

Soraia Ansara

## Social and Psycho-political Impacts in the Social Construction of Political Memory of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship

This article refers to a research on the political memory of the military dictatorship in Brazil, held in three Brazilian cities (Belo Horizonte, Curitiba and São Paulo) in which we analyzed the social and psychopolitical impacts caused by the dictatorship as well as the redemocratization process in building the political memory of community and union leaders. The study revealed two important legacies that were found in the reports of interviewees: the first one refers to police repression, impunity, and authoritarianism still present in Brazilian society; the second legacy refers to the existence of a political memory built by social movements and communities that care about passing on, to the new generations, the events that occurred during the military dictatorship.

Research has clearly shown that there is no single memory but several "underground memories" (Pollak, 1989), built by the popular classes, which contradict the versions disseminated by the official memory and enhance the social movements capacity of action as a strategy of resistance and political struggle of the movements today. To the extent that this fight is assumed by other spheres of Brazilian society it may contribute to memory policies in the fight against forgetting.

### Keywords:

Political memory, authoritarianism, military dictatorship, memory policies

### 1 Introduction

The Brazilian military dictatorship, with all its repressive apparatus, has left many legacies for future generations, both negative - which remain in Brazilian society as remnants of an authoritarian and repressive society and represent a setback for the advance of democracy - and positive - stimulating the resistance practices of social movements.

The present article refers to part of a research on the Memory of the military dictatorship and repression in Brazil in which we seek to analyse the collective memory that was built from the process of Brazilian redemocratization in order to identify what has remained in the memory of generations that came after the repression period, that is, we seek to understand how repression appears in the collective memory of people who participate in trade union movements or community organizations, therefore having a political engagement.

It is noteworthy that the military dictatorship in Brazil included the period from 1964 to 1985 and, unlike other Latin American dictatorships, the Brazilian dictatorship was not embodied in the figure of a single dictator, but had alternating military chiefs in control of State and power through indirect elections. Thus, the president was indicated by an Electoral College – and this gave a democratic mask to the military regime. This sequence of military governments had, according to Sandoval

(1994b), three phases: the first from 1964 to 1968, covering the governments of Castelo Branco and Costa e Silva; a second phase, between 1969 and 1974 during the government of General Emilio Garrastazu Médici, characterized by a strict political repression and accelerated industrialization; and a third phase, from 1974 to 1985, characterized by a period of political opening, including the governments of Ernesto Geisel and João Batista Figueiredo, which marked the beginning of the democratization of the political system, with the end of bipartisanship and the uprising of strike activities and social movements.

However, like other dictatorships in Latin America, the Brazilian dictatorship was characterized by the suppression of constitutional rights, intervention in trade unions - by the strict censorship that imposed obstacles to free information and limited cultural events, reaching politicians, artists, publishers, teachers, students, lawyers, trade union leaders, intellectuals and religious representatives - prohibition to any kind of protest or social mobilization and a strong political persecution and repression to those who stood against the military regime. In Brazil, the dictatorship was based on the National Security Doctrine (Doutrina de Segurança Nacional, DSN) which was not limited to the defence of the country in facing a supposed "communist aggression" but, as Alves (1984) points out, referred to the "inside enemy", in other words, the intent to ensure National Security implied the elimination of internal communist aggression which meant direct repression of organizations and social movements and the constant surveillance of all institutions and sectors of society. In the name of National Security, during the military regime, arrests, torture and death were justified.

While the Brazilian military dictatorship strongly repressed social movements a strong resistance to the regime was established through the underground organization of many social movements and struggles for amnesty and human rights, which started in the dictatorship period and lasted throughout the democratization period.

Dra. Soraia Ansara is Professor at the Postgraduate Program in Social Change and Political Participation (PROMUSPP) at the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities of the University of São Paulo (EACH-USP) and professor at the *University Center Estacio Radial of São Paulo. Rua Dr. Luis Barreto Filho, 31, CEP 02920-140, São Paulo/ SP.*  
Email: [soraiansara@hotmail.com](mailto:soraiansara@hotmail.com)



In 1985, in the beginning of the redemocratization process social movements started to intensify their struggles, bringing back public statements with more freedom after a twenty-one year lapse. This period was of fundamental importance for our study since our research participants were born and/or experienced this post-dictatorship period, meaning that their memory was built under the impact of the redemocratization process and an official speech that blamed the military to work as political openness protagonists and the process of "stretching" of the regime. This speech produced a mute on the resistance of social movements in the crisis of the political system of military rule.

The discourses analysed in this article were collected between the years 2003-2005 in three Brazilian cities (Belo Horizonte, Curitiba and Sao Paulo). The criteria for choosing these cities was not based on the statistical significance of a given "sample" of the population, but on the meanings of political events assigned by some social categories belonging to a *locus* that we consider of great importance to a study in the psychopolitical perspective. This *locus* consists of union and community leaders (adults who have not lived repression and were politically motivated). We chose São Paulo for being one of the cities that suffered major impact during the repression time in Brazil and for considering it emblematic of the pivotal Rio- São Paulo area, where the main political repression centres were located and where there were major political movements at that time; the city of Belo Horizonte, for being considered "the cradle of the military coup", where the civil and military ruling staff of the Minas Gerais State articulated the military coup; and at least one city of southern Brazil, Curitiba, which suffered a smaller impact than the state capitals of south eastern Brazil, such as Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Belo Horizonte. In this study, we used semi-structured individual interviews<sup>i</sup> with three community leaders and three union representatives from each city - in a total of eighteen interviews. The reports were organized according to the goal of highlighting the *marks* left by the past, what has been *maintained* by the generations that preceded us, the events and collective practices in which the individuals found and find meaning (Bartlett, 1995), mainly their collective experiences in communities and social and trade union movements that contributed to the construction of their memories.

