



Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Street Protest against Disappearances  
(Photo: © ANP Foto)

## The Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence

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"Let me help you," he said, as he held up my coat. "Thank you very much," I said. My arms slipped effortlessly into the sleeves as he gently lifted the coat onto my shoulders. Before I could return the gesture, he had already put on his overcoat.

We passed through the dark corridors of the old palace, walked down the marble stairway, and left the Officers Club through the main entrance. "You know, Dr. Robben," he began. "I am a very religious man. And I know deep down in my heart that my conscience before God is clear." We turned the corner at the Café Petit Paris and continued along Santa Fé Avenue. I looked at him and tried to overstem the noise of the traffic: "Well, general, but there are many Argentines who . . ." "Look out!" he yelled and stretched his right arm in front of me. A taxi nearly hit me as I was about to step on the pavement.

A few months later, on October 7, 1989, the general was released from criminal prosecution by a presidential decree (*indulto*). He had been indicted for ordering the disappearance of Argentine citizens and for carrying the hierarchical responsibility for their rape and torture by the men under his command. The decree did not acquit him of the charges or exonerate his military honor but merely dismissed his court case and those of dozens of other high-ranking officers. The Argentine president, Carlos Menem, hoped that this decree would "close the wounds of the past" and contribute to a "national pacification, reconciliation, and unity" among a people divided by the violence and repression of the 1970s.

Six months earlier I had arrived in Buenos Aires to study whether or not these wounds were closing and how the Argentine people were coping with the tens of thousands of dead and disappeared in what the military

had called the "dirty war" against the leftist insurgency.<sup>1</sup> If Argentine society was to be pacified, then the people had to reconcile themselves with each other and their past. Chapters of history cannot be turned by decree. Crucial to national reconciliation was how the Argentine people made sense of the years of intense political repression and violence during the 1976–1983 military dictatorship. At the time, most people had only a vague notion of the incipient civil war that waged during the first half of the 1970s. Many welcomed the coup d'état of March 1976 as necessary to end the country's political and economic chaos. Constitutional rights were suspended, the Congress was sent home, and the unions were placed under military guardianship. People were aware of the censorship of the mass media, the pervasive intelligence network of the security forces, and the many arrests that were made, often under the cover of darkness. They also heard about the worldwide denunciation of human rights violations in Argentina, but the military government was quite successful in convincing the many Argentines who had not been affected personally that these accusations were being orchestrated by the revolutionary Left at home and abroad. It was only after the 1982 defeat of the Argentine armed forces at the Falkland/Malvinas Islands that the public learned of the extent and brutality of the political persecution during the dictatorship. The Argentine people wanted to know and understand what had happened. At the fall of the military regime in 1983, retired generals, former cabinet ministers, human rights activists, union leaders, bishops, and politicians were flooding the news media with their conflicting accounts and analyses. The protagonists of the years of repression had become the nation's historiographers.

The historical reconstruction of the 1970s became intensely contested during the decade following the turn to democracy, not only through conflicting discourse but also through controversial political actions, including one guerrilla attack on an army base, three amnesties, and five military mutinies, the last and most violent of which occurred during my fieldwork. The adversary interpretations came principally from the armed forces, the former guerrilla organizations, the human rights groups, and the Roman Catholic church. The public discourse of the leaders of these four groups became the centerpiece of my research on the contested historical reconstruction of the political violence of the 1970s. I was not interested in writing a history of the so-called dirty war. Instead, I focused on how that history was being remembered, contested, negotiated, and reconstructed in public by its protagonists. I told my interlocutors that I was not in Argentina to establish truth or guilt because that was the prerogative of Argentine society. I made it clear at the start of every interview that I wanted to talk to the principal political actors and understand their ex-

planations of the recent past in a time when opinions and interpretations were still being formed and reformulated. I wanted them to explain their position, just as they had done previously in television and radio programs, newspaper articles, public speeches, and their numerous meetings with local reporters, foreign correspondents, diplomats, and international fact-finding delegations. I chose this approach to the conflicting discourse about the decades of political violence because the historical protagonists refused to enter into face-to-face debates with their former adversaries. Hence I interviewed them about the same principal historical events, contrasted their arguments and interpretations, and compared the opinions imparted to me with their other public pronouncements.

It was in my interviews with the Argentine military that I first realized the importance of seduction as a dimension of fieldwork. My military interlocutors must have known that the image I had received abroad—and which they reckoned was being confirmed in my talks with their political opponents—was one of officers torturing babies and ordering the disappearance of tens of thousands of innocent Argentine civilians. I had, of course, anticipated their denial of these serious accusations, but I did not expect to be meeting with military men who exuded great civility and displayed a considerable knowledge of literature, art, and classical music. The affability and chivalry of the officers clashed with the trial records I had read, affected my critical sensibility, and in the beginning led me astray from my research focus. It was only later that I realized that I had been engrossed in ethnographic seduction. This process of seduction and subsequent awareness repeated itself in my meetings with bishops, human rights activists, and former guerrilla leaders. Each group was seductive in its own way, and it was only after months of interviewing that I succeeded in recognizing the prevalent defenses and strategies and learned to distinguish seduction from good rapport.

I have chosen the word *seduction* to describe those personal defenses and social strategies because it means literally "to be led astray from an intended course."<sup>2</sup> Seduction is used here exclusively in its neutral meaning of being led astray unawares, not in its popular meaning of allurement and entrapment. I prefer seduction to other terms, such as concealment, manipulation, or deception, that carry negative overtones and suggest dishonesty or malintent. Seduction can be intentional but also unconscious and can be compared to the ways in which filmmakers, stage directors, artists, or writers succeed in totally absorbing the attention of their audiences.

