

From a revolutionary logic to humanitarian reasons: Uruguayan leftists in the exile and human rights transnational networks

Vania Markarian

Abstract

This article describes the relationship between the Uruguayan leftists who had to flee their country in the 1970s and several other participants who formed the transnational human rights networks in those years. The analysis begins in Buenos Aires and ends in the 1976 hearings on Uruguay before the U.S. Congress. It touches on the positions of diverse leftist groups, the stand of former senator Zelmar Michelini, the motivations of several Democratic congressmen, and the international campaign launched by Amnesty International. It focuses on the transformation that led many Uruguayan exiles to present their claims in the language of human rights organizations in order to posit their demands and denounce the most dramatic aspects of repression in their country.

Key words: human rights, Uruguay, 1972-1976, political left, exiles, political history.

Before and after the 1973 coup, the repression reached unknown levels in the country, with deaths and missing people, and thousands of persons accused of “political crimes”, jailed and tortured. Emigration and exile were also consequences of this situation. Since the late 1960s (and increasingly after the coup), thousands of left parties activists and leaders abandoned the country fearing for their lives and freedoms.

Although there are many testimonies about different aspects of the political repression, it seems that there is still little academic and journalistic research about these topics, and especially about the experiences and political activities in the exile.¹

¹ With the exception of some essays written during the transition, Uruguayan emigration has been usually studied from a quantitative or demographic perspective. See for instance César Aguiar: *Uruguay: país de emigración*, Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, Montevideo, 1982; Israel Wonsewer y Ana María Teja: *La emigración uruguaya, 1963-1975: sus condicionantes económicas*, Centro de Investigaciones Económicas (CINVE) – Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1983; and Juan Carlos Fortuna, Nelly Niedworok and Adela Pellegrino, *Uruguay y la emigración de los 70*, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios del Uruguay (CIESU) – Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, Montevideo, 1988. The interest in topics such as the exile and political refugees is relatively recent. See for instance Silvia Dutrénit and Guadalupe Rodríguez (editors) : *Asilo diplomático mexicano en el Cono Sur*, Instituto Mora/Instituto Matías Romero, Mexico, D.F. 1999 and Ana Buriano (editor): *Tras la memoria: el asilo diplomático en tiempos de la Operación Cóndor*; Instituto Mora/ Instituto de Cultura de la Ciudad de México, Mexico, D.F., 2000. This late development is reflected in the difficulty that still exists to evaluate emigration causes and to differentiate “emigrants” from “exiles”. Focusing on the denunciations of human rights violations, this work considers “exiles” those who were politically active after leaving the country, no matter the reasons for their

Among these activities, there must be pointed out the participation of many exiles in campaigns against the repressive practices of Uruguayan dictatorship, joining efforts with activists in Europe and the United States in a network devoted to denounce human rights violations in countries under repressive right-wing regimes. This cooperation resulted in a worldwide movement that promoted innovative techniques of transnational activism, and became a reliable source of information for foreign governments and international organizations, and provided the model for later denouncements and actions against other repressive regimes.

In this article I develop some analytical lines of my work about this movement, with special emphasis on the transformation that led Uruguayan leftist exiles, along with other South Americans who were escaping from authoritarian regimes, to participate in human rights transnational activism. Initially, they criticized human rights organizations for not addressing the structural causes (in terms of class) of the current situation in their countries, but gradually they adopted the political rhetoric of those groups, and made their claims in human rights language. There are very few things written about this transformation. My work intends to make a contribution to the literature on transnational activism networks, which usually stresses the importance of common values and rules supported by these networks rather than the different interests and aims of its participants.² Besides, this analysis tries to criticize the widespread understanding of human rights as a legal framework of “universal” scope. In this sense, I address not only the ideological and political strategies affecting transnational activism of Uruguayan exiles, but also broader cultural exchanges expressed in the adoption of a discourse which conceives politics in terms of “victims” and “criminals” and emphasizes the defense of physical integrity of human beings.

I do not pretend, here, to cover all the initiatives developed by the exiles in order to denounce human rights situation in Uruguay, neither to name the many groups that participated in these activities in the seventies and eighties. This paper only analyzes the first period of this movement. It focuses on the year 1976, to describe the process that led to the U.S. Congress decision (later on ratified by President Ford) to cut all military aid to the Uruguayan government due to its systematic violations of human rights. This decision is a particularly clear example of the connections among different actors who had the same objectives and joined efforts across frontiers. Groups of Uruguayan exiles, European and American activists and U.S. congressmen used the language of human rights to support their positions about the situation in Uruguay. I recognize that there were connections among these groups and the human rights international system, which legitimized their actions and provided a common language and basic procedures to make their claims. My goal, however, is to show the reasons the different participants had to defend individual rights, which were the core of that system in the seventies: the right to live (not to be murdered or disappeared) and the right of not being tortured or false arrested. A close examination of the available documents produced by these groups, including propaganda and internal documentation from Amnesty International

emigration. Regarding this point, I take into account the work of Katherine Hite: *When romance ended: leaders of the chilean left, 1968-1998*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 44 and 213.

² See for instance Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

(AI), leaflets and periodicals produced by the exiles, and the records of the U.S. Congress, shows that each group was pursuing very different objectives and had different priorities.

First years of the Uruguayan exile

The first question concerns the Uruguayan leftists: Why did many of them adopt the human rights language, which had so far been very much associated with the anticommunist setting of the Cold War? The Uruguayan exiles resorted to transnational activism once they realized that space for radical politics was closing up in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay). This question does not understate the complex origin of political ideas nor deny that human rights have, apart from the obvious liberal antecedent, roots in socialist, libertarian and Christian traditions, that can not be reduced to the Cold War bipolar philosophy. But this is not enough to understand Uruguayan leftists change. First of all, because the sixties revolutionary rhetoric was used to identify human rights with the international system that tried to protect them, regarding this system as a way to extend Western capitalism in both political and social terms. Second, because the leftist turn in the middle seventies did not involve an explicit doctrine revision. There are no leading articles, congress records or manifestos in which the change of attitude of these groups appear in its entire political dimension and ideological complexity. In order to answer the question stated before, it is necessary to consider a practical issue: Uruguayan exiles started using human rights language once they realized that space for radical politics was closing up in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile and Uruguay). This process was slow, but most of the leftist groups and parties had reached this conclusion by the end of 1976. The immediately previous years were, however, complex in terms of definitions and political alliances for Uruguayan activists, just as for other activists in the region. A revision of what happened in those years is necessary to understand the transnational activism of many of those exiles.

