Political Discourse Theory in the Study of Resistance Movements: an Alternative Account of the Emergence and Constitution of the Human Rights Movement in Argentina

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> […] In the Plaza de Mayo we were all alike. We were all similar one to another, they had taken away to all of us our sons and daughters, we were all hearing the same, we had all gone to the same places. It seems that there was no difference nor distance. That is what we felt so well. That is why the plaza assembled us. That is why the Plaza was consolidated[1].

Abstract. This paper has a twofold objective. Firstly, it aims to shed some light on the emergence and constitution of the human rights movement and discourse in Argentina, and secondly, it attempts to show how political discourse theory can actually contribute to the full understanding of new forms of social mobilization. To do this, it looks at the ways the human rights movement has been accounted for by the literature and it points at some of the common problems and difficulties found in most accounts. It argues that for a more satisfactory understanding of this phenomenon, the movement's emergence should be conceived as the result of a contingent process of political articulation and identification which could have failed in its constitution and success. In this way, it turns to explore the dislocatory effects that prompted the process of popular mobilization, and later, to analyze the discursive conditions that made this new sociopolitical identity possible. Finally, it concludes with some remarks on how drawing on a discourse theory perspective can help us to understand previously unattended aspects involved in the formation of new forms of social and political mobilization.
Key-words: human rights movement; political discourse theory; political identity; political articulation.

La Teoría del Discurso Político en el Análisis de los Movimientos de Resistencia: Un Abordaje Alternativo Sobre la Emergencia y Constitución del Movimiento de Derechos Humanos en Argentina

Resúmen. El objetivo de este artículo es doble. En primer lugar, se propone iluminar la emergencia y constitución del movimiento de derechos humanos y su discurso en la Argentina, y en segundo lugar, intenta mostrar como la teoría del discurso político puede contribuir a un mejor entendimiento de nuevas formas de movilización social. A tal efecto, primeramente se analizan los modos en los cuales el movimiento de derechos humanos y su discurso han sido abordados por los estudios existentes y se señalan algunos de los problemas y dificultades que estos estudios comparten. Se sostiene que para lograr un mejor entendimiento del movimiento de derechos humanos, su emergencia debe ser entendida como resultado de un proceso contingente de identificación y articulación política que pudo haber fracasado tanto en su éxito como en su constitución. El articulo entonces explora los efectos dislocatorios que forzaron el proceso de movilización popular, y luego las condiciones discursivas que hicieron a este nueva identidad sociopolítica posible. Finalmente, se concluye con algunos señalamientos acerca de cómo este tipo de enfoques basados en la teoría del discurso político puede ayudar a iluminar aspectos desatendidos previamente en la formación de nuevos movimientos sociopolíticos.
Palabras claves: movimiento de derechos humanos, teoría del discurso político, identidad política, articulación política.

1 Introduction

The social mobilization around human rights claims in Argentina and the language that made it possible found their origins in the late 1970s. Even if the liberal tradition and its emphasis on individual rights had inspired the political discourses of the beginning of the twentieth century (Botana, 1998; Romero, 1979), this tradition was gradually called into question and eventually left

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[1]Hebe de Bonafini, Conference given by the president of the association of "Mothers of Plaza de Mayo" in Liberarte on July 8th 1988.

aside by the nationalist and populist political projects that dominated the national political formation since 1930s (Bruchrucker, 1987; James, 1988; Altamirano, 2001). In this way, the liberal notion of individual rights was displaced by a new form of understanding that conceived rights as intrisically associated to the will of the people and the common good. In the decades previous to the 1976 military coup, the liberal notions of individual rights, liberties and democracy were disregarded and considered as not valuable avenues for social change by most political and social forces (Barros, 2008). The language of individual rights occupied then a marginal position within the political context and was only available in marginal and small redoubts of society (Cheresky, 1992, 1999; Panizza, 1995, 2005; Roniger y Szanjder, 1999).

It was then under the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and as a result of the mobilisation of the relatives of the victims of illegal repression that this situation started to change. As it has been frequently argued, these groups inaugurated an unprecedented mobilisation around human rights issues in the country and helped in this way to disseminate a wider concern for human rights all over society (Jelin, 1987, 1995; Landi y Gonzalez Bombal, 1995; Gonzalez Bombal, 1987, 2004; Cheresky, 1992, 1999; Brysk, 1994; Leis, 1989; Quiroga, 1996; Fisher, 1989, 1993; Morales, 2010; Gorini, 2006). Since then, human rights issues have acquired a central position within the Argentinean political context and the language of human rights have became an available and legitimate language for different social and political forces alike (Pereyra, 2005; Barros, 2001, 2008).

This paper is part of a larger research project, in which I analyze thoroughly, from a discourse theory perspective, the emergence, constitution and development of this unprecedented popular mobilization around human rights claims in Argentina (Barros, 2001, 2008, 2009, 2012). One of the main questions that encouraged this project was related to the conditions that made possible that change we mentioned above. That is, if until the military coup the human rights language was alien to the local political culture, we could wonder, how was that a resistance movement around human rights' claims could actually emerge and constitute itself in the country? In other words, how was that within that particular context the language and the mobilization around it were actually possible?

My aim in this work is then to bring some light on these questions in the first instance, and also, to show -from the actual analysis- how a political discourse theory can contribute for the understanding of the emergence of new forms of social mobilization and resistance in social and political research. To do this, I will begin by briefly looking at the ways the human rights movement and discourse have been accounted for by the existing literature on the matter, pointing particularly at some of the common problems and difficulties of most of these writings. Central to my criticism is the contention that the movement's emergence and constitution should not be understood as a necessary or as a natural reaction to the atrocities carried out by the last military regime, but instead as the result of a contingent process of political articulation and as a response which could have failed in its constitution and success. I argue then that the appearance of the human rights movement and language in the country can only be understood in its full complexity if special attention is given to the dislocatory effects that prompted the sociopolitical mobilization of the relatives of the victims of repression, and to the particular discursive conditions that made possible not only the articulation of the claims for the disappeared people, for truth and justice around the central notion of human rights, but also, the gradual identification of relatives' groups with the human rights cause and struggle. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks on how drawing on a discourse theory perspective helped us to understand the formation of the human rights demand and on how this perspective can actually contribute to the study of resistance movements and new forms of social and political mobilization in general.

2 The Argentine Human Rights Movement and Discourse Revisited

Most of the existing literature on the human rights movement and discourse in Argentina has primarily explained the movement's emergence and constitution as a direct and spontaneous response to the nature of the repression carried out by the military regime during the 1970s (Brysk, 1994; Leis, 1989; Jelin, 1987, 1995; Gorini, 2006). According to this view, it was precisely because of the unprecedented and massive repression inaugurated in 1976 that a permanent social movement for human rights could in fact emerge and gain widespread social recognition in the country.