I am aware of the risks of using the word *seduction* in the context of violence. The association of the words *victim* and *seduction* makes me vulnerable to the charge that I am implying that somehow the victim brought on himself or herself the pain that was inflicted, while the mere suggestion

that victims of violence might mold what they tell us runs the danger that I will be accused of contributing to their victimization. Ultimately, it might make people question my moral standards. How can I place doubt on the horror stories I have been told and distrust their narrators? It is much easier to acknowledge manipulation by victimizers than by victims. We have more sympathy for unmasking abusers of power than doubting the words of their victims. I have the same sympathies. However, I also realize that in the end the victims may be harmed and their testimonies discredited if we report their views naively and uncritically. We need to analyze their accounts and be attentive to our own inhibitions, weaknesses, and biases, all to the benefit of a better understanding of both victim and victimizer. The ethnographic seduction by victims and perpetrators of violence will in this way become a font of insight instead of an obstruction to insight.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter focuses on the ethnographic encounter because the most common transmission of cultural knowledge in fieldwork takes place through open interviews with key informants. I will argue that seduction is a dimension of fieldwork that is especially prominent in research on violent political conflict because the interlocutors have great personal and political stakes in making the ethnographer adopt their interpretations. The importance of seduction is enhanced by the special circumstances of studying-up conflict. An anthropologist who wishes to understand a major armed conflict from the perspective of its principal protagonists cannot resort to participant observation in its traditional sense but is restricted to account interviews. These interviews may range from a unique half-hour meeting to a series of long conversations. It is during these face-to-face encounters that ethnographic understanding and inquiry are most vulnerable to seduction.

#### EMPATHY AND DEHUMANIZATION

Ethnographic understanding through empathy and detachment has been generally accepted as a common dialectic in fieldwork. We must establish a good rapport with our interlocutors to grasp the world from their perspective, while a simultaneous reflective detachment as observers must justify our perceptions and enhance our analytical insight.<sup>4</sup> "One of the most persistent problems we confront is how to so subject ourselves and yet maintain the degree of 'detachment' necessary for us to analyze our observations: in other words, to be anthropologists as well as participants" (Ellen 1984:227). Bronislaw Malinowski conceived of anthropological research in these terms, and it was to remain a canon of our profession until the 1960s when Clifford Geertz began to problematize fieldwork and ethnography with his notion of "thick description."

Geertz calls attention to the many-layered subjective construction of culture and argues for reproducing this complexity in the ethnographic text.<sup>5</sup> He notes that the relation between informant and field-worker is bespeckled with mutual misunderstandings, clientelistic interests, power games, and cultural proselytizing. These problems of cultural interpretation are of central concern to the ethnographer. Geertz (1973:15) proposes, therefore, the "thick description" of culture "cast in terms of the constructions we imagine" our interlocutors "to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them." A question that arises immediately is whether people's constructions and formulas—not just their content—change under social tension and to what extent violent conflict will therefore affect the thick description of culture. This chapter will show that an examination in the field of the principal methodological and epistemological problems of conducting ethnographic research under violent conflict may yield significant insights about people's interpretation and construction of the conflict under study.

The problem of ethnographic seduction deserves attention because it subverts the *thick conversation* that precedes its description in ethnographic texts. We may become engulfed in seductive strategies or defenses that convince us of the thinness of social discourse. We believe to be seeing the world through our interlocutor's eyes. Yet these eyes are looking away from that which we think they are seeing. We have been led away from the depths of culture to its surface in an opaque intersubjective negotiation of cultural understanding.

This manipulation of appearances touches on the heart of seduction, so Jean Baudrillard (1990) tells us.<sup>6</sup> Appearance rests on a deep faith in the immediacy of our senses and emotions. Sight, sound, and feeling are intimately tied to our subjective experience of authenticity. Seduction wins us over through this pretense of real understanding. However, what is revealed to us is nothing more than a *trompe l'oeil*, and a surreal one at that. The ethnographic seduction trades our critical stance as observers for an illusion of congeniality with cultural insiders.<sup>7</sup> We no longer seek to grasp the native's point of view, but we believe, at least for the duration of the meeting, that we have become natives ourselves. We have become so enraptured in the ethnographic encounter that we are led astray from our research objectives, irrespective of the theoretical paradigm we are using and the anthropological understanding we are pursuing.

Problems of representation, intersubjectivity, polyphonic complexity, and the historicity of truth aside—all of which have already been discussed at length in anthropology—I am calling attention to the epistemological pitfalls of ethnographic seduction. Ethnographic seduction subverts our understanding of social and cultural phenomena by dissuading an inquiry

beyond their appearance. The difficulty with ethnographic seduction is that we are not aware it is taking place. Unlike ethnographic anxiety, which according to George Devereux (1967:42-45) is produced by our repression of cultural experiences in the field that correspond to unconscious desires and wishes, ethnographic seduction puts the ethnographer often at ease. Repression makes the ethnographer "protect himself against anxiety by the omission, soft-peddling, non-exploitation, misunderstanding, ambiguous description, over-exploitation or rearrangement of certain parts of his material" (*ibid.*, 44). Seduction, instead, makes us feel that we have accomplished something profound in the encounter, that we have reached a deeper understanding and have somehow penetrated reality. We are in a state of well-being, and have a *we-feeling* with our informants that we mistakenly interpret as good rapport. It is only when we look back at our meeting and review the information gathered that we realize that we displayed a personal inhibition to break our rapport with critical questions. We realize that we have mistaken seduction for empathy.