The well-known deterioration of the Uruguayan political situation by 1972, and especially after the military started to fight directly against the guerrilla in April of that year, Buenos Aires became the destiny of thousands of leftist activists. Argentina was then experiencing a period of flourishing radical politics marked by the Peronist resistance mobilization and the election of Cámpora as the president in March of 1973.³ Undoubtedly, these circumstances allowed Uruguayan leftists to have a considerable optimism about revolutionary perspectives in the region. The permanence of the socialist Salvador Allende in Chile also contributed to that state of mind. In this climate, the guerrilla organization activists, who were most of the first exiles in Buenos Aires, tried to understand their recent experiences. Especially, these groups took into account the reasons for their defeat and breaking up by Uruguayan repressive forces, redefining goals and means of political participation. But they did not give up the idea of a prompt revolutionary development in the region. A sign of these radical attempts was the

³ This is a particularly complex moment in the contemporary history of Argentina, with permanent force adjustments among complicated actors, as well as constant redefinitions of *battlefields*. Anyway, the brief portrayal offered in these lines serves to explain the evolution of Uruguayan exiles in Buenos Aires. For further information and analysis of those years in Argentina, see for instance Liliana de Riz: *La política en suspenso: 1966-1976*, Paidós, Buenos Aires, 2000.

foundation of the Revolutionary Coordinator Committee by Uruguayan *Tupamaros* and other guerrilla movements of Argentina, Bolivia and Chile.⁴

The coup of June 1973 in Uruguay caused a considerable increase in the amount of Uruguayan exiles in Buenos Aires. The arrival of thousands of leftist activists and some leaders of the traditional parties who were opponents to the regime wider the range of political and ideological positions. With this new wave of exiles, many attempts of reorganizing the fight against Uruguayan dictatorship were made, focusing on the possible return to Uruguay and on strengthening internal resistance. The great concurrence to the ceremony organized by the anarchist group *Resistencia Obrero-Estudiantil* (ROE) on April 19th, 1974, showed that intention. Representatives of various parties and groups got united that day under proclaims: “Resistance will defeat”, “Freedom or death” and “We will be back”.⁵

The creation of the Unión Artiguista de Liberación (UAL) in October, 1974 was also an expression of the search of new organizational forms, directed to promote resistance in Uruguay. This meeting wasn't as crowded as the ROE one. The UAL wanted to fulfill some leftist leaders and groups's old aspirations: to give an organic shape to what was called since the late sixties the “current” or the “tendency”, in reference to different sectors opponent to the Communist Party's tactics; in particular to certain practices called “reformists” and to their intention to approach to a group of supposedly “democratic” military men. They also kept distance from the leftist coalition Frente Amplio (FA) founded in 1971 (elections year), as they considered that the FA had the same posture.⁶ The UAL principal figure was former senator Enrique Erro, who had left the *Partido Nacional* to found the *Frente Amplio*, and obtained the 23% of the coalition (FA) votes with the support of many sympathizers and activists of the *Tupamaros* movement. He had gone into exile to Buenos Aires in June 1973, and by the middle seventies he was one of the most clear opponents to any kind of negotiation with militars, and support “a global confrontation against the dictatorship until its defeat, and the seizure of the power by People towards liberation”. With his radical statements and his deep interest in solve the leftist issues, Erro and his new group were a life proof of the

⁴ For further information see Clara Aldrighi: *La izquierda armada: ideología ética e identidad e el MLN-Tupamaros*, Trilce, Montevideo, 2001, pp. 117-123 and Astrid Arrarás: *Armed struggle, political learning, and participation in democracy: the case of the Tupamaros (Uruguay)*, Princeton University, PhD. Thesis, 1998, pp. 215-274.

⁵ “Uruguay: la resistencia vencerá” (May, 1974), reproduced in *Uruguay: north american Congress on Latin America (NACLA), Archive of Latina America*, Wilmington, Scholarly Resources, 1998 (Roll 4). And see Hugo Cores: *Memorias de la resistencia*, Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, Montevideo, 2002, pp. 135-154 and 167-168.

⁶ See UAL documents in Nelson Caula: *Erro: fiscal de la nación* (3 volumes), Puntosur, Montevideo, 1989, pp. 59-68 y 110-140 (Volume 3). Also see Vania Markarian: *El maremoto militar y el archipiélago partidario: testimonios para la historia reciente de los partidos políticos uruguayos*, ECS/Instituto Mora, Montevideo, 1994, pp. 276-777. And See “Acciones de resistencia y lucha ideológica en el seno del movimiento obrero” in *Boletín de la resistencia oriental*, 30 de octubre de 1974, p. 3 (Uruguay Koordinatie Comité, Instituto Internacional de Historia Social, Ámsterdam UKK-IIHS)

“revolutionary optimism” permanence, a year after the Uruguayan coup and the bloody overthrow of Allende in Chile.⁷

The quick deterioration of the political situation in Argentina started to erode this relative optimism, and at the same time the exiles became targets of the repressive forces and paramilitary groups that acted in Buenos Aires with the support of the regional military governments.⁸ In March 1975 Erro himself was arrested and accused of violation of Argentinean asylum laws. Many of the ROE former activists were kidnapped and disappeared in the following months. Finally, the implementation of a brutal military regime in 1976 transformed Buenos Aires into a deadly trap for thousands of Latin American refugees, including not only Uruguayans but also Chileans who were escaping from Pinochet dictatorship. A new wave of repression swept across the Southern Cone. The understanding that there was no space for radical activism in the region led to a slow but clear change in the forms of activism of leftist groups. As they realized that they were losing their influence in their domestic arena, many Uruguayan exiles began to seek refuge and support from international organizations, foreign governments and transnational actors. This fact explains the exiles turning towards human rights language. Something similar stated Hannah Arendt by explaining “the perplexities of human rights” in the second postwar period:

“[...] the fundamental deprivation of human rights appears first, and above all, in the deprivation of a place in the world that gives meaning to the opinions and effectiveness to actions.”⁹

Zelmar Michelini (a former minister and senator of the *Partido Colorado*, founder of the leftist coalition *Frente Amplio* in 1971 and exiled in Buenos Aires in 1973) was the first Uruguayan to place international denunciations of human rights violations at the top of his agenda. Michelini's interest on these topics started at least in 1971, before the coup- as he was one of the main denouncers of policemen mistreatment to people under-arrest due to political reasons.

Regarding this work objects it's not so important his position to such abuses -that he shared with Erro and other leftists- but his specific expression of his position in his Argentinian exile conditions, particularly when such position is compared with the ones adopted by other uruguayan sector to deal with the same affairs

This comparison leaves aside a series of shades and political and ideological differences during the dictatorship's first years. However, it is useful to show why some groups took more time than other to start talking about the regime repressive practices in terms of human rights. Among these sectors there was the Communist Party on the most important Uruguayan leftist groups in electoral terms that kept acting secretly in Uruguay and it hadn't been the main target of the repression until 1975

. At that time, other leftists were either not yet concerned about these issues because they had not yet been harshly targeted by government repression (like the Communist

⁷ See UAL Documents and other Erro's statements in Nelson Caula: *Erro: fiscal de la nación*, Puntosur, Montevideo, 1989, pp. 59-68 y 110-140 (Volume 3)

⁸ This kind of cooperation was later known as “Plan Condor”. For further information see Documents of the United States government: “Chile and the United States: declassified documents related to the military coup, 1970-1976”. Note: All the Internet quotes of this article were consulted on December 10th, 2004.

