

*Bembas*The Life and Death of Rumors in a Political Prison
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Bits and pieces of a fragile, fragmented discourse. Messages that traveled from cell to cell, cellblock to cellblock, even from one prison to another. Scrupulously and copiously analyzed, discussed and, on occasion, transformed during recreation periods and family visits, they were capable of inspiring both hope and fear, depending on the circumstances. But most importantly they were vehicles – spontaneous, improvised vehicles – for combating misinformation and uncertainty. Political prisoners had a name for them: *bembas*.¹ Often the sole topic of conversation and argument among political prisoners, *bembas* always elicited a broad array of opinions and reactions: skepticism, blind faith, humor, meticulous examination, scorn and, most often, expectant, painstaking analysis. Here are a few examples of this phenomenon:

'400 people are going to be released by Christmas'

'The men in cellblock 11 have had open doors since last week'

'At the end of the month they're going to confiscate the newspapers'

'The *montos* kidnapped an officer in Unit 9 and told him that if he didn't treat us better he would be executed'

'They're doing submarines over in lockdown'

'After the bomb that went off at Coordinada, [General] Corbetta wanted to execute a thousand *montos* and the Partido Auténtico [Authentic Socialist Party]'

'Very few exit petitions [to leave the country] are going to be denied'

'The director [in Unit 9] wants us to raise hell on account of Cabo and Pirles getting killed, so that they can come down hard on us afterward'

'Ramírez didn't commit suicide: they beat the hell out of him in lockdown and then made it look like he hung himself'

'The guy in 232 is a rat'²

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SAGE: London, Los Angeles, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192107073436

No political prisoner could claim to be above or ignorant of *bembas*. There was absolutely no-one who never found himself trapped in the complex web of these rumors – fleeting, fragile and irresistibly seductive as they were. At some time or another, everyone had to ‘work’ (or work for) the *bembas*, and obey their very subtle rules and codes. In this sense, political prisoners were prisoners of the *bembas* as much as they were prisoners of the state. With very few exceptions, all political prisoners eventually became *bemba* addicts shortly after being put behind bars.

This paper offers a tentative analysis of this discursive phenomenon. It describes certain aspects of the production, circulation and reception of *bembas* within the time and space of the prison setting.

It is a modest yet somewhat problematical objective because the three aforementioned phases of a *bemba*’s life (production, circulation, reception) tend to bleed into one another and lose their analytic value. If we attempt to define the circulation of a *bemba* as something separate from or subsequent to its production, we are inevitably distorting reality somewhat. The circulation and production of *bembas* were always a simultaneous occurrence. As they meandered their way through cells and cellblocks, *bembas* would inevitably become transformed, acquiring depth, growing simpler or more complex, dividing, subdividing or even combining with other *bembas*. In this light, the *bemba* revealed itself to be quite a spectacular example of discursive nomadism, its life-span determined by its period of circulation. Because of this, *bembas* were always somewhat perishable as discourses: they would be used until they wore themselves out, and nobody ever held on to them for very long. When they fell into disuse – that is, when they were no longer fit for circulation – they would simply get replaced by new ones. There were certain recurrent *themes* in the realm of the *bembas* (namely, the theme of freedom), but very rarely did one ever come across recurring *bembas*.

These qualities, as well as others to be considered further on, make *bembas* a particularly interesting and, in some cases, valuable subject of analysis. And the objective of this paper is to underscore that interest and that value.

Before going any further, a few salient facts must be taken into account. With very few exceptions, political prisoners in Argentina were subjected to the ‘maximum security’³ regime that was, as its name suggests, extremely severe in nature. Prisoners under this system were locked in their cells, alone or in the company of another prisoner, for an average of 20 hours a day. Almost all imaginable activities were controlled by a series of detailed restrictions and obligations that governed aspects of the inmates’ experience such as: hours of rest permitted; the appropriate manner in which prison guards were to be addressed; the proper arrangement of the prisoner’s belongings inside the cell; the quantity and quality of authorized elements (clothing, personal belongings, books, letters, etc.), and almost all these aspects of the political prisoner’s life were enforced through a draconian code of corporal discipline. The slightest infraction could result in the harshest of sanctions, such as solitary confinement for days on end in cells specifically designated for prisoner punishment, as well as a broad range of physical excesses and pressure tactics (physical abuse, cold-water showers, debilitating exercise, etc.).

In addition to corporal violence, that constant ‘mortification of the self through the body’ (Goffman, 1972: 33), another kind of violence, subtler but no less systematic,

was also employed. The political prison functioned as a machine, tightly regimented and perfected, of misinformation.⁴

In other words: no political prisoner knew, or *was supposed to know*, what would happen to him in the immediate future – an immediate future that, moreover, was never counted in terms of days or weeks, but hours and minutes. At *any* moment, absolutely *anything* could happen: the prisoner could be transferred to another cell, cellblock, or prison; could be interrogated; punished without knowledge of the cause, etc. At any moment the prisoner might find his existence abruptly altered, dealt a fate that could range anywhere from freedom to death.

Without a doubt this misinformation, reinforced through the strict prison rules, was selective and uneven. For example, there were certain jails, and cellblocks within certain jails, where prisoners were given access to newspapers. Correspondence was generally permitted, though subjected to censorship and limited to the prisoners' immediate families. In almost all the prisons, inmates were allowed periodic visits from close family members, and these visits were subjected to varying degrees of supervision. In different prisons, and even in different cellblocks within the same prison, the living conditions varied within certain parameters, ranging from extremely rigid models to more permissive ones.

In all cases, however, one golden rule was uniformly obeyed: prisoners were systematically kept misinformed regarding their individual and collective fates. Great pains were taken to make sure that each 'internal' had absolutely no idea about his future, and this practice was complemented by an elaborate system specifically designed to keep all prisoners absolutely uninformed as to the fate of their fellow inmates.

Of course, despite these rules and regulations, information inevitably leaked its way in. For almost two years, from 1977 to 1979, the newspapers published reports from the Interior Ministry every Saturday regarding releases, authorizations to exit the country, expulsions (of foreigners), and new arrests that the Executive Power had decreed during the previous week. In the prisons or cellblocks where prisoners were allowed to read newspapers, Saturdays were anticipated with great trepidation. With some exceptions, prisoners who were released from prison or allowed to leave the country through these decrees learned of their fate through the newspaper.

In general, however, with the exception of certain situations that escalated beyond the authorities' control, the prison system was oriented toward keeping the prisoners as misinformed as possible, through a series of measures enforced with obsessive severity. These measures included, but were not limited to:

- (a) Periodic inspections, which brought with them physical provocation and punishment as well as intimidation through force. During these inspections, the written documents a prisoner kept in his cell were placed under particular scrutiny. In the La Plata prison (in Buenos Aires province), among others, diaries saved by prisoners were systematically requisitioned. Prisoners were allowed to retain no more than three letters from family members, and though they were allowed notebooks for writing, these notebooks were removed from their cells after a certain period of time.
- (b) With regard to books, the usual humorous stories regarding censors and their

absurd criteria pale in comparison to the degree of censorship imposed in these prisons. Almost no academic texts were allowed, and in general all authors with suspicious-sounding last names (Chomsky, Dostoyevsky) were condemned to the Index. With respect to periodicals, only sports and comic-strip magazines were allowed.⁵

