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Rock nacional and dictatorship in Argentina

PABLO VILA

*The innocent are the guilty
says his highness, the King of Spades.*

1. Introduction

Between 1976 and 1983 Argentina witnessed the full development of a phenomenon which has come to be known as *rock nacional* ('national rock'). At first sight it might appear no more than a matter of musical consumption, fashioning its participants simply as 'artists' on one side and 'public' on the other. But it has proved an original form within which the young create and inhabit a space of their own, relatively protected from the assaults of the military dictatorship (which had made them its principal victims), and has come to constitute, with the passing of the years, a counter-culture and a social movement.

The mass nature of attendance at concerts is only one of the indicators of the social relevance of the movement. Dozens of magazines published over sixteen years (with print runs of up to 25,000 copies) and some 4,000 'underground' magazines served to give voice to the thought of youth, silenced by a violent and authoritarian society. From within those spaces (the concerts and magazines) a 'we' was constructed, an identity within which the musicians became leaders who, through the lyrics of their songs, gave form to an alternative, counter-cultural proposal which challenged the ideology of the dictatorship.

This genuine phenomenon of cultural resistance was highly dysfunctional for the regime. Tilman Evers claims, in this regard, that

Creating spaces for more comradesly relationships, for consciousness less directed by the market, for less alienated cultural manifestations, or for different basic values and beliefs, these movements represent a constant dose of an extraneous element within the social body of peripheral capitalism. Naturally, any result we might expect from this micro-level 'counter-culture' will only appear in the long term. But during this long process it will have demonstrated something much more indisputable and irreversible than the multiple abrupt transformations at the pinnacle of power, precisely because it will have put down roots in daily practice and in the corresponding essential orientations upon which all social structures are founded. (Evers 1985, p. 34)

Our hypothesis, which we shall develop in these pages, is that *rock nacional* represents an oppositional cultural expression of a specific social actor, youth. Its basic characteristics are that it creates its own values, which clash with those of the regime; it functions as an ideology of everyday life; it generates forms of participation which are alternative in character; it is jealous of its autonomy with

respect to other actors and projects, above all of all political parties; and it shapes its own identity in opposition to the authoritarian and anti-democratic powers which define it as one of their enemies. For all these reasons, it indisputably comes into the category of counter-culture.

But to say that it is a counter-culture is to say, in terms of modern theories of action, that it is a *new social movement*. In fact, following Melucci, we can say that new social movements are characterised by making the sphere of culture their privileged space of action (whereas traditional social movements gave battle in the field of relations of production):

The most remarkable aspect of contemporary conflicts is that they overcome the distinction between public and private. Conflict and social struggles invade terrains hitherto considered as private, such as sexual relations, inter-personal relations, profound necessities are the basis upon which new collective identities are founded. . . . This centering upon an identity which is not principally productive or political, but founded upon more profound properties which feel threatened, tends to accentuate the characteristics of fragmentation and marginality of the new movements. Revolt takes on existential contents, the only ones which appear to the actors to be irreducible and not manipulable by the system. (Melucci 1976, p. 57)

The search for a new type of inter-personal relations; the defence of being 'different', youth identity; the creation of autonomous spaces, proposals for the liberation of the body; the assumption by protest of existential contents; the ambiguous and conflictive relationship with politics and the assumption of directly cultural character are all characteristics present in the *rock nacional* movement, which could therefore be considered as a particular type of new social movement. We say that it is a particular type of social movement because it also takes on a special function in that it develops in a context of dictatorship and plays a role in the emergence of democracy: '. . . the search for democracy takes on, in general, the form of a counter-culture; that is, it fills itself with a set of signs which are opposed to the signs which mark the established regime. There thus takes place a cultural confrontation between signs with different and mutually exclusive meanings . . .' (Mires 1984, p. 57).

It should be pointed out here that references to *rock nacional* as a new social movement should be taken with the caution that all such approaches to this particular type of social actor require, especially as regards the consistency and scope of its project. Thus if in the central nucleus of the movement (musicians, journalists on alternative magazines, members of communities, young people who take on rock as their culture, etc.), such counter-cultural contents are found clearly delineated, the same thing does not always occur on the adolescent periphery which goes to concerts, where the same contents appear more blurred, bearing witness to the load of ambiguity which results from their being subject to other influences and social impressions (parents, school, the mass media, etc.).

Notes on methodology

How is one to 'recover' the memory of a social actor when this is rooted in concerts and meetings of groups of friends of which few objective records remain? This was the question which directed the search for the methodological tools fit for the object of study. It was evident from the start that given its highly specific characteristics, the best way of doing it was through sharing, in some way, the crucial activity of the movement, that is, listening to music in a group.

Once this decision was taken, 'Music Listeners' Groups' ('grupos de recepción musical') were set up. These are groups of friends who habitually go together to rock concerts, and who were invited to one or two meetings for the purpose of listening to music and talking about *rock nacional*. The guiding idea behind this methodology is that the gestation and fashioning of meanings and lived experiences in the past have a non-verbal origin, distinct from that of the question, because in phenomena so tied to the emotive as those which concern us here, an emotional trigger such as the music which those interviewed most enjoyed at a given time seems more fruitful than a verbal stimulus, more symbolic-rational in nature.

Therefore at the start of each meeting they listened to those songs by the different groups which had been most requested by the audience (themselves in the past) in each period analysed. This provoked a veritable flood of memories and structuring of lived experiences which, in many cases, led to the meetings being continued on another day at the request of those interviewed. Twenty-eight meetings of this type took place, with an average length of three hours.

Another important source of data were rock magazines, and above all their letters sections, which in some cases took up four or five pages (some magazines received more than 300 letters a month). Complete collections (over seven or eight years) were consulted of the most important, and one or two years of less relevant sources, as well as newspaper articles and non-rock magazines.

Interviews were also carried out with key informants: specialist journalists (Miguel Grinberg, Jorge Pistocchi, Claudio Kleiman); music therapists working with young drug addicts (Mauricio Ruiz); psychologists (Rubén Rojas) and, of course, musicians.