⁹ Hannah Arendt: “The perplexities of the rights of man”, in Peter Baehr (ed) *The portable Hannah Arendt*, Penguin Books, New York, 2000, page 37. This text is part of the book by Hannah Arendt *Los orígenes del totalitarismo*, first published in 1951 (The original in English; translation by the author)

Party) or too involved in blaming each other for the installation of the authoritarian regime (like the more radical groups and former guerrillas). Although the communists strongly rejected the government abuses, they did not characterize at first the regime on the basis of repression, but kept explaining human rights violations as “misbehaviors” or “aberrations” of a “fascist” group inside the Armed Forces, according to previous ideas about its role in dependent capitalist countries.¹⁰ Some radical sectors (Erro, many Tupamaros and other guerrilla groups) had their own reasons to reject what was called by a group of exiles in Stockholm, on April 1974, “humanitarian laments” and “purely informative activity”. They believed that “the problem of political prisoners should be ... addressed in terms of class struggle.” “The prisoners will be freed the day that the revolutionary fight...sweeps away the exploitative system [of the bourgeoisie].”¹¹ Some months ago Erro had said that “people resistance and not international denouncements.” would change the situation of tupamaros leaders who were in -jailed in Uruguay¹².- It is important to point out that Erro as other radical leftist activists were in contact with human rights organizations but they didn’t seem to consider them playing a crucial role against the regime. They still believed in the short term success of their ways of fighting and traditional resistance in Uruguay.

This is also for the PVP (successor of ROE since 1975) whose “emergency “leaders decided to emphasize international denouncement of missing people in 1976 while their leaders and activists were being hunted in Buenos Aires¹³

Besides the confidence in internal resistance, other aspects of political culture of Uruguayan leftist explained the relative lack of interest towards international denouncements. First, activism was still understood as a heroic sacrifice to the revolutionary cause. There was also a certain reject of social and political expressions considered “minor” because they did not struggle against the main contradiction of society, already expressed in terms of class or in its populist version of “oligarchy vs people”. The first point is useful to understand why some leftist activists and leaders took so much time in realizing the scope and consequences of the repression unleashed in 1977 in the South Cone. The second point explained the reject of international organizations that were considered a tool of “American Imperialism”. They also rejected religions or charitable groups trying to help the third world and also activities focused on issues that were irrelevant to the “main contradiction”. I don’t want to underestimate the position taken in such polarized context but to explain who those activist groups were and how important these identifications in their latter political evolution were.

¹⁰ Although party leaders did not completely abandon references to the alleged “nationalistic and democratic forces” among Uruguayan Armed Forces, condemnations of the regime became much stronger after the anticommunist offensive of 1975, characterizing it as a “fascist dictatorship.” See for instance Rodney Arismendi’s expressions in October 1975, reproduced in Alvaro Rico, La resistencia a la dictadura, 1973-1975: Cronología documentada (Montevideo: Problemas, 1989), 287-8.

¹¹ Boletín del Comité de Defensa de los Prisioneros Políticos de Uruguay, April 1974, 2-3, in Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios del Uruguay, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad, de la República, Montevideo.

¹² See Enrique Erro’s statements in Nelso Caula: o.cit., p. 58 (vol 3).

¹³ Hugo Cores, o.cit., p. 197. Years later, PVP became the main denouncer at international level, deepening the relationships started in Argentina. See for instance Cores (o.cit) and my interview with Hugo Cores, Montevideo, December 26, 2001.

Michelini's opinions and actions before 1976 contrasted with these positions. He was undoubtedly the first among Uruguayan exiles who redefined his political concerns and made international denouncement of human rights violations. He did it probably because he could easily resort to his training as a liberal politician to explain his last experiences as leftist activist. But he didn't give up his more radical convictions nor he kept away from his leftist partners: he participated in the foundation of UAL with Erro, he insisted on people's right to fight against the Uruguayan regime inspiring himself in Vietcong¹⁴. Moreover he did not hesitate in pointing to those responsible for the situation in Uruguay, stating that:

“[]Political imprisonment and torture are[...] the central part of a political design to subjugate the nation in accordance to orders []coming from abroad and they have a common origin. In Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Banana Republics and Uruguay soldiers from different armies – but all of them trained in USA-subjugate human beings using the most terrible methods... The U.S. Senate commission which investigated U.S. intervention in Latin America ... established the fact of U.S. cooperation, influence, and support.”¹⁵

His perception of the seriousness of South American situation and his radical opposition to those responsible of that, did not lead him to discard allies but to participate in all fields of political activity where his position could be heard. He didn't discard alliances with Uruguayan regime opposition forces, avoiding to mention leftist internal differences and searching responsible among his partners for the popular movement defeat. Undoubtedly he agreed with Erro in most of these topics and so he adhered to UAL, but keeping his commitment to the *Frente Amplio* and his main leader Liber Seregni, who was in jail in Montevideo. On the contrary, he tried to keep his connections as well as to strengthen his relationships with other opposition leaders of traditional parties, specially with the former president of the Chamber of Deputies Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz and the main leader of the *Partido Nacional* Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, both exiled in Buenos Aires.¹⁶

When compared to the positions of other leftist groups and leaders, Michelini's political discourse shows a series of new emphasis. First, he stressed the need to get international attention and links with human rights groups such as AI and the Red Cross to promote the creation of international mechanisms to punish those governments responsible for violating the human rights of their own citizens. Second, he went from considering international organizations as mere tools of U.S. imperialism to an attempt to balance the contradictory principles of non-intervention and self-determination and the creation of an international human rights system. He targeted the U.S. congress in particular to

¹⁴ See for instance “Organizarse para Vencer”, in *Respuesta*, August 2-9, 1973; “Los pueblos siempre triunfan” in *Respuesta*, August 9-16, 1973 and “El derecho de los pueblos”, *Respuesta*, October 18-25 1973. These texts can be found in the Chamber of Senators, *Zelmar Michelini: Artículos periodísticos y ensayos*. (6 volumes), Montevideo, 1990 –2, pp.15-20 (Volume 6)

¹⁵ Z. Michelini's speech reproduced in William Jerman, ed., Repression in Latin America: A Report on the First Session of the Second Russell Tribunal – Rome, April 1974 (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1975), 116.

¹⁶ Regarding Michelini's relationships with FA in Uruguay and with the Partido Nacional Leaders in Bs.As see for instance the statements of Liber Seregni in Alvaro Barros-Lemez: *Entrevista con Seregni*, Monte Sexto, Montevideo, 1989, p.107; and my interview with Alberto Pérez Pérez, Montevideo, May 24, 2000.

produce immediate action in Uruguay, since he thought the U.S. was responsible for the installation of military regimes in Latin America and could thus press for their ending. Third, he used a new language to speak about abuses: those who suffered them were usually considered “heroes” and “martyrs” of revolution who had consciously sacrificed their lives for higher goals; now, they were also “victims” of human rights violations by a repressive government. Michelini moved from stressing the attributes of the activists to emphasizing the methods of the state. Fourth, he began to characterize the Uruguayan regime on the grounds of its pattern of repression and human rights abuses, and not only as an expression of the opposition between “the oligarchy” and “the people.” To that end, he appealed to Uruguayan traditions of respect for human rights and presented authoritarianism as clear break with this heritage, making good use of his background as a traditional liberal politician.¹⁷