In addition to this general account, some of these approaches have further explained this broad assumption tracing the motives of the social mobilization and claims back to a pre-existing concern or belief in human rights that was eventually expanded when a large scale of repression took place during the 1970s (Taylor, 1998; Jelin and Hershberg, 1996; Gonzalez Bombal and Sondereguer, 1987). As one of these accounts suggests, the fact that human rights were massively violated by the dictatorship "implied a widened social basis for concern about rights, for demands that those should be respected, and for solidarity among the diverse victims of abuses by the state" (Jelin and Hershberg, 1996, p. 4). Thus, from these accounts, the concern for fundamental human rights was already there at the moment of the coup, and the unprecedented mobilization was the result of its extended dissemination as a result of illegal repression.

Other writings instead, have made emphasis on the novelty of the human rights ideas in the region (Cheresky, 1992; Panizza, 1995; Roniger y Szanjder, 1999). That is to say, the gross, massive and systematic character of the human rights violations committed by the military regime prompted the irruption of new forms of social mobilisation that brought about a new language of basic individual rights in the country. As it has been explained by one of these accounts, this movement was holder of a different view regarding rights. In other words, through their symbolic and legal protests groups such as the *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* interpellate the power of the state appealing to universal principles which were presented as alien to the power itself. In this way, the mobilization around the defence of human rights not only questioned the military regime and its practices putting a new language in play, but also the practices of the very political traditions that dominated most part of the twentieth century in Argentina.

Now, as I have mentioned in the introduction, all these accounts shared some difficulties and shortcomings. These problems I consider are related, firstly, to a lack of explanation regarding the political and historical conditions that made possible the emergence of a new form of social mobilization around human rights claims in the country, and secondly, to the poor attention devoted to the identity formation process that this new mobilization entailed (Barros, 2008). There is a common assertion in the existing literature that the mobilisation against the terrorist practices of the state brought about an unprecedented concern for human rights, but there is a *lack* of explanation about *how* this could have happened, *how* this was possible. Most of the writings, either those which highlight the spreading out of an already present human rights language, or those which, in contrast, emphasize its novelty, assume the link between the claims of the relatives and the human rights language as immediate and necessary, as if the claims of the relatives would have been naturally conceived as human rights claims from the very beginning of their struggle. In this sense, it could be argued that these approaches are unable to show *how* the groups of the relatives articulated their claims in a human rights language, and as a result of this, they have also failed to explain how these groups became a *human rights movement*, That is to say, how the movement and its human rights discourse were eventually constituted.

Thus, if a more satisfactory understanding of the human rights movement and discourse is to be achieved, we need to be able to account for the very process of formation of this movement and for the conditions that made it possible. Having as one of its central concern the question of identity formation, I consider a political discourse theory perspective can provide the pertinent means for

producing a more historically and politically sensitive interpretation of the movement's emergence and constitution[2]. I will briefly introduce some of the main premises of this perspective.

The first premise of political discourse theory states that the social must be conceived as a discursive space. This means that every object and action has a meaning and this meaning is given by the establishment of a *system of relations* with other objects and actions. This *systematic set of relations and meaning* is socially and politically constructed and is what Laclau and Mouffe call *discourse* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990). In few words, from this perspective, objects, practices and subjects acquire their meaning and identity only within the context of historically specific discourses within which they are constituted[3]. Thus, starting from this conception of discourse, this theory affirms the primacy of the political dimension in the institution of the social. Discourses are always political constructions that forge and produce society and the way it organises. The aim of the theory is then to comprehend and explain this political moment of social institution, and in this way, one of its major concerns has been to account for the manner in which discourses and identities emerge and constitute (Howarth, 2000). The second premise of this theory is that the institution of the social can never be total or complete as there is a field of discursivity that not only surrounds, but always subverts and dislocates the social and the given meaning, making visible their radical contingency (Laclau, 1990, p. 90)[4]. In other words, any field of discursive social relations is marked by radical contingency, where radical contingency refers to the inherent instability of an object's identity and meaning (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Thus, social fixation of meaning and identity is then always partial and flawed, and involves the work of articulatory practices through which a system of relations is established among elements in such a way that their identity is modified as a result of the articulation process. In addition, those practices entail the institution of nodal points that function as privileged signifiers or reference points through which the rest of the elements of a discourse acquire their meaning. In this way, discourses partially control and delimit the meaning of the social, but this control will always involve a political struggle. Discourses compete for the construction and stabilization of meaning by articulating as many elements as possible around certain privileged points. In this way, the resulting meaning will always be a "political" and "hegemonic" fixation that will involve "winners" and "losers". This leads us to the third premise of the political theory of discourse which points at the central role that social antagonism plays in the constitution of discourses and identities. If, as we mentioned, we uphold a relational and contingent conception of identity and meaning, there could be no positive identifiable characteristics that allow the discursive formation to constitute and delimit itself. Thus, the establishment of its unity, and of its elements, is only possible as far it is opposed to that *which it is not*. In this sense, it is only by dividing itself, that is, by expelling outside itself the *surplus of meaning* -constitutive of the social- and by constructing it as that *which it is not*, that the discursive

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[2]This perspective has been elaborated initially in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's first work together *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (*1985) and has been considerably developed over the last twenty five years (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005; Mouffe, 2000, 2005). These theoretical developments have promoted the production of a whole range of social and political research -theoretical and empirical- , which have, as well, greatly contributed to the increasing precision and sophistication of the theoretical apparatus (Norval, 1996, 2006, 2007; Stavrakakis, 1999; Smith, 1994; Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis, 2000; Panizza, 2009; Barros, 2002; Aboy Carles, 2001; Groppo, 2009; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Squire, 2009; Howarth, 2000).

[3] The "discursive' nature of all actions, practices and social formations does not mean that actions and practices do not exist independently of any system of social relations, but only that what they are depends on the systems of meaning in which they are located. As Laclau and Mouffe explain, a stone is, for instance, "either a projectile or an object of aesthetic contemplation only within a specific discursive configuration" (Laclau and Mouffe in Laclau 1990, p. 101).

[4] The category of dislocation refers to the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible. As Laclau argues, if dislocations disturb identities and discourses, they also create a lack at the level of meaning that stimulates new discursive constructions, which attempt to "fix" the dislocated structure. In short, it is the failure of the structure that compels the subject to act, to assert anew its subjectivity (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 13).

formation produces its own forms of rationality and intelligibility (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 144).