Three semi-structured interviews were carried out at mass concerts in December 1984, with the intention of capturing the opinion of the actors *in situ*.

We also had access to the statistical information which formed the basis of the Pitman y Gerber monograph (Pitman y Gerber *et al.* 1983). This was based upon a survey carried out among 400 adolescents queueing for concerts, of which a selection of a hundred cases was processed, and two group meetings, one with adolescents who described themselves as rock fans and another with a control group who described themselves as 'not just rock fans'.

With this battery of methodological tools, we hoped to reduce as far as possible the particular biases which tend to be introduced into research conducted in accordance with one single technique.

Use is made in this work of participant accounts (whether those originating in letters pages, or from the music listeners' groups, interviews, etc.) *only* in order to *illustrate* an argument whose empirical basis is composed of the combination of techniques utilised, and never of the participant account itself. In any case, the most important function of the participant accounts transcribed is to 'make flesh' in a concrete, lived experience, a particular constant observable by the other techniques. For example, to transform the cold statistical datum that 54 per cent of the sample were interested in the themes of the songs for their socio-political content, and that 63 per cent went to concerts for the content of the lyrics, into the testimony of Jorge, aged twenty-two, a cadet:

I believe that many things you didn't have clear, or that appeared to be the case, or that you felt in a vague kind of way, became firmer and clearer through the themes of the songs. . . . I think that in many cases the musicians functioned as leaders of opinion.

2. Difficult times

2.1. Repression and defence of youth identity (1976–77)

Don't lose heart
Don't let yourself be killed
There are so many tomorrows to
go

(‘Don't Lose Heart’, Charly García, 1976)

They've offended me greatly
And no-one has explained.
Ah, if I could kill them
I'd do it with no fear.

(‘The Canterville Ghost’, Charly García, 1975)

With the military coup of 1976 fear appeared in Argentine society as a social attribute: out of fear civil society turned back in on itself in the context of a situation devoid of points of reference. In a far-reaching attempt to re-define traditional political identities, the military regime proceeded to disperse all collectivities. Political parties, unions, corporations and social movements retreated (on their own initiative or under compulsion) from the public sphere. Society as a whole was privatised.

The youth movement was not unaffected by this development. On the contrary,



Charly García

the culture of fear made the youth movement its privileged protagonist, to the extent that it was upon the young that the bulk of the repression was visited (67 per cent of the 'disappeared' were young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty). Basing itself on the image of 'suspect youth', the repression was directed specifically to this age group: one was guilty unless one could prove the contrary. While the student movement and the political youth movements slowly disappeared as frameworks of reference and support for collective identities, the *rock nacional* movement established itself as the sphere within which a 'we' was constructed. Thus going to concerts and listening to records among groups of friends became privileged activities, as through them broad sectors of the young sought to preserve their identity, in a context in which the young felt threatened by the military by virtue of their youth:

To go to a concert was like a need. We didn't miss a single one. There was a tremendous need to be together. You felt sure that being together nothing was going to happen to you, but if you went out onto the street something would happen to you for sure. There was a great need to participate in something, and to be safe at the same time. I think it was a state of collective energy, do you see? Which is what we were lacking. (Ricardo, 31, bank employee)

Thus the period 1976–77 was marked by a tremendous boom in *rock nacional* concerts. It was common in this period for Luna Park (the biggest covered stadium in the country, in Buenos Aires, with a capacity of 15,000) to be filled once or even twice a month, along with innumerable theatre and cafe concerts. Nevertheless, it was not a period in which there was a noticeable increase in the sale of records of this genre, as what was taking place was a social necessity rather than an aesthetic matter. If we agree with Lechner that 'Considering this constitution of the "we" as what is specific to the political, a folk performance, a strike or a mass can also be transformed into a political act. Independent of its content, any type of ritual supposes the consciousness of a collective power' (Lechner 1982, p. 47), in our case the mass *rock nacional* concerts of 1976–7 provide a clear example of politicisation in a period of the closure of the traditional spaces for political activity. In such concerts the movement celebrated itself and confirmed the presence of the collective actor whose identity had been questioned:

It was as if Luna Park meant a place to meet, rather than a weakness for going to see one group or another. 'We are us, we are here', the twelve or fourteen thousand people who filled the place with their presence seemed to be saying.

(*Expreso Imaginario*, August 1976, concert report)

The appellation 'we' necessarily signals also a 'they'. Who has to notice that 'we shall not go un-noticed any more'? They do. The 'they' of Charly García's 'they want to dishearten us, they want to kill us' or 'they have offended us so often'. From 'them' comes the famous speech by Admiral Massera (a member of the military junta), delivered in the Universidad del Salvador, where he brackets rock with subversion, and which hangs, framed, in the editorial office of *Expreso Imaginario*:

The young become indifferent to our world and begin to build a private universe . . . while they make a strong caste of themselves, they convert themselves into a secret society before everyone's eyes, celebrate their rituals: clothes, music. With complete indifference. And they always seek horizontal identifications, spurning every vertical relationship. Later some of them will exchange their neutrality, their spineless pacifism, for the thrill of a terrorist faith, a predictable destination of an assault on the senses with no prior itinerary, which begins with so arbitrarily sacrilegious a conception of love, which for them thus ceases to be a private ceremony, leads on to promiscuity, carries on to addiction to hallucinogenic drugs and . . .

results in the end in death, of others or of themselves, it matters little, as the destruction will be justified by the social redemption which some manipulators have generally made available to them, so that they can equate with an ideology what was a maddening race towards the most extreme exaltation of the senses. (26 November 1977)

Once again there appears the 'suspect youth' who, once initiated into rock music (that secret society which celebrates its rituals: clothes, music, drugs, free love, etc.), ends up inevitably, for the military, in the guerrilla forces. And in 1977, when there was already talk of 'the defeat of subversion', repressive action began against that cultural manifestation which appeared, in the eyes of the military, as one of its sources: rock culture.