Using this language and wielding these arguments, Michelini could link up with human rights transnational organizations and reach some U.S. congressmen. He worked together with Louise Popkin, an American scholar who was doing research work in Buenos Aires and became interested in the Uruguayan case.¹⁸ With her help, Michelini got an invitation to address the House of Representatives in 1976. But in May of this year, before he could travel, Argentinean military men in plain clothes operating in Buenos Aires with the consent of both the Uruguayan and the Argentinean governments killed Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, another exiled Uruguayan politician.¹⁹ Some people believed that Michelini was killed to prevent him from presenting his claims mainly at the U.S. Congress; while Popkin, the person who most help him to establish bonds with the Department of State said that “any effort was done” to keep him alive²⁰

Beyond the success of these joint attempts to stop the accusations, Michelini’s task didn’t remain undone. These assassinations, plus the Uruguayan Armed Forces’ decision to remove the civil president –Juan María Bordaberry- who had remained in his position after the coup, confirmed exiles about their need to find new allies.²¹ After Michelini’s dead, other people went on with his task to get the international community attention

¹⁷ The best examples of the evolution of Michelini’s thought about these topics are his speech before the Russell Court, April 1974 in William Jerman (editor):o.cit.,pp 111-117; his letter to the Canadian Professor K.J.Golby (March 24 1975), in NACLA 5; and his article “Lo que puede enseñarnos el Tribunal _Russell”, first published in *Noticias* April 28 1975, also reproduced in NACLA 5

¹⁸ See my interview with L. Popkin, NYC, April 1, 1999.

¹⁹ For a detailed report of kidnappings and murders, see Wilson Ferreira Aldunate’s letter to the Argentinean president Rafael Videla in Wilson Ferreira Aldunate: *El exilio y la lucha*, Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, Montevideo, 1986, p.10-24.

²⁰ See the statements of Líber Seregni and Louise Popkin in César Di Candia: *Ni muerte ni derrota: Testimonios sobre Zelmar Michelini*, Ediciones Atenea, Montevideo, 1987, pp. 161 and 190-195.

²¹ About the discussions between Bordaberry and the military authorities who expelled him, see Alfonso Lessa, *Estado de guerra: De la gestación del golpe del 73 a la caída de Bordaberry*, Fin de Siglo, Montevideo, 1996. About the connection between this issue and Michelini’s murder, see Alejandro Vegh Villegas’s testimony in *Jaque*, October 31, 1985. Another element to take into account is that the Constitution established national elections for 1976 and there were people, especially from traditional parties, who believed that the date would be respected by the Armed Forces. What happened on May and June destroyed that hope.

and they set new links with the groups that were lobbying the U.S. Congress to suppress military aid to the Uruguayan dictatorship.

The International Campaign and the USA Congress Hearing

Amnesty International was the most important among these lobbying groups. These were the years when London-based organization became part of the growing human rights network to influence international organizations and foreign governments to promote human rights at international level. In 1976, the Campaign Against Torture in Uruguay was AI's first campaign devoted to a single country and not to individual cases from different parts of the world, becoming a model for the future organization actions

²² The first purpose was to collect signatures around the world on petitions calling the Uruguayan government to allow independent investigation on human rights abuses; a letter-writing campaign addressed to Uruguayan authorities who were supposed to be able to help stopping these abuses; and to make contact with both Uruguayan and U.S. government members to discuss these matters.²³

The U.S. section of AI (AIUSA) played a crucial role in the Uruguay campaign, which was launched in February 1976 in New York, considered a much better platform than London for Latin American countries. Members of AIUSA were well aware of the importance of national, i.e. American, politics in their work. 1976 was the year of the Bicentennial celebration of American Independence. The self-analysis that big anniversaries often promote was taken as an opportunity to reconsider nationalism and develop a general critique to U.S. foreign policy, rejecting as morally corrupt the Cold War theories of containment that drew the line between anticommunist friends and communist foes. This self-analysis was obviously not new and many AIUSA members had been anti-war activists during the Vietnam War. Several religious groups related to the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s were also involved in this campaign.²⁴

The World Council of Churches had a remarkable activity, sending a mission to Montevideo in 1972.²⁵ As part of this self analysis the Watergate case had called the attention on underground activities that certain governmental agencies carried on to control their own citizens as well as to destabilize foreign governments. In addition, U.S. participation in the Chilean coup had also been a reason for many of these activists to engage in the ongoing critique, leading to a remarkable growth in the membership of human rights groups.²⁶ All these people came together in the campaign against torture in Uruguay and lobbied Congress to change foreign policy regarding South American authoritarian right-wing regimes.

²² See AI International Council Meeting Papers (10701/78, Microfilm 256), in the Social History International Institute, Amsterdam (from now on cited as AI-IIHS).

²³ See "Andrew Blane Statement," February 19, 1976, in Ivan Morris Papers, Box 6, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

²⁴ See for instance "Clergy and Laity Concerned" (March 22, 1976) in IM-CU.

²⁵ See E.L. Stockwell, "Uruguay: Do we subsidize Repression?" in *Christianity and crisis*, (October 2, 1972), pp. 211-213, and "Initial Report on Visit to Uruguay", in *NACLA* 6.

²⁶ See Kathryn Sikkink, "The Emergence, Evolution, and Effectiveness of the Latin American Human Rights Network," in *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America*, ed. Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1996), 63. Between January 1974 and June 1976, AIUSA grew from 3,000 to 45,000 members. See Ivan Morris' obituary in *The New York Times*, June 21, 1976, AI Publicity Box 8, in AI-IIHS.

This activist adhesion coincided with the moment that AI aimed at strengthening as an organized lobbying group before institutions and governments that could influence on the regimes accused of human rights abuses. Many of AI work characteristics had its origins in the coincidence between the expansion of its membership and its attempt to assume a more active role at international political level.²⁷ Methods and ways of organization of the Uruguayan campaign looked to face this challenge, combining actions before governments and international organisms with activists participation through letters and signature collecting. They also had a permanent presence in the media with pictures and testimonies appealing to a wide range of people all over the world.

Acting at this level, AI stuck to the three “tactical choices” that defined its work since the 1960s: concentrating on individual cases, working on a small range of gross violations, and anticipating accusations of pursuing a broader political agenda.²⁸ The Uruguayan campaign was a good example of these three choices. It focused on twenty-two documented cases of people killed while being tortured, stressed one type of violation, and presented signatures from Soviet dissidents to back up petitions to a right-wing regime, thus responding accusations of being “a tool of international communism,” in the words of the Uruguayan Armed Forces.²⁹ The emphasis on the topic of torture was also related to the United Nation declaration on “the protection of all people from torture and other punishment and cruel, inhuman and degrading practices” approved on December 1975. AI worked in favour of this declaration and adopted its definition of torture in physical as well as mental terms, emphasizing the idea of the tormentor as a state agent, discarding all justification of his practice.³⁰

Detailed description of reported violations, including photos and prisoners, dead and tortured people figures, and the avoidance to appeal to any kind of ideological or political identification, were AI’s work main characteristics. AI circulars included brief political and historical analysis on Uruguay as reference information for activists, so that they could write letters or make propaganda. AI’s members, who were also devoted to other many cases around the world, didn’t seem to need more information about what was happening in those countries. Its basis to denounce Uruguayan situation was the rejection to any repressive practice -in any state- that violate the physical integrity of its citizens, more than to take part in social and political conflicts originating repression.