These three central premises of political discourse theory that we have just described, turned to be particularly relevant in order to understand and elucidate our case of study. The relational and contingent nature of all meaning and identity, and the constitutive character of social antagonism, allow us to discard essentialist views about the social that attribute positive and natural characteristics to socio-political demands and struggles. In other words, from this perspective there is no a natural or intrinsic meaning in social demands which must be discovered and studied from social science research. In contrast, the meaning and identity of any demand is given by its location in particular discourses, which fixes its meaning in relation to other demands and in opposition to a radical otherness. Thus, this perspective calls us to look at the discursive configuration within which this new form of social mobilization around human rights emerged and to pay special attention to the articulatory and identification processes that it entailed. With respect to this last idea, the centrality given to the articulatory practices in this theory helps us to avoid the problem found in most of the writings regarding the necessary and spontaneous link established between the demands of the relatives and the human rights language, and in this sense, to make us aware in our research of the contingent and political character of that link. It is then to the analysis of that contingent process of political articulation that we turn now.

3 Silence and Absence: The Effects of State Terrorism on the Argentine Society

> It didn't matter what proof you had, they denied everything. They always said they knew nothing[5].

The military regime that took over the government in 1976, in the name of what the regime called the "National Reorganisation Process" (PRN), emerged as a response to a generalised perception of "disorder and crisis" that spread during the last years of the constitutional government of the Peronist party between 1973-1976. The regime became then the embodiment of "Order" and fixed as one of its main contents the "total eradication of subversion" from the country; content that was organised and ordered by means of the logic of "war" (Barros, 2002; De Ritz, 2000; Aboy Carlés, 2001). But this was not a clean war with a defined battlefront, standard methods and a clear enemy. Rather, this was as they call it 'a dirty war on terror', a war which required the use of 'unconventional' and 'drastic' methods against an 'unconventional' and 'non-clearly defined' enemy whose only aim was to destroy by all means the Western and Christian Argentinean way of life and which then ultimately justified the extension of repression to unlimited terrains (Zac, 1995)[6].

This war nonetheless, despite its unprecedented scope had to be fought in secrecy and had to follow certain procedures[7]. These constrains were given by the very claim of the regime to protect the "Western and Christian way of life", claim that introduced in the discourse of the regime and in the reality of the PRN the authority of the Church and the world of the rule of law. The regime was then neither a lawless regime nor was it outside the sphere of influence and criticism of the Catholic Church and of the rest of the western world. These two dimensions imposed certain restrictions to

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[5] A mother's testimony of a victim of illegal repression, Maria de Dominguez (Fisher, 1989, p. 94).
[6] For existing accounts on the dirty war on terror in Argentina, see Andersen (1993); Frontalini and Caiati (1948); Graziano (1982); Guest (1990); Novaro and Palermo (2003).
[7] In this sense, public and open executions were completely out of the question. As General Diaz Bessone acknowledged recently in an interview with the French journalist Marie-Monique Rubin, "the military regime made 7000 people disappeared and it did not execute them publicly because of fear to a Papal condemnation". *Página 12*, 1/09/2003.

what was possible in the war against subversion. If the Military Junta did not want to lose its role as a defender and guardian of the Christian and western values, the military forces needed to fulfill "its mission" to eradicate subversion using certain modus operandi that provoke neither the direct condemnations of the Pope nor the sense of dispensability of the law. There was then in the military discourse a continuous interplay between the logic of war and the rule of law and morality that produced a clandestine and illegal world of centres of detention, of special task forces, of torture, abductions and disappearances that overlapped and intersected with "the official world" of juridical subjects and the rule of law (Zac, 1995).

Against this background, fear became a prevailing aspect in the reality of the PRN. The circulation of unofficial information and rumours about war, the omissions and silence of the authorities, the day-to-day reports of shoot-outs, the actual abductions and violent attacks carried out many times during daytime in public places, as well as the omnipresence of the military and police forces in the streets were some of the mechanisms through which the regime produced and induced an unprecedented perception of threat, mistrust and vulnerability within the population.

As the relevant literature explains, fear was fuelled and diffused to foster obedience to the commands of the regime; to control the identification of the "neighbor", of the "ordinary Argentinean", of the "public" with the "cooperative and well behaved citizen" of the military discourse[8]. But very importantly, fear was diffused also to produce silence (Zac, 1995, p. 161-162) That is, the citizenry, the family, and the public of the Proceso were called to obey the new rules, denounce any deviation and maintain a clear silence. A "time for silence" was necessary to achieve the fulfilment of order[9]. In this way, during the first years of the PRN, silence rapidly extended all through the social body. It became the general and legitimate attitude to assume, particularly regarding all that was related to the war on subversion.

Silence was then crucial for the regime's success. Even though it stood for different reactions and attitudes and neither ensure complete adherence to the military regime, nor a complete identification with its subject positions, the general silence did enable the military junta to prevent the expression and articulation of alternative constructions of reality. It did foreclose temporally the avenues for challenging the regime's short-term plans and aims –eliminate subversion- and eventually assured its continuance in power (Zac, 1995).

Now, this general silence that spread within the population was also very much possible thanks to the toleration and acceptance by most political and social forces of the military regime's plans (Barros 2008, 2009). The most important figures and leaders of the church, political parties, trade unions and the local media identified rapidly with the new conditions imposed by the regime and did not find enough reasons to break with the mandate of silence. In most of the cases their will to collaborate prevented them from challenging and denouncing the unprecedented regime's repressive campaign and let them turn their back on the brutal repression and on the thousands of its victims. It was especially this prevailing attitude which helped the regime to successfully maintain the silence of the majority of the people and to avoid any interrogation of its dirty war against subversion.

Silence prevailed then despite the severe marks the dirty war was promptly leaving on Argentine society. Soon after the coup, vast sectors of the population were affected directly or indirectly by the unprecedented intensity and magnitude of the repression. Thousands of abductions and disappearances disturbed and shocked innumerable families, groups of friends, circles of fellow workers and colleagues, groups of political militants and so forth. Abductions were carried out with a great display of force and weaponry and took place either at the home of the victim or at the place of work or study, or in the street, many times witnessed by relatives, neighbours, friends, or colleagues. Often those were accompanied by threats and mistreatments of the persons witnessing

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[8] There is a considerable amount of work done on the diffusion of fear in Argentina, see for instance Corradi, Weiss Fagen, and Garretón (1992); Nordstrom and Martin *(*1992); Kordon et al *(*1988); Corradi (1987, 1983).
[9] General Jorge Rafael Videla, *Clarin* , 7/03/1977. This is how he described the first year of the PRN.

the attack, as well as by the looting of the place either while carrying out the kidnapping or later. The fear and uncertainty that the abductions produced were intensified by the enigmas that surrounded the operations. In most of the cases, the identity of the kidnappers was not revealed. Although they had some clear marks that shown their affiliation, the gangs did not wear the military or police uniforms and generally did not identify themselves as members of the security forces. Also, in the majority of the operations, the victims were brutally taken without any sort of explanation about the reasons of the abduction or about where they were taken or until when[10].