But the 'they', the enemy of the movement, the enemy of the youth, is also generalised to cover broad sectors of society, to the extent that the 'anti-youth' discourse of the military obtains consensus:

I believe that inside the concert you loved people, and outside you didn't. I don't know if it was because of the music or because you were predisposed . . . but it was as if you had the need to love the people, and they loved you. It's that you didn't love the people in the street . . . and you went to the concert wishing that everyone outside could be like those at the concert. It's that you looked at the people at the concerts and it seemed that everyone was beautiful! Because you were seeing people who looked at you like . . . like a human being looks, you know? With something in their eyes, and outside they all looked empty, do you see? (Carlos, 30, office worker)

On one side 'us', the 'inside', peace, freedom and participation; and on the other 'them', the 'outside', violence. In this way the *rock nacional* movement was constructing the spaces which preserved the identity of the whole community of young people who felt themselves to be represented by it. The concerts thus appear as rituals on the basis of which a collectivity is constituted, and also privileged spheres of communication between the young ' . . . to which were displaced, beyond the unattractive and scarcely credible official stage, the communicative practices in which we Argentines sought to defend the meaning of life and of our history' (Landi 1983, p. 81).

But it was also *rock nacional* which created, in the harshest years of the dictatorship, a means of communication, the character of which *Expreso Imaginario*, with a respectable print run of 15,000 copies, proposed from its first editorial of August 1976, ' . . . to reach those spaces of the mind which are not hardened, which still maintain, through music, poetry, and love, sufficient freshness to contain feelings of life'.

So significant was the communicative phenomenon which was generated around the *Expreso* that its letters pages became its most important section. As a sphere for the consolidation of the 'we', this section laid bare the preoccupations of the young at that time:

You help me to lose my fear.

(Carlos, November 1976)

I am eighteen, and like most young people, the things that worry me most are violence and lack of understanding, but what upsets me most is that people reply in the same vein.

(Liliana, November 1976)

As a visible expression emerging from a youth movement which had not acquired an organic character, although it was undergoing a process of consolidation, it slowly became a leader:

. . . you . . . are the ones who are doing it right. . . . You are almost a little vanguard in these times. (Laura, September 1977)

The *Expreso* comes to represent the trunk, with innumerable branches, which in turn shelter all those of us who believe we love real feelings. (Juan, August 1977)

As a refuge for sociability and a continent of solidarity, dialogue between readers is a constant feature:

. . . it's beautiful to find someone who thinks the same way you do. And it's beautiful that through this magazine we can communicate with each other. (Mariana, July 1977)

. . . good for Sandra! . . . you can't stand all the crap that surrounds you, and suddenly, you open a magazine and you find something as beautiful as Sandra's letter. Then . . . you discover, you remember, you know that there are people who are looking for something else, another life, more authentic, more natural, without lies, without poses. (Jorge, July 1977).
Note from the editors: The flood of letters congratulating Sandra on her letter is staggering.

In this manner *Expreso Imaginario* breaks, just as the concerts do on another level, with the monopoly of discourse which the regime attempts to establish, and inaugurates a current of communication which strengthens a collective actor in a period characterised by repeated attempts to secure its disintegration:

The *Expreso* was like a drug, we rushed to buy it in the kiosks. And if it didn't come out (because the bloody thing was always late) we suffered, we cried, we went round to the offices to ask what was happening, what the hell was happening!, since it was something like two weeks since the *Expreso* came out! (Carlos, 30, employee)

Its function became more important still in the following period, when the military regime managed to break the concert circuit, and the *Expreso* became the last redoubt for the survival of the movement.

2.2 Regime consolidation and the crisis of rock (1978–79)

It's very sad, to let pass by
on one side, this history

(‘This History’ León Gieco, 1976)

If, according to the logic of the dictatorship, the rock movement and subversion were linked, it was necessary to disrupt the circuit of concerts, given that this was the privileged sphere of the constitution of the ‘we’ of the movement. Furthermore, the concerts were used by the musicians to play songs banned by the authorities.

Action against the circuit of concerts took different forms, and was carried out in a number of stages. In the first place a campaign was mounted against the holding of meetings in smaller venues by throwing tear-gas bombs or stink-bombs into the theatres. Later, police repression was stepped up in the big meetings at Luna Park. Hundreds of people were literally ‘rounded up’ and detained for police checks before and after each event. And in the end the owners of concert halls were ‘advised’ not to let them for rock concerts.

The offensive reached such an extent that towards the end of 1977, faced with the impossibility of putting on concerts, a great number of the groups broke up and the leading musicians were forced to go abroad in order to continue working. The winning of a certain degree of consent by the military government (the World Cup, the height of the import boom, etc.) further contributed to the inability of the national rock movement to resist this onslaught, and as a result its members ‘went private’, as the great majority of actors against whom the military machine had gone into action had already done.

Rock nacional also had to compete against another phenomenon which was

challenging it on its privileged ground. The end of 1977 saw the outbreak of *Saturday Night Fever*; disco music, as performed by the Bee Gees and Donna Summer, took over the musical scene. The discotheque replaced the concert. The dance replaced the song. English replaced Spanish. Lack of communication replaced communication. Participants in the movement were seized by the feeling that *rock nacional* was dying:

What is happening to our music? Has the power of 1976 been paralysed? . . . I believe in this movement. And if once we were so many that we were delighted, we must be more or less the same to help to get it out of this . . . chaos. (Silvia, Letters Page, February 1978)

Note from the editors: All the musicians (and we ourselves) are passing through a strange period of confusion.

In the search for explanations for what was happening, some contributions to the Letters Page refer to a change in public behaviour. It would appear that the climate which engulfed the majority of the population as a consequence of the World Cup also affected the rock fans. High spirits (of an aggressive nature), chauvinism



León Gieco

(previously unknown in the sphere of youth music) and in some cases outright violence began to make themselves felt at rock concerts, and replaced the climate of solidarity/togetherness which had always characterised them in the past. Individualism replaced solidarity, private consumption replaced sociability. Around the period 1978–79 the model of society proposed by the military (people who converge as individuals in the market, stripped of their historical connotations linked to collective actors) seemed to be imposing itself upon that other model which guided the rock utopias, and which, to some extent, was ‘rehearsed’ in the concerts (people relating to each other in solidarity on the basis of giving love, and feeling they were participants in a single movement).