If, on the one hand, seduction disarms our critical detachment and thus debilitates the gathering of cultural knowledge, then, on the other, our empathy in research on violent conflict may be hindered by our awareness of the protagonism of our interlocutor. Going one morning from an interview with a mother who had lost two sons during the first year of the dictatorship to a meeting with a general who might have ordered their disappearance, it became hard not to dehumanize them both. How can we engage in constructing an intersubjective understanding with a person who either has violated or transcended the humanity we are trying to understand?

At the early stages of my research I was confounded both by the veil of authenticity that shrouded the personal accounts of my interlocutors and by the public discourse that depicted military officers as beasts or saviors and human rights activists as subversives or saints. We may become so overwhelmed by the presence of political actors who have been dehumanized in society that we may also begin to see them only as saints and sinners or heroes and cowards. As I became more conscious of these public characterizations in Argentine society, I realized that this same process of dehumanization had contributed to the escalation of political violence in the 1970s, when political opponents became enemies and enemies were less than human, only fit for elimination.

Ethnographic seduction sidesteps empathy and detachment. The Socratic dialectic that brings us ever closer to the truth, the positivist model of an oscillation between inductive and deductive steps through which falsification becomes possible, and finally the hermeneutic model of a spiraling ascendance between whole and part that deepens understanding encompass epistemological approaches that become suspended by seduc-

tion. Ethnographic seduction reduces communication and knowledge to appearance.

#### THE MANAGEMENT OF IMPRESSION AND AMBIGUITY

Around the same time that Geertz problematized ethnography, questions were raised about the ethics of covert fieldwork in Latin America and Southeast Asia. In the 1960s, anthropologists began to take a closer look at their research practices. This methodological reflection was greatly influenced by West Coast sociologists such as Herbert Blumer, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Aaron V. Cicourel, and Harvey Sacks who inspired ethnographers to focus on the dramaturgical dimension of the relation between field-workers and their informants. Anthropologists could not routinely study the social and cultural conduct of their subjects but had to realize that the actors might deliberately manipulate and obstruct the gathering of ethnographic knowledge. "The impressions that ethnographer and subjects seek to project to one another are . . . those felt to be favorable to the accomplishment of their respective goals: the ethnographer seeks access to back-region information; the subjects seek to protect their secrets since these represent a threat to the public image they wish to maintain. Neither can succeed perfectly" (Berreman 1972:xxxiv).

The work of Goffman (1966, 1969) on impression management remains highly relevant for our understanding of the interactional processes that develop in ethnographic encounters.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, impression management encompasses only part of the much more comprehensive and complex dimension of ethnographic seduction. Ethnographer and interlocutor may try to protect their public image and try to gain access to each other's back stage, as Berreman explains, but which boundary should they protect and which region do they wish to enter? The ethnographer's definition of the secret knowledge of the interlocutor may not coincide with the respondent's perception. This misunderstanding provides opportunities not only for dramaturgical impression management but also for unintended and counteractive seduction. For example, victims of repression who assumed that I regarded the torture session as the most personal and therefore most valuable back region, assumed that this appraisal could enhance their credibility as a reliable source of information about the years of political violence. Even though many informants intended to tell about it, they still veiled their experiences to impel the inquisitive ethnographer to urge them to share their stories. The more persuasion that was needed, the more persuasive their accounts would be. A troubling similarity between interrogation and interview appeared which could not have escaped the attention of these victims of torture. But now, they had control over how and which valuable information they would give. Several interviewees were

conscious of the manner in which this knowledge was imparted and therefore delayed its disclosure. Others did not try to withhold their revelations, but the effect was the same: I stopped at the threshold of their back region. Why did I refuse to accept the valuable knowledge that was eventually offered?

Baudrillard (1990:83) has written that "to seduce is to appear weak." Certain interviewees did not try to dominate or overpower me but, instead, disarmed me by showing their vulnerabilities. In my interviews with victims of torture, I seldomly asked directly about the abuse they had been subjected to but usually concentrated on their interpretation of the political violence of the 1970s. Being used to journalists who invariably asked them to provide graphic descriptions, several expressed their surprise at my reluctance and volunteered to give me detailed accounts. I generally responded that such painful recollection was not necessary because I had already read their declarations to the courts. Maybe I wanted to spare them, but I probably also wanted to protect myself. Whatever my motives, this voluntary offering of very personal experiences enhanced in my eyes the credibility of the entire interview, whether justified or not. The ethnographic seduction operated through a partial revelation of a dark world that was not further explored but was taken at face value in the belief that such hidden knowledge could always be uncovered.

#### RHETORIC AND PERSUASION

Persuasion seems to be the counterpole of seduction. Seduction wins us over by appearance, persuasion by argument.<sup>9</sup> It is not appearance and emotion that seem at stake but reason. We are supposed to become persuaded by a clear exposition of hard evidence that moves us to reconsider our poorly informed opinions. But how is the proof presented to us? How is the evidence rhetorically couched? How is the information molded to make its greatest impact on us and divert us from the questions we want to examine in depth? Are the interlocutors always aware of the rhetorical dimension of their conversations?<sup>10</sup>

Plato and Aristotle made a distinction between dialectic reasoning based on logic and rigorous proof, which would lead to truth, and rhetoric reasoning, which tried to persuade people by arousing their emotions. "Rhetoric is that part of any self-consciously calculated piece of communication which fails to meet a philosopher's standards of accuracy, coherence, and consistency, but is still necessary if the communication is to be fully successful" (Cole 1991:13). Our suspicion of rhetoric comes from a distrust of such manipulation of our emotions. We feel somehow robbed of the ability to weigh the pros and cons of an argument. Nevertheless, rhetorical and aesthetic modes of exposition are not only an inextricable

part of scientific discourse (see Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Gross 1990) but "potentially powerful resources for the advancement of the sciences: promotion of hypotheses by appeal to aesthetic criteria; jocular and satirical critique of standard and entrenched practices" (Jardine 1991:236). Rhetoric stirs us discursively with tropes, allegories, and modes of exposition. Like seduction, rhetoric may become a play of appearance that diverts us from our research objectives.

