



Violent death, public problems and changes in Argentina

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Sandra Gayol

Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Argentina; CONICET, Argentina

Gabriel Kessler

Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina; CONICET, Argentina

Abstract

This article makes connections between violent deaths, public problems and changes seen in the past 30 years in Argentina. The authors argue that the ways in which people were killed, the ways in which their dead bodies were handled and the ways in which the dead and their behaviours were described in terms of morality play a key role in determining social reaction and the challenging of public authorities. It is suggested that shock and outrage in the face of the violent death of a defenceless, innocent person trigger political, social and cultural changes in highly complex ways. Where contemporaries tend to establish almost immediate causal relationships, a retrospective analysis shows that the ruptures and continuities following each death result from a variety of temporal and causal chains. A death's ability to pose public problems can help us think about democratic processes in Latin America, indicating that democracies in the region are judged in terms of their capacity to solve the public problems embodied by deaths like those analysed here.

Keywords

Argentina, changes, Latin America, public problems, violent death

Introduction

State terrorism in recent years and current high homicide rates place violent death at the centre of the public sphere in Latin America. For some time now, social scientists in

Corresponding author:

Gabriel Kessler, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales, Calle 51 entre 124 y 125, (1925) Ensenada, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Email: gabriel_kessler@yahoo.com.ar

several countries have been studying both disappearance policies during dictatorships in the recent past, and the causes and forms of violence in the present (Anstett and Dreyfus, 2012; Da Silva Catela, 2001; Jelin, 2002; Pita, 2010; Robben, 2000). However, little attention has been paid to the political, social and cultural transformations derived from violent death. In this article, we analyse violent death as an effective channel into the issues arousing public interest, kindling petitions to the authorities and leading to changes in the past few decades. It is our central idea that a violent death combines the personal grief of the relatives with an appeal to the state. In their ability to stir up public concern, violent deaths enable us to rethink democratic processes in Latin America.

Violent death is defined as any kind of intentional killing of someone who is powerless and defenceless. All the deaths analysed in this article were caused by state agents or individuals with the complicity of the state. The police, the army, the gendarmerie, the judiciary and local or national political elites were either perpetrators or accomplices. They tried to protect culprits and play down the importance of what they did.¹ The convergence between private pain and demands on public authorities was made possible by the emergence of a new social sensitivity to violence and new public issues in which death had become a central element. The historical reparations for crimes against humanity and state terrorism that began in the 1980s made several types of death unacceptable. The ensuing scandal brought a series of social and cultural values to the forefront and prepared the ground for the emergence of new issues. If violent deaths have a public impact on the basis of pre-existing reasons, they also produce concurrent changes and later transformations. The political opportunities arising from the deaths analysed here are closely related to the denunciation of the ways in which the victims were killed and their dead bodies were handled, as well as to the defence of the morality of the victims.

As shown in this article, public shock in the face of the violent death of a defenceless human being can have complex political, social and cultural implications. If contemporaries tend to make almost immediate causal connections, a retrospective analysis shows that the ruptures and continuities triggered by the death itself result from the causal and temporal chains.

Death and democracy

Studies of democratic transition have mainly focused on the political culture of democracy and the re-emergence of political parties and civil society organisations. They speak of 'reopening', 'restoration', the public sphere and a democratic agenda – all concepts suppressed during dictatorships (Cheresky and Martin, 2014; Gargarella et al., 2010; Novaro, 2006; Pucciarelli, 2006). Thus, democracy opens what was closed by dictatorship. The violent deaths under analysis in this article enable us to re-examine this line of thought, suggesting that the public sphere is filled with 'old issues' and brand-new problems alike. Old and new, they are discussed with a new language placing emphasis on causation and political responsibility rather than accident or fate. In line with this, the young democracies in Latin America are increasingly being assessed for their ability to deal with a series of public problems, which are defined as topics able to present issues as general concerns that mobilise some sectors of society, elicit the opinion of experts and call for state intervention (Gusfield, 1981).

In this article, we analyse a series of violent deaths in Argentina from 1985 to 2004: banker Osvaldo Sivak, kidnapped on 28 July 1985 and murdered later in Buenos Aires by federal police officers and former members of the intelligence services involved in state terrorism; three youngsters in Ingeniero Budge, a town in the province of Buenos Aires, who were drinking beer in front of a grocer's shop when they were killed by police officers in 1987; María Soledad Morales, murdered in September 1990 at a party by young men linked to the authorities of the northwestern province of Catamarca; Omar Carrasco, found dead in the Zapala barracks, in the southern province of Neuquén, on 6 April 1994, when he was on compulsory military service; José Luis Cabezas, reporter, killed in Pinamar, Buenos Aires province, on 25 January 1997; Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán, activists of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados*, MTD (Unemployed Workers' Movement), murdered in Avellaneda, Buenos Aires province, on 26 June 2002; and Axel Blumberg, who was kidnapped and killed in the suburban district of Martínez, in the province of Buenos Aires, on 17 May 2004. There were many other violent deaths in the period under study. These were chosen for their ability to introduce new topics for discussion and also because together they span 30 years of recent Argentine history.

