

4.4. Resistance? Through Rituals: politics and rock culture during the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983)

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Abstract

The relationship between Argentine rock culture and the last dictatorship (1976-1983) has usually been analyzed through the concept of resistance. Following the approaches proposed by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham CCCS in their classic work *Resistance through rituals*, the scholars who have studied the rock scene in Argentina during the military government stated that this pair represented “unbridgeable ways of seeing the world” (Pujol, 2013, p. 9). In a pioneering work, Pablo Vila affirmed that *rock nacional*—understood more as a social space than as a distinctive music genre—“served to give voice to the thought of youth, silenced by a violent and authoritarian society” (1987, p. 129). The statement has become a sort of milestone.

This paper proposes a discussion about the changing political meanings of a rock culture that became, in a time of violent repression and authoritarian reconstruction of Argentine society, a mass phenomenon. Is the traditional concept of resistance still useful to explain the sociocultural and political role that rock played throughout those years or does it undermine the development of a more complex (and perhaps critical) understanding of that process? Crossing borders—between keeping under and going mainstream, between staying in the country and leaving it, between contesting State power and negotiating with it—Argentinian rock scene profoundly transformed during the 1976-1983 period. Just as Argentine society as a whole did.

Keywords: Argentina, rock music, dictatorship.

Introduction

There are certain events that condense a very heavy burden of meanings. Sui Generis’ last concerts took place on 5 September 1975 at the *Estadio Luna Park* of Buenos Aires city. They represent -from multiple points of view- a break in the history of local rock. Moreover, they point out a crucial moment in Argentina’s recent history.

That day, the group ended its dizzying career playing for a crowd of 36 thousand people, mostly young (*Pelo*, 1975, p. 3). It was a massive audience, one that just a few years ago would have been even impossible to envisage for any local rock band: whether understood in terms of numbers or public visibility, the marginality of rock seemed to have come to an end. The inaugural significance of the event contrasted, however, with the socio-political situation. A few months later, a *coup d’état* led by the Armed Forces took place. Rapidly, the new government implemented a terrorist regime, based on the systematic practice of disappearing people (Duhalde, 1989). Censorship, police arrests and repressive laws developed in the preceding years acquired a qualitatively different dimension when a sector of the population -mainly composed of young people and workers- was abducted, tortured and murdered through clandestine methods (Calveiro, 2008; Franco, 2012). That is why the historian Valeria Manzano states that “in fact, Sui Generis’ concert was the last mass gathering of any kind before the military again imposed dictatorship in March 1976” (2014, p. 425). The concerts of the *Estadio Luna Park* might be understood then, from this different perspective, not as the beginning of something, but as a closure act, the end of an age.

In any case, the harshness of the new regime did not necessarily harm local rock culture. Even if sociability conditions -of young people particularly- were affected by military control, the dictatorial project did not prevent the massive success suggested by Sui Generis’ shows. It seemed, instead, to give it a strong boost. Between 1976 and 1983, rock acquired an enormous popularity in Argentina. Whether read in terms of music production, commercial circulation or dissemination of practices, values and mores associated with rock culture, the change became eloquent (Berti, 2013). A mainly *underground* phenomenon became *mainstream*—redefining, on its way, the meanings of *underground* itself-.

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Therefore, Sui Generis' last concerts announced this massification. However, they could also be interpreted in an opposite way, that is, as an historical ending. How could this ambivalence be explained?

The tension condensed in that big event allows to consider the transformations of Argentine rock during military dictatorship of 1976-1983 as a relevant historical research problem. It supposes both an epistemological question and –it should be admitted- an uncomfortable political issue as well. The project that intended to restrain society also stimulated and legitimated rock. How could this be possible? If those shows of 1975 functioned as a sort of hinge, one big question remains still unanswered: which doors were opened and which were closed in the process?

State terrorism and the massification of Argentine rock during military dictatorship, 1976-1983

On March 24, 1976 a *coup d'état* took place in Argentina. Led by the military and supported by different civil sectors, the new government called itself *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process). The chosen name announced quite transparently its main goal: to radically transform society².

Though it was based on the premise of assassinating a sector of the population (the so-called process of "surgical removal" of an evil without cure), the new repressive mechanism was basically a terrorist one –it was founded on the presumption that the enemy was internal and ideological and the conviction that only the fear of retaliation could convince subjects to absolutely accept *status quo*-. Coordinated by the State structure, the authoritarian methodology focused then on the novel figure of the *desaparecido* (the missing person). Instead of being publicly exposed or absolutely secreted, the annihilation of political enemies by the dictatorship was as evident as impossible to confirm. By this means, the military operated both on bodies and minds: they pursued the creation of a new dominant subjectivity, permeated by fear, individualism, passivity, lack of interest and acceptance.

