5 Argentinean flood management and the logic of omission: The case of Santa Fe City

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When the disastrous flood, generally referred to as "*la Inundación*", occurred in Santa Fe City in 2003, it seemed like a bolt from the blue. Yet, it was far from the first flood to strike the city. Situated between two major rivers, flooding is part of the city's history since its foundation. The lack of preparedness raises questions about the relation between past experience and future action in matters of disaster management. This article analyses the processes of remembering and forgetting as mediators of this relation. By focusing ethnographically on how these entwined processes play out within the Santafesinian bureaucracy, following a logic of omission, it is argued that this logic contribute to the normalisation of disaster instead of future prevention.

Key words: disaster, flooding, vulnerability, adaptation, memory, oblivion, Argentina, Santa Fe City

Introduction: Flooding in Santa Fe City

On April 29th, 2003, a disastrous flood occurred in the Argentinean city of Santa Fe. It came to be called simply "*la Inundación*" (the Flood) by the city's inhabitants. Around 130 000 inhabitants had to evacuate for weeks and months, some even for years. Hundreds of these families had no home at all to return to. The management capacities of local authorities were largely surpassed leaving a third part of the city with severe material and social impacts. In the months following, a protest movement was constituted, consisting of thousands of Santafesinos who had been affected directly or indirectly by the disastrous flood and who were dissatisfied with the risk and crisis management of the municipal and the provincial governments. In general, the Santafesinos were shocked by the catastrophe and, judging from the reactions, the flood was like a bolt from the blue. However, this was far from the first flood to strike the city. Because it is situated between the Paraná and Salado rivers, flooding has in fact been part of the city's local history since the time of the settlement of the place by Spanish conquerors in the 16th century. Since the mid-17th century, at least 30 extraordinary floods have affected Santa Fe. The 2003 flood was however the worst of them all in terms of people affected. A widespread notion I found among my interlocutors was that, during the last decades, "things in this town had only become worse." People referred mostly to the economic and social development of the city after the return of democracy in 1983, but in particular included the 2001 financial crisis in Argentina and "*la Inundación*" in 2003. These events epitomised the structural adjustments made to Argentinian economy in the 1990s, which had largely affected the middle- and low-income sectors. This period was in Santa Fe characterised by low economic growth and increase in unemployment and poverty rates due to economic structural adjustments, turning the city into one with the largest numbers of urban poverty in Argentina. Hence, when "*la Inundación*" occurred in Santa Fe, rates of social vulnerability scored high in over 40% of the population (Arrillaga et. al., 2009).

This article is based on research presented in my doctoral thesis (Ullberg, 2013). This sets out to problematize the idea that there is a relation between social experience of disasters, resilience and adaptation. The Santafesinian case raises questions about such correlations. In order to scrutinise this relationship, the aim of the study is to understand the role of memory as a mediating process between experience and action. Taking Santa Fe City as a case, this study is based on ethnographic fieldwork in this city in the years 2004-2011. It draws on multiple anthropological and sociological theories to analyse how people in different urban settings have engaged with their flooding past through processes memory and oblivion, which configure a particular memoryscape.

This article focuses in particular on one of these urban settings, namely on the political and bureaucratic realms. I describe how memory and oblivion of past floods in Santa Fe are shaped by what I call the "logic of omission;" a particular pattern of selective remembering and forgetting. This logic is here illustrated ethnographically describing some of the inherent practices of Argentinean political and bureaucratic life such as the cycles of exclusion and the *cajoneo*; the making and unmaking of public archives; and flood management plans as artefacts of modern knowledge. I conclude the article by arguing that the logic of omission that pervaded the Santafesinian public administration has contributed to a normalisation of disastrous flooding in this city.

