

# Can representation of individual trauma mobilize collective memory and cultural trauma? A case-study of the *arpilleristas* in Chile

¿El trauma individual moviliza la memoria colectiva y el trauma cultural?

Un estudio de caso de las *arpilleristas* en Chile

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## Abstract

The way events are represented can result in the emergence of different narratives about a commonly experienced, and yet contested past. It is argued that such a process develops the formation of cultural trauma and collective memory in a given society. This essay aims to discuss the representation of one's individual experiences to a wider audience as a means of creating meaning in a broader community and mobilize collective memory and cultural trauma. Hence, the case of the *arpilleristas* in Chile will be discussed as an example of the use of cultural artifacts as a means to represent individual trauma. I argue that the capacity of a group to create collective meaning relies on their ability to establish certain patterns of identification with that community. In this sense, the appropriation of the *arpilleristas* on typical Chilean cultural artifacts was essential for their impact on Chile's national memory as they became the symbols of resistance and one of the main ways to recall the military regime. Nonetheless, such improvements were not perceived in the country's cultural trauma as the *arpilleristas* mobilization did not seem to affect the core aspects of Chile's identity.

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**Keywords:** cultural trauma, collective memory, identity, *arpilleristas*, Chile

## Resumen

La forma en que se representan los eventos puede resultar en la aparición de diferentes narrativas sobre un pasado comúnmente experimentado y, sin embargo, controvertido. Se argumenta que tal proceso desarrolla la formación del trauma cultural y la memoria colectiva en una sociedad dada. Este artículo tiene como objetivo discutir la representación de las experiencias individuales de uno a una

Recibido: 30 de septiembre de 2020 ~ Aceptado: 15 de diciembre de 2020 ~ Publicado: 1 de enero de 2021

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audiencia más amplia como un medio para crear significado en una comunidad y movilizar la memoria colectiva y el trauma cultural. Se discute el caso de las arpilleristas en Chile como un ejemplo del uso de artefactos culturales como medio para representar el trauma individual. Sostengo que la capacidad de un grupo para crear significado colectivo se basa en su capacidad para establecer ciertos patrones de identificación con esa comunidad. En este sentido, la apropiación de las arpilleristas de los artefactos culturales típicos chilenos fue fundamental para su impacto en la memoria nacional de Chile, ya que se convirtieron en los símbolos de la resistencia y una de las principales formas de recordar el régimen militar. Sin embargo, tales mejoras no se percibieron en el trauma cultural del país, ya que la movilización arpillerista no pareció afectar los aspectos centrales de la identidad de Chile.

Palabras clave: trauma cultural, memoria colectiva, identidad, arpilleristas, Chile

## 1. Introduction

During the military regime in Chile, a group of women emerged and challenged the authoritarian government in a way that was unexpected to both the authorities and society. The *arpilleristas* transformed Chilean cultural artifacts into political speech and became important symbols of resistance and their work is still seen as one of the most important representations to recall this period. Nonetheless, the *arpilleristas* did not emerge as an organized group, nor was their art used since the beginning as a means to denounce the government's human rights abuses. In reality, the critical context of dictatorial Chile propelled these women to interact in public workshops in order to learn crafts as a means of economic survival. Consequently, this scenario allowed women suffering from harms caused the regime to develop a way to represent their sufferings using skills learned in the workshops. In this way, the *arpilleras* started to gain life and took over the streets in Chile to publicly denounce and challenge Pinochet's policies and keep the memory of the dead and disappeared alive. On the bases of that, this work aims to analyze how these representations of individual experiences can mobilize individuals into constructing narratives of collective memory and cultural trauma. In this sense, the *arpilleristas* will serve as the case-study to develop the arguments here proposed.

