



**SURVIVING  
FORCED  
DISAPPEARANCE  
in ARGENTINA  
and URUGUAY**  
Identity and Meaning

Gabriel **Gatti**

**P**ARIA  
Desguarnecido  
desvalido  
desventurado  
**EXPOSITO**  
desamparado  
Habrandonado  
Huacho  
hospiciano  
desprovisto  
Desabrigado  
falso  
Gaufrajo  
Guacho  
asilado  
adoptivo  
**HUERFANOS CIENTIFICAMENTE  
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Surviving Forced Disappearance in  
Argentina and Uruguay

## MEMORY POLITICS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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Against Impunity*

By Francesca Lessa

*Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay:  
Identity and Meaning*

By Gabriel Gatti

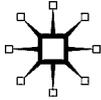
SURVIVING FORCED DISAPPEARANCE  
IN ARGENTINA AND URUGUAY

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IDENTITY AND MEANING

GABRIEL GATTI

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Paris, November 18, 2013

# Introduction: Sociology from the Gut

Yeah, everything I see on the subject, anything having to do with the children of the disappeared or the disappeared themselves or... Some more than others, of course; some make me angry, others don't... I don't know exactly... But none of them tell my story, and yet they're all talking about me. So, what I say is, what's up with that? (I21)<sup>1</sup>

This study is written from a special place: my gut. Because it is I who is speaking. I am not trying to hide it: I am speaking as a sociologist and as a relative of the disappeared.

"I" am Gabriel Gatti, PhD in sociology. What I am normally interested in is thinking and teaching about collective identity and sociological theory: where the two intersect, where they diverge, the liminal forms of identity, forms so insubstantial as to make it hard to talk about them, forms that appear slippery to the language of the social sciences, so much so that they often elude us. They are impossible monsters, devoid of words or representations to depict them. Forced disappearance of persons produces much of that.

"I" am also Gerardo's son and Adriana's brother, Ricardo's brother-in-law and Simón's cousin still, although Simón is no longer Simón, but at least he *is*. They are all, or have all been, in different ways, detained-disappeared. My sister Adriana was killed in a shootout in April 1977. She was 17. Her body remained buried until 1983 in the Buenos Aires cemetery of Chacarita, in that non-place of the NN.<sup>2</sup> Ricardo, her boyfriend, was 18 when he was *chupado* (sucked up) by the ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada), a clandestine detention center; little is known about what happened to him there and nothing is known of his final fate. Simón was taken from his mother when he was only a few weeks old and lived with his appropriators until he was found in 2002. My father disappeared in Argentina in June 1976. We know a great deal of what happened to him in Automotores Orletti, the *chupadero* (sucker) he was "sucked into" when he was disappeared, but nothing of his final fate.

They are dead, and yet they are still in that limbo of the non-dead/nonliving, the place of the disappeared. They are my past and also my present. They are *constantly being* disappeared: neither dead nor alive, they are entities that are certainly uncomfortable to talk about; uncomfortable to build an identity around, I assure you; uncomfortable also to study, to construct a sociology that explores them and the identities that have formed around them over the years. Believe me. They are the place from which I speak—my place of enunciation. They shape me.

But I will not talk about them here, mind you, just about what *surrounds* them from the time they are disappeared: how their presence/absence is managed, how that impossible is processed, how they are represented, how their identity is shaped by what *surrounds* them. That is, then, what this book is about. It is about what *surrounds* the detained-disappeared. I do not go any further than that; I do not go down into the hole. My language—language in general—ventures only as far as the edge. Beyond that, it recoils, it dies out.

I do not mean to imply that the detained-disappeared are beyond words. No, that is not what I am saying. Much less that they are beyond thoughts. I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is quite the opposite: that they should be talked about and thought about, but that neither talking nor thinking about them must be done in just any way or with the language used to think about, speak of, and represent things and phenomena that are more localized and solid. More *normal*. Striking the right tone, however, is difficult, as both with the figure of the detained-disappeared itself and, to a great extent, with everything that came after it—the more than 30 years that have passed since those disappearances occurred, the groups formed to search for the disappeared, the ways in which they are remembered and processed, the memories that manage the image of the disappeared, the policies that regulate their memory...—two strong mainstays of life in society are put into question: *identity* and *language*. Identity, in fact, falters. Not just the identity of the detained-disappeared themselves, but also that of those who surround them, and even the very word “identity” falters. And so does language... Language is distorted, because the words we use to speak about things, the processes we employ to represent them fail when they come against these entities or what surrounds them, and they trip over themselves with the enormous impossibility of moving fluidly around these entities.

That is how it is with the detained-disappeared: nothing that usually fits does. Nothing. Identities lose their footing and the ways of talking about them are forced to navigate uncharted waters. No, nothing fits: bodies are separated from identities; words are dissociated from things; identities without bodies and bodies without identities are born; and family

relations are ruptured; what was normal cracks and is left without bearings. Terrible. The figure of the detained-disappeared is, in fact, a true break in meaning, something that produces a catastrophe: How can a death without a body be managed? How can we represent what happened in places where language was expelled, *chupado*, and where the exception was the norm? How can we recreate the world following absences that are not, strictly speaking, absences? Where does that leave meaning?