Therefore, throughout this article we will analyse the social and psycho political impacts caused by the dictatorship and by the *redemocratization process*, emphasizing two important legacies found in the reports of the interviewees: a) the first refers to *police repression, impunity, and authoritarianism*, yet rooted in Brazilian society through political institutions, policemen and even within community organizations and movements in which the leaders participate; b) the second - especially important for social movements - the *existence of a political memory built by the social movements* that contests the official memory and worries about transmitting to the future generations the events occurred during the military dictatorship.

We understand that history is a representation of the past, and an intellectual operation that breaks the memory collective bonds, as it crystallizes on the official history writing. Memory, in turn, is a phenomenon always current that keeps the bonds between what was lived and the present. As stated by Decca, "The memory is the life, always saved for the alive groups in their name, and it is in permanent evolution, open to dialectic of the memory and the oblivion" (Decca, 1992: 130), especially because it exceeds the limits of historiography and opens a multiplicity of versions about the past.

Differentiating the story that opts for the great events and the official memory disseminated by the discourse of the military government this study emphasizes the underground memories, those silenced and denied by the official discourse.

## **2 The legacy of dictatorship: police repression, impunity, authoritarianism**

Although we live in a democracy, the discourses of our interviewees showed that the years of the Brazilian military dictatorship are still present in the Brazilian society, since dictatorship affected all Brazilian people, not only the ones who lived at that time but later generations, and considering that much of what we have today is the heritage from the military regime. In their memories, there are several critical aspects.

### **2.1 The lack of a democratic political consciousness**

Community and union leaderships admit that the repressive past still remains in authoritarian but camouflaged forms in our society, in the political environment and also in the social movements in which they participate, through the attitudes of certain leaders. "Much of what we still live today is a heritage of that period. The very difficulty that we have to create political and democratic consciousness was affected a lot due to the military regime". (Anderson - union leadership)

It (the dictatorship) continues somehow, half hidden, but it continues today in our midst, (...) in the political arena. We can see that clearly. So I think it's a way to stay, (they) want to stay in power, want to continue dominating the entire political line in which we live, right? So I think it continues there, permeating our environment, in a much more hidden way. (Luciara - community leader).

The interviewees point out that social movements still have much to do to achieve true democracy, to reach a democratic political consciousness with greater autonomy in which the Brazilian people, effectively, can decide the course of the country. The democratic experience in Brazil is still in early stages, the "*democratization process*" marked by many political tensions and conflicts was completed only in 1988, with the promulgation of the new Constitution which established democratic principles in the country.

Although the Constitution of 1988 is well advanced regarding social rights, from an economic point of view it maintained a conservative profile as long as it guaranteed many privileges to business elites. Even though the New Republic policy did not break up with the policy of the military period, as the country continued tutored by

the Armed Forces and open to foreign capital and multinational companies, press censorship was abolished, traditional left parties such as: *Partido Comunista Brasileiro*, PCB and the Partido Comunista do Brasil, PC do B syndicalism and the big unions such as CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores) were fully legalized, consolidating the period of democratic transition, and ensuring the election campaigns and direct elections for president. However, advances in Brazilian new Constitution still have not been converted into more democratic practices and relationships, remaining something to be learned and built, and revealed in the speeches:

If we put it on paper, how long did the democratic period last in the country? It comes down to recent times. So, since the so-called 'discovery' of Brazil, we don't have it. It is very easy to just blame others, since the Portuguese colony, but in fact we did not have a period of democratic experience. Because this is something which is also built, this matter of consciousness. It is something that we are starting to build at this moment and with great difficulty. (...) we have a lot further to go in order to reach independence itself, mainly regarding autonomy and political consciousness, so that we can say Brazilian people is effectively, democratically deciding the path of the country. (Anderson - union leader)

## 2.2 The experience of a false democracy

The discourses showed the absence of a democratic political consciousness is the result of their own experiences in a false democracy or a "so-called democracy" as interviewees refer to the current democracy that co-exists with a repressive apparatus that is, in itself, still a form of dictatorship:

And today what we live is a false democracy. Because there is repression in a certain way, but as we live under this cloud of democracy we think it's okay. But people are dying, the Movements are being massacred, repression continues operating in our society. (Fabiola - community leader)

Eliana states that Brazilian people have not rooted democracy as a value and that dictatorship was responsible for all the social exclusion experienced today in Brazil. And despite being very positive as to the worth of the organization and struggle of social movements, she criticizes the movements themselves for not having worked more democratic values:

So today I see that we have not rooted in Brazilian people democracy as a value we cannot give up, and that the dictatorship was a bad time; a moment of darkness and lack of political and financial transparency which today turns into immense social, economic losses; it increased social exclusion and sent people out of the country; that today those who still demand to leave, it is on the account of that, it is still a reflection of that. The bottom line is we have not rooted it. I think our movements, despite all their greatness and all their worth, they did not deal with that, and they could not cope with this task. Maybe it's because of the necessity to manage immediate matters, and they forget it. (Eliana - union leader)

## 2.3 The concentration of power that introduces the idea of politics as something bad, is nefarious

For leaders the large concentration of political power, power abuse and corruption in different political and institutional spheres lead to the idea of politics as something bad, a harmful thing that conducts to disbelief

in politics and to a lack of will power from the population in getting involved in political issues and even discussing those issues.

I think today there are still some marks, I notice the harm that the dictatorship has done to my parents, my brothers and to the generation I am a part of. The dictatorship still hurts because it left these marks, of power concentration, saying that politics is a bad thing, that politics is a nefarious thing, not a subject to set you free (Emerson - community leader)

One thing, I think of the very conception of politics. People say 'Oh, I do not like politics'. I use to say 'you might not even like petty politics, because politics you do from the time you get up to the time you lie down'. Therefore, the political issue of coexistence, of fighting for your rights, of maintaining your rights is a daily matter. It's something that people have to do as survival. Omitting yourself and allowing people to do it, then, I mean, you might not even like the petty politics that some politicians do and the vast majority of politicians do. So, in that sense, today you see that people are far more politically accommodated (Armando - Union leader).