Based on the detailed analysis of these individual stories, cases are constructed. Following Ragin and Becker (1992), all cases are empirical phenomena that take place somewhere at a given point in time, as well as theoretical categories constructed as such in the course of research. Our starting point is a specific death, to which we add all the implications: discourses, practices, social movements, political changes, changing sensitivities. The time factor is crucial to case construction and analysis. We wanted to go beyond individual features to suggest general lines of argument. Although each case is unique, they are also analytical tools enabling us to draw inferences and make general statements with a broader scope on death in contemporary society. In line with this, we review a series of sociological theories of death, public problems and the political implications of collective action.

Our research is based on the analysis of the national newspapers with the largest circulation (*La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Página 12*), local newspapers (*Diario de Río Negro*, *La Mañana de Neuquén*, *El Ancasti*, *La Unión de Catamarca*), national magazines (*Somos*, *Noticias*, *Gente*, *Siete Días*), television and radio shows, journalistic writing from the period under study, films and other artistic expressions inspired by the deaths under discussion, and 60 interviews conducted between 2012 and 2015.²

In the first section, we analyse the role of the dead body in stirring emotions and leading to petitions to public authority. Then, we review the public problems associated with violent death. In the third section of this article, we discuss the political, social and cultural implications of violent death. Finally, we draw general conclusions about death, bodies and change in contemporary Argentine society.

Bodies in violent death

The body is a key element in the analysis of death. Its materiality turns it into a vehicle of values, practices, demands and ways of relating to death and dead people (Verdery, 1999: 37). The marks and traces left on corpses spur the imagination on a series of

violent actions on defenceless beings. Battered, hidden, some abused, abandoned, left in wastelands, dead bodies shock when they are found: How can anyone kill like that? There is no 'dying well': the order of death rites is altered, and so are the concomitant social practices. In contemporary Western societies, the ideal way of dying is mostly associated with death occurring at the end of a long life, in old age, caused by a disease controlled by medical knowledge and leading to a short agony, or otherwise chosen by the dying subject. This has nothing to do with the deaths under study: young people whose lives are suddenly, brutally broken and their connections with the world of the living reshuffled. These are 'bad deaths', sparking social outrage not only because of their causes but also because the dead bodies cannot rest in peace. The funeral rites – oblation, separation, reintegration, commemoration (Van Gennep, 1960) – are altered. Since the corpses are needed during the investigation and this might take a long time, there is no burial to bring the dying process to an end. Burial is not definitive and thus it fails to stop corpse handling. The mortal remains continue to belong to the judicial system. The autopsy (in the cases under study, performed in Buenos Aires) leads to a series of endless wanderings, while the court proceedings verbalise death. Thus, these people undergo 'bad death' once and again. With the remains exhumed several times by court order, autopsies and expert opinions re-enact the violence and 'bad death' gets written in technical reports.

In this way, rites of passage continue over time and take more than one form. Where should we place the transition? When does separation from the world of the living take place? Does every exhumation count as reintegration? Furthermore, as the corpse is manipulated again, this reactivates collective action and public news. The need prevails to understand how it happened, to grasp the circumstances of death. In the quest for truth, the dead body no longer speaks for itself. Multiple voices speak through it: the judicial system (experts), relatives, friends and acquaintances, citizens, suspects, political leaders and government officials. They all speak in the name of the dead person. With slightly diverging temporalities, specialist knowledge, 'social knowledge' and gossip account for various possible deaths, crude and shocking. Initially, the official version tends to hold the dead person or their relatives responsible for what happened: they got themselves into danger, they made decisions leading to death, they were involved in crimes of passion or went out with bad company without their parents knowing.

Honourable and innocent victims

Justice-seeking social demonstrations have been quite successful in opposing these attempts to delegitimise victims. The central role victims play in the public sphere (as opposed to crime scenes or perpetrators) emerged in the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s. Argentina was no exception. In the United States and England, for instance, bringing victims to the forefront was a strategy for 'penal populism' (Garland, 2001). In countries affected by state terrorism, like Argentina and others in Latin America, the process of building visibility and legitimacy for victims was more complex and pluralistic. It was associated with families' claim for justice and the strategy to find a face and identity for the disappeared (Kessler, 2009). In this twofold operation, driven by human rights movements and relatives, the victims of institutional violence, insecurity

or the abuse of political power must struggle to be recognised as such. When their bodies are found, and then again in trials years later, they have to prove their innocence and good repute.