A short note on theories of memory

The capability to remember and forget is a human feature that has long puzzled thinkers. In common talk this is mostly thought of as an individual, personal and mental feature and the object of study for psychologists, psychoanalysts and neuroscientists. Yet it is also well established that memory is as much a social phenomenon. What the past means to people and the making of society has long been an anthropological concern (Ingold et. al., 1996; Munn, 1992) while the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1941) is generally credited with coining the concept of "collective memory." Although many scholars still use this same term, several other terms have been developed throughout the years to better conceptualise this phenomenon.[1] Inspired by the work of Cole (2001) I have nevertheless chosen to conceptualise this phenomenon as "memoryscape," because I consider that it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneous, dynamic and situated aspects of memory (Ullberg, 2013:13-15). The logic of omission that I discuss in this article is defined as a form of remembering and forgetting that constitutes the urban flood memoryscape in Santa Fe City. In the following, we shall see how this logic is constituted.

Bureaucratic practices and cycles of exclusion

During my fieldwork, getting "inside" the Santafesinian bureaucracy to make interviews was both easier and harder than I had imagined. It was difficult to get interviews and when I did, interviewees were on the whole reluctant to speak about the past before they themselves had been hired to that particular position. What I felt at the time was a methodological problem points to an interesting phenomenon however, which seems to be of relevance to this analysis of remembering and forgetting in bureaucratic organisations. In Argentina, as in other countries (Lundgren, 2000), there is an established political practice that when a newly elected government at any level (municipal, provincial or national) assumes power, there is a considerable turnover of staff. People in politically

appointed positions are exchanged as well as civil servants, because they too are identified with the former political leader, party or policy (Frederic, 2004). There is of course a natural staff turnover in every organisation everywhere, but the turnover in the public administration of Argentina represents a larger movement than can be accounted for by individual careers and pension retirements. New and fresh, or old but recycled, employees, loyal to the new government, are taken in as the new government assumes power. The discarded staff are simply removed or transferred to other less important positions within the administration. This practice is based on an asymmetrical yet reciprocal relationship and can be seen as part of a larger political phenomenon generally labelled "clientelism." Political clientelism in Latin America and in Argentina in particular, is a phenomenon so vastly studied in the social sciences that it has become seen as something of a regional characteristic, close to what has been called a "gatekeeping concept" (Appadurai, 1986). An anthropological take on this phenomenon leaves the normative judgment aside to instead examine its meanings and effects. The cyclical turnover of staff in Argentinean public administration raises interesting questions about political change, continuity, accountability and how this is related to memory and oblivion within organisations and in the public realm.

Guber (1999) has suggested that the Argentinean past is of particular importance in the political struggle to define what the Argentinean Nation is, could have been and should be. This locate processes of social remembering and forgetting at the centre of Argentinean politics and the creation of the Nation State. She likens this struggle with a geological cataclysm (p. 66), in which political periods are abruptly marked by forced exclusion of people and memories. This takes place not only at a discursive level but also within the State in the public administration. The former outgoing administration is regarded as a political enemy by the new administration, and this idea justifies the purge of staff, policies and symbols that can serve as reminders of the former. The new administration picks up and revitalises symbols and narratives from its own political legacies and predecessors, which have been buried in layers of the past, while forgetting, and making forget, those of the immediately preceding administration by in effect erasing both people and policies. The entering of a new administration and the beginning of a new political cycle is represented as a rupture with the former administration, which is why the boundaries to this must be clear (p. 66-67). In order to establish a new administration and enable a fresh start, selected portions of the past need to be purged, or in other words, omitted from memory. In what follows, we shall delve into another useful illustration of how the logic of omission operates by looking at one of the most emblematic technologies of memory, namely the archive, which is where much of the political and bureaucratic past is materialised.