## 2.4 The fear of getting organized - social demobilization

Although we live in a democracy, there is today, according to our interviewees, a fear of speaking, of participating and engaging in collective action which comes from the fear of repression. There are few people who expose themselves or who decide to expose themselves because they are afraid of being ... As in the dictatorship, those who were distinguished in leadership were repressed, they are afraid of being pressed (Armando - union leader). The fact that there was punishment to those opposed to the military regime, who wrote or spoke criticizing it, makes, even today, many people afraid to make their criticism, to voice their opinions, to participate and even fight for their rights.

For example, the question of going out talking or writing an article for something. If it were at that time I could be punished somehow for writing it, but today I'm not going to do it either because someone might want to harm me later with it. So I kind of keep that fear, you know, it can be in writing or even saying something; I get a bit of fear (Celi - community leader)

In addition, due to extremely repressive actions, a fear of repression was produced and still stands as a demobilizing element regarding the participation of many people in social struggles. As we can see from the memories of Sandra and Eliana, remnants from the dictatorship period are evidenced still existing today, specially the fear that leads many people to not get involved in popular struggles. "Today people do not fight because they are afraid of that time, you know". (Sandra - community leader)

And the after effect is the submission of the people. The fear to struggle, to bear a confrontation, to seek their rights, you know? I participate in some meetings where I see that people are afraid of facing any authority or pretended authority (Eliana - union leader)

During the military regime in Brazil, as pointed out by Irene Cardoso (2001) there was the implementation of a "political terror" by the State that was characterized "by the construction of the total arbitrariness, by the creation of the potential enemy", spreading fear and producing the "silencing" of the Brazilian population, and

this strategy precluded politics itself since it intimidated political actions.

The political terror takes the form of a technique of silence production, from censorship going through the silencing of society through fear up to the maximum extent of its expression, when 'it kills death itself', in the disappearance procedures - disappearance of people, of their bodies, of their names, of their legal existence (Cardoso, 2001, p. 156).

With all this repressive strategy, this fear extends itself to other spheres of social life and is likewise expressed in other personal and social relationships that are still structured hierarchically in our society; such relations are still established between superior and inferior, between the principal and the obedient.

Examples abound, the authoritarianism that is present in the political organization of Brazilian society - despite the advance of democracy in the post-military dictatorship time - is reproduced, even today, in other social institutions such as the school that maintains, for the most part, an absolutely authoritarian relationship among principals, teachers and students, based on threat, punishment and fear: the problems in schools, unfortunately, are still solved with scream, with the imposition of norms and not through dialogue; we still find principals that centralize in themselves all the school organization in a bureaucratic way, ignoring completely community participation. The absence of a distribution or socialization of power - the director is part of a monarchic structure where he is the big holder of the power, establishing extreme relations of ordination and submission.

Authoritarianism inhibits the actions, imposes silence and causes fear to express opinions. Fabiola speaks of a collective fear, lived today by the population and which is the legacy of that military period and that is reflected on the way the police operates:

I think the military process left scars in society, that are present until today, a collective fear, even to participate politically. And as I work in the area of Law and I am in the Social Protection Department the issue of policing and popular safety, still has a police identity, the security is made by the police, and I think this feature comes from the military process. I mean, you do not work public safety through social projects, you work through policing, repression yet. So it is still very strong in Brazilian society, even though we live a democratic process. We still lives, in effect, a process of repression of marginalized classes. It is the marginalized people dying! So we still live under the influence of that military period. (Fabiola - community leader)

It should be noted that in so-called enforcement agencies the whole police structure remains exactly as it was during the military period. The police, when addressing people considered "suspicious", does so by using great violence, both physical and moral, guided almost always by prejudice against blacks and poor people. Although there is freedom to speak out publicly, governments still make use of police repression to contain strikes or evict families, using the most brutal violence, through shock troops against unarmed civilians. This police action is an attack against democracy and essentially against human rights, and it is identified by the interviewees as remnants of the dictatorship we live

with in our society, remnants that, according to Emerson, are bound to sacrifice the coming generations:

The state military police forces have many remnants of the dictatorship. A lot of things in this country come top down, the laws are made pretty much top down precisely because of the remnants of dictatorship. The poor do not have access to information; do not have access to freedom due to this hideous dictatorship, right. So, I think we will suffer, we suffer and Brazil will still suffer to get rid of this process. It will take some time to leave this brand of dictatorship behind. Some generations will still go by, who knows our children, maybe our grandchildren, to be born free of that process, of the mark. (Emerson - community leader)

## 2.5 The repressive position in strikes and popular demonstrations

The repressive and authoritarian attitude that still remains in Brazilian society spreads in situations of strike and popular demonstrations. The interviewees report they have gone through similar cases, with abuse of authority and police repression in strikes of their trade union categories or during mass demonstrations. The fact is that the repressive practices remain, considering that today strikes as well as land occupations and other demonstrations are repressed by shock troops, in a treatment of law and civil issues - such as the right to strike, the right to claim land and housing, and the very right to claim - as a police issue, sometimes as an army issue, fostering a culture of violence which is far from being eliminated.

For Victor, the repression is a legacy that survives on ostensible actions practiced by organs of public security that still uses torture practices showing the inefficient public security which, in your way of acting, generates repulse of the population:

I believe, especially when it comes to that public security area, we feel that at certain times, the military police adopts practices that were used at that time, you know, of torture. Recently, television reported this in a town. Then an investigation was opened and so on, but literally, military police has made use of torture practices in order to obtain confession. I think this might be a legacy that still survived. Lots of actions, especially military actions in this country today, adopt some of that repression system, but they should not, because the role, not only of the police but also of the army, should not be that at all, it should be integrating with the population, having the closest proximity to the population. (Victor - union leader)

Although these generations did not directly experience the "political terror" imposed by the military dictatorship, the "scars" of the recent past become evident and they subsist in the "underground memories" (Pollak, 1989) built by popular classes, which contradict the versions disseminated by the official memory.