Nevertheless, if this was happening in the public sphere, *rock nacional* was still managing to preserve at this stage two entities which kept it going as a movement. One was *Expreso Imaginario*, the other was the small group of friends:

For more than a year I have been receiving a share of LIFE, when *Expreso* reaches my station.
(Freddy, Letters, November 1977)

. . . I think we all form a little under-world where we all lived separately until you arrived, *Expreso*, and began to bring us all together. If I’m not alone (or just one of a few) I can fight to turn my dream into reality.
(Guillermo, Letters, April 1978)

. . . the magazine stores up the monthly expectations of many people who aspire to change the established order of things, without yet knowing it. (Ernesto, Letters, April 1979)

These comments (and numerous others along the same lines) lie thickly upon the Letters Pages of the *Expreso* in those years. In a period marked by the loss of manifestations of the movement in the public sphere, the magazine functioned as the preserver of its content, through its notes and commentaries, and above all through the function of exchange and communication (that knowledge that ‘there is someone else’) which its Letters Page fulfilled.

The other sphere in which identity was preserved was the group of friends: meetings of friends not only sustained an identity which found few external referents to aid its re-creation, but also played the crucial role of socialising new generations into the contents of the movement. Only when one realises the importance of this exchange of lived experiences between different generations is it possible to understand the phenomenon that occurred when *rock nacional* returned to the public stage: fourteen and fifteen year-olds chorussing songs made popular a decade before, many of them banned and withdrawn from the record shops.

On the basis, therefore, of the contents preserved by the *Expreso*, the profound communication represented by its Letters Page, and the small groups of friends, the *rock nacional* movement ‘hibernated’ awaiting a new spring. This was to come at the hands of the very musicians responsible for the birth of rock in Argentina. It was as if a return to origins was necessary to enable the march to begin again, to recreate the ‘magic’ of the gathering which the years of the military regime’s greatest success seemed to have obliterated.

2.3. *The loss of military legitimacy and the renaissance of rock (1980–81)*

We are in no man’s land,
But it is mine.
The innocent are the guilty,
Says his highness, the King
of Spades.

(‘Alice’s Song in the Country’, Charly García, 1980)

The panorama began to show signs of change in mid-1979, and the re-discovery of the spirit of former days was celebrated with jubilation:

What happened on May 29–30 cannot be reduced to a simple musical concert. It went beyond those bounds to turn itself into a party in which music was the element which bound us together . . . a climate of shared happiness, a communication which happened between all of us marked the beginning of a new move forward in the sphere of rock. A space for us, for all. For all of us who kept singing: O-OOO-O! (Ralph Rothschild, *Mordisco*, July 1979)

A return to the source in order to emerge from the period of darkness: this was the slogan put forward by the most representative exponents of the movement; the recuperation of the essence, the historic banners which 'had wavered a little' in the period in which the military regime seemed to have succeeded in its project of redefining the social actors; a demonstration that rock had not disappeared; and a continuation along the road which would lead to its being the point of reference for a broad sector of youth:

. . . to those who still live by their own instincts we say: We need a region of poetry and music which disrupts, which confuses, which illuminates. To carry on being here, and sing for a lost generation. ALMENDRA was born and disseminated its art in terrain as muddy as that of today. That of now. A terrain drawn by the socio-economic-emotional reality of the Argentine. . . . The present state is depressing. But to go under is not to disappear. . . . We should today, more than ten years on from those events, go over all that has happened; salvage the essence and continue the voyage: that of our identity. (Almendra, *Mordisco*, September 1979)

All this is reflected in the proclamation made by the mythic group Almendra on the occasion of its return. The idea appears once again of a free space, a space of one's own: that 'region of poetry and music'. To that sphere would belong the task of 'disrupting' the route that the system (in this case the military regime) wished to impose upon the young, while at the same time 'illuminating' its own. Because the generation to which it has to sing has been a 'lost' generation, Almendra can perform this task because 'it was born in terrain as muddy as that of today', in which authoritarian soldiers also governed, and in which the 'socio-economic-emotional' reality was also depressing.

Almendra's concerts were a great success, attracting

. . . more than thirty thousand people, and many more who could not get in. We did not go to see a foreign artist. We went to see ourselves; marginalised by the media, confused by other generations. Thus it was that the applause too was directed inwards, towards ourselves. Alongside Almendra we could say: here we are. That we have our culture, our space . . . everyone wanting to know that we were together, present, feeling ourselves part of something. (Ralph Rothschild, *Mordisco*, January 1980)

It was happiness at the meeting itself. It was the possibility of 'continuing the voyage: that of our identity', as Almendra had sensed so acutely. Almendra was only the excuse to say: 'here we are . . . we are part of something . . .', for in the liturgies of the collectivity one celebrates oneself, and 'although they appear as the exaltation of a leader, this only symbolises the confidence of the collectivity in itself to know how to establish itself in the world' (Lechner 1982, p. 47).

From the time of the performances of December 1979 (35,000 people), there was a flood of young people to the concerts, reaching its peak in December 1980, when the group Senú Girán (led by Charly García) brought 60,000 people to Palermo.

What was the response of the military regime? Repression. The first performances of the new cycle of concerts were repressed, because towards the end

of 1979 the military were still convinced of the viability of their socio-economic project, and acted accordingly. As the lustre they had enjoyed at the time of the World Cup had faded, they now appealed directly to repression. The football supporters who years ago had helped them to empty rock of its content had now disappeared. Part of the public was indisputably the same, but it had changed its attitude, it felt itself once again forming part of something which it considered its own. Another sector was made up of new adherents to the movement, who were, in the first place, adolescents. But for the first time university students came to *rock nacional* in massive numbers, and the 'historic rock fan' raised his eyebrows at this uninvited guest at the party.