In order to address such discussion, this paper engages with constructivist concepts of subjective reality. Therefore, it is assumed that individuals are social agents interacting with a given structure through a dynamic and repetitive process in which actions gain meaning. Consequently, when collectively experienced, it also

allows for multiple interpretations of reality to coexist and constructs one's sense of identity (Wendt; 1994: 389). This theoretical approach gives the basis to understand the concepts adopted in this analysis of collective memory and cultural trauma. In this sense, the concept of collective memory is understood as a series of recollections of a collectivity's past, in which different narratives of the same event may coexist resulting in a hierarchy of narrative(s). Thus, due to subjectivity and dynamism of reality, collective memory is constantly revised by social agents choosing to collectively represent their interpretations of such memories, also interacting in the process of identity formation (Editor; Zelizer, 2009: 214). On the other hand, the concept of cultural trauma here adopted, relies in the capacity of collective memories to affect identity in a deeper sense. As defined by Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004: 10), for cultural traumas to exist, collective memories need to cause discomfort into the core of one's collective sense of one's own identity, resulting in agents collectively representing that social pain. In this sense, unlike trauma experienced at the individual level, cultural trauma is seen as a cultural process as it is "mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory" (Eyerman, 2003: 1).

Having said that, the discussion proposed will apply these concepts into the analysis of the case-study proposed in this work. In this sense, the next section provides a theoretical background to the concepts previously introduced and locates these ideas in the literature of memory and trauma studies. Thus, the concept of so-called carrier groups is introduced to discuss their capacity to mobilize a collectivity and create meaning as an important aspect in the construction of collective memory and cultural trauma. Section three addresses a historical context to representations of memory and trauma through cultural artifacts, to then introduce cases in which embroidery was used to create these narratives. Therefore, this background will provide the basis to discuss the case of the *arpilleristas* in Chile and their ability to act as carrier groups and construct a narrative to create collective meaning in Chilean society. Finally, the last sections debate if this process was sufficiently effective to construct in the *arpilleristas'* representation of their individual trauma a sense of collective memory and cultural trauma in Chile.

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## 2. Collective memory and the construction of cultural trauma

The 20th century was marked by wars, revolutions, genocides, collapses of empires, and economic depressions, often seen as sources of political and social changes, which also caused deep impacts on people's lives. In view of this, several

efforts emerged, mainly from sociologists, in order to understand the causal relation of such events with creation of traumatic experiences in human collectivity. Psychological and medical concepts of trauma were then applied in social sciences aiming to identify necessary conditions in which this symptom would be likely to evolve. In psychiatric discourses, trauma is a human natural response to brutal and destructive events, “resulting in some form of mental or emotional incapacity” (Sztompka, 2000: 452). Hence, a material reality of trauma was assumed, as seen in numerous attempts to detect it through neurological exams as a “symptom produced by a physical or natural base” (Alexander, 2004: 28). Therefore, according to these concepts, trauma was addressed in social sciences as a natural aftermath of social changes primarily characterized as exogenous, imposed, unexpected, and sudden, which, necessarily, would imply in events inherently traumatic. Thus, when collectively experienced, such events can also “gradually impair the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson, 1976 *apud* Alexander, 2004: 4). Having said that, author Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004: 8) argues such perspectives share a “naturalistic fallacy”, i.e. the assumption of trauma as an inevitable consequence of experiences sharing typical features that make them traumatic by nature. Herein, it is claimed the existence of an objective reality that constrains rhetoric which is “bounded by external standards of truth” (Railsback, 1983: 352).

Nevertheless, the idea that social changes generate trauma because of their objective qualities does not explain the existence of different narratives used to describe commonly experienced and yet contested pasts/trauma(s). Hence, the process of constructing these narratives does not require that all individuals share the same experience, as such a process “requires time, as well as mediation and representation” (Eyerman, 2003: 2). The effects of this process when violate the foundational cultural aspects of a society or group’s identity and, consequently, are constantly repeated in individual consciousness, can become part of that collectivity’s memory. In view of this, post-modernist approaches emerged and “challenged the truth-claim of professional historiography by questioning the distinction between knowledge and interpretation, and derivatively between history and memory” (Olick; Robbins, 1998: 110). Consequently, memory studies developed in order to address the possibility of conflicting accounts of the past to coexist by presuming “not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time” (Thelen, 1989: 1125 *apud* Editor; Zelizer, 1995: 217). Additionally, the idea of remembering and sharing multiple recollections of the past by a collectivity expanded memory studies to understand it beyond individual experiences and encompass identity formation as an important variable also deeply

affected by this process. Thus, “dependence on shared frames of reference about the past in effect helps one hold onto one's identity in ways that are meaningful not only to the individual but to the collective” (Editor; Zelizer; 1995: 228).