## 2.6 The concealment of events through media manipulation

The union leaderships are aware of the ideological manipulation used by the military dictatorship in order to hide the repressive events and they recall mainly the use made of the World Cup in 1970:

Ah, how do you say, the full support of media to the military bosses, both to cover up certain things, not to disclose, but also to try to make up a situation. This is the case of the 1970 World Cup that they beautified, right. They gave wide disclosure and celebration as if

everything in the garden was rosy here and it was not. You had no freedom, but there were those, in the mass media who were the instigators. There was the same repression even in the cultural environment, the torture, the deaths, the exile (Ronaldo - union leader)

It is noted that the interviewees, even though not having directly experienced this past, feel affected by it, since the legacy left by the military regime, such as the police repression, social demobilization and impunity, all still have repercussions today in the social and political life of the Brazilian society. In this sense, the speech of José is quite illustrative and it also reinforces the relationship between past and present, showing how this past is brought in to the experiences of the present:

I believe there are repercussions because the history of people is brought to the present time. I believe it has repercussions. Many times people still fear the past. It is a marked past, so deep that we see the engagement of the Brazilian people; (...) we see that the Brazilian people still bear a mark of dictatorship, which is a mark of ineffective organization of their social movements. I think it carries on; actually, we carry it on through laws today. We managed to place the people on the streets to overthrow Collor<sup>ii</sup>, but that was a long struggle. The history of the dictatorship still hangs on the history of Brazilian people. (José - union leader)

The experience from the past has a strong implication in the construction of collective memory, as Connerton (1999, p. 4) pointed out "our present experiences depend to a large extent on the knowledge we have from the past and that our past images suit the legitimization of the present social order". For this author, the present experiences are linked to objects of the past, so that "we will live our present in different ways according to the different pasts we can relate it to" (p. 2).

From this perspective, the past experiences shared by our interviewees within their groups - may them be trade unions, social movements, communities, neighbourhood associations - contribute to the construction of a political memory that enhances the struggles of the present time.

## 2.7 Impunity and human rights violations

Impunity is also responsible for the continuity of the violation of human rights, considering that the failure to punish those who were responsible for torture demonstrates the inefficiency of the State in solving the acts of violation of human rights that occurred throughout the whole repressive period. We refer here to the lateness in turning public the files of the military dictatorship and in punishing those who committed torture and assassination of militants who opposed to the regime. Many of these torturers remained unpunished and held positions of trust in local, state and federal governments. Regarding human rights violations by the Brazilian State, we still come across the use of torture and spankings by police officers in abuse of police authority, by means of threats, constraints and physical aggression. That can be confirmed by the complaints of similar cases human rights in organizations, where we find several of these incidents. Evidently, in cases of substantiated violation by the State, the situation is even

worse, since the State should be the main responsible for ensuring the physical integrity and security of citizens.

Armando speaks of the necessity of not hiding *the opening of the archives* from the population. He advocates the opening as an act that means "to open wide the wounds or impositions of the dictatorship". And he ends up saying that making it public will help us understand the logic of the military power:

The burning of files at the air force base of Salvador (in December of 2004) was another ingredient, an additional edge of what had already been conducted for two weeks concerning the intention to open the files or not, of what is confidential<sup>iii</sup> and what is not then there is a number of things. In fact, we will be working with wounds. You will open, open wide the wounds or impositions of the military dictatorship, that is, it is true authoritarianism, right.. (Armando - union leader)

Many files of that time were destroyed at the end of the dictatorship - including the episode in 2004, as pointed out by Armando, when the press reported the burning of files at the Air Force base of Salvador in Bahia. In 2012, with the release of the files to public consultation at the Brasilia National Archives, it was made public that many files stored in secrecy were destroyed by order of the government of João Figueiredo (1979-1985). These orders departed from the main agency information of the military dictatorship, the National Information System (Sistema Nacional de Informação, SNI), extinct only in 1990, at the end of the government of José Sarney (1985-1990).

The investigation of the facts, rescuing the trajectory of the dead and missing people of this recent period is important, not only from the point of view of the right of their families to demand the government account on how and why their sons, fathers, brothers or partners died, but also to clarify how the facts really happened and not as the military regime intended them to be told:

Tracking, digging out and uncovering mark the willingness to bring up the pieces of bodies and truth that are lacking, thus assembling proofs and completing what was unaccomplished by Justice. The remains of the missing people - remains of the missing past - must first be discovered (un-covered) and then assimilated: that is, reinserted in a biographical and historical narration which admits their evidence (...) (Richard, 1999, p. 328).

During the democratically elected governments that followed, in 2003, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva takes office - the first Brazilian president emerging from the trade union movement. In his government, human rights issues started to be discussed, especially by the National Office of Human Rights (Secretaria Nacional de Direitos Humanos), which was directly linked to the General Secretariat of the Presidency. This office, together with representatives of civil society and in partnership with other Ministries, composed the special committee to analyse and determine whether or not the files held by the federal government should be released.

The persistence of Human Rights groups and of the Family Members of Political Dead and Missing Persons Commission to commence an investigation and reveal

the deaths and disappearances of the military dictatorship period were fundamental to the constitution of a National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, CNV), after almost 30 years since the end of the dictatorship. Created from the Law 12528/2011 and established on May 16, 2012, the Commission, on the one hand, represents an important step towards the inquiry of the crimes committed during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship and a breakthrough in the reconstruction of the political memory of that repressive period. On the other hand, however, we cannot avoid pointing out the limitations of such inquiry, as it has repeatedly been denounced by representatives of the Group *Tortura Nunca Mais*, in Rio de Janeiro.