Archives and the materialisation of selective remembering

The public archive as a technology of governance is central both to memory and accountability. In fact, the archive is often used as a trope when conceptualising memory. The archive is where governance becomes the past objectified, as it is filed and classified. It has been suggested that there is no [political] power without archives (Ketelaar, 2007). Archives are often associated with modern bureaucracy, just like the practice of filing and keeping documents even if the practice of governing through documenting the past has a longer history (Dery, 1998). The modern aspect of the archive as an institution is its public character. Historians date the birth of the modern archive to July 25th, 1794, when the French National Archives were opened up and made public (Osborne, 1999) and address the role of this institution in the making of the values of the French Republic, and not least, its role for social memory (Pomian, 2010).

My own understanding of the archive in the bureaucracy as a public site of memory (Nora, 1989) was put on trial during my fieldwork in Santa Fe as I pursued answers to my questions about disaster preparedness within the local public administration. As I have already mentioned, more often than not, the civil servants that I interviewed replied that they had no knowledge about this or that issue because it concerned a period prior to their employment within the administration. I figured that if I could only access the municipal archive, I could find out about past policies and regulations myself. Yet nobody was willing to help me gain access to the archive. It only later became clear to me that there was no neat archive for me to visit. Presumably there had once been a municipal archive, but in 2005, documents and files were stored in boxes and drawers here and there in the different departments of the municipality. I was told that they had been ruined by damp while standing in the basement of the municipal building. In combination with oblivious civil servants, the municipal past seemed to have passed into the terrain of forgetting. This situation changed however when Mario Barletta assumed power as the new Mayor of the Municipality of Santa Fe in December of 2007.

Barletta had been the head of the National University of the Littoral in 2003. When he was elected Mayor, he set out to modernise the municipal administration in a more transparent vein. One way of doing this was to establish an archive, a Centre for Documentation, which included the digitalisation of documents and to provide open access to all documents from 2003 and onwards from the municipality's web site. This electronic service was operating fairly well in 2012, especially in terms of accessing municipal legislation. Yet all that seems transparent is not necessarily so. To access documents regarding particular proceedings, the applicant had to download a form, fill it in and submit it personally at the registrar's office. Even if the municipal archive was

set up to enhance democratisation and public administration, the archive was far from being accessible to everybody. Furthermore, it was not evident which documents had been cleared for open access, and which had not. This illustrates that as much as there is no political power without a public archive, there is no public archive without politics (Osborne, 1999). Even if an archive is public (as opposed to private), it is not necessarily accessible to the public. In this sense, the archive can be thought of as materialising the logic of omission because it is a selection of what is to be saved, hence remembered, and what can be discarded and thereby forgotten. Another aspect of the virtual archive, in which documents are digitalised, is that it implies a certain degree of technological vulnerability. A computer virus, a software bug or a power outage poses the risk of passing memory into oblivion in a twinkle.

Another example of how the archive is subject to interests and contestations as to what is to be included is that of the Memory Archive created by the Santafesinian Provincial Government in 2006, placed administratively within the realm of the Secretariat of Human Rights. The issue of human rights has been highly ranked on the national political agenda in Argentina in the 21st century, and likewise in many provinces. In the Province of Santa Fe, the Secretariat of Human Rights was created in 2003. Among the many activities carried out here, the most important was perhaps the promotion of trials of local military leaders for human rights violations during the dictatorship. One of my interlocutors in Santa Fe, Fernando, worked at the Secretariat and was deeply involved in preparing for these trials as part of his tasks. In addition, he also testified in some of them, having been a political prisoner himself during the dictatorship years. He considered it very important to keep the memory about the Dirty War atrocities in Santa Fe alive through the archive. Yet, when I met him in 2008, he was not very enthusiastic about including other past issues in the Memory Archive, such as for example the documents and testimonies from *la Inundación*, which had been suggested by the provincial government that year. Fernando was quite annoyed that the *inundados*[2] would share the place of memory with the Dirty War *desaparecidos*[3] in this public archive. He clearly thought the two were not comparable in terms of violations of human rights and lamented that he was forced to let office space to staff that would collect material about the natural disaster instead of working on the memory of the Dirty War. He never told me what the reasons to his reluctance really were, but his stance illustrates the fact that what is to be remembered through the archive, is subject to contestation and negotiation.