Thus, semantic explanations—both existential and academic—for the *absence of meaning*, for the *unfathomable*, for the *irrepresentable*... gain force. There is no other way around it. It is a swampy ground difficult to tread on. It is also uncomfortable to analyze.

## Of Sociology, Which Disappears in the Face of Forced Disappearance

In everyday life, forced disappearances are not managed easily or in the same way by everyone. This is also the case in the field of scholar explanations. Some of the ways to manage them in the day-to-day and explain them academically focus on examining the phenomenon according to political, military, and economic considerations. Such considerations undoubtedly exist. Here, however, I will look at other battles, which are only in appearance less gruesome, but which I believe are more structuring: the battles waged in the territory of meaning. Because, without doubt, much of what is specific to the detained-disappeared and the worlds they generate has to do with the enormous difficulty they produce in language, which recoils from them or is reduced by them. Language is rendered silent. If I were a poet, I would invent a language for this *dis-language*; if I were an artist I would represent the irrepresentable; if were a novelist, I would journey to the depths of the ineffable. But I am a sociologist and sociology is at odds—very much at odds—with what eludes it, it cowers in fear when faced with figures or situations that escape its way of representing, so rounded, so categorical. What am I to do, then? How can I address something that, *by its very nature*, challenges the limits of reason? Perhaps by positioning myself *in its place* and examining it from there, that is, from the place of *things that pose a problem for meaning*, that are hard to analyze, grasp, imagine. Social actors themselves do this—we, as social actors, do this. Why not sociology, then? Instead of explaining and rationalizing, why can sociology, in its explorations of that-which-has-no-meaning, not walk beside the things it analyzes?

There are examples of such efforts in the social sciences, efforts that upon coming into touch with the impossible—the horror, the amorphous, the extreme, the uncertain . . .—far from rationalizing it or fleeing from it, face it head-on with a language marked by the consistency of the object observed: uncertain images for an uncertain reality; in the face of horror and absence of meaning, languages that leave us at the threshold of horror. When faced with what eludes us, when seized by a “theoretical freeze” (Lewkowicz 2002, 91), how are we, as analysts, to go about observing *things* that do not yield to our instruments and our language? The known world has ceased to exist, and with it have gone the old ways of portraying it, of thinking about it, of narrating it. So, how can we speak about what we want to speak of if we say that what we want to speak of is unspeakable? This is what happens with forced disappearance of persons, with the detained-disappeared and what surrounds them: words fail us, our received theories burst into pieces, sociology literally *disappears*.

This is the problem sociologists face with the detained-disappeared: our strategies are too direct, they work well with that-which-has-meaning but not with its opposite; they are comfortable with the stable and institutionalized, but not with that which slips through our fingers, eludes and escapes us, that which becomes stabilized as unstable. Venturing into a territory of social life that rigorously subjects meaning to disaster is, indeed, a problem for sociologists: it leaves us stuttering, inarticulate, and it defies our theories, which are quickly reduced to stammers. Because we cannot navigate that-which-has-no-meaning in just any way.

## From My Shoes, the Place I Speak from

I choose here to venture into that territory from a marked place. Classical science—and, of course, sociology—fancied itself neutral, innocuous, clean, innocent. Objective. The method it defined itself by was unobtrusive observation performed by rational citizens removed from their object; observation by members of a special kind of community, a community of scientists trained as such: *modest witnesses*, with an unadorned, direct, and factual narrative (Haraway 1997). But this perspective is undergoing a transformation, imprinting a radical twist on that original neutrality and changing the modest witness, radicalizing it, inventing the *mutated modest witness* (ibid., 3). This entails that observers recognize their implications, their responsibilities over what they observe, their situation in the field they examine, their position in it (Haraway 1991, 183–201); that they accept that all knowledge is situated, that it has consequences that affect

the object of observation, which is not definitive or unique. It involves recognizing that they are part of the action they observe, that they are “finite and dirty, not clean and transcendent” (Haraway 1997, 36). Recognizing that they speak from their shoes.

Those shoes—my place of enunciation, the place from which I enunciate this text—are marked strongly by a specific sensitivity toward the figure of the detained-disappeared. That sensitivity is sustained in two keys. The first key has a clear *generational tonality*, and I can cite two anecdotes to support this. The first is an anecdote from not too long ago. On April 3, 2007, shortly after publishing an article on narratives about the construction of identity in the world of the detained-disappeared, where I called the more recent ones “narratives of the void,” I received an email from V. S., the daughter of one of the disappeared. I did not know her. Like me, V. S. had settled down in the place where she was initially exiled; like me, she became a sociologist; she is also in her early forties, like I am. And she said something to me about that article (Gatti 2006) that flattered me and that I liked, naturally, but which also had an impact on me: “This is something I’ve been turning around in my mind for some time now: how to go about (re)presenting the thing, discussing the issue, positioning myself. And none of the known ‘narratives’ rings entirely true to me. Your article is the first thing I read . . . that talks explicitly and clearly about this. . . . What you say about narratives of the void is suggestive and clever. Maybe, among other things, it’s because I feel that in part it legitimates my *uneasiness, how very difficult it is for me to find the right words, and the fact that at the same time I don’t want silence. I no longer feel like it’s just me being crazy. It’s a nice feeling*” (Emphasis added).