In fact, AI documents produced in London often remarked the need of distinguishing between their own “purely humanitarian” reasons for targeting the Uruguayan government and the “political” campaign of the exiles. In the first circular preparing the

²⁷ See Kenneth Cmiel: “The emergence of human rights politics in the United States” in *The Journal of American History*, December, 1999. It is available in: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/86.3/cmiel.html>

²⁸ See M. E. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, 88. For a summary of changes in AI’s original mandate, see also Rudolph Ripp, *Transnationalism and Human Rights: The Case of Amnesty International*, City University of New York, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1982 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1996), 27-34.

²⁹ For descriptions of the campaign, see for instance “Ivan Morris Statement” (February 19, 1976) in IM-CU, and “Uruguay petition (Uruguay campaign X)”, NS 109 (June 8, 1976), AI Indexed Documents, microfilm 114, in AI-IIHS.

³⁰ See Rita Maran: *Torture: The role of ideology in the French-Algerian War*, Praeger, New York, 1989, p.7.

campaign, the organizers warned AI activists around the world about the relationship with Uruguayan exiles:

“You may wish to involve Uruguayan exiles groups or ex-prisoners from Uruguay... However, great care should be taken in these cases so as not to allow your actions to be turned into political manifestations directed against the Uruguayan government. For this would not only give the government a too easy opportunity to discredit the whole campaign ... but it would also damage [our] main purpose: to impress upon the government, with purely humanitarian arguments, that it does not need torture. We want them to stop using torture, not more but definitely also no less than that.”³¹

Without knowing the specific circumstances that originated this kind of warning, the circular showed the existence of resentment among AI’s organizers as well as among Uruguayan exiles, who shared basic principles but had different objectives, experiences and strategies.

In spite of this, the collaboration was essential for both of them. Since 1974, AI had been concerned about the risks that Latin American exiles living in Buenos Aires were running, and protested against human rights situation in South Cone countries.³² Michelini had also contacted AI members who tried not only to help him in his effort to make denouncements, but also to avoid his assassination.³³ From 1976 AI received many Uruguayans that needed to take refuge in Europe and encouraged them to join efforts to denounce human rights violations in their country. AI did it because its organization had not been admitted in Uruguay after its joint visit with the Jury International Commission in 1974.³⁴ It is important to add that until 1981 there wasn’t any formal human rights group acting in the national scene that could provide independent information about what was happening.³⁵ For this reason, exile’s testimonies were essential for AI Investigation Department, so that it could distribute reliable information about the Uruguayan case to foreign governments, international organizations and their own activists.

For the U.S. congressmen who promoted the hearings on Uruguay before the House Subcommittee on International Organizations, human rights language was a tool to contest the design and content of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America, framed by a broader debate about the U.S. role in the world. In the 1970s, in a climate of widespread rejection of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Chile, a group of Democratic congressmen began to criticize the “contra-insurgency” and “anti-subversion” programs that had justified former U.S. policy in Latin America. These Democrats framed their criticism to this aspect of the Nixon and Ford administrations in terms of human rights.

³¹ “International Campaign on Torture in Uruguay (Uruguay Campaign I),” NS 202, October 10, 1975, AI Indexed Documents, Microfilm 113, AI-IISH.

³² See for instance “Current situation in Argentina”, NS 36 (July 8, 1974) and “LA Refugees in Argentina” (October 16, 1975), AI Indexed Documents, microfilm 113, in AI-IIHS.

³³ See Edy Kaufman: *Uruguay in Transition: From Civilian to Military Rule*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1979, p. Xiii.

³⁴ See “Mission report on continuing torture and ill-treatment of political Suspects in Uruguay”, AI Indexed Documents, microfilm 113, in AI-IIHS.

³⁵ For a comparison among human rights groups in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay in the seventies and eighties, see Mara Loveman: “High-risk collective action: defending human rights in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina”, *American Journal of Sociology*, volume 104, p.2 (September, 1998).

Senators Edward Kennedy, James Abourezk, and Frank Church and Congressmen Edward Koch, Tom Harkin, and Donald Fraser sought to strengthen the formal foreign policy powers of Congress. They challenged U.S. policy and doubted Secretary of State Kissinger's commitment to human rights. 1976 was the key year for the creation of human rights legislation, with Congress passing the Harkin Amendment to Article 116 of the Economic Assistance Act that forbade "assistance ... to the government of any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of human rights." Fraser got similar legislation incorporated into the Foreign Assistance Act (Section 502B) which controlled military assistance to foreign countries.³⁶ The main goal of the 1976 hearings on Uruguay was to decide whether to apply this legislation to the Uruguayan case.

For these congressmen and senators, then, the small South American country was a "good example" ("a symbol," in Ed Koch's words) of their position on U.S. foreign policy.³⁷ These senators and congressmen's involvement in foreign policy led to changes in congressional participation in international affairs, ending a period of congressional deference to the Executive and questioning the State Department's former exclusive role in foreign policy. During the hearings, they spent a long time criticizing the behavior of the U.S. Ambassador in Uruguay, whom they blamed for providing biased information on the situation there.³⁸

This questioning to the traditional foreign-policy makers allowed an increase in the participation of new actors in the decision-making process. The Latin American human rights lobby grew substantially in Washington, enabling small and weak actors to reach those in charge of U.S. foreign policy. The participation in the hearings on behalf of AI of the Argentinean academic Edy Kaufman and of former senator W. Ferreira Aldunate as a representative of the Uruguayan opposition in exile was a clear example of this relative openness: the group of democratic congressmen above mentioned used the arguments that both representatives gave them to refute Department State delegates's opinions. Together with Martin Weinstein's critical analysis - an American political scientist who wrote a book about Uruguayan contemporary history- Kaufman and Ferreira Aldunate's testimonies were useful to illustrate and strengthen these congressmen's point of view. In September 1976, Congress passed and submitted to the president a foreign aid appropriation bill that prohibited military assistance, international military training, and weapon credit sales to the government of Uruguay for its violations of human rights standards.³⁹ The 1976 vote was an achievement for

³⁶ See David P. Forsythe, Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy: Congress Reconsidered (Gainesville, Fl.: University Presses of Florida, 1988) 2-3.

³⁷ See U.S., Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, *Human Rights in Uruguay and Paraguay*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 18. In 2001, during an interview, Koch said that his main concern had been to suspend economic help to Anastasio Somoza's government in Nicaragua, and that he had taken into account the Uruguayan case as a way to reach that aim, through a country that did not receive so much economic foreign help from USA. See Tomás Mandl and Roberto Porzecanski, "Relaciones entre Uruguay y Estados Unidos: 1973-1981", essay presented at the seminar *A 30 años del golpe de Estado: ¿Qué hay de nuevo en los estudios sobre el pasado reciente?* (Montevideo, July 3 and 4, 2003), p.7.

³⁸ See for instance the statements of Donald Fraser in US Congress (House), Committee on International Relations, o.cit., pp. 120-121.