Most of my Argentine interlocutors were public figures with great conversational experience and finesse. I could therefore safely assume that they had become sensitized to the effectiveness of various rhetorical devices. Invariably there was an exchange of social courtesies to create a friendly atmosphere for what we perceived could become a weighty and possibly painful conversation. These courtesies failed to seduce because of their blatant transparency. Seduction does not work through openness but through secrecy and mystification. Hence the common ground that became established at the start of a conversation depended to a great extent on an acquaintance with each other's cultural identity. Many of my interviewees had visited Europe, expressed their love of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, their admiration of the canals and polders, or recalled with glee the title match victory of Argentina over the Dutch team at the 1978 World Championship soccer tournament in Buenos Aires, during the heydays of the military regime. They also interpreted my presentation of self, assessed my class background, and tried to detect my political ideology. My being Dutch yet living in the United States, my status as a university professor, and above all my access to their political adversaries were of great importance. I, in turn, would praise the friendliness of the Argentine people, the beauty of the countryside, and the architecture of the main avenues of Buenos Aires.

Aside from this obvious impression management, there was a seductive dimension to discourse that was much harder to isolate but that first became clear to me in my conversations with former *guerrilleros*. Many of them had been college students. They had perfected a sophisticated political discourse through innumerable discussions in cafés, prisons, hideouts, and foreign hotels. They would speak in the intellectual's tongue. Well versed in the jargon of sociology and political science, their historical interpretations had a truthful ring. It was difficult to distinguish their vocabulary and semantic constructions from my own.

It was tempting to become absorbed in this discourse. It had an emotional pull. It seduced me by an indescribable familiarity, by its allure of going to the heart of historical events together with their architects; all this set in the special atmosphere of the grand cafés of Buenos Aires with their dense cigarette smoke, the buzzing of voices, and the waiters swiftly maneuvering through the maze of wooden tables while carrying trays of

small coffee cups. I felt that I could take my guard down in this environment and become absorbed in a close discussion in which I could share intellectual doubts and queries with people of my own generation. I felt that I could not afford such openness with the military, the clergy, or with human rights activists who might become offended by too penetrating questions and deny me another interview. What I did not realize was that by this openness I had also abandoned my critical detachment.

Unlike the pseudoacademic discourse of the revolutionary Left, which allowed me to retain many of my conceptual tools, my interviews with the other three groups obliged me to adapt my vocabulary. For example, human rights groups use the term "concentration camp" (*campo de concentración*) to describe the secret places where disappeared persons were held. This term conjures up images of the Second World War and, by extension, suggests that the Argentine military are Nazis at heart. The use of the term "concentration camp" in conversations with military officers would immediately brand me as a sympathizer of the human rights groups and thus hinder the exchange. I therefore used their own term, "detention center" (*centro de detención*). This neutral term was part of an objectifying vocabulary that gave a semantic rationality to the violent practices of the dirty war.

The discursive strategy of the military consisted of appealing both to my common sense and to the dispassionate logic of reason that is supposed to be the hallmark of any scientist. This discursive technique consisted of an outright dismissal of any major human rights violations without denying that they could have occurred. If this technique failed to have the intended effect on me, then they began to relativize the Argentine abuses by making a comparison with atrocities committed by the so-called civilized Western world. In an interview on June 26, 1989, I asked the general mentioned at the beginning of this article about the relevance of licit and illicit rules of engagement, as defined by international law, to the "dirty war strategy" employed by the Argentine military.

I say that when we go to war—and in a war I have to be willing to kill my enemy because otherwise there would be no war—when I am willing to kill my enemy I can kill him with an arrow, but if the other has a machine gun then the arrow will be of no use to me. I have to find a cannon. When the other has . . . [when] I have a cannon, the other will look for a larger cannon or an aircraft. When the other has an aircraft, I will have to try, try to take a missile, and so on. That is to say, war by itself is a social phenomenon. . . . What is licit and what is illicit, when war presupposes that I am going to kill my enemy? Now, the philosopher of war par excellence is [Carl von] Clausewitz. And he says that war is evidently a human phenomenon in which I try to impose my will on the enemy and I therefore resort to violence. Now, he talks about the tendency to go to extremes. He then says that he who tries to impose violence without any consideration will have an

advantage over he who has consideration. Well then, what happens? When they talk to me about restrictions in warfare, these are incubations made by jurists. The nations have not respected them. For example, when they threw the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this was forbidden according to the Geneva Convention. But who was to say to Mister Truman, "Mister Truman, this is forbidden. Why did you throw it? You come along, we are going to take you to the Nuremberg tribunal." No, because he won the war. Who was going to do it? Now, why did Mister Truman do it? Because he said, "Well, there will die 200,000 persons, but if we do not throw the bomb then 600,000 North Americans will die, or one million. Well then, between 200,000 Japanese and one million North Americans let 200,000 Japanese die," and he threw the bomb. Because the distinction between the licit and the illicit in warfare is absurd to me, because war presupposes from the start the use of violence—as Clausewitz says—and the use of violence without restraint till the objective is attained.

