

LEARNING FROM ATROCITY:  
SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION AND HISTORICAL  
MEMORY IN POST-CONFLICT LATIN AMERICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world has witnessed a growing interest in how societies deal with the legacy of state terror. This project presents the first comparative investigation of the ways in which five Latin American nations - Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay - have used secondary school education to interpret past political violence, revealing various levels of commitment to questions of remembrance, truth and national reconciliation.

The goal of this research is twofold: first, to contribute to the evolving literature on transitional justice through a policy-oriented publication on a crucial aspect of human rights practice that remains largely unstudied; and, second, to assist transitional societies accurately represent their historical experience with political violence within educational programs, both in Latin America and, more generally, around the world.

Public education, particularly at the secondary school level, represents a key means of engaging with past political violence. However, to date, the issue has not been carefully studied in a comparative manner or well-integrated into formal, comprehensive strategies of post-conflict justice. Learning from Atrocity addresses this issue through field research and comparative analysis of education policy and historical memory in five Latin American countries. This project will present its findings in two related publications: a monograph comparing educational strategies in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay and a set of guiding principles to be used by

education professionals on how to integrate an honest and rigorous review of past political violence into public education.

Learning from Atrocity focuses attention on the link between secondary school education and the legacy of state terror to ensure that successive generations of a nation's youth are exposed to realistic representations of the past as a means of supporting democratic practice and broad social accountability.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM – TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE FAILURE TO FOCUS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY

From the 1970s through the 1990s, virtually every major Latin American country experienced a transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. In many cases, prior regimes were closely associated with severe human rights violations including torture, disappearances, executions, rapes, illegal detentions and, in some cases, scorched earth policies and massacres. These acts of extreme violence were not isolated instances of excess, but represented key components of systematic government policies. For this reason, one of the central issues arising out of Latin American democratic transitions was how to respond to the violations committed by previous regimes alongside pressing calls for justice and accountability in the face of institutionalized brutality. The theoretical and practical encounter with these issues has come to be known as "transitional justice" or "post-conflict justice."

While this set of ideas and strategies originally arose out of Latin America, transitional justice has become one of the most important innovations in global human rights discourse and practice. This movement is motivated by a fundamental belief in the idea that societies that have experienced atrocities must formally engage with past political violence in order to ensure a democratic, peaceful and stable future. Countries seeking to make sense of past political violence have used an array of different strategies and interventions to achieve these goals including: criminal prosecutions against those responsible for human rights violations; truth commissions that establish an objective record of

past violence; systems of reparation that seek to address victims' harm, loss, and suffering; and mechanisms of memorializing victims through monuments, museums and other practices.

However, despite its commitment to revealing truth about past atrocities, transitional justice has directed strikingly limited attention to the role of public education in the process of social remembrance. In Latin America and throughout the world, virtually no major transitional process has formally incorporated an educational component into its coordinated efforts to face the past. This is not to suggest that no efforts have been made to link education to transitional justice, but rather that this process has generally not been formally evoked as a key component of a broad national strategy and that there have been few attempts to date to make a comparative study of different countries' responses to this challenge.

Preliminary research reveals that, in most post-conflict nations, the Ministry of Education develops its own educational strategies regarding past atrocities and independently develops course material, particularly textbooks that represent the country's recent history. In general, this process is not directly linked to official strategies of post-conflict justice or presented as key element of a comprehensive transitional plan.

Furthermore, post-conflict educational policies in particular countries are largely disengaged from the experiences of other nations and have received limited attention from international organizations and others that encourage coordinated responses to facing past violence.

Learning from Atrocity addresses this situation through field research and critical analysis premised on the idea that secondary school educational policy and materials represents one of the government's most significant contributions to historical memory for the country's youth and for the nation more generally. This situation is particularly relevant in nations where the violence took place over ten years ago and where a significant percentage of the population is under the age of 18, as is common throughout Latin America.

### 3. DEFINING QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Learning from Atrocity is a policy-oriented research project that combines fieldwork-based documentary investigation with broad comparative analysis of the representation of past political violence in public secondary school education in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay. The project seeks to answer a series of basic research questions:

- How do these democratic Latin American states represent past political violence in public secondary school education?
- How does the material used in one nation compare to what is used in other nations in the region?
- What processes are used by each nation's Ministry of Education to determine the representation of past political violence in educational materials?
- How do these processes compare across the region?
- What attitudes and ideas are expressed by authorities as regards the relationship between public education and the broad social process of facing the past to build for the future?
- How do these attitudes compare across the region?
- How can these and other nations better integrate a serious reflection on past political violence into secondary school education policies and materials?
- How can the individual nations studied learn from the experiences of other nations in the world that have faced similar issues of representing past violence?

The research will fill a major gap in the current literature on transitional justice and draw attention to new ways on

integrating these issues into a broad, coordinated and comprehensive post-conflict plan.

#### 4. PROJECT REPORTS AND FUTURE PLANS

Learning from Atrocity will present its findings through two publications: a monograph comparing educational strategies in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay and a set of guiding principles to be used by education professionals on how to integrate an honest and rigorous review of past political violence into public education. In addition, the material will be adapted for academic publication in peer-reviewed journals.

The material will ideally be presented at a regional meeting at the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights with experts from throughout the Americas. This event will allow educators, policy makers and scholars to discuss issues raised in the study and seek to define mechanisms of utilizing secondary school education as a means of supporting transitional justice and the defense and protection of human rights.