Comments, versions and mysteries aside from the earliest official versions make attempts at stripping the dead of their honour and good repute. Counter-versions, demonstrations, photographs and statements rise to annihilate the gossip aimed at tarnishing the victims' names and thus making their deaths sound less important. If the rumours about the victims' lack of morals had spread, we could have had the function traditionally associated with gossip: restoration of order (White, 2000). Analysed both in general terms and against their specific backgrounds, the 'verbal wars' that shaped the meanings of the deaths under study here did not work to restore the moral, social or political order. Instead of just regaining balance by singing the praises of the victims (as reproduced in testimonies, scholarly articles, investigative journalism or judicial statements), they put values under attack and dismantled ritualised routines and practices.

As honourable, innocent victims, the biographies of the dead restore their humanity and establish the 'innocent victim' principle – a necessary condition for social outrage and subsequent collective action. Lives cut short are defended not because they embody exemplary behaviours or values that encourage self-identification, as might be the case with public figures, but mainly to legitimise the demand for reparations for these and other deaths in the public sphere. These people's CVs are brief but include enough data to show that the victims and the people around them are honest and honourable. As the press investigates their past, their relatives lay bare aspects of their lives and multiple tales invite to imagine the ordinary lives of ordinary people cut short by unexpected, horrible death. The photographs and images are very important in placing the victim in a web of relationships: with friends, with their family, at school and so on. Here the connection is made with the victim as a living being, a man or woman cut off from life. There is no pornography of death, as there was in Argentina in the early 1980s, when the corpses of the victims of the military dictatorship were unearthed after being buried in mass graves without being identified (Da Silva Catela, 2001; Feld, 2010; Longoni, 2010). Unlike those internet videos watched by global audiences where prisoners are executed, or the pictures of piles of disfigured corpses that appear in Mexican, Honduran or Brazilian newspapers, the visual materials of these victims introduce a 'happy order' disrupted by death (Marzano, 2010). Showing their mutilated bodies would be like humiliating them again. In these cases, corpse visibility does not add to political meaning. They are persons rather than objects. They are human beings rather than goods.

In these cases, death is no accident or exception. It is unnecessary and, therefore, unacceptable on moral grounds. It is classic solidarity. But, as shown by public statements and demonstrations, it is also self-identification with victims that becomes relevant at the local or national level. And it is group identification with larger issues that call for solutions other than those suggested by the authorities or the state. The deaths we are analysing brought the state into question at a time when the way in which a democratic state should exercise authority or deal with the monopoly of violence was being discussed. Once again, the dead bodies take centre stage. Although inert, they are actors with greater agency than if alive, for they have the capacity to generate social change. As a matter of fact, it was in dead bodies that civil rights movements and the denunciation

of repression by state forces centred and dramatised their claims. The corpses are the starting point and the medium to question values, practices and entire social categories. Who do these dead bodies talk to? What do they talk about? They talk about themselves as well as other dead bodies. They summarise a single life and other tragic fates. They fit in a series of similar deaths reactivating them, making them known, recognised and/or solved.³ In hindsight, none of the deaths analysed in this article is exceptional or extraordinary, but they are unique in their capacity to go beyond themselves to enable social and political objections and demands. Where a posthumous biography legitimises the demands for elucidation of one particular death, in the series of dead bodies it opens up the possibility of founding a collective biography that links the present to the future.

Violent death and public problems

Aggression and violent death have a significant materiality, since the appearance of a dead body alters and disturbs not only the people around the victim but also the audience built around the public interest in this death (Cefai and Pasquier, 2003). However, deaths can easily fall into oblivion. Not every violent death poses public problems. They have to be able to present issues as general concerns that mobilise some sectors of society, and call for state intervention.

The kidnapping and murder of Osvaldo Sivak revealed the involvement of men who took part in the repression (several of them still holding government office) and who had converted to non-political crime in democracy. The murder of María Soledad Morales was a token of abuse and impunity by political authorities in Catamarca. Omar Carrasco embodied physical and verbal abuse against soldiers in the armed forces, and his case proved the obsolescence of the kind of military training for Argentine youngsters established in the early twentieth century. The death of the boys in Ingeniero Budge, and then also the killing of Walter Bulacio,⁴ disclosed institutional violence and the persistence of authoritarianism in the police force. The murder of activists and picketers Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán laid bare an existing repressive machinery in the national and provincial security forces. Finally, the case of Axel Blumberg brought to light the insecurity faced by society as a whole, along with the ineffectiveness of the police in dealing with crime and the absence of public policies in this field.

All these public problems were established as such by a series of actors; they were not the necessary consequence of objective conditions or the seriousness of the issues underlying each death. There are regularities in their construction. First of all, the deaths could not be anonymous, negating the chance of their joining an endless series of never-solved crimes that went unpunished. For this to be possible, actors had to find a matter or problem, even if provisional, to relate one death in particular to a social issue where it could be included but which went beyond the crime itself and the demand for justice associated with it. The death had to be the tip of the iceberg, pointing at a more general problem. This required dismissing official versions, discarding the wrong suspects, exposing complicities, rejecting false causes of death. In the process, the idea was established that the provincial and/or national authorities were trying to hide the truth.