- (c) Conversations with prison guards or officials were strictly forbidden. This rule was frequently broken, though the occasional conversation with the prison personnel was usually brief (given that the prohibition was two-sided) and always revolved around the operation and services of the prison.
- (d) In most prisons and cellblocks, inmates were denied access to media such as television and radio. At the La Plata prison, recorded music was played over the institution's loudspeakers for several hours each day, along with radio broadcasts of the most significant sporting events and news.
- (e) Whenever detainees, for whatever reason, were brought to a specific office, department or wing of the institution (health, legal, etc.), they were always made to walk with their heads bowed, a humiliating disciplinary tactic that also served to keep inmates from exchanging and obtaining information from one another. With his head down, a prisoner could neither see any other prisoners in the particular office or area to which he had been led, nor could he observe anything else going on in the vicinity.
- (f) During recreation periods, prisoners were forbidden from convening in small clusters or for group meetings. They were allowed to congregate to play dominos or chess, or for a bit of conversation, but the maximum number of people allowed in any one spot was between six and eight. Rules tended to be broken in this instance, as well, though usually due to the negligence – not the tolerance – of the prison guards.
- (g) Leaning their heads out the window or the *pasaplato* (the small window through which the prisoners received their food) was cause for punishment. Whenever there was a change in the daily routine of a cellblock (the arrival or the release of a prisoner, for example), the *pasaplatos* were shut.
- (h) Periodically, prison guards would be transferred from one cellblock to another, to prevent guards and prisoners from developing bonds of familiarity.⁶
- (i) Finally, it is important to point out the rather unusual and not very functional fact that the detainees are never informed about things of direct concern to them. In general, prisoners learn of these rules through experience, or thanks to the wisdom and knowledge of more veteran inmates. All prisoners are expected to know the rules, and yet the authorities do absolutely nothing to communicate these to them.⁷

As might be expected, this harsh tactic for keeping the prisoners uninformed was complemented by a parallel tool of equal severity, one designed to keep the prison authorities as well informed as possible regarding the activities and behavior of all the detainees. Silent, constant, persistent surveillance (often invisible to the prisoners) was carried out at all hours of the day and night in the cells, cellblocks and recreation courtyards. The aforementioned periodic inspections, in addition to those searches carried out before and after visits, were absurdly meticulous: the 'internal'

would be forced to shake out his hair, open his mouth, raise his arms, lift up his testicles and separate his buttocks as many times as he was told.⁸

This regimented asymmetry between ignorance and desired knowledge, an integral element of prisons housing political detainees, seems to have taken on a character all its own. As mentioned, all conversation between detainees and prison guards was strictly prohibited. This prohibition, however, did not exist in prisons housing common-law offenders, raising the question of why it was so strictly enforced in the political prison, in addition to the technique previously mentioned.

From our perspective, this rule stands out as a symptom of the political prison's preoccupation with strengthening its weaker, more permeable side. We have already seen how the political prison system employed the most elaborate methods to keep the authorities as informed as possible and the prisoners as ignorant as possible, with the objective of establishing a distance between the two that was vast enough to absorb any incident that might threaten the powers in question. It was in this vein that the political prisoner (as opposed to the common-law prisoner) was perceived as a particularly dangerous 'element' in the eyes of the prison authority or official.

'You are different from regular prisoners', an official at the La Plata prison once confessed to a childhood friend who was a detainee at that penal institution. 'In your group there are professors, political leaders, lawyers, doctors – educated, well-prepared people. We never know what you might be capable of planning; we can never be sure what you are thinking.' In other words, 'the political prisoner is not like other prisoners, because he is someone who possesses knowledge'. This rather dark acknowledgment of the intimate convergence between power and knowledge was also a confession, no less dark or shameful, of the prison official's feelings of impotence when confronting a kind of knowledge that was impossible to fight and that, according to the logic of the prison system, was either to be neutralized or repressed. It is commonly known that prison guards undergo constant indoctrination regarding the characteristics of their detainees. And for a very long time now prison authorities have known that experience quickly dispels the image of the political 'criminal' often promulgated by the mass media, the stereotype of the bloody, fanatical warrior.⁹ For this reason, such indoctrination in political prisons tended to focus on the 'diabolical' aspects often attributed to political detainees. Prison guards were inculcated with the notion of the subversive as a deceitful, cunning person who used his good breeding and smooth conversation to outwit the people around him.¹⁰ Far more threatening than the idea of the prisoners staging an uprising (a circumstance for which the authorities were prepared) was the possibility that these prisoners might be able to engage the younger prison staff with their sly, persuasive words – astute and insidious words that became that much more dangerous when buttressed by an uncontrollable and inalienable power.¹¹ As such, it was important to prevent the power of those words from ever being exercised. The relationship between the prisoners and the security personnel, as a basis for survival and a condition of efficacy, was characterized by the strict observance, on both sides, of silence.¹²

Curiously enough (or perhaps, logically enough), it was in this closed environment, where such drastic measures were taken in order to ensure the greatest levels of misinformation and ignorance, that messages began to proliferate. In this world,

where signs were prohibited or tightly controlled, everything was a sign and a message; everything was inevitable and emphatically significant. At the same time, from the moment they entered the prison environment, all political prisoners invariably became hypersensitized readers, decipherers, hermeneutists. Newspaper reports were exhaustively interpreted down to the smallest detail. All sorts of everyday occurrences – the way in which a door opened or closed, the transfer of a guard from one cellblock to another, unfamiliar noises, an unexpected authorization or prohibition, a change in the recreation hour or in the menu, the sudden presence of an unfamiliar individual – were witnessed and treated as significant events, as messages to be deciphered that either confirmed or refuted hypotheses, or else gave rise to entirely new ones. For this reason, sooner or later, all political prisoners tended to become obsessive semiologists and exegetes of all kinds of signs and symbols.

This was the environment in which *bembas* were born, evolved, and died.¹³

I. *Bembas* and their recipients

The *bemba* was a piece of information that related, either directly or indirectly, to the present or future situation of the political prisoner, and which entirely lacked official confirmation.¹⁴ The uncertain quality of the *bembas* was always explicit: in the slang of the prison world, the *bemba* was very clearly distinguished from the so-called *posta* information that was verified and, as such, was beyond question. At the same time, the instant a *bemba* was either confirmed or refuted categorically, it disappeared entirely.

In order for a *bemba* to ‘make the rounds’ – to circulate, be analyzed, pondered, transformed and refashioned – it had to meet the following criteria.

(a) Above all, it had to appear to possess *verisimilitude*.¹⁵ There was a case dating back to August 1976 in which a priest tending to the religious needs of the prisoners at the Devoto prison in Buenos Aires announced that some two thousand prisoners would soon be released. This information elicited two kinds of reaction: the more politicized prisoners, militants of recognized political organizations, rejected it immediately and categorically. Had there been no identifiable basis for the story, it probably would have been unanimously rejected as false. However, this case was special in that it involved a priest, a member of an institution, the Catholic Church, that had always manifested concern for political prisoners. As such, the information came from a relatively qualified informer, who (was it so absurd to imagine it?) might well have unexpected contacts among military figureheads or government personnel.

These factors were enough to keep another, less politicized sector in the cellblock from rejecting the information so quickly. They could not, however, deem it fully credible when the information in question was uniformly considered by all the prisoners to be highly implausible. Logically, the one thing that rendered this information suspect was the exceedingly high number of releases announced by the priest. At that point, timidly at first and more decisively as time went by, some prisoners began to argue that perhaps the priest in question – either because of a mistake or out of a desire to raise the prisoners’ morale – had ‘inflated’ the number.

Shortly afterwards another version of the *bemba*, which came from a certain prisoner's father who was friends with a certain colonel, began to circulate. According to him, the number of releases was closer to 500.