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The Memory Archive was equally subject to the logic of omission. In 2012, I found that numerous legal documents involved in the so-called *Causa Inundación*, the lawsuit against the municipal and provincial governments regarding the 2003 disaster,[4] had been published in a digital archive on the website of the Provincial Government of Santa Fe, more specifically on the site of the State Attorney. The reason for this was stated as a response to citizen claims (Gobierno de la Provincia de Santa Fe, 2011). Having followed the case and knowing about the problems of the plaintiffs among *the inundados*/activists in gaining access to the files of the investigation, this decision seemed like a major achievement for them. I became curious to know who these citizens behind the claim had been. Gabriel, one of my key interlocutors among the *inundados*/ activists, confirmed to me in a long e-mail what I had imagined, namely that it had been the activists in this protest movement who had presented this claim. What Gabriel was unaware of (and what Fernando did not know either, or was just unwilling to tell me) was that this selection of documents, related to the lawsuits had in fact been incorporated to the Memory Archive, as publicly stated on the government's website. According to Gabriel, this documentation was nevertheless incomplete, missing important information and hence constituting a skewed institutional memory or one that would benefit the government in future hindsight. Here we have an illustration of how the logic of omission governs the politics of the archive. While the *inundados*/activists pushed for transparency in the conflict and the publication of important information, which sustained the memory of *la Inundación* and hence, their struggle for justice, the government at this point responded favourably, yet selectively, by publishing only some of the documents, but not the most compromising. An exacerbated historical analogy of this phenomenon in the Argentinean context was one of the last laws issued in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1983, the so-called Pacification Law (Ley de Pacificación Nacional). This act pursued amnesty for the militaries involved in any action of fight against political subversion in 1976-83. In support of this law, a presidential decree determined that all documents relevant to the regime's detention of people carried out in the framework of the Process of National Reorganisation and under the §23 of the National Constitution, which regulates the possibility of declaring state of siege, should be declared missing from the archives or destroyed (Torres Molina, 2008). The detainees referred to had by then already been murdered by the regime in most cases. In view of a forthcoming democratisation, the military regime considered that they could never be held accountable for this crime if the documentary traces of these actions and the people involved disappeared.

By discarding all documents, the decisions and actions of the government would be erased and accountability made impossible. Amnesia and amnesty go hand in hand. The public archive, as we have seen from these examples, is organised through the logic of omission. What is gathered, filed, authorised, certified, classified and made public (or not), and hence remembered or forgotten, is always a matter of evaluation, negotiation and decision (Lynch, 1999). In the same way, the logic of omission forges how the future is envisioned, as shall become clear when we take a look at the practice of planning.

Materialising the logic of omission through plans

During my fieldwork in Santa Fe, a new municipal contingency plan, the *Plan de Contingencia de la Ciudad de Santa Fe*, was launched. In the 2003 post-disaster context of Santa Fe City, the issue of safety, or rather lack of safety, had been no minor issue. Besides the flaws of appropriate flood protection infrastructure in 2003, an important part of the explanation as to why the governmental response in the 2003 disaster was such a failure in the first place was the lack of a contingency plan. I was told by several interlocutors that there had been no such plan in place at all before 2003 despite the numerous disastrous floods that had affected the city. This void was also addressed in the inquiry commissioned by the judge in the lawsuit of the *Causa Inundación* (Bacchiega et. al., 2005:8). Hence, the launching of a plan in 2005 was framed by the new municipal government as a major political achievement and a fresh start over. The new Mayor separated his government discursively and temporally from other past administrations which had failed in matters of disaster preparedness, while at the same time omitting the fact that the municipality had since long been governed by the same political party that he also represented.[5]