To pose public problems, these deaths had to reactivate previous crimes stirring up similar issues. The rape and murder of María Soledad Morales evoked the murders of

other young women in the hands of provincial political elites, which had been silenced. The Ingeniero Budge case pointed to similar deaths in other working-class neighbourhoods and revived murder reports from the 1970s, silenced by the military authorities. Other deaths were associated with cases that were closer in time, forming series with past crimes with similar causes. Thus, all these murders gave visibility to deaths that had gone unnoticed when they happened. The names of the victims were disclosed and images of them alive were shown; connections between past and present cases were made, so that they reinforced one another. In this way, they were 'desingularised' (Boltanski, 1984), leaving behind their condition as individual cases and seeking universal status – a necessary condition for the gradual transformation from death and private grief into public problem.

Past and present

Deaths like these open up a temporality in the public sphere, but they also enter into a larger temporal dimension by connecting past and present in the series they become a part of with other crimes. This reinforces the idea that they embody a long-established problem, thus underscoring the latter's importance as a public problem that needs to be addressed. On the other hand, both present and past deaths are the result of the persistence of the most undesirable symptoms of a past that needs to be left behind for good. In the media, the way in which the governor of a province shocked by the death of a teenage girl exercised power was described as 'feudalistic' and 'anachronistic' after the restoration of democracy. At the local level, in the place where the murder took place, emphasis was laid on oppression and abuse of women, now considered to be unacceptable.⁵ The killings by police officers linked back to journalists' accusations from the 1960s and a police militarised since the 1930s. The death of a conscript bore the marks of an obsolete military, associated with authoritarianism and coups d'état. Finally, the unemployed activists killed by repressive security forces (police, gendarmerie or other corps of border guards) joined a long list dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

These connections between the present and the past at various moments, although seemingly anachronistic, are to be understood as framed within the restoration of democracy and a series of transformations that were not discussed in the years of the military regime and exploded when the military government was toppled. These transformations have to do with bringing the exercise of political, military and police power into question. They are also associated with the possibility of contesting sexual references in the public sphere, especially the attempts to lay the blame on women for their carefree sexual lives. In all the cases analysed, in the face of extreme violence, the sentiment arose of the need to discuss the limits between public power and a renewed demand for freedom from moral judgement in private action.

From death to case

The passage from death to case and from case to public problem relies on a series of actors, as well as on an expanding scope from local to national. The first requirement is

for a death to be newsworthy. In the cases studied here, this was a gradual transformation: from secondary item to front page news in the papers or prime time news shows on national television. Some acquired national significance more quickly under the influence of online media, or because they took place in the capital, or because they were linked to problems that were already there in the public sphere. The critical point is reached, though, when the case gains stability in the mass media. For a death to be a 'trending topic' for long, a succession of versions, denials, rumours, off-the-record statements and bits of information is required to weave a tale and keep the public interest high. It also requires moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963) to make the accusations against those in power and an active minority (Moscovici, 1976) to lead the movement under way. These can be the victims' friends and relatives, social and political activists, public figures, journalists or political leaders. A relative turned spokesperson, lawyers representing the victim and their family, veterans in the battles of collective action... they are all necessary. Some of them might have contacts in the media or access to decision makers. Moral entrepreneurs play a key role in the transfer of the case to the public sphere and the rejection of the official account of the death in question, accusing those who have accused the victims.

Counter-versions, challenging those in power, have always been a driving force for collective action. They place a moral obligation to the dead on the living, contributing to the stabilisation of the case and the associated public problems in the public sphere. In addition, the moral entrepreneurs draw attention to hidden issues, or at least issues that someone tried to hide. They are the alarm raisers (Chateauraynaud and Tornay, 1999) or whistleblowers who cry out that this death is not just another case, that it is not what they are saying it is. Once the alarm is raised, the case finds its place in the media at the national level. In the examples we are studying here, nationalisation was twofold: there is a national audience that is interested in the subject, and the larger problems posed matter where things happened but are not limited to this place. Once the case acquires national scope, it follows the logic of the media agenda: everyone has to talk about it, and so it spreads to other media. The mass media fight for scoops, front page stories or prime time news. Each of the cases analysed in this article was followed by a journalist or a group of journalists who helped it gain stability in the public sphere.⁶

All the murders we are analysing were committed by state agents or took place in a context in which allegedly the state did not act properly. Thus, they challenge the monopoly of legitimate force or the ability of the state to fulfil the obligation to protect the lives and bodies of citizens. While they bring into question the relation between the state and the legitimacy of violence, in construing them as problems activists seek (and get) support from public agencies in their conflict against other agents: the judiciary versus the police, national versus provincial authorities, national executive government versus provincial judicial authorities, national or provincial legislators versus the police. Criticism of the forms of authoritarianism and of the ways in which the state exercises legitimate violence was part of the agenda during the restoration of democracy. It informed political discourse and guided the action of social movements. The violent deaths under analysis share this general interest while embodying more specific aspects and posing new challenges. In so doing, they illustrate a form of government through the management of public problems and enable us to think about the changes they demanded or brought about.