Thus, the abductions immersed the relatives of the victims and persons connected to their families in a climate of deep confusion and general anxiety[11]. A series of unresolved questions, such as, who the responsible of the abductions were, which were the reasons for the detentions, and where to look for their loved ones were unavoidably posed into their lives. This anxiety is revealed in the following testimony,

> I had a neighbour who was a doctor and after they took my son I went to him and he gave me an injection to calm me down. They come into your house and they take your child like that -you think you've gone mad. The injection didn't calm me at all. At seven in the morning I was in the police station. A guard in the entrance asked me what I wanted. I said my son had been taken away and I didn't know by whom or why (Fisher, 1989, p. 8)[12].

Thus, after the abductions, following the kidnapers' footsteps as well as acting according to the normal practices under a legal order, the initial reaction of almost all the families of the victims was to search for information of their relatives in police stations and military headquarters. The general response of the security forces to the relatives' enquiries was an emphatic denial. Police and military forces alike rejected their involvement in the operations and kidnappings and frequently pretended to ignore absolutely the attacks. On top of these rejections, relatives of the victims were very often subjected to endless waits, intimidations and threats; their statement were refused to be taken and many times they were referred to other police or military units. After weeks or months of going backwards and forwards, the families could not obtain any credible information from the military and police authorities. As the mother of one of the thousands victims of repression explained: "I used to travel from Mendoza to Buenos Aires by train and begin going round all the military barracks and headquarters, the army, the navy, the air force, asking if they had my son. Everyone said they knew nothing […]" (Fisher, 1989, p. 19)[13].

Thus, the families of the victims were forced to start in their search for their relatives an endless circuit of police stations, military barracks that rapidly extended to hospital, psychiatric clinic and prisons. In almost all the cases, families also repeatedly appealed to the law and filed numerous writes of habeas corpus through which they required the courts to locate the detainees and assess the legitimacy of the detention[14]. In the overwhelming majority of the cases, the families received the same negative standard reply from the courts in which it was stated that the person who was being the subject of enquiry was not being detained and no record of arrest was held by the authorities. The judges were unable to locate or rescue a single abducted victim despite the many

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[10] For a detailed account of the modus operandi through which the security forces conducted the abductions see the Report of CONADEP (1986**,** p. 15; p. 322-328).

[11] For several testimonies on the abductions and on the first reactions and responses of the relatives of the victims, see Gorini (2006); Fisher (1989, 1993); Bousquet (1980); Guzman (1994); CONADEP´s Report (1986); Owen Steiner (2003); Mellibovsky (1997).

[12] Testimony of Aida de Suárez. This anxiety can be seen in other similar testimonies. See, for instance, in the same book the testimonies of Dora de Bazze, and of Maria del Rosario (16-63). Also see the testimony of Hebe de Bonafini in Bauducco (1997, p. 85-105).

[13] Testimony of Margarita de Oro. See other similar testimonies in *El Diario del Juicio* (1985).

[14] The Habeas Corpus is the basic right to ask a judge to order the cessation of an illegal restriction of the right of personal freedom. The judge then must be informed if the person in question is being detained, which official is holding him/her, the legitimacy of the detention, and also if there is enough reason for his/her arrest.

obvious evidences regarding the identity of the kidnappers and of the vast information available pointing to the security forces (CONADEP, 1984)[15].

Most of the families, whatever their religious beliefs, also turned to the members of the clergy in their search for help. Appealing to one of the most traditional institutions of the country and identifying the crucial place that it occupied within the discursive formation of the PRN, many of the families thought and had hopes that the men of the Church could give them some information about their abducted relatives and even intercede to get their release[16]. In the majority of the cases though, the responses of the clergy were not what the families expected. There was a homogenous attitude within the Church of not interfering with the regime's dirty war against subversion and of keeping the mandate of silence about the consequences of the war. Many of the cardinals and bishops did not even receive the families of the victims; or in the case they did -forced by the continuous presence of numerous persons in their churches- they categorically denied to have any knowledge of the situation and argued that there was nothing they could do for their relatives. Others, more sensitive to the despair of the families did try to intercede with the military and police authorities on behalf of the victims of repression. Nevertheless, never prepared to assume a public attitude or to confront the military regime, these few steps were condemned to failure and most of the families could not get any positive outcome from these personal favours. Thus, after several meetings and interviews with the representative of the Church, the families were equally or maybe even more desperate and confused.

Thus, as the majority of testimonies show, families used all the means available to them and explored all the official and extra-official procedures to find out some information about their relatives. They individually contacted and occasionally held interviews with government officials, with high-ranks military men and police officers, with important political figures and union leaders, with influential people from the media and from the culture and arts. Except on just a few occasions, almost all these meetings, interviews and contacts had similar negative results: nothing could be done and no information was available about those abducted persons. As we have suggested, a deep silence was surrounding the 'acts of war' and nobody was willing or was able to interrupt it[17].

Thus, the families of the victims were drawn into a lonely search and wait that many times was even accentuated by their own fears, guilt and shame. That is, the victims' families were inevitably affected by the prevailing fear and uncertainty. Many times, ashamed to talk about the abduction of their relatives with others fearing a social condemnation, and in a further degree, afraid of what could happen to their disappeared relatives and to themselves, some families just immersed themselves into an isolated and private task of finding their own relatives. Behind this initial isolation frequently remained as well the families' hopes that a mistake had been made and that their relatives would be returned home as soon as it was rectified (Barros, 2008). This is reflected in numerous testimonies, as for instance,

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[15] As the report of the CONADEP informed, in the first five years of the military government only two cases had positive results, the cases of Timerman and Moya, who were put at the disposition of the Executive Power and later released, and after 1982 there were just a few others.

[16] This is very much revealed in the numerous testimonies of the families of the victims gathered by the CONADEP's report and in the testimonies during the military Junta trials. See CONADEP, and *El Diario del Juicio*.

[17] It is important to mention again that there were exceptions and that some of these figures and leaders did attempt to help the families and the victims, as for instance it was the case of Raúl Alfonsín from the Radical Party, or of Roberto Cox, the director of *The Herald* newspaper. But it is also important to repeat that these were just exceptions that were not in any sense enough to disrupt the uniform silence that prevailed within society or to change the frustration and anxiety of the thousands of families in the search for their relatives.

> We all thought that by going to churches the authorities, by going to the courts we would get them back in the end (Fisher, 1989, p. 63)[18].

> I always believed that they would come back. We all did (Fisher, 1989, p. 91)[19].