In her research about the characteristics and implications of the military repression during these years, Pilar Calveiro points out that:

Concentration camps, that secret that everybody fears, many do not know and some refuse to accept, is only possible when State's totalizing attempt finds its molecular expression –it plunges deeply into society, permeating it and nurturing from it. That is why they are a specific repressive modality, whose particularity cannot be dismissed. Concentration camps do not exist in every society. There are many murderous powers; it could almost be said that they all are in some way. But not all powers are concentrationary (...). Analyzing the concentration camp, as a repressive modality, can be useful to understand the characteristics of *a power that circulated through the social tissue and cannot have disappeared*. If the illusion of power founds in its ability to disappear what is dysfunctional, *it is also illusory that the civil society supposes that the disappearing power can disappear, by a non-existent magic*. (1998, p. 16)

The last military dictatorship was qualitatively different from other previous political regimes, radically innovative, because it not only tried to contain society, but to affect it, to reorganize it. It made an effort to restore the values of the legitimate and the illegitimate, to specify what was admitted and what was not. It worked hard to define what it was impossible to do, but also –and mainly- what it should be done. While its success is difficult to measure, its dynamic role in the shaping of living conditions must be taken into account to understand any socio-cultural phenomenon of the period.

Argentine rock is no exception to this statement. Since the late Sixties, this musical and cultural phenomenon rapidly flourished in the country in a powerful and unique manner³. In a historical context defined by political radicalization and intense social mobilization, young rockers –whether musicians, cultural promoters, or simple fans- developed their own practices and ways of life within a vast youth culture of contestation (Cattaruzza, 1997; Manzano, 2014). Even if it occupied a marginal position with respect to traditional or revolutionary political activism (specially the prominent guerrilla groups), rock culture emerged in those early years as a significant sphere of cultural and political socialization that expressed the diverse modernizing dynamics of Argentine society.

² A complete history of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* can be found in Palermo and Novaro (2006).

³ Argentine rock was a musical expression that, while inspired by the English-speaking models, quickly acquired its own characteristics: the use of the Spanish language on the lyrics, the fusion with other national musical genres and the development of an original poetic and musical imagination based on its own short but powerful history. New sociability circles took shape around it and a series of political meanings were configured.

The impact of the 1976 *coup d'état*, as noted above, was ambiguous for Argentine rock. On the one hand, the spaces for gathering and participation were restricted and controlled, and any explicit opposition to the political regime was repressed. On the other hand, nonetheless, music and rock culture started occupying the center of the socio-cultural scene during those authoritarian years. Symptomatically, as Pablo Vila explains, it was during this transitional period that what used to be called *música progresiva argentina* (national progressive music) became *rock nacional* (1989, p. 10)⁴. How could these transformations be interpreted by considering the military government construction? What links can be established between rock massification and the goals sought by State terrorism, the particular repressive mechanism developed in Argentina?

New perspectives on Argentine rock during the last military dictatorship

"It is not by chance that this change in the use of the labels occurred during the dictatorship in the seventies, when the youth movement more strongly than ever needed a means to construct its identity" (1989, p. 10), states Vila. In a series of pioneering articles (1987, 1989), the author offered an explanation to the issue of rock massification during the last military dictatorship that has become a sort of milestone.

According to Vila, in the face of the closure of other participation spheres (mainly those related to political and student activism), young people found in rock concerts a place where they could somehow resist military repression and reconstruct an identity of their own:

While the student movement and the political youth movements slowly disappeared as frames of reference and support for collective identities, the *rock nacional* movement established itself as the sphere within which a 'we' was constructed, a 'we' that surpassed the boundaries of the traditional fans. Thus, going to concerts and listening to records with groups of friends became privileged activities, through which broad sectors of the young sought to preserve their identity in a context in which they felt threatened by the military by virtue of their age. (1989, p. 15)

Following the arguments developed by Stuart Hall and other researchers of the Birmingham *Contemporary Center for Cultural Studies* (CCCS) (Hall and Jefferson, 2003), Vila states that Argentine rock was a cultural resistance movement that "in the concerts (like rituals) (...) celebrated itself and confirmed the presence of the collective actor whose identity had been questioned by the military regime" (1989, p. 15). In his perspective, therefore, there would be no paradox in the process of rock massification that occurred precisely between 1976 and 1983; its increasing popularity was a consequence of the social role it fulfilled during the violently repressive Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. Rock music and culture, he concludes, became a "genuine phenomenon of cultural resistance" that "was *highly dysfunctional* for the regime" (1987, p. 129).

