Reading Memoria Activa’s Discourse: Demands for Justice and Identity Symbols

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Starting in the 1990s, the Jewish community reached a level of visibility unprecedented in its long history in Argentina. After two tragic events, the attack on the Israeli Embassy in March 1992 and the AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina or Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Society) bombing in July 1994, the display of elements characterized as “Jewish” received a level of attention unknown until then. Such visibility took different forms. One such form marked the urban fabric—in the name of safety standards aimed at reducing the impact of another possible attack of the same kind—to signal the location of Jewish community institutions. Formerly indistinguishable congregations and schools began to stand out in the city landscape because of yellow cement blocks, pilotes, raised as barriers to car bombs.

On another level, increased Jewish visibility took place via the staging of numerous public acts of remembrance devoted to the attacks. Oftentimes those acts were accompanied by the explicit support of non-Jewish public figures. Prominent personalities in the fields of popular music, politics, the

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1 This chapter comprises a paper given at the Eleventh International Research Conference of LAJSA (Latin American Jewish Studies Association) that took place at Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2002; an addendum written two days before the conference; and an addendum written in late May 2014. The latter addendum contextualizes the first two parts and provides a key for readers who will find a work that, in its original version, dealt with a recent past—1999, the date of the editorial analyzed in the paper—and a later moment, when the piece was written. We have chosen this format in response to the editors’ wish to reflect on the specific period of the twenty years since the AMIA bombing. While the chapter is listed as coauthored by Fernando Fischman and Javier Pelacoff, due to the editorial obligation to respect the coauthorship of the original version presented in 2002, the process required to revise, translate, update, and further develop some of the original concepts was completed entirely by Fernando Fischman.

2 On March 17, 1992, a bomb destroyed the Israeli Embassy located in downtown Buenos Aires, leaving twenty-nine people dead and over two hundred injured, and on July 18, 1994, the headquarters of AMIA was attacked and eighty-five people were killed.
media, and, to a lesser extent, academia, expressed support and solidarity with the victims by partaking of such commemorative performances.\footnote{Richard Bauman, “Performance,” in Bauman, Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments, 41–49 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). We understand them to be performances in that they are “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (41).}

Although these acts took the form of public performances, not all responded to the same logic. On the one hand, there were commemorations in the metropolitan area like the unveiling of plaques, naming of squares, planting of trees, and even school activities devoted to the subject—institutional undertakings from both the Jewish community and national and local legislatures. On the other hand, other innovative public interventions, like those carried out by Memoria Activa (Active Memory), without neglecting their commemorative character, emphasized denunciation.\footnote{Memoria Activa is a civil association formed by relatives of victims of the attack and other actors of the Jewish community that early on took a discordant position toward the way Jewish leadership—and other relatives—headed the demand for a full investigation.} They did so during weekly public performances held in the Plaza Lavalle, across from the Palacio de Tribunales (Palace of Justice). Such performances blended a symbolic repertoire associated with Jewish belonging (blowing the shofar, the utterance of biblical phrases in Hebrew) and forms of social protest rooted in the Argentine national political culture (the ritualized presence in a highly marked space on a regular basis with denunciatory speeches). These other forms of Jewish visibility in terms of social protest contributed to gradual alienation from the institutional initiatives of the Jewish community that emerged simultaneously.\footnote{We refer to the commemorative ceremonies that AMIA carries out every month on the 18th, in the street at the entrance of the building.} Consequently, they shaped a singular phenomenon out of their ability to combine discursive elements from diverse fields.

This chapter examines the discourse of Memoria Activa in order to establish how it articulates a particular cultural identity and a universal collective demand. Our research focuses on the explicit public discourse, contained in transcriptions of speeches from the weekly demonstrations oftentimes broadcast live by cable news channels. Through the analysis of these concrete materials, we gain an understanding of some of the implications of their protests.\footnote{At the time of the LAJSA conference in June 2002 when the original version of this paper was presented, both authors were undertaking individual research projects on Jewish commemorative practices that used a corpus of written media sources in their empirical materials.} The specific material we take into consideration for this work is an editorial