Still very much assuming the regime's interpretation of the situation, that is, "only subversives were taken", these families expected that once it was proved that their children were innocent they were going to be released. Thus, their individual search was conceived in many cases as limited to finding their relatives and to proving their innocence.

During the course of their search nonetheless, the hopes and assumptions of the victims' families started to fall apart and a sense of helplessness and desperation started to grow within them. The lack of responses regarding the whereabouts of their relatives was drawing the families into a situation they were incapable to grasp or understand. After persistently appealing to all the resources available to them under the reality of the PRN, the abduction and disappearance of their relatives could not be symbolised nor explained. That is, all the symbolic references were failing to help the families to come to terms with the new experience that they were undergoing and a growing frustration was seizing their lives, as this testimony reveals,

> It is very difficult to explain how you feel when they take a child from you and you don't know what happened to that child. It is like a terrible emptiness, like something has been wrenched away from inside and there is nothing you could do about it. No one would help us (Fisher, 1993, p. 105-106).

These families were then experiencing along with the absence of their relatives, the *absence* of *meaning*. This *absence* was the effect of a situation of *dislocation*, that is, a situation that presupposes a structural failure in the symbolic order and that makes visible the inherent radical contingency of all social structures (Laclau, 1990, p. 39-41). In other words, the military discourse and other discourses available under the PRN failed to symbolise the new events prompted by the illegal repression and this failure was showing its de-structuring effects on numerous families and groups of society that were affected by the abduction of one or several of their members. Thrown into an endless search these families were shattered and incapable -despite all their attempts- of making sense of the experience they were living in. This traumatic experience, that at some point reached the level of madness and threatened the identity of these groups, was the instance that opened up the possibilities for struggle and change within the universe of the PRN[20].

Thus, as it could be argued, it was the dislocatory experience produced by the dirty war against subversion which prompted the unprecedented mobilisation and protest around human rights claims in the country. However, this dislocatory experience was not so much the result of the massive and unprecedented nature of the illegal repression unleashed by the military regime as it has been commonly argued by the literature. It was actually the consequence of the failure and incapacity of the military discourse and other discourses available under the PRN to articulate the effects of the repressive campaign. This failure was precisely what forced the relatives to start a new path of collective search and mobilisation and to attempt to rearticulate the dislocatory effects of the war, such that this re-articulation provided them with a new principle of reading that allowed them to make sense of the new situation and to come to terms with their own experience of absence and lack.

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[18] Testimony of Margarita de Oro.
[19] Testimony of Hebe de Bonafini.
[20] The effects of dislocation, as we stated in the beginning of our paper, are contradictory, In Laclau's words, "If on the one hand, they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted" (1990, p. 39).

In the following section I account for the constitution of these forms of collective mobilisation and for the new mode of political identification that it entailed. As I will show, this new political identity constituted around the defence of human rights was only possible, in the first place, by means of an increasingly available human rights language that was spreading inside the national context. The new availability of this language allowed not only the articulation of the claims for the disappeared people, for truth and justice around the central notion of human rights, but also, the gradual identification of the relatives of the victims with the human rights cause and struggle. In the second place, this political identity found its primal expression in the mobilisation and activism of the groups of relatives. That is, its emergence crucially depended on the engagement of the affected groups in different social and political practices through which the relatives could identify the similarity of their individual cases and represent the equal source of their absence and failure. This process of political identification entailed the constitution of a political frontier and the production of an Other which at the same time rejects and reaffirms the identity in question. Thus, through this process of identification and by the representational means of the human rights discourse the claims of the groups of relatives were transformed and their identity as human rights groups constituted.

4 Coming into Being: The Constitution of the Human Rights Movement and Discourse in Argentina

4.1 The Availability of a New Language

> […] there is overwhelming evidence that many innocent citizens have been imprisoned without trial, have been tortured and have been killed. The actions taken against subversives have therefore been self-defeating: in order to restore security, an atmosphere of terror has been established; in order to counter illegal violence, legal safeguards have been removed and violent illegalities condoned (Amnesty International, 1977, p. 50).

Since the beginning of 1977, the international pressure on the military regime regarding human rights violations inside the country began to mount rapidly[21]. Throughout the year then, the regime was forced to respond to several accusations and warnings launched by the international community having as a result to deal publicly once and again with the consequences of the dirty war. As shown in detail elsewhere, one of the junta's strategies to respond to those accusations was based on the denial of the allegations and a re-affirmation of its democratic and law obeying commitment[22]. Through this strategy, the government attempted to contest the increasing association of the regime with illegal repression and human rights abuses and, ultimately, to safeguard its acclaimed

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[21]Already by the last months of 1976, the first problematisations of the consequences of the war on terror were starting to arise. By September 1976, for instance, there were numerous reports in the media about the series of hearings that the Subcommittee on International Organisations and Movement of the US Congress held on the status of human rights in Argentina. See *La Opinión*, 29/9/1976, *La Nación*, 30/09/1976. A month later, the on-site observation of a delegation of Amnesty International was as well extensively covered by the media, which followed all the steps of the mission and described in detailed the background of the organisation as well as the profile of the members of the delegation. See *La Opinión*, 4/11/1976, 9/11/1976 and *La Nación*, 13/11/1976. See for an account of the international pressure on the military government, Ian Guest (1990).

[22]This strategy of negation was articulated with what was called the Anti-Argentinean campaign. This campaign was part of an international conspiracy generated abroad by communist and terrorist groups that aimed to boycott the image of the country in the world and ultimately to destroy and interfere in its future development. Thus, the first reports on human rights abuses were articulated as part of this campaign and then associated to subversion, terrorism and to foreign and alien interests. The other strategy to respond to the international human rights accusation was articulated around the figure of "a situation of exception" and the so called "excesses of repression". Both strategies, although contradictory, survived and overlapped throughout the long years of the Proceso. See a detailed exposition of this argument in Barros (2008, 2012).

embodiment of the western and Christian values that conferred its legitimacy of origin. It is in this last sense that the declarations and statements in favour of democratic values and human rights were more and more frequent in the military speeches. We can find countless examples of this attempt of the regime to rearticulate the human rights signifier to its own project of order vis-à-vis chaos. Particularly important were Videla's trips abroad during 1977. For instance, in a press conference in the US, which had great repercussions within the country, Videla explained: "it was in defence of human rights of the majority of the people that the war on subversion was fought" (La Opinión, 15/9/1977)[23].