The *bemba* had been born, and with startling speed it spread throughout the cellblock and even made it out to some neighboring cellblocks. If not nourished, however, a *bemba* was destined to languish, especially when at the outset it contained some element of controversial information. After this *bemba* was born, a rumor began to spread during one of the visiting periods that the prison was getting ready to free 400 prisoners. As the result of this new information, for a few weeks in late August and early September 1976, many prisoners began to harbor the hope that between 400 and 500 prisoners would soon be released. Toward the end of September, the authorities carried out a massive transfer of political prisoners from the jail at Villa Devoto to the prisons at La Plata and Sierra Chica (Buenos Aires province), which put an abrupt end to the *bemba*.

First and foremost, it is worth asking why the figure cited by the priest – 2000 prisoners to be released – was unanimously deemed unbelievable. This issue, in turn, begs the following question: what, exactly, were the criteria for verisimilitude within the political prison? One easy answer might be that, given the general conditions at the time – in August of 1976 the repression had reached its worst moment – it was in fact quite unlikely that the military government would suddenly decide to release so many prisoners all at once. After all, the amnesty decree put forth by the C ampora administration in May 1973 only benefited 800 people, the sum total of all political prisoners at the time. To this day, in fact, the armed forces and their spokespeople have continued to condemn the C ampora government for that measure.

This response, not entirely misguided for that matter, nevertheless overlooks the especially significant fact that prisoners almost always, quite systematically, considered all 'immoderate' information impossible to take seriously. In this vein, for example, the rumor that all the political prisoners at Villa Devoto would be transferred to the aforementioned prisons at La Plata and Sierra Chica (a story that came from multiple sources and which certain facts such as previous transfers seemed to corroborate), nonetheless met with remarkably strong resistance. Without a doubt, there was a very clear mechanism of denial at play there: nobody wanted to have to go through the experience of a transfer. On the other hand, though, prisoners often exhibited the same resistance when presented with excessively optimistic *bembas*, as illustrated by the following example. Toward the end of 1976, in honor of the Christmas and New Year holiday, the government issued a decree that freed some one thousand prisoners. These releases were not preceded by a single *bemba*.

In short, the idea of the *bemba* was to encourage neither excessive fear nor excessive hope. The *bemba* was to offer information that was neither too surprising nor too unexpected. *Verisimilitude, in the world of the political prison, was less associated with what was probable and more associated with what was moderate.*

(b) Returning to the *bemba* of the 400–500 releases, we may also ask ourselves why, as an immediate consequence of the massive transfer of inmates from Villa Devoto to La Plata (and a smaller group to the Sierra Chica jail), the *bemba* fell out of circulation and ceased to exist. There are several reasons that may explain it: for one thing, the decision to remove a significant number of inmates from one prison and resettle

them in another prison that was far away from the Federal Capital and known for exclusively housing political detainees, seemed to refute the hypothesis that there would be any new releases on the horizon, at least for the time being. 'If they were going to release us, why would they move us?' It is also possible that, among the prisoners, the traumatic experience of the transfer itself, during which they were often mistreated and beaten, effectively banished any idea, fear or hope that was related to anything other than their immediate reality. At the moment of a transfer or a torture session, the only thing that exists or counts is the miserable present moment. Only after they have finally resumed their normal, everyday prison routines – once they have returned to their cells, their recreation periods, their conversations, and calm has been restored – do the first incipient *bembas* emerge, most of them revolving around the situation in the new prison.

While these arguments are not irrelevant, we still feel they fall short, that they fail to fully explain the issue at hand. Neither the transfer to La Plata and Sierra Chica, nor the anguish the prisoners surely experienced during the trip itself, nor the return to 'normal' life should have rendered the *bemba* – which had been planted so firmly within the cellblocks at Villa Devoto – so irrefutably obsolete. From our point of view, it seems that if the transfer was relevant in some way, it was relevant in that it was *not* the reason for the evaporation of the *bemba* in question.

In effect, prison transfers generally resulted in the redistribution of the inmates among the cellblocks of the new prison. For a few days, this simple fact wrought complete havoc upon the social conditions governing the circulation of the *bembas*. *Bembas* only circulated and existed as such in the kind of familiar, complicit atmosphere that emerged during relatively prolonged periods of coexistence.¹⁶ Very rarely did *bembas* circulate among strangers. And when they did manage to pass through walls and travel from cellblock to cellblock, they did so because sender and recipient knew each other. Information that by definition was bereft of all guarantees, the transmission of which placed its interlocutors – if only briefly – in compromising situations that were experienced as illegal complicity, could not be passed on to just anyone.

(c) The third factor that determined a *bemba's* success involved the question of its transmission: when communicated, the slightest hint that the transmitter was also the original source of the information – that is, the 'manufacturer' of the potential *bemba* – would categorically disqualify the information from being categorized as a *bemba*, though it might still be considered valid as a simple opinion, whether or not it was reasonable or possible. If a piece of information was known to be the product of pure reflection, no matter how lucid or sensible it seemed, it could not be termed a *bemba*. If reflection ever came into play, it was always in the form of commentary on or analysis of already-existing *bembas*, which inevitably evolved out of information culled from external sources, or (when the *bemba* involved something about the prison operation) internal indices, though this was relatively unusual. There were some political detainees whose connections (supposed or real), education and personalities conferred an extra level of authority upon the information they transmitted. In general, these people tended to be professionals, intellectuals or high-ranking labor activists, and older than the correctional institute's average age.¹⁷ As far as the *bembas* are concerned, however, no one authority seemed to prevail on its own, and

the less visible its origins, the greater success a *bemba* was likely to have when passed along. Most importantly, the utterance of the *bemba* had to be completely devoid of any construction that might lend it the quality of an opinion. In simple – and hence superficial – terms, *bembas* were never to include phrases such as ‘It seems to me that’, or ‘I think that’, among others. Opinions and suppositions *preceded* the *bembas*, which is why a *bemba* was never presented as an opinion.

This does not mean that the prisoners avoided trying to learn the origin or the source of the *bembas*. On the contrary, in fact: this was always a top priority the minute a potential *bemba* was uttered. ‘Who told you?’ and ‘How did the person who told you hear about it?’ were inevitably the first questions fired at the carrier of any new tidbit of information. The results, however, were not always conclusive, and frequently the search for an exact source would take on a rather Kafkaesque quality, becoming an endless quest for an elusive objective. If a *bemba* was not based, at the very least, on the implication of an outside source with some level of authority (military leaders, government officials, etc.), or relatively solid indicators, it would die in the womb.

(d) Sources and guarantees that seemed a bit *too* failsafe also precluded a story from attaining *bemba* status, even when the information had not yet been categorically confirmed. Information that seemed either completely credible or absolutely implausible was always fatal for a *bemba*. An example of this was the murder of the *montonero* leader Dardo Cabo. A well-known detainee held at the La Plata jail, Cabo had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Executive Power (in other words, denied due process), in early 1975. In late 1976, he was abruptly transferred to a new cellblock. Days later, through visitors, the other prisoners heard that he had been removed from his cell because he was to be transferred to another prison and murdered along with Rufino Pirles, another militant *montonero*. This story quickly made the rounds through the prison. Apparently, the visitors had read this (extremely distorted) news in the Saturday paper, and since the Saturday paper always arrived at the jail the following Monday, the prisoners had no way of verifying the information. The news was ultimately confirmed that following Monday, no longer as a hypothetical story but as official information.¹⁸ The political detainees, however, had deemed the assassination of both militants an irrefutable fact from the minute they heard it on Saturday. Nobody seriously questioned the validity of the visitors’ information, for it contained too many elements that were beyond doubt in the eyes of the political prisoners. Nobody had proposed alternative versions, nor had anyone tried to deny, contextualize or modify the information. All they had, at that point, were the sensations of indignance, impotence, grief and of course fear that stayed with them. This is the story of how that particular crime, though not officially confirmed, was never a *bemba*.