There is evidence for the emergence of a sphere of dissidence which was valued as such by the most lucid elements in the movement. This was reflected in the mass nature of the phenomenon, in the clearly questioning content of some of the most popular songs, such as 'Alicia's Song in the Country' ('Canción de Alicia en el país'), 'Collective Unconscious' ('Inconsciente colectivo') ('Yesterday I dreamed of the hungry, the mad/Those who went, those who are in prison/Today I awoke singing this song/Which was already written some time ago/It is necessary to sing again, once more'), or 'José Mercado', and above all in the appearance of chants against the government (beginning with the football chant, 'If you're not jumping you're a soldier' ('El que no salta es un militar'), which provoked the curious spectacle of the whole stadium jumping in unison upon their seats). This sphere of dissidence was also detected by the military regime, who stepped up the level of repression in response to the growing size of this oppositional challenge.

From 1981 onwards, however, police action was not the only point of contact between the state and *rock nacional*, as the new military administration, in accordance with its general policy, adopted a strategy of dialogue with the movement. The political orientation of General Viola implied a shift in the centre of gravity of political power from within the military corporation onto the terrain of linkages with different actors in civil society. A future Minister for Youth formed part of the project espoused by the new President, and he had identified the rock movement as a valid interlocutor, able to participate in the political opening in its own area: that of the young.

But unlike the political parties, who '... contributed to maintaining the relative stability of the Viola government through a policy of moderation and containment of anti-military hostility ... [to avoid] the production of offensive criticisms, denunciations, and frontal attacks on the military government ...' (Fontana 1984, p. 23), the human rights movement, the neighbourhood movement and also *rock nacional* not only kept up their assault on the dictatorship, they redoubled their efforts. Thus on the one hand the marches protesting over the 'disappeared' swelled in size, while on the other the oppositional content among concert audiences became more marked: the chant 'El que no salta es un militar' was slowly replaced in the preferences of the young by 'Se va a acabar, se va acabar, la dictadura militar' ('It's going to end, it's going to end, the military dictatorship').

This was the panorama presented by *rock nacional* on the eve of the War of the South Atlantic: concerts of a size never seen before, songs with an increasingly marked oppositional content (demanded by the public themselves) and a strongly anti-military climate among the audience. The most representative element in the movement were perfectly well aware of the ground they were treading and the role they had to play:

García: The people are expecting a kind of message, they need strength, vitality, and in the

lyrics we denounce things, and do all we can so that people go home turned upside down, and we don't need a message which says: 'you must do this!'

Expreso: So there isn't a clear message?

García: No, what is happening is the message.

(Interview with Charly García, *Expreso Imaginario*, December 1981)

What was happening truly was the message. Because

some activities acquired (during the dictatorship) a political and cultural value not so much for what they were or what they were saying, but, fundamentally, as a consequence of the very act of their taking place, which came to be part of the language. The case of what was called 'national rock' is typical in this sense: it does not refer to a homogenous style of music or to a common artistic level, but to the unity of the phenomenon of youth culture which it embraces.

(Landi 1983, p. 82)

The mass gatherings of the social movement also represented ends in themselves, and at times the music was only an excuse. A concert in which the songs are applauded more as soon as their first notes are recognised than when they finish shows clearly that the music is fulfilling something other than an aesthetic function.

Before the Malvinas War, *rock nacional* was already playing to the full its part as leader and co-ordinator of an oppositional movement embracing broad sectors of the young.

2.4. *The War of the South Atlantic and the access of rock to the media (1982–83)*

Friends on the block may disappear

Singers on the radio may disappear

People in the papers may disappear

The ones you love may disappear

(‘The Dinosaurs’, Charly García, 1982)

The period between December 1981 and the Malvinas War saw the return of the military ‘hard-liners’. Galtieri’s government presented itself as a return to ‘the sources of the military process’, through a return to military authoritarianism on the one hand (remember the President’s famous phrase: ‘the ballot boxes are under close guard’) and a re-launching of the monetarist economic line associated with Martínez de Hoz on the other.

Civil society did not accept, in general, the closure of the political space which Viola had opened up, and both political parties and unions increased their opposition activity, leading up to the rally organised for 30 March by the CGT-Brasil. In this context, the Malvinas War appears as an attempt by Galtieri, by means of a military action which struck a chord deep in the hearts of all Argentinians, to resolve ‘domestic political conflicts and re-establish the basis for the legitimisation of an authoritarian political project’ (Fontana 1984, pp 30–31).

In response to an invitation from the military authorities to put on a rock music concert on account of the war, the movement mounted a ‘Festival of Latin American Solidarity’ on 16 May. It was guided by a double purpose: to reflect a desire for peace, and to make some kind of contribution to the needs of the young men holed up in the south, friends, brothers, comrades of the 60,000 young men and women who came to the Obras Sanitarias stadium to contribute handkerchiefs, cigarettes, sweaters and other warm clothing:

I went to the Malvinas concert . . . but I only went to take a sweater for the kids who were cold.

(Oscar, 24, day labourer)

It's as if God had said: 'Here, kids, you've got to tell him that the war's no good.' And I remember that although we had to disguise the fact, all of us who were there went for peace.
(Roberto) (Pitman y Gerber *et al* 1983, p. 6)

From the epic reconstruction of 'the only ones opposed to the war' to the simple 'I went to take a sweater', by way of the possible utilisation on the part of the military of the intentions of the young people present, the whole range of responses picked up with regard to the Festival of Solidarity stress the commitment of those present to peace:

I hope it will be a homage to peace and not to war, as it might appear from some points of view. We, as free musicians in our country, are totally convinced that the war offensive must end.
(Luis Alberto Spinetta, leader of Almendra, *Pan Caliente*, June 1982)

And the way in which the festival developed finally reinforced the message of peace. After a somewhat confusing start, it was León Gieco's performance which tuned in with the feelings of the majority of the 60,000 crowd. From that point on there was no more confusion. Everyone knew why the person at their side had come, because, as Gieco sang:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| I only ask God | Sólo le pido a Dios |
| not to make me indifferent to war | que la guerra no me sea indiferente |
| It is a great monster that tramples | Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte |
| On the poor innocence of the people' | toda la inocencia de la gente. |

Everyone remembered, too, that the peace movement in Argentina is interwoven with the rock movement, and Porchetto's 'A Little Peace' ('Algo de paz') became the other big success of the night.