The increasing expressions of concern from the international community about the country's human rights records vis-à-vis the regime's responses to the allegations soon begun to show their effects in the Argentine social and political context. That is, these exchanges and confrontations – covered by the local media in detail- were bringing to the fore a new reading or understanding of the war on terror that was opening the debate about its methods and consequences as well as spreading out the possibility for new expressions of consent or dissent within society. That is, despite the dense veil of silence covering the consequences of the war on terror, some of the social and political forces could not remain completely immune to the increasing international pressure. This was the case for instance of the Catholic hierarchy during the first months of 1977. The Episcopal body fearing a condemnation for its passive and tolerant role issued a series of public and confidential documents in which, despite the repetition of its approval and support for the military government, expressed its concern about the irregularity of the state repression and the numerous human rights violations inside the country (Mignone, 1999).

Also, the exchanges between the international community and the regime prompted the existing local human rights organisations to raise more clearly their concern about the current situation. The APDH issued a public letter to the President of the country few days before the first anniversary of the military coup (La Nación, 22/3/1977). The letter was the first clear public petition to the military authorities in which a local group claimed for the release of all the political prisoners and the publication of the list of all the people detained as well as the information of the centres of detentions in which they were held[24].

It was against this background that the voices of discontent of the many relatives of the disappeared and detained persons started to be heard and to actually take shape inside the country. The increasing international criticisms and the responses of the government as well as of the various sectors of the national community represented an interruption of the apparently smooth functioning of the military regime and meant the introduction within the universe of the PRN of a re-description of the war on terror which had its own language, symbols and conventions. This interruption and new understanding opened up new possibilities and spaces for the groups of relatives, and very importantly made available a new language to articulate and express their claims.

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[23] See also a similar declaración in *La Nación*, 9-9-1977.
[24] A first letter was sent to Videla in December 1976. See the letter in *La Opinion*, 13/12/1976.

4.2 Solidarity and Political Engagement

> The fact that such a tragedy did not paralyse us, but on the contrary, stimulated us, is amazing. It gave us strength to start on a path that we had never thought we were going to take[25].

> Walking, holding each others' arms tenaciously, relating one to another, we were also strengthening our thoughts and growing and assuming[26].

The expression of discontent and frustration of the relatives that we mentioned above was neither easy nor straightforward under the adverse political conditions of the first years of the PRN. The availability of a new language did not prompt spontaneous echoes of protest and opposition. The sheer censorship and its consequent silence, the prevailing fear and insecurity made it very difficult for them to express any form of critique or dissent. As we mentioned above, the relatives were extremely concerned about possible reprisals and accusations of subversive actions. Thus, from the very beginning, the groups of relatives attempted by all means to differentiate themselves from politically motivated groups, emphasising their ordinary positions as "mothers", "wives", or just "family" of the victims and limiting their first steps and actions to imploring requests for information to the authorities about their missing relatives that did not involved any direct accusation or confrontation with the regime (Barros, 2008).

It was then by meeting together, organising press releases, walking every Thursday afternoon at the square, etc., that the groups of relatives began to partially dismantle their concerns and fears. As a mother expresses it, "each time we came together we felt stronger, safer, less afraid" (Owen Steiner, 2003, p. 77). This idea of security and strength that the testimony shows was the result of a new sense of companionship and solidarity that was developed in the course of these meetings. It is necessary here to highlight that this increasing solidarity found its origins in the several rejections and denials that they all had experienced and shared in their search. Thus, there was not a positive feature grounding the bonds and increasing attachment of these persons but only a common and repeated experience of negation and lack of responses. That is to say, although they had all suffered the disappearance or detention of a close relative, what initially united them was not that particular loss or, as it has been commonly explained by the literature on this issue, their defence of life and fundamental individual rights of the disappeared persons, but the repeated rejection and lack of responses from those to whom they demanded an answer and who were able to respond and bring concrete solutions. Thus, what brought these persons together was ultimately the absence of signification of what had happened to their missing relatives. As a mother recalls,

> […] In the Plaza de Mayo we were all alike. We were all similar one to another, they had taken away to all of us our sons and daughters, we were all hearing the same, we had all gone to the same places. It seems that there was no difference nor distance. That is what we felt so well. That is why the plaza assembled us. That is why the Plaza was consolidated (Bonafini, 1988, p. 15).

Thus, the situation of frustration experienced by all these relatives triggered what could be described, using Laclau's theoretical insights, a form of aggregation in which a logic of equivalence prevailed: the relatives began to come together constructing an equivalential chain between their unsatisfied claims[27]. That is, beyond the particular character of their case and situation or their very private and intimate pain and suffering, the relatives established in the course of their gatherings at

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[25] Matilde Mellibovsky's testimony in Matilde Mellibovsky (1997, p. 77.

[26] Hebe de Bonafini, Conference given by the president of the "Association Madres de Plaza de Mayo" in Liberarte on July 8th, 1988.

[27] For an account on the logic of equivalence, see Laclau and Mouffe (2001).

the square, at the churches or at the League's offices a sense of equality and solidarity among themselves that was very much based on their shared experiences of absence and rejection[28]. It was only in relation to that rejection that their claims became equivalent and that they could establish among themselves some sense of unity and solidarity. It is then from there that they began to stress the equal nature of their aim beyond their differential character. As a mother clearly mentions it, "we began to realise that the explanation for the disappearance of our own children could only be found in the explanation for all the disappearances" (Fisher, 1989, p. 30).

4.3 Antagonism and Political Engagement

During the meetings then and first actions together, the relatives started to make sense of the fragmented reality of the PRN, putting together the pieces of information and the rumours about clandestine detention centres, killings and torture that began to spread through the official world of juridical subjects. Some information was coming from the few prisoners that had been freed, who were approaching the circle of relatives and uncovering the horrors of the dirty war. The relatives then began to know where their missing relatives could be held or what may have happened to them and discovered a new universe of macabre words and meanings that denoted the kind of mechanisms and procedures deployed in the world of war and secrecy[29]. These rumours, far from calming down the uncertainty, made it worse, generating more pain and frustration among the relatives as well as a compelling necessity to understand what had happened to all those who had been taken away.

The relatives received the information about the clandestine world against the background of increasing international criticisms and accusations about human rights violations. As we have mentioned above, the international community in different manners accused the military government to carry out an illegal and illegitimate repressive campaign against political opponents and pointed at it as the main responsible for the violent situation that prevailed in the country.