Violent death as a catalyst for change

What were the political, social and cultural changes brought about by these violent deaths? Here we need to make a distinction between two analytical registers: the retrospective methodological strategy to restore the complex (and often indirect) temporal and causal chains in the ruptures and continuities introduced by each death, and the references by relevant historical actors (family, politicians, organisations, public opinion) making direct connections between the ruptures and a specific death. There tends to be an overlap and mismatch between these two registers and the restored temporal and causal chains.

These gaps between historical reconstruction and the most common version of each death lead us to suggest an ambiguous relationship between such death and the changes with which it is usually associated. While in the social memory this relationship is quite straightforward, reconstruction shows that this is not usually the case. When a political measure, the fall of someone powerful or a social demand made into law are historicised, it becomes self-evident that the seeds of changes or events like these have been out there for some time, during which some actors were already fighting for them. Such death precipitates the conditions and the political opportunity for issues to be discussed and measures to be implemented. It introduces what Koselleck (1997) called 'acceleration' in historical time. This acceleration has to do with the fact that the social mobilisation and discourses stemming from such death make pre-existing changes and perceptions of sexuality, state institutional practices and the status of victims visible in the public sphere. And they add up to the specific discourses and demands associated with each death case in particular. So new ideas and others which have not found an outlet so far combine and feed on one another, thus setting the conditions for a time of change.

Innovating is not easy in politics. It is our contention that, to some extent, the forms of these deaths – disappearance, mutilated body found, disrupted private mourning rites, versions and statements that question the morality of the victim – led to a specific type of crisis characterised by a disjunction between Koselleck's space of experience and horizon of expectation. The space of experience is shaped by the past experiences that persist in the present, an amalgamation of cultural and social fragments of inherited traditions passed on from one generation to the next. The horizon of expectation is the future in the present: what is expected to happen. The crisis comes when the past is no longer accepted as continuity in the future. The deaths studied here challenged the continuity of the past: they triggered processes in which the inherited experiences, and the characters and institutions embodying them, fell under attack.

Our interviewees considered the crises following these deaths (and the ways in which these people had been killed) as turning points: people said 'no' to the inherited traditions, which had become unbearable – in some cases, quite suddenly. The case of María Soledad Morales transformed what used to be seen as a paternalistic provincial government into a cruel and violent regime. The murder of the young boys in Ingeniero Budge by the police, quite a common practice in those days, against the backdrop of the upswing of democracy, was something local people – and then a larger sector of the population – could no longer tolerate. The disappearance and death of soldier Carrasco sowed the seed of social claims against compulsory military service, which had been a necessary rite of passage into adulthood for Argentine males for many generations.

How can we understand and typify these changes? Following Tarrow (1998), we identified changes in the politicisation of participants, the impact on institutions, social practices and political culture. We included the emergence of social movements or organisations (Tarrow's starting point) as an aspect of politicisation. The mobilisation resulting from the quest for truth and justice in a case of murder is an experience in political socialisation that leaves its mark on the protagonists. It does not have to do with a change in individual subjectivity only, but with the possibility of engaging in other causes, similar or different, perceived as revealing a public problem.

Actors' politicisation

A recurring aspect of the cases under study was the transformation of the victims' relatives and friends into social and political actors, with varying degrees of permanence in the public sphere.⁷ They had not had political experience before, nor had they participated in demonstrations or similar activities. In general, they claimed for themselves the role of citizens who did not want to be associated with politics, or at any rate with party politics (at least in the beginning). Actually, the strength of these movements lay in part in their grassroots origins, outside political parties. At a later stage, they entered into various kinds of relations with parties and organisations: alliances, participation as separate entities or full separation. Some of the movements welcomed religious or human rights organisations while rejecting political parties. The new feature in these social mobilisations (or, in any case, in how they were perceived afterwards) was the participation of a 'silent majority', moved by the outrage and shock provoked by the murder. In recent years, participation in the web, like Facebook, took pre-eminence over street demonstrations.

The social mobilisations following these murders led to the emergence of social movements, some of which then went a long way from the demands they had their origin in. The Coordinating Agency Against Police and Institutional Repression (*Coordinadora Contra la Represión Policial e Institucional*, CORREPI), one of the leading organisations fighting police brutality in Argentina, was formed out of the demonstrations that followed the murders in Ingeniero Budge and the death of Walter Bulacio. The death of Axel Blumberg resulted in the establishment of the Axel Blumberg Foundation in November 2004, whose work was somehow overshadowed later, along with the high-profile role played by the victim's father. The Parents' Committee in Catamarca, set up after the death of María Soledad Morales, became the Committee for Truth in Crime (*Comisión Pro Esclarecimiento del Crimen*, COPE) and, later, came the Catamarca Women's Movement, which was crucial in the overthrow of the ruling family in the province. In other cases, the organisations and movements dissolved when they attained their original goals.