In this way, collective memory is understood through a constructivist subjective sense in which past traumas are constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed in individuals' consciousness and become part of their identity. The constant recollection of these traumatic events in a collectivity's memory is very important in the construction of national identity as it allows individuals that had not themselves experienced such events and yet can recall them as part of their own history. In this way, identity and representation play an extremely important role in acts of remembering. As such, this results in an interactive process of constructing collective memory, for “it represents a graphing of the past as it is used for present aims, a vision in bold relief of the past as it is woven into the present and future” (Editor; Zelizer; 1995: 217).

On the basis of the foregoing, Alexander (2004: 10) argues that events are not inherently traumatic, nor their alleged shared objective qualities are sufficient conditions to cause trauma, but rather subjective meaning and the extension of their impact on collective identity is what attributes a traumatic status to such experiences. Thereby, according to this view, cultural trauma embeds the interaction of agents with a subjective reality that can be represented through multiple ways, consequently constructing symbolic meaning and possibly affecting essential features of one's identities.

For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors “decide” to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go (Alexander, 2004: 10).

Similar to the construction of collective memory as a dynamic process constantly being revised through the interaction of multiple narratives, experiences and symbolic representations; identities may also suffer similar consequences when traumas are represented in a collectivity by social agents (Alexander, 2004: 22). In this sense, identity and cultural aspects are extremely important variables not only to understand the construction of traumatic experiences but also in identifying who are the agents constructing this narrative, what they use to represent traumatic

events, and how such representations can result in the (re)production of cultural trauma.

Having said that, the concept of “carrier groups” comes to light as agents who participate in the process of constructing the notion of trauma. Thereby, carrier groups are part of a collectivity and have a minimum of public credibility to represent their claims and interests through particular discursive talents and, as a consequence, mobilize a wider audience to create symbolic meaning within the environment in which they operate (Alexander, 2004: 11). In other words, because trauma is about representation and, therefore, may be perceived as such even by the ones who did not experience the event itself, carrier groups are pivotal in “articulating claims, representing the interests and desires of the affected to a wider public” (Eyerman, 2004: 62). In addition, these groups create so-called master-narratives as part of the process to collectively representing trauma by relying “specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis” (Alexander, 2004: 15). Hence, aesthetic approaches come to light to address the importance of recognizing the relationship between the represented and representation as an act of power which “helps us understand why the emergence, meaning and significance of a political event can be appreciated only once we scrutinize the representational practices that have constituted the very nature of this event” (Bleiker, 2001: 519).

[...] collective memory does not only exist in the individuals, but that in fact it is located in cultural artifacts. Analyzing the contents of cultural creations, as for example films, one may see how a social group symbolically reconstructs its past in order to confront traumatic events of which it is responsible (Igartua; Páez, 1997: 84).

In view of this, the next section deals with the idea of cultural trauma to discuss its representational process in creating narratives of social sufferings. Herein, on the basis of an aesthetic approach, cultural trauma can assume different types of representation, however, this work focusses on studying a particular form of art as one of such possibilities: embroidery. Accordingly, it will be discussed examples in which embroidery was used by particular groups to express their interests and create narratives by generating symbolic meaning to represent their sufferings or claims. In doing so, context will be given to introduce my case-study into the analysis here proposed, i.e. the impact of the arpilleras in Chile through the representation of their individual traumas in the country’s collective memory.