For *rock nacional* the seizure of the Malvinas and the consequent decision of the authorities not to transmit any more music in English meant the chance to secure massive coverage in the audio-visual media which until then had denied it space. This coverage made it possible for the music's proposals to be heard by a greater number of people and led to an acceleration in the already marked mass nature of the phenomenon. In this context *rock nacional*, not having supported the government in its military adventure (as the political parties had done) and representing the real losers in the war – the hundreds of young men killed or mutilated – assumed a position of outright criticism of the government. The content of lyrics became increasingly oppositional and the chants from the audience became more pointed, with some concerts echoing to the chant: 'Firing squads, firing squads, for all the soldiers who betrayed the nation' ('Paredón, paredón, a todos los milicos que vendieron la nación').

Thus, for example, Fito Páez describes in 'Difficult Times' ('Tiempos difíciles') all the horror of the figure of the 'disappeared':

| | |
|---|--|
| The gravediggers have done their job badly | Los sepultereros trabajaron mal |
| The descrotors forgot that buried flesh | Los profanadores se olvidaron que la carne |
| Does not produce, but there are living | se entierra |
| branches | y no produce, pero hay ramificaciones que |
| And worse, they are alert. | están vivas |
| Mothers who cry over grey earth | y es peor, están alertas |
| Sons who train so as not to die . . . | Madres que le lloran a una tierra gris |
| I drink to that, I sing to that | hijos que se entrenan para no morir . . . |
| The cemeteries of this town will be lit up | Brindo por eso, canto por eso |
| With hells to revenge the souls in question | Los cementarios de esta ciudad se iluminarán |
| And scraps of spring will appear. . . | de infiernos para vengar las almas en |
| | cuestión |
| | y llegarán trocitos de primavera |



Fito Páez

This song, along with the re-issued 'Illegal Oppression' ('Apremios ilegales') by Pedro y Pablo (composed in fact for the earlier dictatorship of 1966–73)

Illegal oppression
 Criminal abuses
 Your human condition
 Violated at their pleasure
 Shock treatment and the witnesses
 Shrieking as they die
 However loud you scream
 Your voice will not be heard
 How long will everyone hide
 What they know and prefer to conceal
 How long this criminal torture
 Rotten emissaries of evil

Apremios ilegales
 abusos criminales
 tu condición humana
 violada a placer
 Picana y los testigos
 muriendo de alaridos
 por más que gritas fuerte
 no van a escuchar
 Hasta cuando todos disimularán
 lo que saben y prefieren callar
 Hasta cuando la tortura criminal
 reventados emisarios del mal

and Charly García's 'Los dinosaurios' and Spinetta's 'Maribel', dedicated to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, marked the high point of the production of lyrics denouncing the situation through which the young lived in the years of the dictatorship. The privileged sphere for meeting and communication within the movement continued to be the mass concerts:

What did going to national rock concerts in the time of the military government mean to you?

The concerts were freedom . . . a meeting in freedom: a liberated zone. You wanted to get in at any price because you knew that inside something different was happening . . . it was a place where people lived freedom in the music, I don't know . . . it was in the air, yes? We asked for freedom there.
 (Carlos, 19, student)

A sphere for the construction of liberty, a utopia made real, even though only between those four walls: yes, but when between five, ten, twenty, and as many as 60,000 people express and feel the same thing, it makes a movement of opinion of genuine scale. The rock movement not only asked for but also to a certain extent anticipated the freedom that was to come.

3. The movement

3.1. Oppositions and the field of conflict values

Rock nacional calls into question the way in which adults conceive the world – the realistic conception:

. . . all those [adults] who surround you have their eyes closed to life, and the worst thing is that they want to get you to be the same way, and at this age you see things as they should be, not as they are.
(Rodolfo, Letters Page, *Expreso Imaginario*, October 1977)

For the young, who tend to orient themselves in accordance with fundamental behaviours rooted in values, the ‘realism’ of adults, their pragmatic behaviour, is synonymous with hypocrisy. This is so because a substantial part of the values upheld by the young come from the socialisation which they receive from their elders, so that their denunciations are directed against the inconsistency between the values affirmed by adult society and its social practice.

The rock movement coined a term to denote this hypocrisy: *careta*. To be *careta* is to appear to be something one is not:

Argentina is *careta*, like all the countries which are coerced and under repression. It was the country of the magazine *Gente*, of marriages between artists, of the jet-set, the country where everything is beautiful, the appearance put on for outside. But inside there were people who were dying of hunger, and there isn't a single bit of political news in the papers . . . it's all football.
(Roberto) (Pitman y Gerber *et al.* 1983, p.4)

In addition to those values which they absorb during a process of socialisation, whether adults respect them in practice or not, the young people of each generation create and uphold new values. In the context of complex modern societies, the young fulfil the function of putting forward new experimental values, which society cannot yet adopt. In this sense, certain practices of the young anticipate behaviour patterns which will later be generalised through the whole of the social body, but which are temporarily repellent to it. It is there that conflict emerges over the breaking of bounds which the system is not disposed for the moment to cross:

Rock is against the society imposed by older people. (Carlos, 19, student)

We're against the establishment. (Augusto, 17, student)

To be against the society imposed upon them and against the establishment is to insist that other values exist to be imposed and established – one's own. For the young, the existence of two projects in opposition to each other (those of the adult and youth worlds) is expressed in a series of opposed pairs: violence–peace (or more violence, in the case of ‘heavy rock’); materialism–spirituality; individualism–community; greed–disinterest; routine–innovation; interest–love; alienation–creation; realism–fantasy; the constructed–the natural; the superficial–the profound; authoritarianism–liberty, etc. In this way the oppositional attitude of rock is

established in the face of a social system characterised as hypocritical, repressive, violent, materialistic, individualistic, routine, alienated, superficial and authoritarian.