By the end of 1977 and beginning of 1978 then, and after several visits to the country of US government officials and of a great presence in the media of exchanges between the military junta and the international community about the country's human rights records, the groups of relatives published their first press-releases in the national newspapers (La Prensa, 3/9/1977, 28/9/1977, 5/10/1977; La Nación, 10/12/1977). In these first collective actions, drawing on an increasingly available language of individual, rights, liberties and duties, the groups of relatives began to articulate a more imperative and oppositional form of request that challenged the military regime's silence and ambiguity about the war on terror. The press releases in this sense represented a crucial step towards the relatives' confrontation with the military authorities. The relatives started to give shape to a demand that was positioning them in a relation of antagonism to the military discourse. This antagonistic position entailed the identification and representation of the military regime as the main source of their desperate and shared situation of absence and uncertainty. That is, the regime and by association those which stand by its side, began increasingly to be portrayed as responsible for the irregular and illegal situation of their relatives and for the families own uncertainties regarding their beloved ones. In the relatives' words in a press release: "those who have the truth about this problem are the mean of the government" (La Prensa, 7/1/1980). In this new initial picture, the military authorities were denying the families, mothers and wives of the country, the so acclaimed "legal order" and eventually the "peace", "truth" and "justice" that supposedly prevailed

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[28]The establishment of an equivalential relation between the relatives would not be straight forward or immediate, as we have shown in the text, it would be the result of the engagement of the relatives in different activities and collective actions. This relation would not mean the complete erasure of the differences and particularities of each of the groups. That is, as we will see further on in the text, the groups would continue developing its own activities and strategies.

[29]As one of the mothers recalls, "We began to hear words like 'capucha', 'submarino', 'picana' and we began to piece together the full extent of the horror" (Fisher, 1989, p. 66).

under the PRN order. In contrast, the authorities were provoking what the relatives expressed, in a press releases, as "the most cruel torture for a mother: the uncertainty on the destiny of their children" (La Nación, 10/12/1977).

In this way then, the relatives drew an antagonistic frontier through which those who denied the truth about their missing husbands, daughters and sons were radically excluded from the domain of the legitimate. The side beyond the frontier was more and more discursively constructed as that which blocked the plenitude of the identity of numerous families/mothers/wives of the country. That other side was ultimately portrayed – in the relatives' words- as the "enemies of the peace, welfare and justice" in the country (Familiares de Detenidos y Desparecidos por Razones Políticas, 1978).

4.4 Effects of Frontiers

This antagonistic frontier established by the relatives and the identification of the source of social negativity that it entailed soon showed their effects on the other side of the frontier[30]. By the end of 1977 and faced with the new interpellations raised by the relatives, the regime launched a repressive and intimidating campaign against the groups of relatives that reached its highest point in December of that year, when a group of fourteen relatives and two French nuns were abducted[31]. This episode represented a big blow for the relatives, particularly for the group of women that suffered the abductions of three of its most militant mothers. But instead of weakening their actions, this event encouraged these relatives to continue their search and struggle even with more determination. That is, the December's events and the persisting government's intimidation and repression very much intensified the relatives' representation of the regime as the source of their unfulfilled requests, and ultimately, of their experience of failure and absence. The incipient antagonistic frontier was then reinforced by these acts of violence and repression. The initial relation of solidarity and equality that was gradually established among the relatives was in this way strengthened by their common opposition to the power beyond the frontier. As a testimony of a mother shows: "we felt one similar to the other, because we were equal, […] because the enemy was in the same place and becoming harder, because the enemy had ordered our kidnappings" (Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 1999, p. 15).

In this sense, the negativity that initially united them all was now given a name and a location: the military regime. Thus, it was then on the basis of this negative operation that the relatives gave unity to their claims and began to shape their own position and discourse within the reality of the PRN.

4.5 A New Political Identity Around the Defence of Human Rights

The increasing identification of the regime as a constitutive other whose existence and presence pose an equal threat to the relatives' realisation as mothers, fathers and citizens of the nation, was one of the main conditions for the constitution of the relatives' groups as a new political identity under military rule. As we explained in detail elsewhere, drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's argument on the relational character of political identities, the "other" or antagonising force not only negates the full constitution of the identity to which it is opposed but also affirms it. As Laclau defines it, the identity in question "would not be what it is outside the relationship with the force antagonising it, the latter is also part of the conditions of existence of that identity" (Laclau, 1990, p. 21).

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[30]As Laclau explains the operation of the logic of exclusionary limits has a series of effects which spreads to both sides of the limits (Laclau, 1996, p. 37).
[31]See the several testimonies regarding this event in Fisher (1989).

This incipient political subjectivity that was taking form under the difficult political context of the PRN, emerged as a result of a situation experienced as a dislocation. As Laclau explains, the dislocation of a particular order calls for the need to re-articulate and re-institute the disrupted space. Every response to a dislocation thus attempts to provide a new principle of reading that could make sense of the people's experience of dislocation and change and ultimately to re- create a new stable social meaning. Thus, there is always a critical dimension in the origins of all these responses: a critique of the de-structuring effects of the dominant discourse. Resulting from this critique the subject or group in question constructs the new principle of reading of the situation and gives content to its own position and particularity (Laclau, 1990, p. 62). This critical dimension at the emergence of every social demand could be clearly seen in the relatives' response. As we explained previously in this paper, the life of numerous families had been dislocated by the silence and denial of information on the whereabouts of thousands of persons abducted from home, working place or the streets. This denial and silence drove the families into a stage of deep desperation and soon prompted them into a collective mobilisation and protest. Thus, the response of the relatives emerged as a critique of the failure of the authorities to provide them with some credible answers to their desperate requests for information and ultimately to address the consequent absence of meaning they all experienced.

As we mentioned before, a language of human rights that was increasingly available and disseminated in the national political context inspired the relatives' criticism to the military regime and marked decisively the kind of interpretation of the situation that these groups could offer, as well as the content of their particular demand. This meant at the same time, that other sorts of interpretations and readings of the experience of repression and its consequences based more on political or economic terms were somehow foreclosed from the discourse of the relatives. It was in this way then that a reading very much influenced by a human rights language prevailed and was consolidated in the relatives' struggle throughout the years. In the relatives' language the disappearances and detentions were not characterised as any other sort of ordinary crime, but as crimes that have been internationally condemned as human rights violations and that have been the focus of concern of the international human rights discourse since the beginning of its emergence. That is, the disappearances and detentions and the constant threat to the rule of law and to the personal security were in this manner crucially articulated to repressive acts of political nature and articulated eventually to human rights violations. Along these lines, the problem of human rights was presented, in the reading and diagnosis of the situation produced by the relatives and reflected on their press releases, as "the main problem of the country" and as the "major obstacle for its future development" (Familiares de Detenidos y Desparecidos por Razones Políticas, July, 1978).

Through this articulatory process then, and in an attempt to dominate the meaning of the social, the signifier "human rights" begun to occupy a more and more privileged position within the relatives' reading of the events. That is, with this notion, the relatives responded, represented and at the same time made sense of the dislocatory effects of the dirty war on terror. By this representational means, they offered a description of the reality of the PRN quite different to the one given by the government and supported by the main political and social actors. As it has been clearly expressed in a relatives' press-release,

> The kidnapping, detention and later disappearance of persons have a systematic and massive character in our country, constituting a crime against humanity. These acts constitute a violation of the rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to life, to liberty, to security, the right to the physical integrity with explicit condemnation and prohibition of torture and other form of cruel or inhuman treatment, the right to an impartial trial (Press-release, Clarin, 22/05/1981).