### 3. Threads and needles writing memories

As previously discussed, the process of constructing collective memories is rooted in acts of representation which can be accomplished through art, institutions, discourses, etc., and allows for different recollections of the past to (co)exist in various forms and expressions. In this way, representing memories go beyond the idea of formally documenting facts and history, or what is claim as so-called objective reality, to encompass a collectivity's identity and cultural aspects. This process results in multiple manifestations and possibilities in which sufferings, conquests, and other social events, are portrayed. However, the role played by carrier groups as agents in this process of creating symbolic meaning to social events also opens space for developing competing memories and, consequently, proceeds the tendency of privileging one narrative over the other. As Bleiker (2001) points out, attempts of representing reality are in fact act(s) of power when one arbitrarily selects what are acceptable forms to represent memories, however, undoubtedly, they do not reflect all possibilities to understand and recall past memories. Hence, the position occupied by carrier groups in time and space, is also conditional to the extent of acceptance of their narratives as meaning producers in collective memory and cultural trauma (Mälksoo, 2015; Donnelly; Steele, 2019).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the fact that elite groups use acts of power to privilege certain narratives, does not diminish the importance of looking for alternative forms of representations throughout history as legitimate sources that can inform and give context to collective memory. Thus, this process also addresses "the connection between artistic representations and the social experiences, taste, and mentality of a specific society" (Foster, 1976: 172). In view of this, cultural artifacts have played an extremely important role in history as a language used to preserve traditions, give voice to social claims, and narrate stories, in addition to being part of a collectivity's sense of identity. Likewise, embroidery pieces were extensively used, especially in medieval and modern times, to illustrate and chronicle characters, events and glimpses into societies' everyday life at that specific period of time. Moreover, they also served for political and propaganda aims to kingdoms and empires through illustrations of wars, conquests and weapon arsenals. For instance, in 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte made use of this propaganda element by capturing an emblematic English embroidery piece in which images narrated the Conquest of England, the Bayeux Tapestry, and publicly displayed it in Paris as a way of demonstrating his superiority and ambitions over England (Hunter, 2019: 6).

Nonetheless, the association of embroidery with women's work made it an extremely de-valued art and called for a re-invention of its concept. Consequently, by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the representation of tales of wars and

conquers through needlework became then seen as exclusively of masculine creation, therefore, changing its name to tapestry. Thereby, tapestry was dissociated from any relation with female work, even so, conjectures suggested the presence of female stitchers in the long process of its making. Thus, as Claire Hunter (2019: 8) argues, the analysis of such tapestries also implies that these women would use the process of sewing to make covert additions as a “chance to slip in a personal testimony of life after invasion, or even document abuse”. On the other hand, from this same period onwards, embroidery was mainly confined to the domestic sphere and generally used as decoration pieces in homes.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of first wave feminism, a shift in the use of embroidery for essentially domestic purposes was noticed when female protesters started to represent their revindications and claims through needlework in public demonstrations. Moreover, during the American Civil War, quilts were secretly used by enslaved African American population escaping to northern areas where slavery had been abolished. These quilts included patterned messages that were oriented towards an embroidered star which offered to escapers on their way to the north a kind of tactile map that could be easily folded and carried around with lower chances of being caught (Rall; Costello, 2010: 83). In this sense, one perceives particular cases in which embroidery pieces started to gain new meaning beyond traditional concepts of so-called domestic work generally assigned to women. Thereafter, other examples emerged of embroidery being used to represent stories, social events, sufferings, protests and, consequently, becoming sources of influence on collective memory and cultural trauma.

For instance, Laotian Hmong refugees in Thailand at the aftermath of the Vietnam War represented their exodus stories through *paj ntaub* - traditional artifacts of Ban Vinai culture in which embroidery was used to make story cloths. Hence, these pieces would not only narrate stories of suffering, culture, etc., but also serve as a means for economic survival to Hmong people since they were sold and even exported to other locations. Consequently, *paj ntaub* had a great impact in the construction of collective memory of that community. As Sally Peterson (1998: 11) points out albeit “not all Hmong left Laos by the same route or under the same circumstances [...] most [*paj ntaub*] recount tales with similar undercurrents of terror”. Likewise, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 also caused women artisans to change an ancient practice of making carpets in which “flowers, birds, and decorative knots were replaced by machine guns, grenades, helicopters, and tanks” (Thill, 2019) as a way to represent the harms caused by the war. Such practice continued after the US invasion in 2001, and for many of these Afghan women, remained as their main way to narrate their stories of war.



The examples previously addressed provide evidence on the importance of narratives not limited to official documents and history books. In this way, albeit the influence of certain elite carrier groups to impose their narratives is undeniable in the construction of collective memories, however, undoubtedly, artistic representations similar to the ones presented here certainly also play an important role in giving voice to claims and creating meaning in a collectivity's sense of identity. Having said that, the next sections will discuss the case of the *arpilleristas* in Chile and how they were able to mobilize a wider community through the representation of their individual traumas. In doing so, focus will be given to the development of giving voice to these ladies' particular sufferings through embroidery to create meaning in Chilean society, consequently, also implicating in their interaction with each other to construct among the *arpilleras* a broader political and social conscious. Thereby, the results of such process to impact Chile's collective memory will be debated, as well as the construction of an idea of cultural trauma in the country's perception and relation with the harms caused by Pinochet's dictatorship period.