Other Argentine officers also referred frequently to the bombings of Hiroshima, Dresden, and Nagasaki and to the double standard of the "human rights prophets," the French, who collaborated with the Nazis during the Vichy government, tortured Algerian partisans, and in 1985 bombed a Greenpeace ship in New Zealand, yet who convicted in absentia the Argentine navy officer Alfredo Astiz for his alleged role in the disappearance of two French nuns who had collaborated with subversive organizations, so the Argentine military argued. When I objected that two wrongs do not make a right, that the comparisons do not hold, or that many of the offenses by Western nations were backed by written orders, the Argentine military appealed to the vicissitudes and unpredictabilities of warfare.

Such rational discourse may be highly persuasive from a logical point of view—especially when one has not yet found equally powerful counterarguments or succeeds in listening dispassionately to the rationalizations—but produces an uncomfortable tension with one's emotional aversion to the consequences of warfare. Just as it is hard to reconcile our instantaneous repudiation of violent death with a military necessity to fire on people, so it becomes very difficult to stand one's moral ground in the face of these technorational arguments for human suffering. The barrage of sophisticated rationalizations of violence together with the argument that the use of force is the constitutional prerogative of the security forces are very hard to counter. My objections that the violence was disproportional, that more humane counterinsurgency methods could have been used, that the prisoners were not given due process, that these methods violated the very principles of civilization that the military professed to protect, and, finally, that what was justified as mere excesses of war were deliberate and planned violations to paralyze the political expression of the Argentine people were dismissed either as leftist propaganda or as a manifestation of my unfamiliarity with the practice of warfare.

Another discursive tactic was to sketch ominous scenarios of what would have happened if the Argentine military had not destroyed the insurgents root and branch. The grave situation in Peru during the late 1980s, when the Shining Path revolutionaries controlled large areas of the highlands, and had even succeeded in reaching the gates of Lima at the time of my fieldwork, was mentioned as a nightmare that had been prevented in Argentina through the resolute action of the armed forces. Finally, the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent disenchantment with communism in Eastern Europe were presented as arguments for the moral righteousness of the repression in Argentina during the 1970s.

The human rights activists and former guerrilleros could have equally made appeals to common sense, but many preferred to make an emotional plea to a moral sense of humanity and justice. How to respond to an indignant rejection of torture, to the kidnapping of babies for the benefit of childless military families, and to the extraction of money from desperate parents with misleading information about the whereabouts of their disappeared son? Rational arguments, such as those given to me by the military, justifying torture as a conventional practice in counterinsurgency warfare, as was the case in Algeria, South Africa, Vietnam, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, Spain, Peru, El Salvador, and many other countries, are impotent against the tears of the parents of a revolutionary who was abducted, tortured, and executed. I became virtually unable to penetrate this emotional shroud with questions that might be easily misperceived as apologetic, uncaring, cold, callous, and hurtful.<sup>11</sup> The more emotional the reaction, the greater my personal inhibition to discuss these issues further.

The following fragment from an interview with the father of a seventeen-year-old member of the outlawed Peronist Youth (*Juventud Peronista*) who disappeared in April 1976 demonstrates this inhibition, despite the encouragement of the interlocutor to proceed. After his son failed to arrive at a birthday party where he was expected, the father began a desperate search. He contacted an acquaintance who is a police officer, and they began to make inquiries at the precincts and hospitals of Buenos Aires, all to no avail. After several months, the father came into contact with a colonel in active duty through the mediation of a befriended retired first lieutenant. The following dialogue took place.

And he says, "Tell me what happened." So I told him what happened. And with all virulence, you looked at . . . I looked at this man, but I tell you as I told you before, that I tried to see from all sides if I could find the point of the . . . of the thread of . . . , to, to arrive at the thread or the needle in the haystack [*punta del ovillo*], trying to, to discover anything. After telling him everything, he says, "Good. Look, you have to do the following: you have to pretend as if your son has cancer." I was listening and saying to myself, What is he saying? [The colonel continues.] "Pretend that he has cancer and that

they have . . . that he is in an operating room and that there is a butcher and a doctor; pray that it will be the doctor who will be operating on him." And then I looked at, at the one with whom I had made a certain friendship, and he took hold of his head and covered his, his face. Because he must have said, he himself must have said, What is this sonofabitch saying? Because then he realized that all his venom, his virulence came out of him [the colonel]. This man had stuck a dagger in my wound and had twisted it inside me. I say to him, "Pardon me," I say, "Sir, but do you know something?" I said this because of what he was telling me. "No, no, I am weighing the various possibilities [*hago una composición de lugar*] and I am making a supposition. I don't know anything of what might have ha—." And I say, "But how do you have the gall to . . ." and because of my nerves the words couldn't come out, but I had wanted to say "You are a son of a thousand bitches." You see, tell him whichever barbarity. And then the other saw my condition because he thought that I was going to lose it. . . . I wanted to grab him by the throat and strangle him, but then anyone of those who were there would have taken their gun and killed me. There, for the first time in my life, the desire came over me to murder someone. I had been destroyed. . . .

Something [my wife] didn't know. With the passage of time I have told her. These are unfortunate things that happen to you in life. And there, yes, it crossed my mind that yes, that day I could have ended up killing that man. I don't know what stopped me. Because I was desperate. But you cannot imagine how, with what satisfaction he said what he was telling me. And you should analyze that, that this man was in active service.

But I was unable to analyze. Exactly as he had tried to detect any sign in the face and words of the colonel that betrayed the tiniest bit of information about his son but became paralyzed by the cruel supposition, so I became unable to stand aside and observe. He had incorporated me into his torment, sometimes discursively placing me in his shoes and at other times highlighting the moments of his greatest anguish. I could have asked him about the place of the meeting, the spatial arrangement of the offices, which army regiment had been involved, whether he ever heard of the colonel again, how he knew that the man was a colonel and not an extortionist who would try to wrest money from him, whether he ever saw the first lieutenant again, and so on. But my mind went blank, and I could only share this man's sorrow in silence.