From an anthropological perspective, plans can be seen as documents and "artefacts of modern knowledge" (Riles, 2006), referring to the materialisation of knowledge and information that pervade modern life. Others have defined the practice of documenting as technologies of government (Nyqvist, 2008; Scott, 1999) and "intersections of exchanges and meetings of different [discursive] domains" (Weszkalnys, 2010). A contingency plan can be said to materialise such modern knowledge as it communicates notions of risk and how to deal with it. It has been suggested that contingency plans, in particular, are symbolic "fantasy documents" (Clarke, 1999) because they represent an organisational rationality that is in control over processes that it can never completely be in control of, simply because risk is such a complex phenomenon and uncertainty and unpredictability are at its core. Yet the fact that a plan and a policy exist at all, is generally seen as a reassuring action of safety; a badge of rationality (Clarke, 1999). As material objects, plans also shape thinking and acting

(Nyqvist, 2008). Their very purpose is to coordinate action and intervention. Plans can thus also be seen as artefacts that gain meaning through context, as objects with social lives (Appadurai, 1988; Miller, 2005). While plans are future oriented as they anticipate risk and action, they are simultaneously historical objects in the sense that an existing plan materialises the outcome of a past process of negotiating ideas and interests. In this sense, plans can be seen as time objectified.

There is not space enough here to describe in detail the 2005 contingency plan of Santa Fe City.[6] For the purposes of my argument, suffice it to say that it consisted of numerous policy documents that forecasted risky places, people and practices by remembering the city's past and present in particular ways. By describing selected aspects of the past and the present of social life and flood management in Santa Fe, other aspects were omitted. Nothing was for example mentioned about those economic and political processes that put people and places at risk by forcing them to live in risky places. Nor were the significant human effects on natural processes, such as deforestation, agricultural technologies or regulation of rivers for energy production, considered in the framework. This is perhaps not surprising if we consider such a plan to be part of the disaster risk reduction "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1990). The logic of omission can in this vein be seen as constitutive of this apparatus, while at the same time, plans are political as much as archives are.

In April 2005, the director of the municipal Department of Pumping Stations had a bit reluctantly agreed to meet with me. He had been publicly accused of mismanagement in *la Inundación* by activists in the *inundados* protest movement, and had assumed that I would also hold him accountable. After some insisting, I finally managed to convince him that I was an impartial scholar, genuinely interested in understanding the point of view of municipal employees regarding the problem of flooding in the city. We met at Rolando's office located in a store building, presumably an old train shed. A large yard surrounded the building where trucks were parked and large pieces of machines were leaned against the walls. Rolando's office was dark and gloomy, perhaps due to the bookshelves in oak wood and the large desk. Rolando himself was sitting behind the desk but stood up as I entered the office. He politely invited me to sit on the wooden chair in front of the desk. As I began asking him questions about the technologies of flood prevention in the city, he seemed to relax and told me about this system. As we were talking about the state of disaster preparedness within the municipality. I asked him about the lack of a flood contingency plan. Without saying a word he first looked at me and then opened a drawer in his desk. In silence he threw a tiny green booklet and a thin spiral bound folder with a transparent cover on the desk in front of me. I read

the title on the first page of the booklet: *Ct.I.M.A Flooding and Environmental Control*.[7] It had been published by the Secretariat of Water Affairs of the municipality of Santa Fe and was a summary of the purposes of this programme, which was to control, maintain and operate the flood defence system.

The plan consisted of nine pages, in which the CIMA programme for the management of the flood defence infrastructure was outlined. While it was not really a plan for how to organise an evacuation in a flood emergency, the programme described the equipment, personnel and time needed to operate and maintain the embankments, the canals, the reservoirs, the floodgates and the pump stations in order to mitigate floods. It also included an early warning system. This flood management plan was not dated, so I asked Rolando when it was from. He laconically replied that he and his colleagues had formulated it after the 1992 floods, but that it was closed down in 1996. He continued:

> *¡Fue cajoneado!* Our plan was put away and forgotten. Then, the 2003 flood occurred and here we are. Now they are trying to invent the wheel again.