#### 4. Arpilleristas and the transformation of trauma into political speech

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From the 1960s to 1990s, under allegations of a possible communist threat, several countries in Latin America had their democratic elected leaders overthrown and replaced by right-wing military dictatorships, marking a period of sheer repression and resistance in the region. The years between 1973 and 1990, Chile experienced one of the most atrocious periods in its history during Augusto Pinochet's authoritarian regime when the country suffered thousands of disappearances, deaths, and cases of torture against anyone accused to act against the government. Nonetheless, although Pinochet's administration was severely opposed by many, it also had enormous support especially in its early years which was essential for his coup to have succeed. Hence, in the last years of the previous president Salvador Allende, elite groups mobilized marches in Chile to demand government action against the economic crisis as well as showing support for the military to take control of the country. On the basis of that, upper-class women became the symbol of these movements as "they orchestrated the famous marches of the empty pots to demonstrate the scarcity of goods that surely existed at that time", and, consequently, were of strategically importance to support Pinochet during the regime (Agosín, 1996: 21). As Marjorie Agosín (1996: 21) points out, the manipulation of women in military coups was extensively used in Latin America as a means to destabilize alleged leftist governments, and apparently was first

experienced in Brazil, as noted by the author through the statement of a Brazilian military member in the 1970s:

We taught the Chileans to use their women against the Marxists. Women constitute the most efficient political weapon; they have time, they are capable of great emotion and they mobilize quickly. For instance, if you want to start a rumor that the President drinks too much or that he has serious health problems, use women. By the next day the rumor will be all over the country.

In view of this, one of the tactics used by Pinochet to increase legitimacy and support, was to reinforce traditional role of women within patriarchal structures and establish a “gendered dichotomy of society, causing women to fear the collapse of their beloved Chilean culture if the traditional gender roles were not upheld” (Boldt; White, 2011: 32). As one notices, this narrative based on conservative values about women’s role in Chilean society and that was imposed by the government after Pinochet took power, clearly contradicted the encouragement given by him on supporting women in the ‘marches of the empty pots’, which were crucially important to increase the support given by Chileans to the military coup. However, this narrative was primarily effective in elites not affected by the disappearances and high unemployment rates. Even so, Pinochet promoted what became known as political motherhood, which established interaction among the *Centros de Madres*<sup>2</sup> (CEMAs) as a means to train poorer women in crafts and increase their family income, since many had experienced the disappearance of their male counterparts and became the breadwinners of their households (O’Rourke, 2012: 142). Thereby, the CEMAs promoted workshops and taught these ladies to make *arpilleras*, traditional embroidered textiles in Chilean culture. However, because many were suffering from the loss of sons, husbands and fathers, the *arpilleras* would mainly serve as a reflection of their own experiences living under the dictatorship. The symbolic meaning of the *arpilleras* was deeply strong to their creators as sometimes, due to material scarcity, locks of their own hair and pieces of their own clothes would be used to give life and narrate stories of loss, often being their closest way to remember the lives of their loved ones (Agosín, 1996: 61).

<sup>2</sup> The *Centro de Madres* emerged in Chile during the 1930s and consisted of promoting amongst women what were then perceived as indispensable knowledge for them to exert their role as homemakers and mothers, which clearly reflected patriarchal aspects and gender misconceptions in Chilean society.

Arpillera: Peace, Justice, and Freedom.



Photo: Colin Peck. Conflict Textiles ©

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Arpillera: Dancing Cueca Alone.