However, this antagonism between rock and dictatorship does not seem so easy to be confirmed in the facts. Based on the evidence, it must be admitted that the massification of Argentine rock still stands as research problem and an unpleasant political question. It is necessary to emphasize, for example, that while guerrilla groups were violently repressed, several political and student organizations and trade unions were dissolved and thousands of activists persecuted, rock culture remained distant from the repressive focus of the dictatorship. Numbers, though never sufficient to represent repressive phenomenon in its whole dimension, indicate this lack of concern. There are no *desaparecidos* that were rock musicians or were involved in rock production, circulation or broadcasting. There were no exiles among them, *stricto sensu*, only some made the individual choice to leave the country in face of the oppressive political climate, rather than being forced to do so by specific pressures⁵. Besides, although all musicians had to be necessarily more cautious when writing their lyrics, there were few rock songs in the blacklists distributed by the government⁶. In fact, a series of documents of the province of Buenos Aires Intelligence Agency

⁴ An extended consideration on the label *rock nacional* on Alabarces (1993, pp. 23-30).

⁵ Due to various personal circumstances, Pappo, Moris, Litto Nebbia, Charly García, David Lebón, Andrés Calamaro and Miguel Abuelo, among others went abroad during the period.

⁶ Apart from any militant expression, which was rapidly banned, censorship continued being strongly associated to morality campaigns; it covered a wide range of musical genres –from folkloric to commercial music. In 2009, the COMFER (*Comité Federal de Radiodifusión*), published the secret document "Cantables cuyas letras se consideran no aptas para ser difundidas por los servicios de radiodifusión" ("Songs whose lyrics are considered unsuitable to be broadcasted") issued by the last military dictatorship. The blacklist of 221 songs shows clearly how censorship functioned in this moral perspective. Among a varied list

(DIPBA) shows that, unlike what happened with other music genres, the military regime understood rock not as a subversive expression but only as focus of potential agitation⁷. As for the military and police raids, they occurred indeed throughout dictatorship; however, they constituted –like censorship- a long-term practice (Martinez et al., 1998; Avellaneda, 1986). Its recurrence indicates deep lines of continuity between dictatorship and precedent and subsequent democratic governments.

In conclusion, from a different point of view, the strong dichotomy between the rock phenomenon and the military regime dissipates. This claim does not certainly overshadow the fact that repression fell with special emphasis on youth, affecting the possibilities of rock musicians and fans. As Valeria Manzano asserts, by 1974:

a broad and dreadful rightist backlash had been unleashed: it targeted young militants and rockers alike as supposed links in a chain that included, in the perception of rightists and many other Argentines, drug consumption, subversion, and deviancy. Youth had become the locus of potential danger for the national body, that which the military in 1976 had proclaimed its duty to heal. (2014, p. 427)

Yet the “tremendous boom” of concerts detected by Vila (1987, p. 133) in 1976 and 1977 and that Sergio Pujol finds in 1981 (2013, p. 171), and –more generally- the continuous and increasing organization of rock shows, many of them in big theatres or stadiums, contradict the image of a rock movement resisting persecutions and describe a much more ambiguous and contradictory scene. On 30 December 1980, for example, Serú Girán played for an estimated audience of 60 thousand people. The group played there his song “La grasa de las capitales”, insisting that “no se banca más” (“it’s not tolerable anymore”). The free concert, nevertheless, was promoted by the State television channel and took place at the estate of the Argentine Rural Society (SRA), one of the most powerful economic corporations of the country, strongly associated to the regime.

Even if military did not like rock or morally disapproved it, tolerance, and not hostility appears as the main attitude they chose and maintained towards it. An attitude they definitely did not hold with other kinds of artistic or political expressions. The massification process, consequently, does not necessarily support the resistance hypothesis. It can also function as its perfect counterexample.

Resistance? Through Rituals: State terrorism and the (re)construction of subjectivity

Between 1976 and 1983 the Argentine State, led by the Armed Forces, assassinated an estimated number of 20,000 people, most of which are still *desaparecidos*. The concealment of crimes coexisted with its undeniable existence. This repressive strategy had, as noted above, a basic objective: to generate terror within the population, thus encouraging political demobilization and passivity. Dictatorial authoritarianism was, indeed, much wider; it featured censorship, police arrests, and the suspension of republicanism or any kind of political activity.