What were the elements at work in this story that precluded it from becoming a *bemba*? They were a diverse collection of indicators that may have seemed unrelated but, from the perspective of the political detainee, they seemed to converge inexorably toward one and only one conclusion. Among the indicators were Dardo Cabo’s isolated and inexplicable transfer from one cellblock to the other; the undisputed leadership of both militants, especially Cabo, among the general prison population, not just the members of their own organization; their status as political

prisoners who had been denied due process; the other detainees' well-honed ability to interpret the information they received from the news reports; and finally, their awareness of the fact that the forces of oppression had carried out countless other operations of the same nature. The ability to coherently articulate these indicators was part of the wisdom of the political prisoner which, naturally, often became an insurmountable obstacle to the emergence and dissemination of *bembas*.¹⁹

(e) As demonstrated by the aforementioned examples, *bembas* could either be 'positive' or 'negative'. Naturally, the former were much more abundant and fertile. As a general rule all negative *bembas*, especially when facts came together to corroborate them, were counterbalanced by optimistic ones. An optimistic *bemba*, however, did not necessarily generate a negative one in response.²⁰

An unusual number of *bembas* began to proliferate and circulate in the days leading up to the aforementioned transfer of the detainees from Villa Devoto to the La Plata prison. From late August 1976 onward, there had been talk that the Villa Devoto detainees were going to be transferred; in June of that same year a significant number of people had been transferred to La Plata. Then, one night in early September, several prisoners were removed from their cells and led to an undisclosed location. The majority, it should be pointed out, were labor activists who were not terribly politicized and did not belong to any organizations. The following day, despite the fact that the *bemba* about the imminent transfers had already begun to circulate, a rumor suddenly began to spread: apparently, the men who had been removed were going to be released shortly thereafter. In the space of a few hours, this rumor became a virtual fact for many prisoners, but as a *bemba* it was destined to die an early death when, a few days later, some visitors to the prison confirmed quite conclusively that the prisoners in question had only been transferred to the Sierra Chica jail.

As a result of this new information, the *bemba* about the transfers gathered more strength for a few days, and took on an even more negative quality due to two circumstances: one, the fact that the inmates had been moved to Sierra Chica, a jail that was far from the Federal Capital, where they were subjected to a far stricter regimen than the one in place at Villa Devoto; and two, the fact that the transfer itself had been particularly harsh and violent, according to information provided by visitors. One man lost an eye and several prisoners ended up with fractured bones from the beatings they received during the transfer.

In addition to all this, around 20 September, the recreation periods and the open-door scheme (which was still being employed at Villa Devoto) were suspended, forcing the prisoners to remain inside their cells 24 hours a day. This was not the first time such rules had been imposed, however.

Not all the prisoners associated this special confinement with the still-flourishing *bemba* regarding the transfers. Many of them proposed alternative hypotheses, the most common of which suggested that some high government official or prison employee had been murdered by a left-wing organization.²¹ This story was based on a previous experience. A few months earlier, similar measures had been taken following the murder of a warden and then the murder of police chief Cardozo a few weeks after that. This hypothesis, however, did not jibe with the guards' relatively friendly attitude toward the prisoners this second time around. The previous time,

not only had the recreation periods and the open-door scheme been suspended but the prison personnel had become much more menacing, as well, with prison officials paying some very threatening visits to certain cells. The story of a possible execution, however, remained in circulation. Some people hypothesized that an internal re-organization of the prison was under way – this had been mentioned as a possibility during the previous few days. On 24 September, four days after the lockdown began, the majority of the prisoners held in the Buenos Aires prison were transferred to La Plata.

(f) The life of a *bemba* was often turbulent and always short-lived. It was rare for a *bemba* to last more than three or four weeks, and there were some that lasted only hours or even minutes, but this in no way stopped people from regarding them as *bembas*. One example of an ephemeral *bemba* was the story, circulated on 30 October 1976, that the detainees in jail under the jurisdiction of the Executive Power were once again going to be allowed to exercise their option to leave the country. This particular *bemba* was born in the following way: the prisoners in one of the cell-blocks at La Plata went down for their morning recreational period a few minutes before the day's newspapers had arrived. Another group of prisoners went down a bit later with the newspapers already in hand. The second group spent their recreation period in a courtyard adjacent to the courtyard that held the first group. Though separated by a passageway, the two groups of prisoners were able to communicate with one another by shouting whenever the guards weren't paying attention.

At a certain point, those in the first courtyard heard shouts coming from the second courtyard, where the men had already seen the newspaper, and among the many things they discerned was the word 'options'. The mere sound of this word sent a wave of euphoria through the prisoners, who began to cry that 'the options came through'.²² A flurry of exultant conjecture, calculation and commentary quickly followed: 'it must be very strict, and it's probably going to be very complicated but it's a fact', 'we can finally start the countdown', 'I'm going to Spain', 'I'll go wherever the fuck I can', 'Mexico's no good because its on bad terms with the Argentinian government', and so on. These gleeful, effervescent feelings lasted barely an hour: before the recreation hour ended, the cellblock in question finally received the newspaper and learned the exact wording of law 21.449, which did not reinstate the option to leave Argentina, and moreover extended the suspension for another six months. The only real news was that, according to the new law, prisoners who had not been tried would now be allowed to request to leave the country. It would be up to the Executive Power to decide whether or not to grant these requests. The *bemba* about the 'options' was so short-lived that it did not even make it to the cells: it died in the courtyard where it was born.

II. On the conditions governing the reception of *bembas*

As previously mentioned, the *bemba* emerged and evolved in the vast terrain of uncertainty that was produced and reproduced by the machine of the prison system. When we consider this from the perspective of how the *bembas* were received, we see

that this terrain was anything but homogeneous. The level of acceptance of a circulating *bemba* could range anywhere from the most blatant skepticism to the most patent confidence.

This broad scope of reactions is directly related to the general characteristics, experiences and profiles of the prisoners. As such, it is necessary to identify the differences among the various elements of the prison population, and to do this we must establish pertinent criteria for carrying out this process of differentiation. The criteria we have defined are based on the degrees and types of political prisoners but we must point out that they can be slightly simplistic, given that they reflect the most visible differences among the members of the penal community. Of course, these differences should not be disregarded simply because they are immediately recognizable. After all, it is somewhat inevitable that people who have been arrested for political reasons and held in an establishment expressly for these purposes are primarily identified by their political inclinations. It should remain clear, though, that by limiting ourselves to the aforementioned criteria we are somewhat simplifying the process that contributed form and definition to the reception of the *bembas*.

This is a perfectly legitimate objection, and while it places the criteria in another light, it in no way invalidates them entirely, especially if we take care to use them with a bit of flexibility. Moreover, as we will try to demonstrate, the categories created to distinguish between the various types of political prisoners do correspond to clear and significant differences with respect to the reception of the *bembas*, which leads us to believe that, for a first attempt, this is indeed sufficient. Though they are objectionable *a priori*, these criteria may be validated, at least in part, *a posteriori*. And there is no reason that future research cannot fill in the gaps and move beyond the limitations of the research undertaken here.

Based on the criteria in question, we have classified political prisoners into the following categories:

- (a) Integral members and active supporters of left-wing political organizations (Argentinian and otherwise)
- (b) High-ranking labor union officials
- (c) Labor representatives not affiliated with a political organization
- (d) Professionals and intellectuals with left-wing ideas, who were not active agitators
- (e) Members, generally low-ranking, of the Peronist government overthrown by the March 1976 coup d'état (for example, mayors of small towns, secretaries of provincial parliaments, etc.)
- (f) The 'distant' or second-tier sympathizers of a political organization (people who, for example, read publications of these organizations, or purchased support bonds, but did not directly participate in their activities)
- (g) The so-called *garrones*, individuals who were arrested by mistake or by happenstance, who were neither activists nor politically oriented²³
- (h) Common inmates mixed in with the political prisoners, often informers for the prison authorities (also known as *soplones*, or rats).

