1 Preface

We must demilitarise trade union and political life.
We must banish arrogance from Argentine society.
And I believe – this is something that all Argentinians who are in their right mind after the absolute madness that this has all become, with the incredible climax of the Malvinas question – that there is no reasonable Argentine who does not share these ideas. I believe that this time it will be possible.
Juan Manuel Abal Medina
Secretary General of the Peronist Movement 1972–1974
Interview with Revista Siete Días, March 1983

When I was invited to a conference on the culture of remembrance at the University of Córdoba, Argentina, in 2023, I had no idea how much this visit would move me and inspire me to take a journey through Argentine history. The conference was organised by colleagues I knew very well, and they had asked me to give the closing speech. I was very surprised at how strongly my rather casual criticism of the Montoneros (the Peronist urban guerrilla group) was received. Even decades later, the horror, pain and loss of that period are still very much present. The past has not yet passed, and the present is the time and place for controversial interpretations.

Forty years after the end of the military dictatorship, there was still no unanimous opinion on the actions of the Montoneros. While the right-wing Peronists apologetically spoke of the "two demons", the military and the guerrilla, the left-wing Peronists were reluctant to openly criticise the Montoneros. It was obviously impossible to equate the experiences in Argentina with mine in Germany. Thirty thousand young people, mainly from the Argentine middle class, had been kidnapped and murdered. Siblings, friends, children, people were arrested at random.

The outcome was disastrous for everyone involved. The novel on this subject by the Argentine Martin Caparrós is titled "A quien corresponda" (*To Whom it may Concern*).

When I accompanied a student group from West Berlin to Argentina in 1974, I saw only the glittering façade, the radical. Tens of thousands of supporters of the Montoneros took part in frequent demonstrations, accompanied by loud drums and chanting slogans. The weekly magazine "La Causa Peronista" was available at newsstands, featuring spectacular reports on kidnappings and assassinations.

The sensational rise of the Montoneros, attracting a significant proportion of the Argentine youth of that era, was followed by disillusionment in the face of increasing murders by right-wing death squads and later by the military. In contrast, the West German terrorist organisation 'Red Army Faction' (Baader–Meinhof Group) remained marginal throughout its existence. And while in West Germany the constitutional state successfully combated the RAF through propaganda and police action, the Argentine military unleashed a "dirty war" unprecedented in Latin America to annihilate the guerrilla movement.

The fact that today, many decades later, there seems to be little criticism or self-criticism of, for example, the murder of right-wing Peronist officials by the Montoneros made me pause. These murders are still justified as resistance against the exploiters and oppressors in the country, and of course thousands of Montoneros were armed to start a revolutionary war when the opportunity arose.

This led me to consider the role of violence, which seemed to take precedence over the movement's political goals. Given the politically divided society, a revolution would be bloody above all else. On the other hand, a counter-revolution took shape in the form of a military dictatorship that did not shy away from genocidal measures to exterminate the children of the middle class and was therefore the decisive opponent of the revolutionaries. The supporters of the violent war of liberation in Argentina and their sympathisers in Europe recklessly believed that unleashing the struggle would bring the goal of a revolutionary society closer.

No one had read Hannah Arendt. And even if they had, her uncomfortable theses would have been summarily rejected. "What a load of crap," was how a left-wing journalist in Berlin described Arendt's book on the revolution to me. My observation that violence tends to unleash a momentum of its own that is difficult to rein in did not impress him. People like to read what reinforces their existing opinions, not what requires them to engage in critical reflection.

However, there is one phenomenon that distinguishes Argentina from the wealthy countries of Europe, namely the social question. Poverty, the division between rich and poor, the arrogance of power, corruption and the lack of a tradition of enlightenment all promote violence, both on the side of oppression and of resistance. A look at Argentina's history reveals a wealth of violent relationships since the wars of independence. Deep-seated social and political injustice is compounded by

anomie, the structural weakness of the state, the resulting lack of law enforcement and spread of corruption, and finally a deep-rooted culture of violence.