Actions and institutions

All the deaths analysed were followed by packages of measures, from Criminal Code reform projects or partial changes in criminal policy regulations to crime victim reparations and the establishment of new government agencies dealing with the public problems posed by the deaths. Some of the measures were at the core of the demands made

by the victim's family or the crime-related movements; others followed with time and still others were the result of initiatives and gradual elaboration by state agents.⁸ There are two common elements. On the one hand, the deaths reactivated pre-existing projects, drew attention to ideas with little visibility and spread discussion among social actors. On the other hand, the public powers appeared as flexible or ductile. Decision makers (members of the provincial or the national executive, legislative powers, etc.) reviewed their position on the basis of social mobilisation and its impact on the media, accepting changes and giving their support to different contending factions. Here the state shows its pluralistic nature: the national government can appropriate collective demands at the expense of the provincial authorities; the legislative, executive or judicial power at any level can act to oppose other powers or even the same power at a different level (national versus provincial, provincial versus local), and so on. Furthermore, the impact of the measures taken in a federal country can vary across the territory.

All the cases led to the replacement of authorities: officers who resigned, broken political alliances between the national and the provincial governments, shifting political loyalties and removal of symbols of the challenged powers. A case similar to that of María Soledad Morales in Santiago del Estero called for federal intervention and cancellation of the title of 'Illustrious and Protective Citizens of Santiago del Estero', granted to the governor and his wife, for being contrary to both the provincial and the national constitutions, which do not provide for titles of nobility, on the grounds that all citizens are equal before the law (Farinetti, 2000). Likewise, all the cases sparked criticism of the police. Some officers were accused; others, prosecuted; still others, forced to retire.⁹

In addition, new government agencies were set up to deal with the emerging public problems, like the Anti-Impunity Programme in the Ministry of Justice, gathering the families of victims of unsolved violent crimes.¹⁰ Others were restructured, as in the case of the Office of the Secretary for Security of Buenos Aires province, which included an Audit and Control Department after the death of José Luis Cabezas, where citizens can complain about or report power abuse or crimes committed by the police. Just like DNA studies in Argentina are inseparable from the human rights movement and the filiation of the children of the disappeared, several of the cases analysed here are associated with new investigative techniques and technologies for the search for truth, like the mobile phone call tracker Excalibur, used for the first time in those years.

Changes in political culture

According to Tarrow, changes in political culture are the most difficult to identify. In general, they involve transformations in language, in the topics under discussion, in the repertoire of actions and in the way in which demands are voiced. Tracing the changes at this level means analysing the success and outcome of collective action beyond immediate or formal results. For instance, a social movement can lead to no political changes and thus be considered unsuccessful, yet it can leave its mark on claims and demands, as well as on the language used to voice them, that may be reactivated later and lead to the changes the movement originally failed to introduce.

The cases studied in this article led to the coinage or widespread use of new categories and words. Each of them is associated with easily identifiable terms. The Sivak case

introduced the concept of *mano de obra desocupada* (unemployed labour), meaning former participants in the repression who were 'employed' in crimes like kidnapping and extortion after the restoration of democracy. The killings in Ingeniero Budge led to the use of the term *gatillo fácil* (trigger-happy) to describe the murders by members of the security forces (police, gendarmerie or other corps of border guards). The death of María Soledad Morales spread the concept of *poder feudal* (feudalistic power) to refer to local ruling dynasties in backward, peripheral provinces. The case of José Luis Cabezas underscored the 'impunity' component in the crimes of state terrorism and mafia gangs associated with those in power, a word then used by the opposition in the Menem administration (1989–1999). On the whole, the cases of theft or kidnapping and murder in the 1990s began to be classified as *casos de inseguridad* (cases of insecurity) rather than *crímenes* (crimes).

The new cognitive categories served as frames for the social legibility of new events. Some, like 'insecurity' or 'impunity', allowed connections between problems that would otherwise have hardly fallen within the same category, e.g. crime, use of violence by police forces, gender-based violence and accident with a common denominator – insecurity – or even more dissimilar cases with the common feature of justice not done.

Some of the deaths were followed by the popular canonisation of the victims, who were added to the country's crowded pantheon of popular deities (Carozzi, 2006; Guy, 2004; Lozano, 2007). All the cases analysed were channelled into cultural expressions: films and documentaries, theatre plays, novels, paintings, sculptures, graffiti, stencil graffiti, interventions, comics.¹¹

Their presence moved from the rhetorical to the aesthetic – especially the pictographic, in the form of murals and interventions in public spaces. Meanwhile, the new technologies enabled new forms of remembrance via networks and the circulation of images and discourses. Anniversary events strengthened these forms of representation. Monuments, crosses and plaques were set up in the places where the bodies had been found. The so-called 'massacre of Avellaneda' (the murders of Kosteki and Santillán) is perhaps the most iconic case in this regard. Images of it are circulated every now and then, both in social media and in public spaces. The train station where the two youngsters were shot down was renamed after them – a powerful and original form of political and visual intervention. These forms of representation have kept the deaths alive, reactivating them in the face of new events and demands, and thus preserving their influence in the ever-changing agenda of public problems and issues in post-dictatorship Argentina.