Since its opening the National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, CNV) has proposed to investigate the serious human rights violations and the repressive acts perpetrated in the period from 1946 to 1988 (referring to civil between 1937-1945, military dictatorship from 1964-1985 and the beginning of democratization), and to establish a communication path with society as well as partnerships with government agencies and civil society organizations. After two and a half years the results are available in the final report on the Internet ([www.cnv.gov.br](http://www.cnv.gov.br)) that was officially presented on December 10, 2014, the International Human Rights Day. However, this report deserves a specific study and a more accurate review, which we intend to do in due time, once it does not clarify everything that was concealed during the military regime, generating many controversies. Such controversies regard certain proposed solutions, especially in relation to the political missing persons and the access to all files of the apparatuses of repression that corroborated the atrocities committed, and also concerning how, where and by whom they were practiced (Coimbra, 2013)

The opening of the dictatorship files is a right to memory that allows the victims and their families the access to the information that concerns their lives. This information is under the confidential protection of the State power and its opening makes it possible that the violations of human rights are investigated by Justice. We believe that the disclosure on the atrocities perpetrated against those who were opposed to the regime intends to stop State political violence, enabling the denunciation of the severe violation of human rights, avoiding the repetition of past mistakes and the concealment of facts and information relevant to the consolidation of democracy and the transparent relationship between State and society.

### **3 The existence of a political memory built by the social movements**

In this study we developed the concept of political memory which is collective in our understanding in the sense it is advocated by Halbwachs (1990), in other words, it's constructed by the from the social groups and regarding the current political context.

The collective memory does not match all the representations of the past, but can be understood as the selection, interpretation and transmission of certain representations, specifically produced and stored at a certain point of view.

However, we can't talk about a single collective memory, since society is composed of a plurality of groups, who design and reconstructs the memory, giving new meaning to the past from their values and interests. In this process there are conflicts and disputes in the interpretation and meaning of the past enabling us to understand why some reports disappear and others are converted into hegemonic accounts.

When we say that there is a political memory it means there is mutual influence between the political consciousness and the construction of memory, so that the memory stimulates the political consciousness and provides forms of collective action, the same way as political consciousness can be crucial in constructing political memory. In the political participation process, the subjects became aware of their past, their social and political reality by constructing a political memory that empowers and mobilizes them to participate in the current political struggles. This kind of close relationship between the construction of the community and union leaderships with their political behaviour is an aspect of the political memory, especially because we understand that the political memory perspective is different from the one experienced by collective memories, in other words, the prism of political behaviour (Ansara, 2005; 2008).

We must emphasize that this political behaviour is closely linked to the formation process of political consciousness which consists in understanding "(...) the interrelated social psychological dimensions of meanings and information that allow individuals to make decisions as to the best course of action within political contexts and specific situations" (SANDOVAL, 2001, p. 185).

The idea above enables us to understand - as suggested by Sandoval (1994a) - how through political consciousness, the subjects are not only subjects but also political actors since they begin to participate in the society. Thus, these actors' political memory has the function of activating and enhancing collective action.

The memories of our respondents gave evidence of certain aspects which denounced political and ideological manipulation strategies of memory, through what we have called *oblivion policies* established along the military dictatorship, from the construction of a consensus which produced the official memory; including amnesty processes, which hindered the clarification of political crimes in order to erase the memory and act as if nothing had happened; to the burning and destruction of documents in order to hide the acts of terror from the population (abductions, illegal arrests, torture, murder and occultation of the remains of corps) which imposed the silence and oblivion.

Our research notes that, throughout the process of Brazilian democratization, several policies established an official memory that used all the ideological devices to lead to oblivion of what happened during the military

dictatorship (1964-1985) and to erase the marks of the resistance and the popular class struggle in an attempt to hide from the Brazilian society the history of the "losers", as if they didn't belong to the politic scenery. The official memory, since the military dictatorship time, justified the generals' authority and the state violence by the utilization of ideologies as the instauration of the social order, the warranty of national development over the meaning of "economic miracle" and the nation sovereignty preservation. The official memory made a single version of the past, neutralizing the social conflicts, universalizing specific interests, naturalizing historical facts and relativizing the use of violence use, making the population believe that the military regime was one of the best periods lived on the Brazilian history, since it filed the peace, the order and the national balance.

It can be said that there are continuity and rupture around the political memory of repression in Brazil that manifest themselves in different versions that reveal how real battles for memory. Kaiser (2005) classifies the memory of the transition in three possible groupings: the version of the military, which maintains today's speech that the military defended the Brazilian population of the communist threat and subversion; the position of the human rights movement that reconstructs the memory of the victims denouncing the atrocities committed by the dictatorship and demanding the investigation of crimes under international law and the consensus memory, the result of negotiated transition from dictatorship to democracy that has an intermediate position, a memory that exposes a limited insight into the crimes of the dictatorship. While acknowledging the excesses committed during the dictatorship, the consensus speech questions the extent of repression and advocates forgiveness. Thus, the consensus memory aligns the policy of silence and oblivion favoring the official memory (Telles, 2007).

Although the process of handling the "official memory" - which was based on the propagation of terror and fear or concealment of political violence events - has produced alienation and the demobilization of the vast majority of the Brazilian population which does not get involved in policies actions, our data showed how the experience of participation enabled the reconstruction of a *political* memory capable of breaking the alienation through the criticism of the official memory and by empowering the people who currently participate in social movements to continue the struggle against all kinds of repression and authoritarianism.

In order to show how such a memory was configured we must point out some elements which allow us to state the union and community leaders have built a political memory clearly opposed to the official memory which predominates in the imaginary of the population.

### 3.1 The knowledge of the past enhances the action of social movements today

Speaking of the military dictatorship, the interviewed leaders pointed to the repression imposed by the military regime in Brazil and highlighted that the union and

popular movements have organized themselves and fought against repression assuming the risk of being tortured or killed, therefore they deserve recognition of Brazilian society.