This form of representation articulated around the central notion of human rights was increasingly consolidated during the months that followed the visit of the Inter- American Commission of

Human Rights to the country (Barros, 2001)[32]. That is to say, the space opened up by the commission's visit was clearly defined and organised around a human rights discourse and its only presence greatly contributed to reinforce the meaning that the relatives gave to the consequences of the war on terror and to their own claims. The relatives' requests for information and truth about the disappearances, for the release of the detainees, for the effectiveness of justice and juridical security that had begun to be articulated around the signifier human rights, were effectively transformed and consolidated as a demand for the defence of fundamental individual rights. In this way, these elements were then transformed into internal moments of the discourse of the defence of human rights and their meaning was then partially fixed by reference to that nodal point. As a result, it could be argued that the signifier human rights conferred the relatives' claims and struggle a meaning and a unity, and in this way the content of their particular demand. On the second day of the OAS's visit to the country, the relatives expressed,

> FOR THE FULL PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC.
> With truth and justice to reach peace, […] it is necessary to attend primarily the cause of human rights.
> This is why we claim for:
> The apparition alive of the detainees-disappeared people.
> The immediate release of all those detained for political reasons …
> Those who had legal causes and or processes should be judged according to the National Constitution….
> The use of the right to leave the country established by the National Constitution…
> The suspension of the actions that motivated this petition and that continue until now (Press release, La Nación, 7/9/1979).

Thus, as the above press release shows the human rights demand begun then to embody in the relatives' discourse all that what was absent and neglected under the PRN. It condensed the relatives' shared opposition to the lack of information about the disappeared people, of justice, of security and of truth. Ultimately, it could be said, it became to represent the relatives' opposition to the military regime and at the same time a content to the power that lay beyond the frontier, transforming the "other" into the fearful dictatorship that was responsible of committing the worst human rights violations in the country.

Now, the prevailing position that the human rights signifier actually acquired throughout the relatives' struggle, particularly after the visit of the Commission, not only transformed their claims and struggle, but also their own identity. By enunciating their claims in the form they did, these groups were increasingly named and addressed as "human rights groups". That is, although these groups did not cease to stress their conditions of relatives or of mothers of victims, the enunciation of this particular signifier as a means to represent their claims placed them increasingly in the position of social activists and human rights defenders and brought them closer to the rest of the human rights organisations, forming what would be later known as the human rights movement.

5 Concluding Remarks: Discourse Theory and Political and Social Analysis

A last consideration can be made on how a discourse theory perspective contributed to the analysis of the formation of the human rights demand and how it can actually have a say in the study of new forms of social mobilisation in general. As it was shown in the course of the paper, one of the main problems found in the literature on the human rights movement in Argentina has been the lack of

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[32] See for the full report of the visit of the Commission, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina,* Organisation of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat, OAS, 1980.

explanation regarding the process of emergence and constitution of the popular mobilisation around human rights claims. Most of the approaches would either attribute the relatives' groups an unalterable belief on human rights taking for granted their mobilisation and protest, or would stress the novelty of the human rights ideas in the country without addressing how this change and the process of mobilisation it involved were actually possible. Thus, a discursive theoretical perspective that stresses the political dimension that is very much present at the origin of all social objectivity and identity helped us to avoid taking for granted or overlooking the process of articulation and political engagement that the emergence of the human rights demand entailed. The critique and explicit challenge to the regime and the relatives' political mobilisation were neither inevitable nor straightforward. This process was a difficult and long lasting one which required the availability of certain discourses and the engagement of the affected groups in different social and political practices through which they begun to identify the similarity of their individual cases and represent the equal source of their absence and failure. As a result, accounting for this process of critique means to provide a detailed analysis of the particular conditions that made it possible. This theoretical perspective then makes us aware that new social demands and new challenges do not emerge spontaneously without any sort of articulation. There is always a moment of politics at the emergence of all social claims that involves a process of political articulation and engagement that needs to be stressed and pointed out if a full understanding of the phenomenon is to be achieved.

At this point, a brief remark needs to be done. It could be argued that there has been a tendency in the field of discourse theory to overemphasise the political instance that is in play when an already constituted political demand attempts to become the surface of inscription for other demands and claims[33]. As I have explained elsewhere, this political process is extremely relevant for discourse theory to understand the functioning and emergence of hegemonic myths and social imaginaries but should not overshadow another important moment of politics which is the instance in which simple requests or demands become actual demands, in which critiques constitute themselves as legitimate and valid critiques. As we have showed in the analysis above, the same kind of political logics can be seen at play in both instances and it is relevant, especially for the sort

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[33]In his later work on populism for instance, Laclau starts his analysis with the category of social demand and he describes it "as the elementary form in the building up of the social link". The notion of demand, according to him, has an ambiguous meaning and it is actually this ambiguity which gives place to different logics of political articulation. He differentiates two main forms of demands: democratic demands, which are the ones that are isolated and are simple "requests", and popular demands, which are a plurality of demands that had turned into "claims" and which through establishing an equivalential relation constitute a broader social subjectivity. But how does Laclau account for the emergence of simple requests and claims? In his latest book, to explain this he uses one example that although it is imaginary, he says corresponds to situations widely experience in Third World countries. He says, "think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shantytowns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a demand which initially is perhaps only a request. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter, but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remain unchanged for sometime, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way and an equivalential relation is established between them". Thus, from his example we can deduce that simple demands or request for instance for housing, water, health, etc. respond to basic needs that in case of unfulfilled they would necessarily lead to punctual complains to the authorities and to expressions of discontent that potentially after some time of rejection could turn into anti-systemic demands. So the emergence of simple demands is in this way taken for granted and almost explained as spontaneous and there seems to be no need of any sort of political articulation. What we can see though with our own case of study is that this is not exactly like that. In order for people to come together and request for punctual things, as it could be "human rights" or "water", there should be certain discourses available and an already process of mobilisation and engagement should be also taking place. This is how we would say that in the absence of this process of political intervention these simple demands for housing, water, health are also absent. Disagreeing with Laclau's example, this last case is many times the situation widely experience in Third World countries. That is, despite the obvious necessity of simple facilities and services, the failure or the unwillingness of political discourses to articulate these issues make this situation normal and non problematic for the people living without them. See Laclau's formulation on popular demands in Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b).

of analysis involved in the study of new forms of social mobilisation, to explain and acknowledge this equally important moment of politics. There is in this theoretical perspective the appropriate means to actually do that.

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