Conclusion

In this article, we highlighted the importance of violent death in posing public problems and introducing changes in recent decades in Argentina. Based on a selected number of deaths, we reconstructed the dynamics of their transformation into cases first and then public problems, and validated them with other deaths of the past few decades. We showed that the ways in which the victims were killed, their dead bodies were handled, and the dead and their behaviours were described played a central role in the reactions and changes that ensued. We also laid emphasis on the complexity of these relationships: other similar deaths fell into oblivion without raising social demands. Change was understood as a

multidimensional category: the fortunate combination of several factors is required not only for changes to be demanded but also for them to be realised. In this article, we showed that it took a certain convergence of factors, stabilisation in the media and action by public agents for these violent deaths to trigger complex practices leading to political, social and cultural transformations. Each of these deaths had to link back to similar past events to be able to pose a general problem, and then they themselves can be used in future cases to introduce further changes. The transformations took place at various levels: political careers, new organisations, legislation, political and social discourse, forms of social mobilisation, places for remembrance.

Based on the analysis of these violent deaths, we tried to make a contribution to the study of transformations in post-dictatorship Argentina, while interacting with accounts of violence in Latin America where these links are usually overlooked: violent death/general interest issues/public problems. The question remains whether processes similar to those described for Argentina can be observed in other Latin American countries where violent death and a past of political dictatorship are central concerns. With a homicide rate of 23.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (about 140,000 in 2012), Latin America has the world's highest violent death rate (UNODC, 2013). Certainly, there must be similarities and differences resulting from the history of individual countries and from the specific characteristics and magnitude of violence. However, comparative reports like *Latinobarómetro* (2013) show that crime-related violence is a major concern across the region, irrespective of particular objective facts. Therefore, analysing the impact of violent death in Latin American societies is a challenge that lies ahead for local social scientists.

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Notes

1. These individual deaths are different from those perpetrated in the context of state terrorism (1976–1983), which were the result of a systematic plan to exterminate the so-called ‘enemies of the nation’ (mostly members of left-wing groups).
2. The interviews were held with relatives of the victims and leading actors in the demonstrations that followed the deaths; also, with citizens from the towns where the events took place, irrespective of their involvement in subsequent demonstrations. A sample was defined that represented both sexes and a variety of age groups and social classes (as inferred from occupation). They were semi-structured interviews, some of them recorded. All interviewees were asked to give their consent to the interviews being used anonymously in an academic paper.
3. For instance, the finding of Osvaldo Sivak's body in 1987 and arrest of the murderers helped locate the bodies of other businessmen who had been kidnapped and killed by the same gang.

Likewise, the death of Omar Carrasco encouraged the families of other conscripts who had died in dubious circumstances to file their claims, while the killing of Kosteki and Santillán in 2003 form part of a long series of popular activists killed.

4. Bulacio was killed by the police after a raid at a rock concert in April 1991.
5. *Poder feudal* (feudalistic power) was a label widely used in newspapers like *Página 12*, *Clarín* or *La Nación* in connection with the case. On the other hand, the mention of the rape in the case of María Soledad Morales was rather irregular. In the interviews held in 2015, her death is described as femicide, a category that was not in use at the time of the crime or in the years after.
6. Journalist Fanny Mandelbaum rose to fame while reporting on the Morales case from Catamarca for a national television channel. Ernesto Tenenbaum, a correspondent of *Página 12*, also earned public and professional recognition with his coverage of this case. At the local level, César Atilio 'Kelo' Molas followed the case on a daily basis for *El Ancaesti* until sentencing of the perpetrators in 1996. Reporter Guillermo Berto, from *Diario de Río Negro*, was a key actor in the Carrasco case. When it gained national notoriety, *La Nación* sent a correspondent, Jorge Urien Berri, to the crime scene in Zapala and the conscript's hometown, Cutral Có. Later on Urien Berri and Marín (1995) wrote a widely read book about the case.
7. Some of the victims' relatives turned into political actors, playing an active role in similar cases taking place after their own. Ada Morales, María Soledad's mother, took part in the demonstrations that followed the murder of two youngsters in the province of Santiago del Estero in 2003. She also gave support to Madres del Dolor (an association of mothers of victims of police abuse, reckless car drivers, etc., formed in 2000). Sister Martha Pelloni, principal of Colegio del Carmen y San José (the school attended by María Soledad) and coordinator of the so-called *marchas del silencio* (silent marches) for justice, became an active campaigner against human trafficking. Juan Carlos Blumberg, Axel's father, founded an NGO and named it after his son. Championing the claim for harshest punishment for common criminals, he rose to political prominence nationwide.
8. In December 1994, as a result of Omar Carrasco's death, Law 24.429 was enacted, on voluntary military service. This meant the abolition of compulsory military service. After the killing of Kosteki and Santillán, in 2003 President Néstor Kirchner banned the use of weapons by police agents during demonstrations. The death of Axel Blumberg in 2004 led to the enactment of harsher criminal policies, including longer imprisonment as maximum penalty (25 to 50 years) and more stringent probation conditions.
9. The murder of María Soledad Morales led to the federal intervention of the province of Catamarca (17 April 1991), and the governor was removed from office. Likewise, the police agents who were responsible for the deaths of José Luis Cabezas and then Kosteki and Santillán were tried and sentenced.
10. At: www.jus.gob.ar/derechoshumanos/atencion-al-ciudadano/programa-nacional-de-lucha-contra-la-impunidad.aspx.
11. A shrine was set up where they found the body of María Soledad Morales and filmmaker Héctor Olivera shot a film based on the case, *El caso María Soledad* (1993). The place where they found the car belonging to José Luis Cabezas, with his charred body inside, is now marked by stone monuments, crosses and plaques. Streets were named after him and squares bear his name on commemorative plaques. A documentary was made about the killings in Ingeniero Budge, titled *Budge pregunta, seguirá preguntando*. A film by Juan José Jusid, *Bajo bandera* (1997), was inspired by the Carrasco case. The place where Kosteki and Santillán were killed, Puente Pueyrredon in the district of Avellaneda, hosts all kinds of performances on the anniversary of their death. Moreover, the train station where the two youngsters were shot down was renamed after them.