We reiterate that this list should be interpreted with caution, in part because it is

a partial and necessarily limited mode of classification, as previously mentioned. In this vein, for example, there is the question of intermediate or hybrid cases (intellectuals with some activism, labor representatives with some Marxist background, etc.). But on the other hand, in the interest of further honing the classifications in question, we also observe a 'vertical' distinction that is common to almost all the categories except the last one, and which distinguishes between the prisoners at the disposition of the Executive Power and those subjected to either a trial or a court-martial.²⁴ With these caveats in place, we believe that the categorization scheme mentioned above is, in a general sense, acceptable as a form of assessing and differentiating among the population of 'internals' in a political prison.

More often than not, prisoners in categories (c), (d), (e), (f) and (g) tended to be the most receptive, in 'positive' terms, of the *bembas*. The least receptive – that is, the most skeptical – were the political prisoners in categories (a) and (b) (in that order) and, though for different reasons, the non-political prisoners in category (h). After a closer analysis this is what came to light:

First, let us consider the more receptive group. Among them, it was those in category (d) that constituted a special case: of all the prisoners, the intellectuals and professionals were always accorded the greatest level of authority and respectability by their fellow inmates. Viewed less as producers and more as exceptional commentators on the *bembas*, they were always the first to be consulted regarding the credibility of a newly minted *bemba*. No doubt this was a gratifying role, though it was not always the most comfortable, because it inevitably forced the intellectuals to adopt a 'rational' distance – especially with respect to the optimistic *bembas* – that may well have been frequently at odds with their more spontaneous wish to want to lend them credibility.²⁵

Another special case was that of the so-called *garrones* (those arrested by mistake) in category (g), the group that was by far the most sensitive to the *bembas*, the most inclined to believe them and, as such, the most befuddled by the complex network of information generated by the constant circulation of stories. We have already discussed the circulation of contradictory *bembas* within a single cellblock, something that tended to occur in the days just before national or religious holidays. Almost like clockwork, two opposing *bembas* would suddenly emerge in the days leading up to these holidays: on one hand, there would be a positive *bemba* stating that a significant (though never excessive) number of releases would be announced; on the other hand, a negative *bemba* would rear its head, claiming that no such releases would be decreed. The former was supported by the government's traditional custom of granting amnesties and pardons in celebration of the holidays, while the latter was based on the argument, derived from explicit statements made by military authorities, that 'there would not be another 25 May 1973'. This argument was not without foundation, and for this reason positive *bembas* never defended the possibility of anything good occurring on 25 May, and instead pinned their hopes on religious holidays, when it was thought that the Catholic Church might intervene on behalf of the prisoners.²⁶

The *garrones* tended to listen to all these different versions. Hungry for information, always willing to lend an ear, seamlessly moving from utter faith to utter disbelief in a *bemba*, theirs was an attitude that frequently inspired scorn in the other

detainees, most especially the active militants. The naiveté attributed to the *garrón* was one of the most prominent themes of the humorous stories, both real and fictional, that circulated through the prisons, a phenomenon that is easily understandable. The *garrón* was the most helpless of individuals, the prisoner who had the fewest points of reference, not just with respect to the prison system and its rules but to the other detainees, as well. Perplexed by the apparent senselessness of his situation and the unforgiving nature of prison discipline, the *garrón* was often equally confused by his fellow inmates, who spoke a language different from his own, who shared and compared experiences that were entirely anathema to him, who suffered or rejoiced over facts that had nothing to do with those of his own life.²⁷ The *garrón's* experience was even more complex, however, for upon finding his fellow inmates to be educated, thoughtful, supportive individuals rather than ruthless savage criminals (the image of the 'subversive' promoted by the mass media) was a welcome surprise, but another cause for bewilderment. For all *garrones* in this situation, the indiscriminate consumption of *bembas* was not just a way of keeping (or feeling) informed, it was a vehicle through which they might integrate into the mainstream of the prison population. Their 'naiveté', their willingness to accept the most wildly varying stories, was the price they paid to maintain and strengthen that integration. They knew full well – and in this sense were not at all naïve – that nobody was indifferent to the *bembas* and that assimilation and dissemination of the *bembas* was a common denominator that might allow them, through those stories teeming with anxiety, expectation and desires, to bond with their fellow inmates.²⁸

Regarding the political prisoners who were most receptive to the *bembas*, we may consider those in categories (c) and (f), for all practical purposes and in the most general sense, as semi-*garrones*. This is not, however, a question of mere category. In this middle ground between the *garrón* and the political prisoner who very consciously assumed his status as such (even if not an active militant), a series of quantitative differences emerged which proved to be critically important to either extreme. In effect, precisely because they were diametrically opposed, the case of the *garrón* and that of the left-wing militant and/or intellectual had one point in common: neither group felt the slightest sense of guilt, nor did they feel affected by the veiled or open accusations directed at them by the prison personnel. Both groups believed themselves to be victims of an unjust system and situation that, naturally, they each defined in very different terms but which, in both cases, admitted of neither regret nor self-recrimination. On the other hand, the non-integral member or sometime sympathizer of left-wing organizations or the labor representative who was not politically active endured their experience as political prisoners with a shameful sense of guilt and a very clear sense of anguish.²⁹ In general they tended to be wary of the 'subversives', who responded with equal, if not more suspicion and mistrust. Much like the *garrones*, they were particularly receptive to the *bembas*, though they were notoriously selective about the ones they chose to believe. In particular, the unpoliticized labor representatives were receptive almost exclusively to the positive *bembas* concerning their own situation, but did not use them to integrate. Instead, this group used the *bembas* as a vehicle for distancing themselves from the other prisoners, creating their own little subgroup that was separate and distinct from them.³⁰

The prisoners in category (e) exhibited characteristics most similar to the ones just

examined. However, explicit adherence to Peronism – in general ‘right-wing’ Peronism – implied a minimum of political activism that facilitated their integration with the other detainees, who tended to treat them with a certain level of solidarity.³¹ With the exception of those who were being tried, this group was widely receptive to the *bembas* and very active in their production and circulation.

The political prisoners in groups (a) and (b) were the ones most impervious to and suspicious of the *bembas*.³² First, however, it is important to note that the majority of the high-ranking labor activists were being tried in the judicial system and, given this particular situation, they were generally not interested in *bembas*. In effect, the judicial process, with its relatively clear and distinct stages, became a logical reference point that partly eliminated the sense of uncertainty that was so critical to the cultivation of *bembas* and, most importantly, the expectation or hope of immediate freedom.

The more skeptical prisoners – that is, the integral and active members of left-wing organizations – tended not to believe the *bembas* for a variety of mutually dependent reasons. In the first place, these prisoners had special access to a kind of information that was qualitatively different from the information contained in the *bembas*, but which, combined with other factors, served as a partial replacement for the *bembas*: the political reports issued by their respective organizations. This information (which came to them through prison visitors and duly coded letters), offered an extensive system of coordinates that allowed all politically active prisoners to define their own individual situations in extremely broad terms.³³ It is important to point out another fact that was partly related to these prisoners’ ideological stance and partly related to the objective facts of their situation. Their objective situation was evidently the most compromised: the prison system itself was designed to eliminate any ambiguity in this regard, by housing these prisoners in special cell-blocks, subjecting them to a system that was stricter than what was imposed on the other prisoners, etc. Due to this circumstance, they had to have felt extremely skeptical of the optimistic *bembas*, especially those suggesting that the government would be adopting measures in favor of the political prisoners. And, as we have already mentioned, the majority of the successful *bembas* were of this variety. When pondering the fate of the political prisoners, their ideology – at least their explicit ideology – was translated into a combination of short-term pessimism and mid- and long-term optimism. For them, the release of the prisoners (a favored topic of the *bembas*) would only come about through a radical change in the Argentine political landscape. This belief, generally strengthened by the certainty that this change was not long in coming, made them naturally skeptical of the *bembas*.