I intuitively hesitate to present this account as an example of rhetorical seduction because the term "seduction" immediately evokes the association of an intentional manipulation of truth for dishonest ends. This is not the case here. I do not have any reason to doubt that this dialogue—whatever the exact words—took place, and I believe even less that the narrative was consciously constructed. Still, I think that the term "rhetorical seduction" is appropriate here because the repeated telling of the same story has led to a formulation that has proven to be the most moving and

therefore most persuasive.<sup>12</sup> The account affected my emotional state to such a degree that I was no longer able to see the discourse behind the conversation. I could not ask further questions but allowed my interlocutor to take me along on the incessant search for his son.

Sometimes, I would end an interview here, unable or unwilling to continue. At other times, I would gently relieve the tension by leading the conversation into neutral waters, discussing highly abstract concepts such as war, justice, or political freedom. Only a radical break with my emotions would allow me to regard the conversation once again as analyzable knowledge.

This example has demonstrated the emotional incorporation of the ethnographer in the ethnographic encounter, but this intersubjectivity also has a counterpart in the interlocutor's reactions. An Argentine anthropologist, who knew one of my interviewees, a former guerrillero, recounted to me one day his rendition of my meetings with him. He had told her that during a stirring moment of our conversation in which he was reflecting on the terrible waste of lives in the political struggle of the 1970s, he saw tears in my eyes. This intensified the awareness of his own tragedy and made him break down as well. At these moments of a complete collapse of the critical distance between two interlocutors, we lose all dimensions of the scientific enterprise. Overwhelmed by emotion we do not have the need for any explanation because we feel that all questions have already been answered. What else is there to ask? What else is there to tell? What more do we need to know? What more is there to know?

#### SECRECY AND TRUTH

Any research on political violence runs into too many skeletons to handle, too many closets to inspect. Aside from deliberate lies, half-truths, and unfounded accusations—many of which are impossible to trace or verify—there is a lot of malicious gossip and character assassination. One way in which interlocutors try to add credibility to their charges is by means of a staged confession introduced by statements such as "Let me tell you a secret," or "I have never told this to anyone," or "I will tell you this, but you may not record it or write it down."

Secrecy seduces. The belief that the interlocutor is hiding a darker side is seductive because it teases the ethnographer to surrender. Only a surrender to the interlocutor's conditions of truth will yield the desired information. The remarks about secrecy made by my interlocutors served as a strategy to overpower my interpretive stance as an observer. It was an invitation to complicity. I do not want to exaggerate the political influence of social scientists, but most of my interlocutors were aware of the potential impact of an authoritative analysis of the last dictatorship. The impartiality

of local scholars is called into question by most Argentines. They are accused of writing polemic books (*libros de combate*), polemic in its most literal sense: books for waging war. These books are believed to sacrifice scientific accuracy to political ends. Foreign authors are regarded as more neutral than national scholars, and some of them, such as Robert A. Potash (1969, 1980) and Alain Rouquié (1987*a*, 1987*b*), have become household names.

The political weight of my research became most apparent during my last interview with the general who had saved me from being run over by a taxi. Almost two months after the presidential decree that dismissed the court case against him, I met him again at the Officers Club. After a quarter of an hour I told him that I noticed a change in his demeanor. He was much more relaxed than during our last series of interviews. He laughed and said that four months ago he was in the middle of a political battle (*batalla política*). "Now," he said, "everything is history, and eventually the Argentine people will realize that the military acted in a correct way." Comparing this last interview with our previous conversations, he had become almost aloof and seemed uninterested in persuading me of his rightness. His short answers were delivered in a casual and offhand manner. The political battle had ended. Had I been one of its foot soldiers? Had I been used as a sparring partner for a future crossfire examination by the public prosecutor, or had I been used as a gullible courier of the general's political message?

The question of truth does not receive much attention in the many books on fieldwork that have appeared in the last three decades.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, earlier generations of anthropologists were much more concerned about prying the truth out of their informants (see Rosaldo 1986). For instance, Marcel Griaule (1957) writes in his book on fieldwork: "The role of the person sniffing out social facts is often comparable to that of a detective or examining magistrate. The fact is the crime, the interlocutor the guilty party; all the society's members are accomplices" (quoted in Clifford 1983*b*:138). S. F. Nadel, Griaule's contemporary, favored equally inquisitive methods: "In the case of interviews which bear on secret and forbidden topics, I have found it most profitable to stimulate the emotionality of a few chief informants to the extent of arousing almost violent disputes and controversies. The expression of doubt and disbelief on the part of the interviewer, or the arrangement of interviews with several informants, some of whom, owing to their social position, were certain to produce inaccurate information, easily induced the key informant to disregard his usual reluctance to speak openly, if only to confound his opponents and critics" (1939:323). Finally, a classic field guide recommends: "It is sometimes useful to pretend incredulity to induce further information" (RAI 1951:33).



James Clifford (1983b:143-144) has remarked, "By the late sixties the romantic mythology of fieldwork rapport had begun publicly to dissolve. . . . Geertz undermines the myth of ethnographic rapport before reinstating it in an ironic mode. Like Griaule he seems to accept that all parties to the encounter recognize its elements of insincerity, hypocrisy, and self-deception." However, a major difference between the two authors is that Griaule was still hunting for undisputable truth. Geertz, instead, is representative of an entire generation of anthropologists who accompanied the interpretive turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Function and explanation were exchanged for meaning and understanding, and many anthropologists felt more identified with notions such as the definition of the situation and the social construction of reality than with a positivist belief in truth and method.<sup>14</sup>

Even though most anthropologists today feel much closer to Geertz than to Griaule and Nadel, our informants continue to think in terms of truth and falsehood. This issue becomes especially relevant in research on violence because the protagonists of major political conflicts are often accused of undermining the very foundation of society and of being responsible for the ensuing human suffering. The question of historical interpretation is of great political importance to them, and they will do their best to convince us of their rightness and to ignore dissenting views. We can, of course, not expect our interlocutors to incriminate themselves or recount their traumatic experiences with an anesthetized detachment but, instead, we should anticipate that they may consciously or unconsciously try to divert us from our investigative aims by disarming our critical gaze. In response to Geertz: not all Cretans may be liars, but some are, and some of them are seducers as well.