³⁹ See *ibid.* and U.S., Congress, *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 781-9.

those Democrats seeking the consolidation of human rights as a foreign policy principle, even before Carter administration embraced this new approach in the following years. Regarding Uruguayan exiles goals, the consequences of this decision are more difficult to evaluate. On one hand it was clear that they could be heard in unsuspected fields, as highest decision levels in international politics, and to promote actions against the Uruguayan government. Michelini was the first who was aware of the importance of reaching a wider audience, mainly the American one. On the other hand, however, the suspension of military assistance didn't cause the fall of the Uruguayan regime, nor ended its repressive practices. In response to the suspension of military assistance, the Uruguayan government used and abused of a nationalist conservative discourse, to reject furiously any kind of foreign government and NGO interference in internal affairs.⁴⁰

It is possible to propose a couple of ideas to understand this reaction towards the American decision. The available documentation allows reaching some conclusions regarding United States's influence before 1973; The American Embassy in Montevideo was worried about the growth of left-wing people and supported actively the measures taken to stop the popular movement and to defeat the guerrilla force, which strongly contributed to the growth of authoritarianism in the country.⁴¹ Moreover, the American Ambassador who was appointed on July 1973 was an open defender of the new regime. The shortage of disclosure documents after 1973 explains our partial knowledge about the Uruguayan-American authorities relationship. The American Ambassador discussed human rights topics in Uruguay, underestimated Democrat congressmen's opinion and showed his approval to "what the Uruguayan government is trying to achieve". But up to that moment, documents similar to those proving Henry Kissinger explicit support to the repression practiced by Chile and Argentina weren't found.⁴² Anyway, there are no doubts that in 1976 the Uruguayan regime looked down

⁴⁰ See Junta de Comandantes en Jefe, *Las Fuerzas Armadas al Pueblo Oriental: El proceso político*, Junta de Comandantes en Jefe, Montevideo, 1978, pp.368-370 and 408-410. For other consequences of this case, including plans to murder Ed Koch, see Samuel Blixen: *El vientre del Cóndor: Del archivo del terror al caso Berríos*, Ediciones de Brecha, Montevideo, 1994, pp.184 and 220-221.

⁴¹ See for instance the report and advices in the U.S. Department of State, "Longterm (post election) courses of action-Uruguay" (December 22, 1971), in National Archives, Record Group 59. For a later example focused on the Tupamaros guerrilla, see Brian M. Jenkins, "The evolution of U.S. policy on kidnapping: A working note prepared for the Department of State and Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency" (November, 1974), in *World Government Documents Archive-Declassified Documents Reference System – U.S.* (available in: <http://www.ddrs.psmmedia.com>). See also Clara Aldrighi's first conclusions about the Department of State materials in her essay "Los sucesos de febrero y junio de 1973 en los informes de los representantes diplomáticos de Estados Unidos en Uruguay", presented at the seminar *A 30 años del golpe de Estado: ¿Qué hay de nuevo en los estudios sobre el pasado reciente?* (Montevideo, July 3 and 4, 2003).

⁴² See Siracusa statements about his meeting with the Generals Luis V. Queirolo and Julio C. Vadora in U.S. Department of State, "Telegram from AmEmbassy Montevideo to RUEHC/SecState" (August 7, 1976), in National Security Archive (NSA), *Argentina declassification project (CD ROOM)*, NSA, Washington, D.C., 2003. About Argentina and Chile, see "Kissinger to Argentines on dirty war: "The quicker you succeed the better", "Pentagon and CIA sent mixed message to the Argentine Military" and "Chile and the United States: declassified documents relating to the Military Coup, 1970-

publicly the new American Government position because it got conflicting messages through different ways. When human rights turned into an official policy in Carter's administration, it was clear that it wouldn't be easy to control the forces unleashed in the continent to stop protests against social and economic repressive measures. We must not forget that the critical impulse reinforced by the Vietnam war was not totally reflected in such decisions and contemporary projects. Sectors supporting right-wing regimes in Latin America did never ceased to be strong in the American government.

Uruguayan Exiles and Human Rights

On the other side, it isn't easy to know up to what extent leftist Uruguayan exiles realized the complexity of the international process in which they started to participate, apart from their general tendency to consider the new American policy as an "intelligent imperialist stunt from which they had to take advantage. On one side, it is difficult to separate different groups's attitudes towards this and other efforts of international denouncement of alliance policy and the attempts to achieve a common front against dictatorship. The expressions of support towards Ferreira Aldunate were frequently mixed with considerations about the convenience of having good relationships with the leader of the *Partido Nacional*. Moreover, the early 60's are not the best moment to consider these matters, which only became urgent at the end of the decade. It was proved that the Armed Forces got the power to stay and move forward in the process started with President Bordaberry dismissal in June 1976. This consciousness of the strenghtening of dictatorship, together with a repression that had no antecedents against the opposition, also influenced the exile's reactions towards the activities of human rights groups concerning the Uruguayan case.

Many of them were impulsed to act in any field where they could present their testimonies and defend their partners, regardless of other considerations about the intentions of the actors with whom they shared their efforts of denouncement.

From this observation, it is possible to describe some exiles' reactions facing the first attempts of denouncing the Uruguayan situation in terms of human rights. First, it is obvious that many groups started to change their ways of speaking about government repression as well as about the experiences of their partners jailed and tortured in Uruguay. The detailed way in which those repressive practices were described shows this change. The objective of these descriptions was not only to enhance their fellow's heroism and the promotion of an ideological agreement with the ultimate objectives of their fight, but to sensibilize people in order to put an immediate end to that horrible suffering.

At the end of 1975, Erro, who was in jail in Argentina, asked himself:

"What would have been of Dreyfus without...Zola this transmission of feelings that impacted Europe and then the whole world.(::...)We haven't found yet this example of human being that makes people fulfill human rights".⁴³

Other groups also change their way of thinking about these topics, assuming what was called a *technical, objective and cold approach* to describe in a detailed way torture in Uruguay, leaving aside sadness, fury, anguish and heroism for later on.⁴⁴

1976", Electronic Briefing Books, National Security Archive. Available in:
<http://www.gwu.edu>.

⁴³ Letter from Erro to his wife (October 29, 1975), in Nelson Caula: *El diario de Enrique Erro: la cárcel, el exilio y la transición*, Rosebud, Montevideo, 1998, pp.253.

⁴⁴ See Comité de Información sobre la Represión en Uruguay, *La tortura en Uruguay* (Caracas, 1974) and Uruguay: *Los rehenes del fascismo* (Caracas, 1974) in NACLA 4.

These new ways of talking and searching solutions to the repression showed points of coincidence with the human rights language used in transnational denouncement networks. Some kind of approach to a way of understanding politics in terms of “victims” and “criminals” that didn’t have any antecedents among leftist activists could be seen. Until that moment, the “victim” label wouldn’t have been accepted by any leftist as it was reserved for people that still ignored the history’s inexorable course, and so refused to speed it up. From this point of view, human rights supposed a change in its political activity conception: from a language of revolutionary heroism and ideological identification to a discourse focused on “humanitarian” reasons.