This skepticism, however, did not mean they were entirely uninterested in the *bembas*, as in the case of the high-ranking union leaders on trial at the time. Active militants did not deprive themselves of the pleasures of listening and circulating *bembas*, though they generally peppered them with discouraging comments. In a sense, these prisoners were the ones who most faithfully followed the rule that a *bemba* existed only insofar as it was circulated and propagated.³⁴ In all other respects, their skepticism was simply effective, so to speak, often prompting them to modify the *bembas* but not necessarily to discredit them. A good example of this is the previously mentioned *bemba* that came to life following a priest’s sudden announcement that 2000 were about to be released.

Finally, those who fell into category (h) (non-political criminals, many of them ‘rats’) paid almost no attention to the *bembas*, either because their experience told them to wait for the facts (many of them were prison *habitués*) or else because they possessed supposedly irrefutable information thanks to their contacts within the prison security staff.

III. How *bembas* circulated

At the beginning of this piece it was stated that a *bemba*'s production process was inextricable from its circulation process. In a sense, we might say that the ‘work’ of the *bembas* is very similar to what Marx (1966, II: 135) stated about the transport of goods: that such work is manifested as ‘the continuation of a production process *within* and for the process of circulation’.

Nevertheless, in the case of the *bembas*, there are certain special qualities about this ‘continuation’ of the production process within the process of circulation. We have said that in the cycle of its circulation, every *bemba* is invariably qualified, rationalized and transformed in many ways. Each version of a *bemba* functions as a kind of *materia prima* for a re-elaborated work that is intimately and necessarily linked to its constant and occasionally turbulent travels through the prison population. In this light, the circulation of a *bemba* was always a *productive* kind of circulation.³⁵

This circulation was productive in another sense, as well, in that it *forced the transmitter to constantly recreate, to recreate its material conditions of exercise*.

In these prisons, communication between cells was forbidden, as was all contact between prisoners in different cellblocks and in different courtyards. Despite this, *bembas* managed to pass through gates, doors, walls and distances of all sorts. *Bembas* spurned the material compartmentalization of the prison space and the rules that reinforced it, and as a result that space was redefined, defied and invaded, its holes and weak points exposed.

Whenever these transgressions were discovered, the punishment meted out by the authorities was always particularly severe. Occasionally certain conduits of information were detected and neutralized but it was always useless: the *bembas* inevitably managed to outsmart all obstacles, always reaching the prohibited cell, cellblock or courtyard, even traveling from prison to prison on occasion.

The techniques were various and depended, to a large degree, on the characteristics of the prisons in question: sign language was often employed to communicate between adjacent courtyards; prisoners washed and emptied latrine pipes in order to speak or send written messages between cellblocks on different floors, and similar messages also found their way through the pipes connecting sinks in adjacent cells. In the absence of sinks, prisoners took the aluminum jugs used for breakfast and converted them into makeshift ‘telephones’, which they used to communicate through the walls between cells. Messages were also sent inside cigarettes, jars of candy and bags of *yerba mate*. Correspondence was forbidden between relatives housed in different prisons (not an unusual situation, as in the case of politically active couples), but relatives often managed to maintain epistolary communication thanks to wily letter-writing skills and the collaboration of confidantes outside the

prison confines, two techniques that also facilitated their (also prohibited) correspondence with people outside the prison. Prisoners also managed to communicate with one another by tapping on walls in previously established codes based on Morse code.

Prisoners used a variety of techniques for counteracting and neutralizing the effects of the surveillance that, as we have previously noted, was generally intended to be invisible: a few key words from the cleaning staff (themselves political prisoners) served to announce the ever-dreaded arrival of a prison official in the cellblock; chunks of glass held through the peepholes of cell doors, like rearview windows, served to reveal the movements of the prison personnel prowling around the cellblock. In addition, through experience and constant practice, prisoners tended to develop a heightened sensibility for perceiving and discerning the slightest sounds and movements, to the point of being able to identify the different guards by the way they walked.³⁶

Upon arriving at a new cell, the political prisoner with a certain amount of experience would regularly settle in, once he was alone, by meticulously exploring all fissures, holes, pipes, and interstices – that is, all the crevices and pathways that might eventually serve to keep watch on the people watching over him, and to create circuits for clandestine communication.

Without a doubt, the delicate nature of these pathways and the difficulties and obstacles that complicated clear and fluid communication between prisoners had an effect on the circulation of information in general and of the *bembas* in particular. For example, because of the frustratingly slow process of communicating with sign language, messages were often simplified or transmitted with incomplete information, given that prisoners always had to suspend communication at the slightest hint of danger. As a result, *bembas* were often disrupted in the process of being relayed, and this inevitably gave rise to misunderstandings. In this sense, however, even when transmitting misinformation, circulation was always productive in nature; some *bembas* actually owed their very existence to confused or incomplete information.

Prison visits were another fertile environment for the exchange of *bembas*, as well as the creation of new ones. In general, political prisoners anxiously awaited any news from their relatives but also tended to be skeptical of the information they delivered, mainly because they were aware that their close relatives and friends had been very abruptly thrust into legal, penal, political and administrative milieux of which they knew very little. Information gathered and received from proper state authorities (the interior ministry, the courts, offices of the armed forces) was frequently misunderstood and improperly communicated. For political prisoners, many of these information tidbits lacked the guarantees they sought and, as such, they tended to be treated as *bembas*, which in fact is what they were.

IV. Conclusion: in praise of the *bemba*

It would be very easy to make light of these poor crumbs of information and the feverish, never-ending activity they inspired. Political prisoners did this on a daily basis, though they also pondered them quite seriously and devoted their ingenuity

and energy toward their circulation. Without question, political prisoners tended to project (and not always subconsciously) their fears, hopes, anxieties and expectations through the *bembas* – most specifically, the obsessive hope that the long nightmare of incarceration would come to an end. Without a doubt, these detailed decipherers of texts, these implacable exegetes, these systematic hermeneutists were not always able to be objective in their readings and interpretations, and their complicated baggage as producers, transmitters and consumers of messages offers a wealth of material for psychoanalysts and social psychologists.

Few political prisoners, however, were unaware of this. In the solitude of their cells, prisoners did not simply weigh the possible legitimacy and verisimilitude of the *bembas* that came their way. They would also examine the motives that drove them to reject or accept a given version of a story, in a task of self-analysis that one prisoner felt was analogous to the practice of maintaining a ‘civilized’ attitude in their daily activities: ensuring the cleanliness of the cell, behaving appropriately during mealtimes, taking care of personal hygiene, acting courteously with fellow inmates, never giving in, never surrendering in the face of the moral and psychological degradation brought on by the prison system. The prisoners were always keenly aware of remaining mistrustful both of unfounded expectations and fears as well as overly obsessive hopes. They knew all too well that such reactions were frequently brought on by the mere fact of confinement and the prison system itself. For them, the experience of ‘falling for’ a false *bemba* was yet another form of humiliation.³⁷

Seen in this light, the *bembas* take on a different meaning. In a sense, they constituted the ‘ground zero’ of the prisoners’ internal resistance to the systematic misinformation they were fed, the primary and most elemental form of opposing, materially and collectively, the violence of such an institutionalized denial of communication and information. That these discourses produced a simulation, a caricature or a false illusion of knowledge is less meaningful than the fact that they also facilitated the constant reactivation of the illegal circuits of communication that the circulation of *bembas* continually produced.