What also calls the attention is those people's enthusiasm to keep their hope and will to struggle against dictatorship what enabled us to celebrate the direct elections "as diretas"<sup>iv</sup> even if there was a coup by the Electoral College it was for sure a victory for the working class. (José – union leader)

For most trade unionists and community leaders, the victory against the dictatorship is attributed to the working class and social movements which have began their organizing force during the dictatorship and had stronger power than today. They pointed out that the struggle for freedom, the confrontation against repressive governments, social injustice, authoritarianism and corruption demanded organization of the movement. Knowing that many people shed their blood and lost their lives fighting for freedom, drives them to struggle and make them realize that there is still much to do.

I think that it make sus realize that there is still much more to do. And I think today through the organization of the people, social movements, pastoral, ecclesial base communities, you can at least experience what drove them to lose their lives for a justice cause, for freedom. So I think this drives. (...) So I see it has much to do with the recent popular organization. If we organize ourselves as a popular movement or as a community it is because we believe that it is possible to do something different. Another world is possible, another Brazil is possible through organization (Luciara - community leader)

In this sense, knowing the past and the example of those who struggled against the dictatorship still remains among the people who are struggling today, and provides the continuity of history. The relation between past and present which is relevant for building the political memory appears in the comparison they make between one period and another showing how the struggles of the past mobilize movements in the current struggles.

(...) But I also believe, that this change will only come with an organized people, the people on the street and then the role of the social movements is essential. And then this image of struggling for freedom, of facing governments is important because these people also overturned a military dictatorship.(...) It means, our role here in this movement is to organize people to overthrow this thing called capitalism. .... (Edilson-union leader).

The last fighting spirit, which mobilized the people to "overthrow the dictatorship", is a reference that enhances the movement to overthrow is capitalism and neo-liberalism, whose strategy is presented in a subtle form of domination, making it difficult to identify against what one is fighting, something that, according to them, was evident in the period of dictatorship.

The willpower that mobilized those who fought against the dictatorship was also more effective because the "enemy" (the military regime, with its repressive techniques) was concrete, visible.

The memories that bring back events, that are rebuilt and kept for the social and union movements, coming from those who are predisposed to act against the repressive mechanisms and who are opposed to political conformism, to submission and to the emphasis on order that justifies repression. In this sense, memories are able to transform the past knowledge into new political practices in the near future.

### **3.2 The importance of political consciousness - the struggle against forgetting**

We realize that knowledge of the military dictatorship and repression occurs when these individuals start to have political consciousness through participation in the union and movements, as they learned about the dictatorship in meetings, seminars promoted by social movements and communities in which they participate, in positions of leadership training in the "popular schools"<sup>v</sup>.

From the moment you're been part of a movement, part of a community, it is necessary to have this interest to know what is our history, what our roots are. I attended many training meetings that gave me that support to know a little more about what has led us today to organize as a community. I knew the story through popular movements. I think preserving this memory of the dictatorship within the social movement is essential, transmitting this memory to the new generations. (Luciara – community leader).

The community and union leaderships built a *collective memory* which lies within the *memory social landmarks* that, according to Halbwachs (1990), refer to the groups they belong to and act as memory supporters. Those groups keep the military dictatorship's memory alive by this shared past that is remembered through their educational and political activities, motivating the new leaders to be aware of the importance of knowing the past to act in the present. It is about a collective memory, which its particulars and its relations with political action, that builds as a political memory that recognizes the resistance force of the social movements that fought against the military dictatorship. The processes lived and shared by groups and social movements that refer to past events are memories that are particularly important for social movements and groups in the present. (Fentress & Wickham, 2003: p. 15). Therefore, we cannot separate the construction of political memory, groups and social movements, as we understand that the constructions of the past are supported by collective structures, as pointed out by Halbwachs (1990, 2004) and created by social actors, whether groups or individuals. In this perspective, the collective memories depend on the relationships that these social actors establish and develop with the family, social class, social movements, the school, the church, political parties, etc.

### **3.3 Those who have experienced political violence and torture gave a citizenship lesson in for the country!**

The interviewed contrast the courage of political militants and of the people who suffered political violence showing that the generation fought and faced the

dictatorship must be recognized and revered, because it gave a citizenship lesson to Brazil.

This leaves us enthusiastic because you think about the violence that these people suffered! And at the same time something outstanding is the courage of these activists, these people. These people actually gave a citizenship lesson to Brazil! (Emerson - community leader)

Despite recognizing the existence of the dictatorship sequels, such as fear that lead many people to not get involved in popular struggles, this fear does not deter them to participate in social movements.

### **3.4 The conquest of freedom and the apprenticeship for the future**

This achievement, obtained through suffering and struggle, was a learning experience that brought prospects for the country and allowed people a glimpse of what Brazil is today and how it can be different: "I think the importance of people meeting and knowing a little more about the history and the country has to do with having more prospects, more solutions, a chance to build something different and also to value the organization itself." (Luciara - community leader)

"(...) I did not experienced it, or had family members who have experienced it. But now, as I have a political role, I also have a certain identity with the political struggle of the people who gave their lives for this cause (...), including a more critical view of the military police, authoritarian experiences, policies. I would say this more critical view, politically. (Fabiola - community leader)

### **3.5 The memorial spaces created by communities and social movements**

Community leaders living in Perus - one of the neighbourhoods in which the study was carried out in district of São Paulo - indicated that they learned of the dictatorship because of existing clandestine cemetery, where usually local communities and social movements celebrated the events of the period of military dictatorship in Brazil. The simple fact that there is a common ditch in the cemetery of Perus o, might not be enough to evoke the memory of what happened during the dictatorship. However the activities organized by local groups, communities, Church, Human Rights Movement convert this space into a memorial space, "a place of memory," where they celebrate and reflect on the victims of the military regime in Brazil.

Regarding celebrations, Paul Connerton (1999) points out that it is through commemorative ceremonies - using the performance - that the knowledge of the past is transmitted and preserved. For him such ceremonies allow us to "see that the images of the past and the knowledge of the past are remembered, transmitted and stored for performances (more or less) rituals" (Connerton 1999, p.45). In this regard, Connerton (1999) discusses the important role of celebrations held as a resource to make memory of past events, such as the celebrations held in Mass Grave Perus Cemetery in São Paulo, mentioned by respondents. In addition to being a resource used to evoked memory, memorial spaces

and celebrations are active processes of collective memory, as Cardoso (2001, 2000) rightly points out.