Authoritarianism: the crisis within the crisis

If this is the characterisation the rock movement makes of the adult world in general, the existence of dictatorial regimes further exacerbates some of its perceived characteristics; as a result of this the terms used to describe them come to monopolise the discourse of the young and the movement, to the detriment (if only temporary) of the rest. Thus violence, repression and authoritarianism (or their opposites, peace and freedom) come to be the fundamental watchwords put forward by rock during the period of military rule. Notwithstanding this – and given the characteristic noted before, that frequently the confrontation with adults seems to be total – it is not accidental that the young link the dictatorship to adults in general, at the same time as they signal their clear opposition to it:

The country has ended up penniless. Capital has been expatriated to the extent that this nation has been turned into the most dependent and indebted on the planet. What did you do about it, dad? . . . every son should turn himself into an inquisitor of his father. Because if the government in fact hands over to the politicians a devastated country, then also our grandfathers and fathers are handing over to us a very dubious piece of history in which they are all accomplices for what they have done or failed to do. . . . In the eyes of their children, every father will take his share of responsibility in the face of all this mess, and we young people will be able to demand a 'mea culpa' from this shrivelled and ancient society, now that its authoritarian leaders are getting older, and finding it a little harder to keep their gaze fixed upon us. (Miguel Cantilo, leader of the group Pedro y Pablo, *Primera Plana*, April 1983)

It is precisely this absolute conviction of the adolescent who grew up during the military period, and of the movement he/she represents – the conviction of being in no way responsible for the disaster – which gives solid arguments on the one hand, and courage on the other, to confront repression. It is for that reason that the first mass setting in which slogans were chanted against the government, and the military regime was called a 'dictatorship', was a national rock concert.

The enemy within the movement

The rock movement in Argentina recognises a fundamental fear, one which perhaps has its origins in the fate of other youth movements at an international level, of being co-opted, exploited, or 'turned over' by the system. This possibility is lived as a constant threat, and these young people were highly sensitive to it. Two terms coined within the movement are of key importance to understanding the radical and non-negotiable attitude with regard to certain values: *transar* and *zafar*.

To *transar* is to enter into transactions with the system, for example making commercial music, abandoning original values, and so on. To *zafar* is the opposite, it is to 'escape' from the system, to escape from it by any means possible. When the young detect attitudes they suspect of being *transa*, comments arise such as 'they're making commercial music now', 'they've sold out', 'they're taking the easy way', etc. Incorruptibility is demanded of all members of the movement, but of its leaders in particular.

This fear relates to the way the system might penetrate rock, producing a separation between the public and the artist. In general it is the money the artist is

(allegedly or really) earning which is accused of provoking the split. And the money comes, for the most part, from the hand of a producer. Cause and agent are thus identified. In this way the artist's representative is identified as the fifth columnist of the establishment within the world of rock. It is he who makes money out of the music, the ideals and the poetry of the music. The utopia of the members would seem to be to achieve the abolition of intermediations between the music and the public, with the idea that the music and the public make up the movement. All the other things are invasions, and the invasions are the system.

Beyond the existence of certain data which make it possible to glimpse 'commercial' behaviour on the part of some musicians, one would have to ask whether some of the accusations of *transa* are not linked to issues which have more to do with the young people who make them than with the musicians against whom they are directed. It might be suggested that some of those recriminations have their origins in the mythic reconstruction which each member and subgroup of the world of rock makes of what was his moment of entry and initiation into the movement.

Curiously, practically all our interviewees on the one hand, and the majority of readers of rock magazines writing to the Letters Pages on the other, identify the moment of the greatest authenticity of the movement (leaving aside its 'untouchable origins') as the time at which they themselves were socialised into the rock culture. There is a 'before' and an 'after', a 'paradise lost' in which, apparently, all past time was better. This intersection between the cycle of one's personal life and the history of the movement seems to mark a key point, becoming a landmark which is converted (perhaps unconsciously) into a divisor between a mythical 'before' and 'after'. These generally coincide with adolescence and entry into the world of rock.

Perhaps the perception of how long the movement retained its 'idealism' is linked to the moment at which they themselves, because of the time they had reached in their own lives, came to an equally idealistic conception of the world, governed by absolute values, purity of principles, etc., and it is possible that in part they project their subsequent disillusionment back onto the movement as a whole. The theme is pertinent, given that the rock musicians have given eloquent signs of wishing to 'escape' from the system, and avoid being drawn into the bourgeoisie:

Now that I'm part of the system . . . well, it's not very nice. You have to watch out all the time that the system doesn't devour you, and it wears you down . . . if I should happen to see that I can't keep my head together, I'll retreat and play in smaller places, without sponsors.

(Charly García, *Clarín*, 6 March, 1983)

It is a constant feature of *rock nacional* that groups break up at the moment of their greatest success, the cases of those who broke up once they had started to decline being exceptional. The leading musicians have always attached greater importance to their creative development than to the dictates of economic success. Paradoxically, actions of this kind lead them to form new groups which themselves become successful (sooner or later), as in general the change in their style of composition corresponds to the detection of new needs which are emerging among their public. This phenomenon is a constant to and fro between the public and the music which makes for their growth together.

3.2. Youth culture and 'Us'

Rock nacional defines itself as a movement. Its members are bound together by a shared culture, an ideology of life, which has the particular characteristic of bringing

into play the personality as a whole, in its rational, social and affective aspects. It is an oppositional culture which not only embraces the political, economic and social orders, but also calls into question a form of conceiving of the world:

Rock is our culture. The culture of a generation which rejects the inheritance of previous generations, an inheritance of crisis, blood, one of the worst in the world. It is art for today and implies a whole ideological and philosophical posture.

(Andrés Calamaro, keyboard player with Los Abuelos de la Nada, *La Razón*, 16 December 1984)

It's a movement that goes beyond music. It's a philosophy, a way of life. For me, in personal matters, it was also a religion. Rock is your home and you feel it . . . it is giving you identity, speaking to you.

(Ruben) (Pitman y Gerber *et al.* 1983, p. 5)

Rock is what you were feeling and what you were living every day: your problems, your wishes, your desires. You don't carry it in long hair or faded jeans, you carry it in your heart.