Photo: Tomomitsu Oshima. Conflict Textiles ©

In addition, as the *arpilleristas* interacted with each other in workshops, they would share life experiences and sufferings which made them more conscious of the country's political situation and abuses committed by the military regime. Consequently, this scenario propelled the emergence of women's groups which not only "protested the human rights abuses of the government but also [served] as a means of economic survival" (Boldt; White, 2011: 28). Thus, due to the regime's pre-constructed idea of female role restricted to the domestic sphere, most actions of women were ignored and gave them opportunity to politically "organize on the basis of their gender" (Boldt; White, 2011: 33). Therefore, the *arpilleristas* would take over the streets in protests as they translated their art into political speech demanding the government to stop committing the human rights violations and provide clarification of the ones who had disappeared.

The military dictatorship obligated these women to confront public life, to make the pain and the grief visible. They not only created tapestries but also initiated street protests, obtaining through their own initiative a power that had previously been denied to women. Such activities arose as a response to usurped maternity. The *arpilleristas* were united in an alliance of sisterhood that tried to negate masculine authoritarian power, oppression, and exploitation (Agosín, 1996: 21).

As the cases of human rights abuse were becoming more frequent and alarming in Pinochet's regime, the *arpilleristas* started depicting scenes beyond their individual experiences and sufferings, to represent a wider variety of human rights issues that was affecting the country, such as unemployment, political oppression, lack of education, etc. In this way, "the *arpillera* workshops educated women about the world and oppression that was occurring not only by the military-authoritarian regime but by the traditional patriarchal power structure" (Boldt; White, 2011: 35). Furthermore, the *arpilleristas* organized public demonstrations beyond the use of embroidery to represent their stories. For instance, these ladies appropriated of Chilean traditional dance, *La Cueca*, in which is originally danced by a couple, to make public appearances where they would perform alone and, therefore, draw attention to the disappearance of their male counterparts. Hence, the transformation of *La Cueca* to *La Cueca Solo*, "a denunciation of a society that makes the bodies of victims of political violence disappear, denying them a proper burial and silencing their mourners" (Agosín, 1996: 86).

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Having said that, one can see how the *arpilleristas* appropriated of traditional cultural artifacts in Chile in order to represent their individual sufferings and opened space to their further engagement with denouncing the country's political and social situation under military government. Thus, these women mobilized their works and public demonstrations to keep the memory of the dead and disappeared alive in Chilean society until justice were found and the government admitted its abuses and confessed the truth about the ones who had been mysteriously lost. Moreover, the reachability of these ladies went beyond national boundaries since *arpilleras* were sold to places outside Chile and *La Cueca Solo* was performed to many tourists, also inspiring international music stars to write about them such as Sting's "They Dance Alone" (Agosín, 1996: 84). Nonetheless, the impact of such events in Chile's collective memory under Pinochet's authoritarian regime and the capacity of the *arpilleristas* to create meaning in Chilean society in order to construct the idea of cultural trauma need to be further discussed. In order to do so, the next sections will apply the concepts of carrier groups, i.e. *arpilleristas*, and their capacity to make meaning in a collectivity's sense of identity, and, finally, analyze what was their contribution to the country's collective memory and cultural trauma.

## 5. From individual to cultural trauma and collective memory?

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On the basis of the case previously addressed, one can notice the importance of the work done by the *arpilleristas* in order draw attention to atrocities committed by Pinochet's authoritarian regime. In this sense, the discussion on whether these ladies were able to mobilize their individual traumas into collective memory and cultural trauma can be analyzed under the following aspects: 1) *arpilleristas'* awareness of their individual traumas; 2) their capacity to create meaning in Chilean society; 3) the impact of their representations in national identity. First, the interaction in the CEMAs promoted a strong sense of identification between women who were experiencing similar stories of disappearances and deaths. Consequently, their empathy towards each other's pain not only made them aware of a broader scenario of government's abuses, but also opened space for them to take action and publicly give voice to their claims. In doing so, the *arpilleristas* were not only denouncing the regime's abuses, but also questioning their own identities in a society that mostly saw women as apolitical actors. Hence, as Alexander (2004: 10) argues, trauma is not simply the result of a collectivity experiencing pain, but rather the capacity of that experience to affect the core of one's own identity. In this way, living under the dictatorship made the *arpilleristas* aware of their individual

traumas in a broader context and propelled them to organize on the basis of their identity whilst using traumatic experiences to challenge government authority.