Having become temporarily disillusioned by the subtle strategies of persuasion of my Argentine interlocutors, I turned to the texts they had produced in the 1970s. This led to a search for secret army documents, intelligence reports, human rights pamphlets, and the clandestine publications of the revolutionary Left. I realized, of course, that these written sources were just as much discursive constructions as the spoken word of their authors. Nevertheless, the texts were concurrent with the historical events I was studying, and I could compare the oral accounts I had recorded of those actions, decisions, and events with contemporary clandestine, classified, and official sources. I hoped to puncture the appearances of my interlocutors, disentangle myself from their seduction, and reach back in time to the origin of their talk, the events, ideological articulations, power struggles, and armed confrontations. The anxiety of not being able to rely on oral history made me cling to contemporary inscriptions that at least had an appearance of authenticity.<sup>15</sup> I do not use "authenticity" here in

the sense of true or real but rather as genuine to the interlocutor's own sense of truth and reality. "Authenticity relates to the corroborative support given an account . . . by its internal consistency or cross-reference to other sources of information" (Brown and Sime 1981:161; see also Denzin 1970, on triangulation). An analysis of the interviews and a comparison with statements made during the time of repression allowed me to distance myself from the surface account that they tried to make me accept as the only true reality.

Clearly, the ethnographer of violence and political conflict may become encapsulated in the webs of seduction spun by his or her informants and interlocutors. Just as Lenin had inverted von Clausewitz's definition of war by stating that politics is the continuation of war by other means, so seduction became the continuation of Argentine politics after the turn to democracy in 1983.<sup>16</sup> Neither brute force nor coercion but the molding of appearances became the weapon of influential players in the Argentine polity. Ethnographic seduction was my personal experience with a national debate in Argentina among the adversarial protagonists of the decades of political violence.

But why resort to seduction? Those who dispute power and authority are aware of the importance of seduction. They realize that arguments alone do not persuade people, that charisma is the privilege of the gifted few, but that appearances are taken at face value by many. We as ethnographers are also subjects of seduction because our informants have a stake in making us adopt their truths. They perceive us as the harbingers of history. We will retell their stories and through our investiture as scientists provide these with the halo of objectivity that our academic stature entails.

What a weight on our shoulders; the weight to be the arbitrators of an absolute truth in which we have lost faith ourselves. What should we respond? That there is no truth? That truth is always historical? That their truth is not the truth of their opponents? That they have entrusted us with a Rankean authority in which we do not believe and which we do not want? That we cannot verify what they tell us? "But what are you saying?" they asked me. "How can you doubt the tears I have shed with you?" They reassure me. "You will be able to tell the truth about what really happened in Argentina." "We need foreign researchers like you who will be able to tell the truth that we cannot write." "Abroad, they can write a truth that nobody wants to publish here." They made appeals to my responsibility. "We need scientists like you whose books will allow the Argentine people to reach a reconciliation." They even tried to induce guilt. "I have told you my story so that you can write the truth." "Do not use the things I have told you against us." "Make sure that my story can never be used by those who killed my daughter."

## SHREDDING SHROUDS OF POWER

He had been on their hit list for more than three decades, old admiral Rojas; this diminutive man with his piercing eyes and hawkish nose. He and general Aramburu had been the strongmen of the revolution against Perón in 1955, and in 1956 he had personally signed the execution order of general Valle after his failed uprising against the military government. Aramburu had been kidnapped in 1970 and was executed by the Montoneros guerrilla organization. Rojas was to be next.

The two petty officers in the hallway asked me to open my briefcase. After examining its contents, one of them opened the elevator door and we stepped inside. We stopped at the fourth floor. He accompanied me to the door. The admiral invited me in with a jovial gesture. I sat down on the couch as he sank away in a large armchair. "I have a great many grandchildren," he began. "They often come to visit me and stay for lunch or dinner." Now I knew why there was a pile of heavy-metal records next to the turntable. The image of an 84-year-old admiral Rojas listening to AC/DC in the company of his teenage grandchildren was disarming. This had been one of the most influential men in Argentine politics in the 1950s, but the stack of heavy-metal records gave him away. These records revealed the transparency of power.

Because isn't power nothing but seduction; a mesmerizing play of brocaded clothes and ermine mantles; an enchanting appearance that obscures the seducer's vulnerability? Seeing the bearers of Argentine authority surrounded by the photographs of their children, smelling the food from their kitchens, and walking on the plush carpets of their apartments disintegrated power into human transience.

But, you may object, power rests on real force, and our ethnographic judgment should not be swayed by outward niceties and runaway emotions. I think you are right. One may become so familiar with the power holders—in the sense of convivial as well as knowledgeable—that it may obstruct one's perception of the authority vested in them. I therefore have to retrace my final steps and erase the imprint they have left. Seduction means after all, in a literal sense, "to be led astray from an intended course."