This appeal referred to the human body as a link between those who suffer and those in a position to stop that suffering, based on a detailed description as a veracity proof. In AI reports, for example, the profuse details about “the suffering bodies of the others” wanted to raise compassion, and that compassion was presented as a “moral imperative” to improve that situation.⁴⁵

The consequences of this mandate in terms of political action weren’t clear at all and many leftists argued that it only calmed down the feelings and delayed the truthful revolutionary action. Uruguayan exiles from different groups and political parties complained in a similar way about human rights activism, recognizing that AI detailed reports about torture cases didn’t pay the necessary attention to the ultimate objectives of those who were suffering those abuses, to their heroic resistance and their devotion to major causes, focusing on denouncing the specific practices that made that people “victims” of human rights violations.

In fact, their incipient collaboration with this kind of organizations didn’t imply their renunciation to praise their partner’s “revolutionary heroism”, or even their renunciation to previous characterizations of Uruguayan situation in terms of “actors” like “people”, “oligarchy” or “imperialism”. In this first stage of exile there were practically no efforts to find a conceptual frame that gave sense to both languages, perhaps because the change was more a result from the hasten circumstances than a deliberated ideological revision.

However, some kind of tensions came up among leftist forces, when talking about “two ways to understand solidarity” according to what was published in 1975 in the Comité de Défense des Prisonniers Politiques bulletin in Uruguay, whose headquarter was in Paris. The division was set between a “purely humanitarian solidarity” and its critics, who wanted to know not only “how” but also “why” repression existed. This last demand tried to explicit “who” where the “victims”, knowing previously that this explanation would support those who wanted to “raise the socialism and destroy the Burgeois Estate in Uruguay”.⁴⁶

Years later, PVP was undoubtedly the group that made most of their efforts to denounce the social problems behind the repression carried on by the dictatorships in

The reports published by Grupo de Información Sobre Uruguay (GRISUR), with headquarter in Ginebra, present the same unbiased vision about the situation in Uruguay. See for instance *Informaciones 1975 y 1976*, *Uruguay Informations 1976*, *Noticias del Uruguay 1976* and *Informes y Testimonios 1976*, in NACLA 2 and 5.

⁴⁵ About this and other characteristics of “humanitarian narrative”, see Thomas W. Lacqueur: “Bodies, details and the humanitarian narrative”, in Lynn Hunt (editor): *The new Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989, pp.176 and 202.

⁴⁶ *Uruguay en Lutte* (March 1975) in NACLA 5 (the original in French; translation by the author)

the South Cone, but basing the characterization on their repressive actions. The “terrorism of state” idea that started to be used at the end of the seventies condensed those efforts.⁴⁷

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the communists, who in 1976 started to report systematically the abuses of the Uruguayan dictatorship and to cooperate with the human rights groups, showed both efforts as the natural way to react under the urgency of a situation that they used to compare with the antifascist fight.⁴⁸ The central place given to Alvaro Balbi’s case (a communist tortured and murdered in Montevideo) on AI’s campaign was a clear example of the Communist Party’s support to this kind of denouncements.

None of these characterizations end up the analysis of Uruguayan leftist positions towards international denouncement efforts made during the early years of the dictatorship. However, it allows starting thinking about the debate trend for the next period, debates that also took place in other South American leftist sectors at the same time. In general terms, Uruguayan exiles participation on transnational activism networks showed a change on their political activity in accordance with the new challenges that arose from the establishment of cruel dictatorship regimes in the South Cone. Realizing that space for leftist activism was diminishing due to an unprecedented repression, exiles searched for new ways to continue their fight. Without capacity to influence in the political scene, they started to search for actors that could press the government to stop the most urgent repression aspects.

During the second half of the 70’s, some changes took place in the international policy, favoring the contact with the new allies. Many Uruguayan exiles became experts in the use of available denouncement mechanisms in ASO and UN. For instance, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate’s son Juan Raúl Ferreira behaved actively at ASO, making good use of his insertion in American human rights groups as the Washington Office for Latin America and Liga Internacional de Derechos Humanos.⁴⁹ From leftists rows, relatives and partners of communists, PVP, and Tupamaros (three of the most popular leftist groups) contributed to these efforts exposing resources in the presence of Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH), pressuring OEA to deal with the Uruguayan case.⁵⁰ Finally, when the Parliament approved the first critical report made by the CIDH in 1978, many exiles expressed their agreement.⁵¹

⁴⁷ About PVP’s position regarding the denouncements of human rights violations, see for instance *Textos y Documentos* (June 1977) and *Informes y Testimonios* (April and May, 1978), in UKK-IIHS.

⁴⁸ Arismendi talked about the need of an alliance policy, “wider than the one we thought before Chile”. Rodney Arismendi, o.cit., pp.260-261.

⁴⁹ See for instance the memorandum prepared by Joe Elridge (director of WOLA) and Juan Raúl Ferreira in U.S. Congress (Senate), Committee on Foreign Relations, Latin America, 95th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1978, 95 and 196-204. For the version of Juan Raúl about his activities in USA, see Juan Raúl Ferreira: *Con la patria en la valija: El exilio, Wilson y los años trágicos*, Linardi and Risso, Montevideo, 2000.

⁵⁰ About the connections between Juan Raúl Ferreira and other Uruguayan exiles, see for instance his letter to “Queridos amigos” (June 7, 1978) in CEIU. About cases presented by different leftist groups exiles, see Organization of American States, Inter American Commission on Human Rights (OAS-IACHR), Uruguay. Available in: <http://www.oas.org>.

⁵¹ After long and complicated negotiations between CIDH and the Uruguayan government, the Parliament officially approved the Commission’s report on July, 1978.

Along with the command of complicated procedures of this international organization, exiles' actions showed some kind of revision about previous positions of frontal rejection to Interamerican coordination instances. The major novelty was a hopeful attitude towards the consolidation of ASO's human rights policies occurred in those years.⁵² This change did not mean a total abandon of their ideas about ASO as an "American imperialism instrument", with reference to the organization postures towards Cuba.

This new attitude of leftist exiles aimed at stressing the success of their activities of denounce rather than to celebrate the Interamerican system's achievements and Carter Administration's positive influence. According to this position, USA and ASO assumed a critical position towards the Uruguayan government because they didn't want to be the latest defenders of a regime that was being left apart in the international scene.⁵³ Although this analysis simplified the complexities of the American domestic politics and the motivation of the human rights groups of this country, exiles weren't wrong when they stressed their own role. Researchers of the ASO human rights regime have pointed out the contrast between the many cases presented by the exiles of the South Cone dictatorships in the seventies and the practically absence of denouncements in 1964 Brazilian coup.⁵⁴ Beyond the international policy changes, it is important to point out that Argentinean, Chilean and Uruguayan activists who presented these claims came from countries with liberal democratic traditions, who knew beforehand the existence of a legal system that backed up their rights at the international field. Although these ideas were not in the center of their political concerns before the exile, they were in a good position to incorporate this new language, or at least to criticize it from a platform of shared political traditions.