Indeed, for Rolando to keep a copy of this plan in the drawer of his desk, in the *cajón*, struck me as symbolic to what he just told me. *Cajón* means box or drawer in Spanish and the verb *cajonear* is used in Argentina to denote a hindrance, delay or holding back of a question or a procedure within the political realm and in public administration, by putting it away. An analogy could be made to the English concept of "shelving," yet *cajonear* seems to denote a particular form of holding back something, since it is no longer visible but rather contained within the darkness of oblivion. In this respect, Rolando, keeping his own copy of the plan in the drawer seemed symbolical, not to say ironic, of the logic of omission.

Conclusion: The logic of omission and the normalisation of disaster

This article has analysed how the historical problem of flooding in Santa Fe was addressed within the municipal realm of the city. I have argued that different bureaucratic practices and artefacts follow and reproduce a logic of omission regarding flooding. As has been illustrated ethnographically throughout this paper, this logic refers to a pattern of selective remembering and forgetting that enabled new governments and decision makers to cyclically start over. This logic can be said to characterise the Santafesinian bureaucracy in particular, but it confirms what has been observed of other parts of the Argentinean political world. In Santa Fe City, this logic forged the ways in which the urban flooding past was handled within the municipal and provincial spheres of action, which in turn forged flood management policies (or the absence of them). As we have

seen, memory within the public administration was shaped by the practice of changing administrative staff within the public agencies following the electoral time cycle. This was not because individual experiences are forgotten when people are changed, but because there are incentives to not remember past decisions and arguments. This pattern of forced exclusion also involved materialised memory of the bureaucracy, that is, documents such as plans and documents placed in public archives or *cajoneados* in the drawers of public servants, withdrawn from use and the public eye. Technocratic narratives and calculations of risk framed how the flooding past was addressed in policy documents. Future oriented contingency plans omitted addressing root causes of social vulnerability to flooding and instead framed the problem as one of human obstruction to the course of nature. The logic of omission within the Santafesinian public administration normalised cultural notions of disastrous flooding and enabled policies of neglect. I hold that instead of enhancing community resilience and adaptation to recurrent hazards, this contributed to the reproduction of conditions of social vulnerability in the urban outskirts and creating conditions for the recurrence of disaster.

Notes

1   Among these are "social memory," "cultural memory," social or collective "remembering" and "memory-work". Historians, on their part, use the term "oral history" (Vansina, 1965). For a comprehensive overview of the anthropological and sociological study of memory, see (Climo and Cattell, 2002; Olick et. al.,, 2011).

2   *Inundado* means a flooded person in Spanish. In Santa Fe City, this is a historical social category, given the recurrence of disastrous flooding. In the wake of *la Inundación* in 2003, the category transformed from denoting merely disaster victims to activists, as many people affected by this particular flood mobilised to protest against the flaws in the disaster management of the government and to make claims for political accountability and economic compensation.

3   The *desaparecidos*, literally the "disappeared [people]," refers in Argentina to the thousands of people who suffered forced disappearance during the Dirty War. Most of them were murdered and many of the bodies have never been found.

4   The so-called Flood Lawsuit actually referred to two different legal processes. One was pursued according to the Criminal Law to establish responsibility of public officials before, during and after the 2003 disaster. This was the one in which the *inundados*/activists' plaintiffs claimed that former Governor Reutemann should also be interrogated. The other was pursued according to the Civil Code by around 6,000 *inundados* plaintiffs who demanded economic compensation.

5   Since the return to democracy in 1983, the Santafesinian municipality had been governed by the *Partido Justicialista*. Not until 2007 was there a power shift when a centre-left coalition called *Frente Progresista Cívico y Social* won the elections at both municipal and provincial levels.

6   For a detailed description and analysis of this plan, see Ullberg (2013).

7   The acronym C.I.M.A. stood for *Control de Inundaciones y Medio Ambiente* in Spanish.

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