I went to Argentina to understand the contested historical reconstruction of the violence of the 1970s but soon became entangled in the rhetoric and seduction played upon me by its protagonists. Disillusioned, I sought refuge in the denuded truth of some "hard facts," only to discover that my understanding had run aground in the shallowness of the written word. I had to retrace my steps and stop where seduction, rhetoric, interpretation, and intersubjectivity suffused the ethnographic encounter. I could only subvert seduction by playing along with it and grasp its mean-

ing from the inside. This experience made me sensitive to what many Argentines, especially those who had suffered the disappearance of a relative, had felt during the years of repression. The disappearance was a form of deceit in which all appearances were kept up; the appearance of justice, of innocence, and due process. Where people became surface manifestations. Where lives changed course surreptitiously. And where reappearance depended on a gesture, on a nod of the head. It was in this clearing that I realized that ethnographic seduction crosscuts the interplay of empathy and detachment that sound fieldwork ordains. Standing in this clearing, it became finally possible to realize that the many directions I had been sent to were only intended to entice me away from where I was already standing.

## NOTES

1. The research in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from April 1989 until August 1991 was made possible by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. I thank Adam Kuper, James McAllister, Carolyn Nordstrom, Frank Pieke, and Jan de Wolf for their thoughtful comments.

2. Devereux (1967:44-45) has used the term "seduction" in his discussion of countertransference reactions among anthropologists. However, he defines it not as conscious manipulation but as emotional allurements.

3. An additional danger of using the term "seduction" is that it might result in an unwelcome association with Freud's seduction theory. For all clarity, my use of the term stands clear from Freud's theory about hysteria and distances itself from the implied notions of the repression of sexual desire.

4. Rapport is generally regarded as essential to successful fieldwork, "simply because of the assumption that people talk better in a warm, friendly atmosphere, and the additional assumption that attitudes are somehow complex and hidden and a lot of talking is essential before the attitude is elicited" (Hyman 1954:22). The issue of rapport has been discussed with much greater depth in sociology than in anthropology, possibly because the methodological emphasis on participant observation makes anthropologists downplay the actual importance of interview situations for acquiring local knowledge. See, e.g., the discussion of rapport by Hyman (1954:153-170) and Turner and Martin (1984:262-278) and the critique by Cicourel (1964:82-86).

5. Despite this call for attention to the native tongue, Clifford (1983a, 1988:38-41) has argued that Geertz has always remained the authoritarian voice that arbitrated the interpretational disputes among his informants. Clifford has emphasized the dialogic intersubjectivity of the ethnographic encounter with its polyphonic variations and discursive conflicts, as exemplified by Dwyer (1982) and Crapanzano (1980).

6. This chapter has drawn inspiration from Baudrillard's general statements about seduction but should not be taken as an application of his ideas (for a feminist critique, see Hunter 1989).

7. The opposite of the illusion of the cultural insider is the illusion of the objective investigator. "Methodological objectivism is a denial of the intersubjective or dialogical nature of fieldwork through which ethnographic understanding develops" (Obeyesekere 1990:227).

8. The account interview is not a context-free exchange of information but in the first place a social relationship with all its concomitant complexities (Brenner 1978, 1981). The impression management during my research in Argentina involved an array of stratagems. The location of the interview was chosen with the aim of exuding authority or familiarity. Some preferred their homes, while others invited me to the stately buildings of the church and the armed forces or the personalized offices of the human rights and former guerrilla organizations. Impression management also involved a manipulation of the senses. Dress, physical gestures, facial expressions, and ways of making eye contact and shaking hands are all part of a presentation of self that influences the social interaction between ethnographer and interlocutor (Agar 1980:54-62). For an analysis of the unique problems of female researchers who study the military, see Daniels 1967.

9. Simons (1976:134-138) distinguishes between co-active, combative, and expressive forms of persuasion. The co-active form attempts to bridge the psychological differences among interlocutors by stimulating the identification between speaker and audience. The combative form tries to persuade through coercion and intimidation. Combative approaches are most effective in situations of social conflict. Finally, there is an expressive approach that deliberately rejects the conscious manipulation of the audience but that hopes to raise people's consciousness through self-criticism and by openly sharing experiences. The co-active form of persuasion is the most versatile strategy because it can incorporate aspects of the other two forms.

10. Roloff (1980) analyzes aspects of rhetorical persuasion that remain hidden to both speaker and audience.

11. A scene from *Shoah* comes to mind in which Claude Lanzmann virtually coerces Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, to recall his experiences: "AB: A friend of mine worked as a barber—he was a good barber in my hometown—when his wife and his sister came into the gas chamber. . . . I can't. It's too horrible. Please. CL: We have to do it. You know it. AB: I won't be able to do it. CL: You have to do it. I know it's very hard. I know and I apologize. AB: Don't make me go on please. CL: Please. We must go on" (Lanzmann 1985:117).

12. Part of the dialogue quoted here can be found in almost the exact same words in Cohen Salama (1992:230).

13. Historians and sociologists have paid more attention to deliberate distortion; see Dean and Whyte 1970; Ginzburg 1991; Gorden 1975:445-460; Henige 1982:58-59.

14. During the same period, there was also considerable interest in action research and Marxist and feminist analyses. These three approaches are at the opposite end of seduction because the ethnographer tries to seduce people into accepting his or her interpretation of social reality as the most objective and correct analysis. The language of oppression and exploitation is used as a powerful rhetoric of persuasion.

15. Devereux (1967:46) explains this "anxious clinging to 'hard' facts" as an expression of the ethnographer's fear that he or she is not properly understanding or communicating with the informants.

16. War, according to von Clausewitz (1984:87), is "a continuation of political activity by other means."

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Mozambique  
(Photo: Joel Chiziane)

# Fieldwork under Fire

Contemporary Studies of  
Violence and Survival

EDITED BY

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Antonius C. G. M. Robben

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