Considering this historical context, should not the process of massification of rock be interpreted in a substantially different way? How did this development become possible? Why did the military not strongly pursue rock culture or censor rock music? Why did they not prohibit concerts, even if they knew these meetings enabled society to express criticisms to their government?

The concept of resistance, understood in a very restricted and operative sense –this is, as a social movement explicitly organized in defense of a particular cause-, does not seem appropriate to describe a socio-cultural phenomenon like rock. It is impossible to affirm that rock musicians or fans have had a distinctive and common program or an unequivocal will to confront the military. For a broader definition, it does not work much better. If resistance is, as Pablo Alabarces suggests, “the ability of sectors in a subaltern position to develop actions that can be interpreted (...) as indicating or willing to modify domination relationships” (2008, p. 23), any sort of expression that do not completely reproduce the dominant discourse could be presented as an act of political opposition.

of songs and artists (Cacho Castaña, Alfredo Zitarrosa or Donna Summer) there were only eight Argentine rock songs: “Violencia en el parque” (1973) by Aquelarre, “San Lorenzo” (1972) by Billy Bond, “Canción de amor para Francisca y su hijita”, “Tema de los mosquitos”, “La historia esta” y “Las dulces promesas” (todas de 1978) by León Gieco, “Ayer nomás” (1970) by Moris and Pipo Lernoud, and “Me gusta ese tajo” (1972) by Luis Alberto Spinetta. For a history of censorship in Argentine during the period 1960-1983, see Avellaneda, 1986.

⁷ Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado, “Antecedentes del conjunto musical ‘Almendra’”, Mesa Ds. Factor “Varios”, Carpeta 15.321, DIPPBA; Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado, “Antecedentes ideológicos de artistas nacionales y extranjeros que desarrollan actividades en la Argentina”, Mesa “Referencia”, Carpeta 17.479, DIPPBA.

Though it cannot be simply rejected, this explanation dismisses the ambiguities and contradictions that –in the light of what was said- define rock culture during the period 1976-1983. It might be politically correct, and it is evidently more pleasant: but it is epistemologically restricting.

It seems more appropriate, instead, to study rock transformations by considering what Roberto Pittaluga has described as the reconfiguration of the “representative frames that define representability” (2014, p. 2) that occurred during the National Reorganization Process. Pittaluga explains that the logic of silence that spread over those years had profound and lasting consequences on Argentine society. “There are those who understand silence as an act of resistance and fidelity to principles, but I found it more reasonable to recognize it as the emergence of a new subjectivity, aloof from its own past and from all political discourse”, he suggests. The military regime promoted, according to the author, the creation of a new “subjective figuration” by which “staying alive supposed becoming mute; a muteness that had a weighty political meaning” (2014, p. 6). From this perspective, rather than symbolizing opposition strategies or embodying acceptance of repressive actions, rock massification process could represent, by its ambivalence and difference with other more radically political expressions, the success of State terrorism and its social consequences.

According to Lawrence Grossberg, “understanding how rock functions requires that it be continuously placed back into its context to ask what were its conditions of possibility and what were the conditions constantly constraining its possibilities” (1992, p. 134). Throughout the last military dictatorship, Argentine rock took advantage of its conditions of possibility; it changed and became a popular phenomenon. But it was also affected, constrained, and limited by these conditions of possibility that were -at least to some extent- imposed from the outside. It is true that, as Valeria Manzano explains, even if the government set up on March 24th, 1976 had its well-defined goals, “neither were historical breaks easily implemented nor the ‘authority-reconstitution’ project completely imposed (...)” because “the past associated with the libertarian and revolutionary movements of the 1960s and early 1970s was simply too close to produce a definitive break”. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that “the military tried hard, and in some respects, they achieved major success (...). Political activism and its connection with youth and change”, Manzano concludes, “(...) would lose its utopian meanings, gone with the (youthful) bodies of thousands of people” (2014, pp. 246-247).

During the early seventies, a time of political activism and social mobilization, Argentine rock occupied a secondary position. However, since 1976, rock progressively assumed a prominent socio-cultural role. This change has traditionally being explained by the theory of resistance. I state, by contrary, that rock success does not necessarily symbolize an opposition to the regime; still more, it represents quite the contrary. The National Reorganization Process aimed to alter radically the subjectivities; it tried to demolish the foundations of a society that was challenging hegemonic power. The enormous impact rock music and culture had in Argentina during the realization of this repressive project illustrates the achievements of the military and epitomizes, in its own way, the end of a time of social contestation. Even if it expresses a social disapproval, rock massification carries the indelible traces of a political defeat. Far away from the revolutionary ideals, it is a *product* of State terrorism and it announces, at last, the beginning of a new era.

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