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Author biographies

Sandra Gayol is Full Professor at the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS), Argentina and researcher at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET). Her fields of interest are the social and cultural history of Argentina and Latin America. She is author of, among others, *Sociabilidad en Buenos Aires. Hombres, honor y cafés* (2000), *Honor y duelo en la Argentina moderna* (2008), *Sociabilidades, justicias e violencias: Prácticas e representaciones no Cone Sul* (2008) (with Sandra Pesavento) and *Muerte, política y sociedad en la Argentina* (2015) (with Gabriel Kessler).

Gabriel Kessler is Full Professor at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina and researcher at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET). His fields of interest are inequality, violence and crime. His publications include *Sociología del delito amateur* (2004), *El sentimiento de inseguridad* (2009), *Controversias sobre la desigualdad* (2014), *Neoliberalism and National Imagination* (2005, with A Grimson) and *Inseguridad, precariedad y riesgo* (2013, with D Merklen and R Castel).

Résumé

Nous établissons un lien entre les morts violentes, les problèmes d'ordre public et les changements survenus au cours des 30 dernières années en Argentine. Nous défendons la thèse selon laquelle les circonstances du meurtre (la manière de tuer, le traitement du cadavre, la nature et le comportement moral de la victime) jouent un rôle essentiel dans la réaction de la société et l'importance du défi à l'ordre public. Nous suggérons que l'émotion et l'indignation soulevées par la mort violente d'une personne innocente et sans défense déclenchent des réactions politiques, sociales et culturelles d'une grande complexité. Alors que nos contemporains tendent à établir presque immédiatement une relation de cause à effet, une analyse rétrospective montre que les ruptures et les continuités observées après chaque meurtre résultent d'une grande variété de chaînes temporelles et causales. La capacité des homicides à provoquer des problèmes d'ordre public peut nous aider à penser les processus démocratiques en Amérique latine en nous montrant que les démocraties de la région sont jugées sur leur faculté à régler des problèmes d'ordre public comme ceux qui sont étudiés dans cet article.

Mots-clés

Mort violente, Amérique latine, Argentine, problèmes du service public, changements

Resumen

En este trabajo, hacemos conexiones entre la muerte violenta, los problemas públicos y los cambios en los últimos 30 años en Argentina. Sostenemos que las formas en que las personas perdieron la vida, las formas en que sus cadáveres fueron manejados y las formas en que los muertos y sus comportamientos fueron descritos en términos de moralidad juegan un papel clave en la determinación de la reacción social y el desafío a las autoridades públicas. Sugerimos que la conmoción y la indignación frente a la muerte violenta de una persona inocente e indefensa desencadenan cambios políticos, sociales y culturales en formas muy complejas. Donde contemporáneos tienden a establecer relaciones causales casi inmediatas, un análisis retrospectivo demuestra que las rupturas y continuidades posteriores a cada muerte resultan de una variedad de cadenas temporales y causales. La capacidad de una muerte de plantear problemas públicos puede ayudarnos a pensar acerca de los procesos democráticos en América Latina, indicando que las democracias de la región son juzgadas en términos de su capacidad para resolver los problemas públicos consagrados por las muertes como las analizadas aquí.

Palabras clave

Muerte violenta, América Latina, Argentina, problemas públicos, cambios