However, celebrations and commemorations may allow social groups to revive the memory of significant events, generating awareness of the past, but also how they can be used by the ruling powers to keep the official memory. This warning is made by Ricoeur (2003), stating that there is an abusive political use of national celebrations, the great dates characterized by victories and defeats and that are clearly linked to manipulation and exploitation of memories, such as the celebrations of the "Discovery of Brazil", the "abolition of slavery" and the "Revolution 1964" (term officially attributed to the Military Coup of 1964), among others.

In fact, what comes up when we highlight the memorial spaces created by communities and social movements, such as the Clandestine Cemetery in Perus, is the dispute of different versions that are attributed to the past, these senses that deny the great national holidays, which do not relate to the struggles of the popular classes. These examples confirm the importance and the need to develop policies that, as suggested Perrone (2002, p. 109), "create and maintain memorial spaces that help build and nurture a collective memory", which questions the versions established as official memory and, at the same time, understand that building a political memory brings to public attention the tensions between history and the stories of individuals, the global and the local, the private and the public, the State and Social Movements.

Memories of union and community leaders show us that the reconstruction process of the past dictatorship is done through the political awareness and participation in social movements and own memory devices built by these movements, as the courses, seminars, trainings, celebrations etc. In other words, their memories are reconstructed under a political consciousness that makes this memory a political memory. It is, therefore, a dialectical process in which the collective memory works as a consciousness vehicle, for people to recover the historical memory, to take the authenticity of this past and link it to the present time and , to a personal and national project (Martín-Baró, 1998, p.171).

Knowing the past enables society not to remain passive, accepting the events as inevitable, and contributes to not repeating past mistakes. In this sense, the political memory reconstruction process breaks with fatalism. In this perspective, the memory policy plays a key role in the process of political participation of social actors working today in the social movements, since it enables those generations to discover selectively those "elements of the past that have been effective ways to defend the interests of exploited classes and returning again to be useful for the purposes of struggle and conscientization" (Fals Borda, 1985, apud Martín-Baró et al., 1998, 301).

Therefore, based on memory built by community and union leaders, we can say that knowing the past increases the power of intervention, and stimulates collective actions, since these collective memories can

recognize what was in the "underground" of history as something lost, veiled, hidden.

#### 4 Final considerations

In this article we elucidate the political memory of military dictatorship and repression in Brazil built by community and union leaders, trying to show that the presence of two major legacies in their memories: a) police repression, impunity, and authoritarianism; b) the existence of a political memory built by social movements and communities. The memory of these leaders reveal a past built by forgotten memories, memories not told in official narratives, but which are now told by themselves as a resistance policy that enhances memory to continue the fight against political authoritarianism, domination and injustice, seeking a society that is really fair and democratic.

This reconstruction allowed to understand memory as a strategy of resistance and political struggle, that is, as a battle between antagonistic versions of a dictatorial political period that marked the life of the participants and the history of the Brazilian society. Therefore, the study shows that the process of building political memory is a real struggle against forgetting that brings us to the debate on the importance and the need to create "memory policies" that counter the "oversight policies" established throughout the dictatorship and the Brazilian democratization period. (Ansara, 2012)

Among the legacies of the dictatorship evoked this political memory, we identified at least five strategies used by repressive apparatus in their forgetfulness policies:

a) the manufacture of consensus or collective consensual memory - clearly present in the policies established in the process of transition from dictatorship to democracy, in which the post-dictatorial regime sought to defend and restore national harmony, based on the consensus of speech. This strategy attempts to erase the past and promote forgetting by hiding the crimes committed by the dictatorship and erasing the memory developed by resistance struggles against the dictatorship;

b) amnesty processes - seeking civic peace, reconciling enemies in order to establish social harmony by institutional forgetfulness, through the amnesty process that puts an end to all ongoing processes, suspending all the lawsuits, preventing the determination of political crimes and erasing the memory, as if nothing had happened.

c) the political and ideological manipulation - while acts of violence proliferated throughout the country, the military regime used political and ideological manipulation to hide these events from the population. This manipulation was practiced by the official media, the formal school, football (World Cup 1970 - that overshadowed the events), the imposition by fear, the economic miracle and patriotism preached by the regime.

d) the burning of files - many of the era files were destroyed at the end of the dictatorship.

e) impunity - Brazil does not punish the torturers and murderers of the period, as in other Latin American countries, and although the Brazilian government has acknowledged its responsibility for the crimes committed during the dictatorship, this recognition has not reached those who died in clashes with police and those who committed suicides motivated by the regime, this recognition was not extended to all victims of the regime.

These strategies attempted to hide the repressive acts and also the violation of human rights committed by the state, assigning a normal character to the events as if they had not occurred; establishing dictatorial power relations as natural, invisible and even unconscious, alienating and falsely justifying dictatorship as necessary for 'maintaining social order'.

However, the memory of the past of resistance and struggle mobilizes the political actors of the new generations to the collective action of the present. Therefore, we cannot deny that we are facing an extremely important legacy: political memory built by social movements that challenge us to think about memory policies that include the demands of the movements for building a popular memory or a "memory of the losers", by groups and minorities who create new supporters and places of memory, through discourses, demonstrations, celebrations, rituals, the systematic organization of existing own files and the struggle for opening the dictatorship's files.

The discussion of the political memory is still fresh in Brazil and has intensified since the creation of the National Truth Commission, which by making public its first report again opened this debate. However it is not just the work of this committee, but should be expanded. Politics of memory can strengthen public structures of the civil society and expand the meaning of the public debate trying to heal the wounds caused by the past and build a collective memory that counteracts the official memory. In other words, clarifying the killings and political disappearances that occurred during the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship, building and maintaining memorials spaces that help build and nurture a collective memory that questions the established versions, so that the politics of memory is assumed as an activity of utmost importance in the fight against oblivion policies (Perrone, 2002) and, accordingly, pointing out to the construction of new social practices.