(Federico) (*Humor*, 1984)

Rock as a form of life, as a daily concern, as ideology, as the sphere of the self, as a valid interlocutor, as a practice of freedom: these and other similar descriptions are conspicuous in the discourse of the members of the movement, revealing the re-socialising function which it plays in contemporary Argentina, characterised as it is by the imposition of a culture of silence and self-censorship in the family sphere. Young people were looking elsewhere for the truthful information that was being kept from them, as neither the manipulated information which they received from the mass media, nor that which they received from their teachers and lecturers, nor the dialogue they conducted with their parents (who generally appealed to self-censorship to avoid repression falling on the family) made any reference to the real country the young experiences every day. To say that 'rock spoke to you', or that rock was 'what you felt and lived every day', is to say that the communicative practices with which many young people maintained their relationship with reality were structured around the *rock nacional* movement, not round the *careta* country of their parents:

It was rock which made me see the things that were all right, that you think are all right. I believe that many things you didn't have clear, or that appeared to be the case, or that you felt in a vague kind of way, became firmer or clearer through the themes of the songs or statements. I think that in many cases the musicians functioned as leaders of opinion.

(Jorge, 22, cadet)

3.3. *The concert as the principal channel of participation*

Although the culture of rock had multiple manifestations (a language of its own, particular types of clothes, etc.), it was centred primarily upon music, with the artists becoming the leaders of the movement. These leaders are seen as co-founders of the cultural phenomenon that has been generated, as they interpret the feelings of the young and re-create it, not only in specific musical forms, but also in multiple common codes. The relationship between the artist and the public is practically symbiotic: one does not exist without the other. This goes much further than the simple economic problem of a public supporting an artist by attending concerts or buying records, because artistic production itself depends upon the quality of this relationship. The reason for this is that it is demanded of the musician that while his own idiosyncrasies are respected he should continue to express the everyday experiences, the desires and the values of the young people who make him their

leader. In this way the resulting phenomenon is shared, given that it does not belong exclusively to the musician, as he only transmits back, in an artistic product, what his people first gave to him:

. . . the people are the main protagonist in what we are doing. The public has to provoke the phenomenon of Luis, and Luis has to provoke the phenomenon of his public . . . it's a question of making them feel that they are getting something impressive, and that they are the ones who invented it.
(Luis Alberto Spinetti, *Expreso Imaginario*, August 1980)

I believe that in the concerts there are two artists: the public and the artist. Fifty per cent each.
(Jorge, 22, cadet)

The close relationship between artist and public is the nodal point of all the phenomenon known as *rock nacional* and the concert is the physical sphere in which it is moulded. In addition, this characteristic of the movement brings with it the idea of equality, absence of division: the musician is the representative of the lived experiences of his followers, and in order to continue in that position he must share these with them. If he is converted into a 'superstar' he will not be able to do so, he will cease to represent his people and lose popularity, as a result of which the circuit around the idea of equality will be completed. The dangers of 'stardom' are perceived by the most lucid elements, and pointed out by the young fans in the majority of participant accounts:

. . . the musician sold me the idea that he was the same as me, and now I see that it isn't so, and I have every right to tell him that he's a cretin, and to give me back what is mine.
(Pablo, 22, student) (Pitman y Gerber *et al* 1983, p. 6)

Therefore keeping the circuit which feeds rock well oiled is not simply a matter of preserving the concert as a meeting place, but primarily of keeping open communication between the musician and the public – that recycling of messages and lived experiences which makes one both equal and an idol and at the same time transforms a leader into the most 'equal' of the equal. The concert, as the principal participatory form, thus takes shape as the sphere of reunion of the young with their own lived experiences. In it ideology is renewed, the proposals of the leaders are ratified or rejected, and outsiders are given a display of the numerical size of the movement. It is lived as a ritual of re-creation, regeneration and re-affirmation of 'us', of the collective identity. The slogans, the 'O-OOO-O!' of Woodstock, the requests for the most significant songs, the outburst of joy at the recognition of favourite songs when the musicians play the opening chords are, more than the applause at the end, the signs of the approval and affection of the public. Applause at the end is the result of an aesthetic appreciation of the consumed artistic product, and for the movement the aesthetic is only one more component, not the principal reason for the meeting. In sum, *rock nacional* is a movement which creates leaders rather than idols, which demands the re-affirmation of the commitment of the musician to the reality of his public at every meeting, as it were in a daily plebiscite which is the nodal point of its survival as an oppositional youth movement.

4. Conclusions

The *rock nacional* movement has played an extremely important part in the socialisation and re-socialisation of broad sectors of Argentinian youth during the military period, restoring truthful communication regarding the real country, salvaging the meaning of life in a context of lies and terror, consolidating a collective

actor as a means of counteracting an individualistic model of life, counterposing a supportive community of actions and interests to the primacy of the market. The highly oppositional content of the songs, the frankly critical attitude of the audiences, and the gathering together in public places to express opposition to the military regime were some of the characteristics of this youth movement, which, in the context of the crisis of legitimacy provoked in Argentina by the emergence of successive dictatorial governments, has made itself one of the alternatives to the crisis, creating popular and communal channels of participation each time that traditional channels have been closed down.

It is a movement which has leaders but no idols, which celebrates itself in massive concerts, and which transforms some songs into genuine hymns: 'Girl with Paper Eyes' ('Muchacha ojos de papel'), 'Cold Tomato Juice' ('Jugo de tomate frío'), 'The Raft' ('La balsa'), 'The Bear' ('El oso'), 'The March of Rage' ('La marcha de la bronca'), 'Song for My Death' ('Canción para mi muerte'), 'I Only Ask God' ('Sólo le pido a Dios'), 'Alicia's Song in the Country' ('Canción de Alicia en el país'), or 'The Canterville Ghost' ('El fantasma de Canterville'); during the dictatorship, in 1983, the latter was played in the funeral cortege which followed the remains of the conscript Palacios, assassinated in Campo de Mayo after having been tortured for a minor infraction.

It is a movement which wins the backing of adolescents who write on their rucksacks, as did Roberto (15):

My arm is peace, my party is rock, and my eternal end is love.

Without any doubt it has been, for broad sectors of youth, a refuge, a sphere of resistance and a channel for participation in the context of a closed and authoritarian society in crisis.

(translated by Paul Cammack)

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