The author of this essay was not entirely removed from these circuits, even after he was released from prison. Though not authorized to do so, he would communicate with a friend still behind bars by signing his letters with his friend’s mother’s name. And though he enjoyed and valued his (invaluable) freedom and all its corresponding privileges, he could not help but feel that space and time had distanced him from that fleeting and irreplaceable pleasure of triumphant transgression, a pleasure that could only be properly felt in the ostensibly impenetrable world of walls, gates and locks. He was, as such, left with the consolation of the disengaged *bemba*, the pure discourse that meandered about with neither obstacle nor complications: ‘it seems that my friend will be released soon, that the delay in his release is of a purely administrative order, that his file is already at the Interior Ministry, that a colonel of the 2nd Unit Command said that . . .’.

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Notes

1. This term is borrowed from the popular lexicon of Cuba, where *bembas* refer to extremely prominent, thick lips – hence, the extension of the term as a synonym for the words *rumor* or *version* (of a story). Before the triumph of the Cuban revolution, the clandestine radio station of the July 26th Movement frequently broadcast tidbits of gossip that came to be called *radiobembas*. Because these broadcasts were available only to a very limited group of people, the *radiobembas* traveled by word of mouth among the population. The genesis of the term, as such, is eminently political.
2. According to the ‘open door’ scheme prisoners were allowed to keep their cell doors open for some portion of the day in addition to the time allotted for recreation, which gave them the opportunity to meet in the cellblock, read together, drink *mate*, etc. ‘Montos’ are *montoneros*. ‘Submarine’ is a form of torture in which the victim is prevented from breathing by having his head submerged under water. ‘Lockdown’ refers to the cells used for punishment of prisoners. ‘Coordina’ refers to the former Federal Department of Coordination of the Argentine Police, now known as the Office of the Superintendent of Federal Security. A bomb was placed at the office of this government entity – one of the main torture locations – in June of 1976, resulting in numerous casualties and deaths. *Rechiflarse*, the original Spanish term, which is translated here as ‘raising hell’, describes a form of prison protest in which prisoners instigate unrest by making noise with their cutlery or any other available instruments, booing the guards, singing bits of songs, etc. The last quoted expression refers to a prisoner who was sent into lockdown for unknown or ambiguous reasons and who, according to the official report filed, attempted to hang himself by fashioning a noose out of his clothes. A ‘rat’, in this case, is the term used for the prisoner who works for the prison authorities as an informer.
3. The first draft of this paper dates from May 1978. It is important to note that the prison protocols and practices described here reflect that date.
4. It is important to point out that the majority of the political prisoners had been taken into custody following the state of siege that began in Argentina in October 1974, and which allowed the Executive Power to arrest and place any citizen at its disposition without the benefit of due process. Effectively denied *sin die* the right to exercise the option of abandoning the country (a right granted by the national constitution for all detainees in these circumstances), the prisoner was denied, from the outset, one very basic and crucial piece of information: the duration of his or her incarceration. The Executive Power held certain prisoners in custody for periods of up to six years, without the benefit of a trial or other legal action.
5. Even in this last example, there were certain limits: sophisticated comic-strips or magazines that contained suspicious-sounding references to social and political events – for example, those of Hugo Pratt – were forbidden at the La Plata prison.
6. Goffman (1972: 31) mentions the fact that in religious orders ‘the cloistered are usually made to change cells once a year, to keep them from developing feelings of affection for it’.
7. There is one more aggravation to add to the list: despite the fact that the rules were almost absurdly specific and exacting, there was an entire range of activities left to the discretion of the prison guards to permit or prohibit. This often led to minor misunderstandings that were frequently resolved through severe punishment.
8. This constant invasion of the detainee’s privacy was not the exclusive domain of the political prison. This is in fact a rather typical occurrence at what Goffman calls ‘total institutions’, though it was particularly prevalent in political prisons and, to an even greater degree, in concentration camps.
9. This stereotype remained intact among vast sectors of the armed forces, as well as among those units of repression (paramilitaries and para-police) charged with ‘dirty work’ such as murder, mutilation, and other tasks, especially sadistic torture. Without a doubt, both the first group (those that gave the orders) and the second group (those that carried them out), needed to believe in that stereotype.
10. This image serves as a complement to the one the authorities would attempt to elicit from the prisoner during interrogations and torture sessions: the confession as an act of purification, the voluntary expulsion of evil, and the condition of the ‘generous pardon’ bestowed upon the person who knew enough to rehabilitate and atone in time.
11. It is interesting to note that intellectual professionals (including students) constituted a minority

among political prisoners, but this was irrelevant: being labeled a Marxist was enough to be considered an 'intellectual' thanks to the doctrinaire and ideological connotations of such a label.

12. It is necessary here to point out one specific fact that distinguishes the political prison from the prison for common-law offenders. In the case of the latter, beyond its evident failure in terms to achieve its explicit objective of rehabilitation and re-education, it is possible to discern one positive functionality: the typical prison assures and channels the general economy of illegality beneath the always controllable figure of 'criminality' (which the prison system produces and reproduces over and over). However, as Foucault suggests, the political forms of illegality escape that general economy. That is the origin of, among other things, the ideological leitmotif so deeply rooted in the military that considers 'subversive criminals' to be a kind of aberration of nature. That is also the root of the reprehensible return to the practice of punishment as vengeance, to which thousands of disappeared and murdered militants were and are testament. Moreover, it bears mentioning that the extreme cruelty with which criminals were treated was often extended to their family members, whether or not they were militants. All these examples are symptoms of the political-military authority's inability to positively functionalize political illegality. As such, the political prison was consumed by its 'negative' functions. In this sense, for example, the sole objective of corporal discipline was to humiliate prisoners and to find pretexts to punish them. On the other hand, individual and collective work was not contemplated within the scheme of the political prison – in fact, it was expressly prohibited. There was absolutely no hope of 'correcting' political prisoners. At no moment did the authorities consider the possibility of holding lectures, distributing reading material, or initiating any kind of project that might lead the political prisoners down 'the right path'. Without a doubt, positive sentiments were utterly absent because the authorities were aware that these types of measures would be not only useless but dangerous, for they could open a door through which the prisoners might exercise a bit of knowledge and power, the potential scope of which represented an unfathomable risk. For these reasons, we tend to think that the architectural construct of Bentham's Panopticon does not properly respond to the operation of a political prison. In effect, among other things, the Panopticon exercises a dissuasive role with respect to the temptation of transgressing norms: though it may be invisible, surveillance of the internals in a political jail is in no way subtle or hidden. In fact, the political prison system seems inclined to try and maximize the occasions on which it may punish its detainees. For this reason, the control mechanisms, even as detailed as those of the Panopticon, are much less ostensible and 'cumbersome'. The methods of surveillance used are deliberately rudimentary, and in general amount to multiplying the number of actively silent guards and officers.
13. A young and talented student, Ignacio Mazzola, advised me of the following passage in *Lettres ul Castor*, vol. II, by Jean-Paul Sartre: 'It seems that liberation has begun; not here, in other places (they say at Seine, Seine-et-Marne, etc., but naturally these are just manners of speaking). Here we ought to carry out a small sociological study of the cravat (lit.: 'ties'). They are extraordinary, both for their depth and precision as for the speed at which they are propagated. They have their own rhythms. And in addition, they have a tendency to cancel themselves out from one moment to the next – that is, an optimistic cravate is quickly compensated by a pessimistic cravate that is every bit as pessimistic as the first one was optimistic. There are times of day when we go 'out for cravates', that is, when we go down to the courtyard. I must tell you about this complete and extraordinary society that is the prison camp.'
14. The *bemba* is always about the fate of the political prisoners, both with respect to their situation inside the jail (Would it improve or get worse? Would they be moved to another cell or cellblock?), as their legal situation (How long would they remain in jail? What possibilities were there of a trial or a court-martial?).
15. Specifically, according to the criteria of verisimilitude that were specific to the social milieu in which the political prisoner found himself, a topic which will be addressed further on.
16. Not too prolonged, though. In general, bonds of familiarity and solidarity were quickly re-established among political prisoners. All it took, however, were a few days of silence for a *bemba* to become obsolete.
17. The counterpart to the authorized commentator was the detainee who was qualified, ironically and pejoratively, as the *bembero* – that is, the person accused of being a creator of *ex nihilo bembas* which, as such, were not considered true *bembas*.