## References

Alves, M. H. M. 1984. Estado e Oposição no Brasil (1964-1984). [State and opposition in Brazil (1964-1984)]. Petrópolis/RJ: Vozes.

Ansara, Soraia. 2005. Memória política da ditadura militar e repressão no Brasil: uma abordagem psicopolítica. [Political memory of military dictatorship and repression in Brazil: a psycho-political approach]. Tese de Doutorado em Psicologia Social. São Paulo: PUC-SP.

Ansara, Soraia. 2008a. Memória Política, Repressão e Ditadura no Brasil. [Political Memory, Repression and Dictatorship in Brazil]. Curitiba: Juruá.

Ansara, Soraia. 2008b. Memória Política: construindo um novo referencial teórico na Psicologia Política. [Political Memory: constructing a new theoretical reference in the political psychology]. Revista Psicologia Política, 8(15), 31-56.

Ansara, Soraia. 2012. Políticas de memória X políticas do esquecimento: possibilidades de desconstrução da matriz colonial. [Politics of memory X politics of oblivion: possibilities of deconstruction of the colonial matrix]. Revista Psicologia Política. 12 (24). 297-311.

Bartlett, F. C. 1995. Recordar: un estudio de Psicología Experimental. [Remembering. A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology]. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. (Originalmente publicado em inglês em 1930).

Cardoso, Irene. 2001. Para uma Crítica do Presente. [For a Present Criticism]. São Paulo: Editora 34.

Coimbra, Cecília M.B. 2013. Comissão Nacional da Verdade: acordos, limites e enfrentamentos. [National Commission of Truth: agreements, limits and confrontations]. (<http://www.torturanuncamais-ri.org.br/?artigo=comissao-nacional-da-verdade-acordos-limites-e-enfrentamentos>).

Connerton, Paul. 1999. Como as Sociedades Recordam. [How Societies Remember]. Oeiras: Celta Editora.

Fentress, J. & Wickham, C. 2003. Memoria Social. [Social Memory]. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1990. A Memória Coletiva. [The Collective Memory]. São Paulo: Vértice. (Originalmente publicado em francês em 1950).

Halbwachs, Maurice. 2004. Los Marcos Sociales de la Memoria. [Social Frameworks of Memory]. Barcelona: Anthropos Editorial. (Originalmente publicado em francês em 1925).

Kaiser, Suzana. 2005. Posmemories of terror. A new generations colpes with the legacy of the "Dirty War". New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Martín-Baró, Ignacio. 1998. Psicología de la liberación. [Liberation Psychology]. Madrid: Trotta.

Perrone, Claudia. 2002. Políticas de Memória e do esquecimento: as ruínas do sentido. [Politics of memory and oblivion] In: Rauter, C., Passos, E. & Benevides, R. (Orgs.). Clínica e Política: Subjetividade e Violação dos Direitos Humanos. Equipe Clínico-grupal. Grupo Tortura Nunca Mais – RJ. Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Franco Basaglia/Editora Te Cora. 101-110.

Pollak, Michael. 1989. Memória, Esquecimento, Silêncio. [Memory, Forgetting, Silence]. Estudos Históricos. FGV. 3.

Richard, Nelly. 1999. Políticas da Memória: Técnicas do esquecimento. [Politics of Memory: techniques of oblivion]. In: Miranda, W. M. (Org.). Narrativas da



modernidade. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica. 321-338.

Ricouer, Paul. 2003. *La memoria, la historia, el olvido*. [Memory, History, Oblivion]. Madrid: Editorial Trota.

Sandoval, Salvador. A.M. 1994a. *Algumas Reflexões sobre Cidadania e Formação de Consciência Política no Brasil*. [Some Thoughts about Citizenship and Political Awareness in Brazil]. In. M.J.Spink. *A Cidadania em Construção: uma Reflexão Transdisciplinar*. São Paulo: Cortez. 59-92.

Sandoval, Salvador. A.M. 1994b. *Os Trabalhadores Param: Greves e Mudança Social no Brasil: 1945-1990*. [Workers stopping: Strikes and Social Change in Brazil: 1945-1990]. São Paulo: Ática.

Sandoval, Salvador. A.M. 2001. The Crisis of the Brazilian Labor Movement and the Emergence of Alternative Forms of Working-Class Contention in the 1990s. *Revista Psicologia Política*. 1 (1). 173-195.

Telles, Edson. 2007. *Brasil e África: os paradoxos da democracia*. *Memória Política em democracias com herança autoritária*. [Brazil and Africa: the paradoxes of democracy. Political Memory in democracies with authoritarian heritage]. Tese de Doutorado em Filosofia. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo.

## Endnotes

i All interviews have complied with the ethical standards of the Ethics Committee in the research, and the subjects signed the Instrument of Consent. All names are fictitious.

ii First president elected by direct vote, in 1989 and deposed through impeachment in 1992.

iii Many files of different military organizations were considered confidential and sensitive, thus becoming subject to the confidentiality of the Decree 4,553 / 2002 which extended the boundaries of all the categories of "sensitive documents relating to the security of society and the State" (reserved, confidential, secret and top secret) for 50 years. This decree, considered unconstitutional, was repealed only in 2012.

iv José refers to the movement known as Direct Elections Now, that mobilized several sectors of Brazilian society at large street demonstrations, with the claim "Direct elections now!" In the years 1983-1984. This move did not result in direct elections, as the government is an electoral college which indicated Tancredo Neves for president. His unexpected death before assuming the presidency brought to power his deputy José Sarney, who ruled Brazil from 1985 to 1989. Direct elections were only implemented in 1989, this election that elected President Fernando Collor de Mello.

v These "public schools" are those alternative schools of leadership training organized by ONGs (Organizações Não Governamentais, in English, NGOs), churches or collective social movements.