These are presented here in chronological order: the politics of violence, the culture of violence, and the culture of cruelty. After the War of Independence (1810 to 1818), Argentina sank into a 40-year civil war between the provinces. This was finally ended by the bloody dictatorship of Rosas, which also enabled the formation of a unified state. The subsequent expansion into Patagonia as the third step after independence and civil war or dictatorship directed the violence outwards and led to a war of conquest against the owners of the vast and fertile lands, the numerous indigenous peoples. Geopolitical strengthening against Chile, economic enrichment and racist extermination coincided. Thus, expansion and genocide together lead to the completion of the new nation. The war of extermination against the indigenous peoples is clearly genocide, which continues with similarly murderous energy in the unbridled willingness to crush protests by the emerging working class at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the 20th century, we encounter military dictatorships whose actors defended the power of the land oligarchy through political regulation. Between these, Perón, as a populist representative of the new social classes, advocated the idea of a corporate state borrowed from Italian fascism, but after nine years in office he was removed by the military and the bourgeoisie in a coup and prevented from returning to power for 18 years. Under the influence of the Cuban and other revolutions, Peronism split in the 1960s into a left-wing guerrilla movement and a right-wing trade union movement, leading to what was to date the last dictatorship in Argentina. After defeating the guerrilla movement, they unleashed a reckless war against Great Britain over the Falkland Islands, lost it and with it their reputation, and stepped down in favour of democratic elections.

Argentina has thus experienced every conceivable form of violence. These are expressions of a long-standing socio-cultural disposition, which may also explain the resistance to profound criticism of violence. Various phenomena of violence become apparent. In particular, a culture of violence that regulates its acceptance, as well as its use. The national epic "Martin Fierro", which is steeped in violence, is still part of everyday cultural life. So too is the experience of brutal cattle ranching. Electric cattle prods are used to torture political opponents, and in the 19th century, under the dictatorship of Rosas, the people were decked out with red ribbons like cattle.

Similarly, the divisions between classes and parties provide ample opportunity for irreconcilable conflicts that lead to violence. Finally, there are psychological crises that can be counted among the various trauma caused by physical and psychological violence, such as the depressions during the long period of economic decline since the 1930s, which appear in literature as "metaphors of failure" (Scheines, Chapter 7), leading to a high number of suicides among poets.

Of course, Argentina is not alone in its excesses of violence. The Holocaust committed by the Germans, the colonial wars waged by Europeans, the Armenian genocides or the horrors of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, among many others show that such acts of violence are possible everywhere. The United States is also a nation steeped in violence. It too was founded through a war of independence, the indigenous population was killed to take possession of the land, and slavery was only finally abolished after the Civil War, when the very existence of the republic had been at stake.

But in Argentina, there is a striking continuity of class violence — no enlightened overcoming of the feudal mindset of the colonial administration, no bourgeois reform of the oligarchic land and livestock economy, and no reform of rural property relations, as in the United States, Canada or Australia, where the appropriate size has increased productivity. Cruel is the treatment of animals in the livestock industry, the genocide of indigenous peoples, the torture and murder of members of the young left-wing Peronist middle class, who were thrown into the sea while still conscious, and the new fate known as "disappeared." Although all of these are forms of violence, this term lacks emotional impact, or subjectivity. Cruelty, on the other hand is terrible for the victim, and in its act horrific.

Other phenomena that encourage violence, besides the culture of violence, class structures and structural injustice, are weak political and administrative institutions that fail to enforce law and order, a lack of guidance caused by the collapse of social norms that is called *anomie*. The consequences are corruption, damage to economic production and losses in the financial sector. Instead of horizontal power through the empowerment of individuals, *anomie* promotes vertical rule by cliques. Whereas anarchists define power and rule in equally negative terms, republicanism distinguishes between positive politics as power in a pluralistic form on the one hand and rule as a relationship of force on the other.

