for a book. Members are also hoping to organise visits to the sites where they were detained. However, gaining access to these buildings, which remain in the hands of the Ministry of Defence, is not a straightforward task. As the Ministry's archives remain closed to the public, even access to hospital birth registers for those born in captivity has proved impossible.

Ongoing legal impunity and a lack of resolution as regards the past provide the backdrop to *Niños en Cautiverio Político's* struggle, particularly if we consider the rejection of the recent plebiscite to annul the *Ley de Caducidad*; arguably a setback for the human rights movement in Uruguay. However, impunity is not only a legal issue and as Kaiser reminds us, the term can be understood as a 'cultural' one (Kaiser, 2002, 502). In this light, these adults, victims themselves of the dictatorship and the antecedents which led to this, play a crucial role in exposing the lesser known aspects and effects of state terror, particularly in reminding Uruguayan society of their pervasive and wide-ranging nature.



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Photos courtesy of *Niños en Cautiverio Político*.

## Interviewees

Micaela Montevideo, Uruguay. Member of *Niños en Cautiverio*. Micaela was held prisoner with her mother until the age of twenty-one months.

Paloma Montevideo, Uruguay. Member of *Niños en Cautiverio*. Paloma was released from captivity at the age of ten months.

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