Secondly, the fact that traditional artifacts of Chilean culture were transformed by the *arpilleristas* to represent their pain and, posteriorly, denounce a wider variety of government's human rights abuses, was crucial to develop a sense of familiarity of such demonstrations among Chilean society. In this sense, the *arpilleristas* had established what Editor and Zelizer (1995: 228) defined as "shared frames of reference" on the basis of aspects that were already part of Chilean's identity. Such practices, gave these ladies public credibility to act as carrier groups and represent their interests and claims to a wider public, including the ones who had not directly experienced themselves the traumatic events represented in the *arpilleristas* public demonstrations of *arpilleristas*. Consequently, the appropriation of *arpilleras* and national dance *La Cueca* was essential for women to confront the government's narrative, because it allowed them to create symbolic meaning in Chilean society to their own traumatic experiences. In this way, the *arpilleristas* were seen as symbols of resistance against the military regime. In view of this, it can be said the *arpilleristas* impacted on national memory as the *arpilleras* became one of the main ways to recall the dictatorial period even years after Pinochet's fall. Thus, this form of resistance also spread throughout other countries in Latin America and symbolized memories of military oppression in these locations.

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The arpillera assumes a unique identity in Latin American history.

It is a courageous piece of needlework that transfigures experiences of grief and searching into a fabric of memory, managing to engrave itself upon Chilean culture by converting female submission and reserve into nonviolent, yet denunciatory, weapons (Agosín, 1996: 68).

Notwithstanding the above, the ability of the *arpilleristas* to mobilize cultural trauma is argued to have not succeeded in the same way. Recalling Alexander's (2004: 10) idea of cultural trauma as the result of social crisis becoming cultural crisis, the democratic transition in Chile proved that such process was not perceived. In this sense, one notices structures of a gendered society, which preceded Pinochet's administration and was reinforced by his regime, still continued to be part of Chile post-democratization. The idea of the military government to associate women as "the pillars that supported the country" (Agosín, 1996: 22), attached their position in traditional gender roles to the essence of Chile's identity. Nonetheless, even after Pinochet's fall and the undeniable importance of *arpilleristas* in confronting the regime and becoming national symbols of resistance, were not enough to cause the collapse of the country's identity based on a gendered

dichotomy. As Boldt and White (2011: 38) point out, the democratic transition in Chile showed that “women had done their part to help fight the opposition; now they could return to their homes”. On the basis of that, the concept of cultural trauma as the construction of a collectivity’s conscious of past events resulting in “acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander, 2004: 10) could not be applied in this case. Hence, although the *arpilleristas* were important to construct how Chile would then remember the military regime, the establishment of cultural trauma by causing collective discomfort about the basic foundations of their identity, i.e. patriarchal structures, was not clear evidenced, especially in the early years of democratization. Thereby, “Chilean society appears to shift between the thresholds of memory and oblivion, between the need to remember and the need to forget. Yet reconciliation without justice and acknowledgment is a price the *arpilleristas* cannot accept” (Agosín, 1996: 94).

## 6. Final considerations

This essay aimed to discuss how individual traumatic experiences can be represented and mobilize collective memory and cultural trauma. In this sense, the case-study of the *arpilleristas* in Chile provided an example in which groups of women were united by sharing similar experiences of suffering under the military government. Consequently, this process allowed for a construction of a common identity among the *arpilleristas* that was also reinforced on the basis of their gender and status in society. In this way, the *arpilleristas* appropriated of traditional cultural artifacts in Chile which was essential to establish collective identification on the representation of their trauma among Chileans. Therefore, these women became symbols of resistance during the military regime, posteriorly, turning their work into one of the most significant aspects of national culture.

Nonetheless, the ability of the *arpilleristas* to influence core features of national identity was not perceived as the country maintained its patriarchal structures even after Pinochet’s fall. Having said that, this analysis demonstrated the importance of agents establishing patterns of identification with a collectivity in order to create symbolic meaning to represent their narratives. Nonetheless, albeit such process can mobilize these representations into collective memory, does not imply that core aspects of that collectivity’s identity will be affected to cause cultural trauma. In view of this, further work needs to be done in order to address the concept of cultural trauma not solely as a result of collective representations of social changes, but also how cultural trauma can impact one’s identity to the point of triggering social changes.

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