This platform allowed them to take part easily in the lobby activities in favour of human rights that had been carried on before UN since the Chilean coup.⁵⁵ Uruguayan exiles coming from different groups and leftist parties support the UN Human Rights Commission and took advantage of the Human Right Committee, which had the particularity of accepting private citizen denouncements against their own states. A group of residents in Geneve, central office of both organizations, coordinated these efforts, while activists and leaders living in other countries went there in several opportunities to talk with different delegates and officers, to present their claims and gave press conferences and other activist activities to get international disapproval of the uruguayan dictatorship.⁵⁶ From 1976 on, these activities were carried on constantly,

See all this process in OAS-IACHR, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Uruguay*, January 31, 1978. Available in: <http://www.oas.org>.

⁵² For a detailed analysis of this evolution, see Tom Farer, "The Rise of the Inter American human rights regime: No longer a unicorn, not yet an ox", in *Human Rights Quarterly*, nº 19, 1997, p.3.

⁵³ See Enrique Rodríguez, "La política exterior del fascismo", in *Estudios*, 68, June 1978, pp.54-59; and *Informes y Testimonios* (July 1978) in UKK-IIHS.

⁵⁴ See Tom Farer, o.cit.

⁵⁵ For a detailed description of the different tools available at ONU to denounce human rights situation in the member countries, see Iain Guest: *Behind the disappearances: Argentina's dirty war against human rights and the United Nations*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Filadelfia, 1990, pp.439-444, 476-477 and 484-485.

⁵⁶ About the coordination activities, see GRISUR: "Pequeño informe sobre la Comisión de Derechos Humanos 1979", in Federatie Uruguay Komitees, Instituto Internacional de Historia Social, Amsterdam. About the meeting between Uruguayan leftist leaders and

although the good services of Uruguayan delegate at UN, Carlos Giambruno, sometimes smoothed UN's position.⁵⁷ In the following years USA position changed drastically and with her the international organization receptiveness towards the exiles's claims and other groups willing to condemn Latin American right-wing dictatorships. While President Reagan put an end to a stage in American foreign policy, Uruguayan exiles started to orientate their activities towards the domestic situation of their country, where the first signs of a long and complicated transition towards democracy started to be perceived

Apart from the undeniable attractiveness in terms of convenience at that moment, at least until the early 80's, these international denouncement activities showed some kind of revision of the way leftists have conceived the relationship among activists, bourgeois legality and traditional guarantees for political participation. This revision wasn't the exclusive result of the collaboration with human rights groups. It didn't also imply to give up the idea of politics as a competition to take the power and subvert the class structure. It is clear that together with the exile political experiences, transnational activism for human rights led people to revise their emancipation vision as an inherent and exclusive conquest of the revolutionary change, and to adopt an individual rights conception of universal scope. This revision can be related to the controversial way in which Immanuel Wallerstein conceives leftist contemporary challenges. This author states that leftists should get: "a definite break with its former strategy of social transformation through the acquisition of the power of state" and they should recognize that "there are no strategic priorities in the fight. A set of rights for one group is not more important than a set of rights for another group".⁵⁸ Although this idea is not so clearly seen in Uruguayan exiles' documents and it hasn't been analyzed up to what extent the Uruguayan left-wing incorporated these ideas to their comprehension in fields as genre, sexual minorities and cultural diversity, it is possible to see an approachment to the human rights as an incipient movement in this sense.⁵⁹

UN delegates, see for instance the interview between Enrique Rodríguez (Communist Party) and a sovietic representative, in letter from Erro to Federico Fasano (February 21, 1978), in Nelson Caula: *Erro: fiscal de la nación* (3 volumes), Puntosur, Montevideo, 1989, pp. 30-31 and 70 (volume 3). About denouncements before the Human Rights Commission, see for instance Erro's testimony and other documents in Nelson Caula: o.cit., pp. 232-259 (volume 3). About other lobbying and denounce activities did by different leftist leaders and activists, see for instance *Desde Uruguay* (April 1978), pp.1-2, in NACLA 1; and letters from Werkgroep Uruguay Amsterdam to "Compañeros Uruguayos" (February 14, 1978), and from Theo Van Boven (Human Rights Committee director, UN) to Working group on human rights in Uruguay (March 19, 1978), in Werkgroep Uruguay Amsterdam, Instituto Internacional de Historia Social, Amsterdam. About the cases presented before the Committee, see for instance *Desde Uruguay* (September 1979), pp. 7-8, in NACLA 1.

⁵⁷ About Giambruno's performance, see Iain Guest: *Behind the disappearances: Argentina's dirty war against human rights and the United Nations*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Filadelfia, 1990, p.141. There it is also described in general terms the Uruguayan case evolution between 1976 and 1980.

⁵⁸ See Immanuel Wallerstein: "El derrumbe del liberalismo", *Secuencia*, nº 28, January-April, 1994.

⁵⁹ See the article by José Pedro Barrán: "Posmodernidad y militancia política en la izquierda", in *Brecha*, Montevideo, July 14, 2002.

I would like to make two final observations regarding the way exiles approached to human right language during the 70s and 80s. First, I would like to emphasize that this approachment was possible because human right movement didn't use that language as a doctrine in which all political actions were based, but as a flexible (and sometimes ambiguous) discourse to articulate concrete claims before wide audiences. My description of the different participants's interests and concerns in this movement tried to show that transnational networks not only expressed the participants's shared values and objectives but also that were spaces to promote private political purposes, which were sometimes controvertial. The majority of the documentation regarding these networks is basically interested in the analysis of common elements and it usually leaves aside the diversity of interests involved in human rights promotion at global level. A more careful look shows not only the existent tensions but also the negotiation of new goals among actors with different political conceptions. Focused on the Uruguayan case, this article showed how ideologies, collective identifications and particular political experiences influenced on the forms of political participation at transnational level and on the creation of alliances among groups with different interests.

The second observation aims at showing an essential limitation in this conceptualization about the human rights transnational movement. I would like to point out explicitly that the referred "flexibility" of this movement and its different ways to understand the international legal frame doesn't mean that human rights are a language politically and ideologically neutral, as it is said by many of its defendors. This work has tried to retribute to this language all the cultural load of its political uses, especially related to the idea of politics in terms of "victims" and "criminals", and to the defense of the body physical integrity above other interests and political and ideological objectives. Although the uneasiness when dealing with these aspects did not disappear completely, several Latin American leftists sectors commanded this language and integrated it to their political activities against the authoritarian regimes in their countries. On analyzing the theoretical transit of intellectual leftists in those years, Cecilia Lesgart reviewed the transformations in the way of thinking about political and social change that was the basis of the articulation of anti-dictatorship activism, with ideas of "political democracy" and "transition towards democracy"⁶⁰. In the Uruguayan case, it is clear that the adaptation of new languages to the objectives of the moment as well as the revision of the way to understand activism were the result of exile, which marked leftists integration to the political processes of the 80s.

Translated by María Cristina Cafferatta

Translation from Cuadernos Del CLAEH, Montevideo, p. 85-108, año 27. 2004

⁶⁰ See Cecilia Lesgart: *Usos de la transición a la democracia: ensayo, ciencia y política en la década del 80*, Rosario, Homo Sapiens, 2003.