The second anecdote has to do with my coming into contact with products recently spawned by children of the disappeared who belong to my generation, and with one product in particular: Albertina Carri’s movie *Los rubios* (2003). Narrating life in the void and narrating it *differently* was what she set out to do in her movie:

I had to somehow convey how I start thinking about memory, about absence, about the void, about fictions . . . because this is clearly something that happened to me. . . . On the other hand, in doing so I didn’t want to prevent viewers from thinking for themselves. I thought that telling them straight out, “Well, you know, my parents were killed when I was three,” would be like taking something away from them, a certain capacity. Because it’s something that shocks you. I know that. I mean, I live with it.<sup>3</sup>

Differently, yes: abandoning heroic aspirations, asserting the value of informality and chance, reclaiming one’s own childhood as a possible one,

speaking of one's identity as if it were a fictional one, speaking of the identity of one's parents as a mystification. . . . Upon a cursory reading—which I would not want for my own text—Carri's work may appear to be irreverent toward the generation that came before her. But it is not. It reflects *a different way* of narrating disappearance: it does not speak from the filled-with-meaning; it projects a way of *speaking from the void*. It entails staying there—in the void—and thinking from there about the disappeared, about identity, about oneself.

The other key that I draw on to explain my sensitivity for the figure of the disappeared is built on certain precautions, which generate a reluctance in me, sometimes even a belligerence toward linear or direct interpretations of the phenomenon of forced disappearance of persons and its consequences. Perhaps “belligerence” is not a proper term to describe this position. It would be more accurate to find a midpoint between *respect* for such interpretations—after all they shaped and colored the narratives that formed my childhood and adolescent landscapes—and the *need to offer alternatives*, which come to rationalize and give form to different ways of experiencing and narrating the *world of the disappeared*. Perhaps less literal ways, with causal relationships that I imagine more winding than straight; playing, I would like to think, with the textures of the void and the absence, capable of seeing life, and not just trauma, in these places of void and absence. I may not have another choice, that may be how it will have to be, because that was the way I found to deal with that experience. But I think it goes beyond that. That sensitivity is an indicator, a fact that denotes a new development associated with a *certain moment*: the emergence of managing strategies that are specific to a generation forced to carry with it a supervening, already-made absence, to manage the impossible that is the detained-disappeared and to invent languages to bear it.

In any case, this text is tainted by that sensitivity—I am not trying to hide it. It could not be any other way: in this matter *my body* is a true *battlefield*, scarred by the many wounds left by this catastrophe. Which is why I had to travel far to do this. I had to go from here to there and back again; moving there while I was here and moving here while I was there. Adverbs still confuse me, mind you. Do not think I come out of this unscathed. If I am lucky, I will come out less disappeared and more of a sociologist. Or not. But I will come out knowing that I speak from my shoes and that it is only from there that I can pull off this sociology of the detained-disappeared and of what surrounds them. In these shoes and in the body they hold up there is a bit of everything: figures, old ones that have always been there, like the silhouettes of the absent, always present; like the discourses heard since childhood—from the tragic discourse of loss raised like a flag by the Mothers to the epic discourse of the search

conducted by the Grandmothers; from the militantly heroic discourse that is the domain of old comrades to the more playful discourses of some contemporaries. Also in my shoes there is the possibility of resorting to the explanation of forced disappearances as the product of politically and economically supported apparatuses, which I have heard from activists, some sociologists, and more than a few political scientists. And in those shoes, too, I have found new strategies in my explorations: noisy silences, direct ellipses, nonliteral languages, which speak of this by speaking of the impossibility of speaking of it.

They are complicated ways of speaking and of doing sociological work. I choose them. Which is why I do not want to make this book easy, you should know that. In fact, I think that in order to be how it should be, it has to be unsettling.

## From the Field of the Detained-Disappeared, the Place I Speak about: Human Rights, Transitions, Lifeworlds

It's not because of my awful experience that I have something to say.... (I27a)

In sociology, a field can be roughly defined as an institutionalized social space, a social space crystallized around a phenomenon or a type of phenomena (Bourdieu 1998). It is a *slice* of reality whose facticity and objectivity—its “how it is”—is not important, rather what matters is that the field exists in the imaginary of the agents who participate in it and place their stakes on it. There are fields that, if not universal, are very common, so much so that we have naturalized them to the point of perceiving them as universal and ubiquitous: the field of politics, the field of economics, the field of religion, the field of culture. . . . Others are less common, but highly generalized in the contemporary world, as social resources (actors, routines, institutions . . .) cluster around the phenomena they take their name from, setting them apart as an arena of action: the field of sports, the field of the arts, the field of human rights. . . . They all share a characteristic: they exist because the agents they engage act *as if* they existed, and develop practices in response to that assumption. This generates a clustering of forces within these fields: social relations, life paths of individual and collective agents, cultural representations, routines, more or less consensually constructed narratives, scientific objectifications, institutional acts. . . . That is all that