18. According to the official news, Cabo and Pirlas had died during the Montoneros' unsuccessful attempt to free the two men by overtaking the police vehicle in which they were being transferred. Naturally, nobody believed this official report, given that the only legitimate information it contained was that Cabo and Pirlas had died. As such, the only possible interpretation of this story was that the two men had been murdered by the dictatorship.
19. Clearly, this 'wisdom' was an unevenly distributed attribute, depending on the experience, politicization and education of the detainee.
20. We should bear in mind that notions of 'optimism' and 'pessimism' have rather superficial psychological origins and refer less to the transmitter of the *bemba* and more to the conditions under which it was received – conditions that, as we will see, were extremely variable. In any event, taking note of these issues and of the admittedly descriptive nature of this essay, we mention these terms to draw the reader's attention to one fact that is consistent and beyond debate: the more 'neutral' a piece of information, the less chance it had of working as a *bemba*.
21. At first, this story circulated as a mere opinion, but became a full-fledged *bemba* when a convincing-enough fact emerged: at the Villa Devoto jail there were common-law prisoners who had permission to keep and use radios and TV sets. Occasionally, the broadcasts they heard and watched would reach the cellblocks where the political prisoners were housed. Around this time, several inmates were sure that they had heard non-stop religious music, 'the kind they play on days of national mourning, as if they had killed Videla or some other capo'. This fragile method of reasoning was enough to transform an opinion into an assertion, a *bemba*.
22. In other words, political prisoners who had not yet been tried would again be allowed to leave the country, a constitutional right that the military dictatorship had revoked.
23. We should point out that these mistakes and happenstances refer exclusively to the instances of the arrest of a *garrón*, and not to the time spent in prison. Maintaining a quota of *garrones* in prison was not only useful but necessary for ensuring the smooth operation of the machine of political repression, for they constituted a kind of 'reserve' (periodically refreshed) that could be freed whenever the national and international campaigns in defense of the political prisoners grew more intense.
24. It should also be noted, however, that the Executive Power could also have jurisdiction over a trial or a court martial. A dismissal of either, for example, did not necessarily signify release from prison.
25. Paradoxical as it may seem, the intellectuals and professionals (that is, those who very clearly fell into category (d), non-militants who were ideologically aligned with the left) were among the most optimistic of all the prisoners. Without a doubt, the people in this group had cultivated a vision of their own particular situation which they projected upon the other detainees, offering an optimistic perspective based on the fact that they felt untouched by an integral political commitment and felt very firmly supported from beyond the confines of the prison, given that, among other things, they had more resources, better contacts, and national and international campaigns in favor of their release.
26. This is one of the few instances of recurrent *bembas*.
27. Who were the *garrones*? Previously we stated that they were individuals who found themselves in prison because of error or happenstance. This, for example, was the case of the small property owner who rented out a room to a young student who was later discovered to be a left-wing activist; or the employee to whom a friend or acquaintance entrusted 'for a few days' a small, locked suitcase that was in fact filled with weapons or incriminating documents; or the shopkeeper who was offered the chance to make some fast cash in a lucrative business deal that was, in the event, controlled by a clandestine organization. The salient aspect of all these *garrones*, beyond their individual legal concerns, was their total lack of involvement or interest in political activism. There were also political prisoners who in legal terms deserved to be categorized as *garrones* (having landed in prison because of a mistake or by chance and who were never accused, neither formally nor informally, of anything), but who were not *garrones* in the practical sense and who did not function as such inside the prison. Many of them were even active militants. There were also cases of *garrones* who became politicized inside the prison.
28. It is worth mentioning that the *garrón's* receptivity to the *bembas* also revealed something else, a tactical attitude the other prisoners frequently employed: skepticism as a deliberate attitude and pose. This pose, it should be noted, was different from true skepticism that was neither feigned and

which characterized, as we will see, the most active and dedicated militants. Ostensible skepticism was always revealed as such within a relatively short period of time. After strenuously objecting to a supposedly implausible story the ostensible skeptic would inevitably begin to ask about the source and the facts supporting the story and, in no time at all, would begin to disseminate the story, either intact or altered, and then defend it to newly skeptical listeners (especially if the *bemba* in question was a particularly optimistic one).

29. This may be the one case in which the political prison did, in fact, achieve a certain level of functionality, based purely and exclusively on the intimidation factor. In effect, among the aforementioned categories of prisoners it was common to emphatically and repeatedly declare that if they 'made it out of here', never again would they get themselves 'mixed up in problems'.
30. On more than one occasion, the labor representatives to whom we refer (not to be confused with the politicized labor representatives, who fall into category [a], tended to be separated from the 'guerrillas' and placed in a special cellblock.
31. In certain cases this solidarity had its limits. At least one sector of these detainees believed (occasionally with good reason) that their freedom could be negotiated and secured at the highest levels within a relatively short period of time. For that reason, it was not advisable for them to 'make a mistake' in jail by exhibiting excessive friendliness toward the prisoners who were openly recognized as extreme left-wing militants or guerrillas. This circumspection was often explicit. For example, when the prisoners who belonged to PRT invited the prisoners in their cellblock to a 'public' event, which was naturally carried out in secrecy, some of the above-mentioned prisoners excused themselves from attending, citing the aforementioned reasons.
32. Notwithstanding the exceptional but extremely significant cases of the *garrones* and *semigarrones* who never believed the 'optimistic' *bembas*, mainly because they promised a freedom that they did not desire, at least temporarily and for a variety of reasons.
33. Something similar occurred with the high-ranking union leaders who, through their lawyers, often had access to a similar kind of information.
34. We will return to this point in the final paragraph.
35. One might argue that by being modified in the course of its circulation, a *bemba* was no longer the 'same' *bemba* it was when it started out. To this argument we respond, though for partially different reasons, with the same argument that Claude Lévi-Strauss used when objecting to those people who sought the 'true' version of a myth: a *bemba* is the sum total of all its variants. We are simply drawing attention to the dynamic of those variations, the 'motor' of which was none other than its very process of circulation (see Lévi-Strauss, 1976: 199).
36. We should point out that the political prisoners learned most of these techniques from the non-political prisoners. Given the very close surveillance to which they were subjected, however, the political prisoners tended to both improve upon and refine these techniques, and invent new ones as well.
37. In the early days (until the middle of 1976) at the Devoto prison, theatrical performances and social gatherings were permitted. On such occasions, the topic of the *bembas* (their origins, transformations and contradictions) frequently inspired all sorts of parodies, jokes and comical stories.

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