The interaction between a weakening of power and the associated increase in violence can be understood as a decline in civic action and an increase in violence to enforce particular interests, but also conversely the strengthening of power reduces violent relations through consensual action. However, this requires social conditions based on justice. What Arendt describes as the formation of power is, for Lincoln, the majority principle. In his speech on the indissolubility of the Union in 1861, he declared:

> A majority, held in check by the restraints and limitations of the Constitution, and constantly modified by the wise changes in the views and sentiments of the people, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Those who reject it necessarily drift towards anarchy or despotism. Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority is completely unacceptable as a permanent institution, so that if the majority principle is rejected, only anarchy or despotism in some form remains.

Power and violence mark the contrasts between a pluralistic, largely non-violent citizenry and a rule based on violence. From this contrast, it can be concluded that the weaker power, politics and civil society are, the more easily violence can spread, and conversely, an increase in violence not only reveals the weakness of power, but can also contribute to its further weakening.

Accordingly, Arendt's concludes in her essay on power and violence that "any loss of power opens the door to violence, if only because rulers who feel that power is slipping from their hands have very rarely in history been able to resist the temptation to replace it with violence." According to Arendt, there is also the "danger of violence, even when it is consciously kept within the bounds of short-term goals," in that, "as is commonly said, it is not the end that determines the means, but the means that determine the end. If the goals are not achieved quickly, the result is ultimately not only defeat, but the prevalence of violence in all areas of political life."

This interplay between violence and anarchy has accompanied politics in Argentina for the 200 years since independence. In the following, I will primarily document the sequence of forms of violence, highlighting the weaknesses of power and politics. To illustrate the violence, I will draw on numerous eyewitness accounts and literature. The events should not be left to objective, dry documentation, but should strengthen the imagination and arouse feelings such as compassion and outrage. Your outrage is necessary so that we no longer resign ourselves to violence as a supposedly unalterable part of politics and rule.

Arendt defended her stance of not writing *sine ira et studio* about totalitarian rule. She even considered it impossible to write about the situation of English miners without emotion. In this way, two perspectives are placed in a reciprocal dynamic of scientific factuality and literary interpretation, creating a unique narrative style through a shared history of micro- and macro-narratives, while at the same time producing a thematically limited narrative of its own. (Koschorke) This study thus represents an approach to an interdisciplinary scientific-literary form of investigation and knowledge, in which science is not to be replaced by literature or vice versa. Personal experience is fundamental here: "One can only survive one's own life by narrating it, by narrating oneself," explains Swiss writer Peter Bichsel. For the thinker Arendt, too, experience is the starting point of thought and at the same time the place of a reflexive connection, so as not to end up in "any" theory, i.e. one that is alien to the world.

In this study, as in the sciences of politics, society and literature, there remains an obligation to renounce violence, as Tocqueville postulated in his study of democracy in America with regard to a constitution and jurisprudence that recognise and defend human dignity, because this makes people's behaviour gentler. "In democratic ages, people rarely sacrifice themselves for one another; but they express a general sympathy for all members of the human race. They do not inflict useless suffering, and when they can alleviate the pain of others without harming themselves

much, they do so willingly; they are not unselfish, but they are mild." Conversely, morals become brutalised when politics and the judiciary disregard the principles of justice.

I ask my friends and colleagues in Argentina for their indulgence. This is the view of a friend from outside. The critical tone is not an expression of disaffection, but quite the opposite: it is an expression of sympathy for the many stories of suffering, without forgetting the great cultural achievements. After all, this is not a work of historical research, but a collection of stories that revolve around the phenomena of violence and politics in different voices.

I am grateful to the Ernst Reuter Society of Friends, Supporters and Alumni of Freie Universität Berlin e. V. for their support with the printing costs, and my friend Richard Holmes for his comments and language editing.