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Research article

Clandestinity and militant culture in Latin America, 1960s to the early 1980s: epistemological and historical reflections and an agenda for research

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Abstract

Clandestinity was a central aspect of the life and organisation of the militancies of the diverse cultures of the Cold War Latin America left. Yet the topic is scarcely considered central in testimonies or historical analyses of the period. In this article I approach both clandestinity as culture and the culture of clandestinity as lived experiences, ways of organising and *modi operandi* among militant organisations and individuals of the period. To do this, I resort to diverse types of literature, ranging from academic analyses to personal testimonies, including fictionalised accounts. I then elaborate on the possible historical, methodological and epistemological reasons why clandestinity has not been explored in the majority of the academic or testimonial corpuses presently available, stressing the possibility, as a hypothesis, that we may still be facing silence – a main tenet

of clandestinity – as political doctrine. I also briefly discuss oral history as a main tool to access knowledge of clandestinity and question whether clandestinity may be an object of the historical record.

Keywords clandestinity; clandestinity as culture; biographic genres; militancies; Latin America; Cold War; left-wing political organisations; oral history

Introduction

I have long studied and pondered the gendered aspects of militancies and revolutions in Latin America.¹ Long enough, in fact, to have witnessed the literature grow into a field with a well-established canon. During this time, I have been struck by the relative absence of literature on clandestinity as a topic. Several texts purport to deal with this concept because they use the words ‘clandestine’ or ‘clandestinity’ in their titles, but they do not dwell on or problematise clandestinity per se.² In oral history-based work, one finds references to going into clandestinity either as a means to perform specific tasks or to show a deeper commitment to the cause or as a necessity for security reasons, but here, too, little has been enquired into this important aspect of militancy and activism during the Cold War. Often clandestinity is treated as an implicit condition, left for readers to assimilate almost as an afterthought. Clandestinity in these works occupies an ambivalent position: either unimportant or so relevant that it belongs to silence (as is the case with so many traumatic events that took place in the many situations of state terrorism or dirty wars of the Cold War period).

My hypothesis to explain this silence is that clandestinity’s overarching command – to keep secrets – operates for many former militants with the strength of things well learned, of being connected to emotions – insecurity, fear, solidarity, belonging – felt at the level of the body. The grip of clandestinity applies to individuals with a deep level of participation in their organisations, whether political parties, fronts, trades union, armed branches, or popular or grassroots movements.³ Yet even those former militants who were less involved still experienced some degree of clandestinity. For example, many of them adopted a pseudonym to participate in the activities of the group or collective (*colectivo* is the name usually given to working or discussion groups within organisations). For them, as I have learned from interviewing former militants and participants, undertaking clandestine tasks was only one part of their contribution towards the (loosely defined) cause.⁴ Even those who did not actively participate in politics, but who nonetheless sympathised with progressive causes or persons, knew about or heard talk of being clandestine, acting clandestinely or going underground (for example, *anda en la clande...* they’ve gone underground; this shorthand, popular explanation needed no further comment).⁵

References to clandestinity were in the air. The 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, with all the cultural changes these decades entailed, also witnessed the knowledge or experience of clandestinity.⁶ Without a doubt, a life lived *underground* must have been experienced quite differently in the very diverse contexts in which the political, social and political armed movements existed throughout the Americas. However, whether in films like Costa-Gavras’s *Estado de sitio* (*State of Siege*, 1973), songs like ‘El zenzontle pregunta por Arlén’ by the Nicaraguan Los de Palacagüina, fiction like that by the Uruguayan writer and poet Mario Benedetti, marches and demonstrations, social gatherings or political *colectivos*, clandestinity was, as in a cultural oxymoron, always present.⁷

As part of a larger research agenda about the topic, in this article I describe and analyse some of the characteristics of clandestinity present both in most leftist organisations of the Latin American Cold War period and as lived experience by the militants of these organisations.⁸ In presenting these features, I emphasise how they instilled – perhaps even to this day – a discipline of silence and compartmentalisation. After that, I develop the phenomenon conceptually, focusing on definitions and, more importantly, on the multifarious meanings attributed to clandestinity in relevant literature. Then I consider clandestinity in organisations and the experience of clandestinity within organisations, after which I turn to the culture of clandestinity and clandestinity as culture. I conclude the article by raising questions triggered by this research and offer further thoughts on the nature of the silence surrounding clandestinity in the lives of former militants up to the present.

A note on the methodology and sources

To illustrate numerous aspects of clandestinity as part of militant culture, I draw on diverse sources, including new historical research on Cold War Latin America and testimonials collected by numerous researchers and myself.⁹ I also use fictionalised autobiographical accounts and novels based on historical events that explore the phenomenon of Cold War militancy. Although seemingly of a fundamentally different nature, fiction written about and during this period captures the experiences and dilemmas faced by militants who could not write about their lives without risks to themselves and their families. Fictional accounts should also be understood as repositories of the culture of militancy that existed in the region during that period, and as repositories that could portray the experience of militancy and its culture in ways that other media could not. This is why fictionalised accounts written by militant or politically involved authors often provide key details about very personal sensations and experiences.

Experiences like militancy epitomise a commitment individually made and collectively lived.¹⁰ Clandestinity, while perhaps not common to all experiences of militancy, usually came with the territory (in Cold War Latin America) and acquired different dimensions experienced individually and lived as part of an organisation. The fact that it was an individual, subjective experience underlines the relevance of biography to the research of the diverse Latin American militancies of the Cold War era. In whichever fashion oral history is approached – life histories, biographies, testimonials, interviews, biographical fiction – the personal narrative may stand for the collective; or differently said, the voice of one may represent the voice of many, as much as it would be likely to speak of the atmosphere of the time.¹¹ Understanding the culture(s) of militancy is thus inextricably linked to life history in any of its many incarnations.

Oral source documents are thus the privileged foundation for enquiries into clandestinity. Nevertheless, I will insist, clandestinity is scarcely spoken about as a standalone experience, beyond narrations of militant experience that may skim the topic or perhaps even provide some passing insights into it. Beyond proposing that this may still be due to the commitment to silence that militants embraced, there is also the fact that the Cold War period during the 1960s and into the 1980s was intersected by political and social violence, highlighting the possibility that memories recalled in narratives and interviews are pierced by trauma,¹² entailing a targeted forgetfulness,¹³ whether intentional or not. These silences or omissions may also respond to the need to make sense of past experiences in the present, not only for listeners or readers, but also for the subject themselves. Bringing these thoughts to bear on clandestinity is relevant, as it is worth pondering whether these adaptations and omissions – intentional or happenstance – conceal clandestine activities, persons, periods and places.

What is clandestinity? Definitions and meanings

Both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* define *clandestine* as something kept secret or done secretly due to its illicitness.¹⁴ Etymologically, the term comes from the Latin *clam* (secret) and *celare* (to hide). Its definitions therefore put an emphasis on the ‘secretive’ and the ‘illicit’, both of which certainly apply to the militant activities of the second half of the twentieth century during the Cold War in Latin America. Nevertheless, we must not leave aside the fact that in those days the state also embarked on clandestine – illicit and secret – activities, such as torture and imprisonment in underground jails, in many instances fed and exacerbated by Cold War demands. In the bipolarity created by the hegemony, Latin America counted as a backyard to the United States. Determined not to have another Cuba on the continent, the covert strategies of the Cold War implemented and carried out in many countries of the region included, via the national security doctrine, the creation of an internal enemy – defined ideologically – against whom there was to be no clemency. Often trained and aided by American advisers, local security forces – special police corps, the army, paramilitary groups – carried out clandestine state repression activities, which included torture sessions, temporary and/or permanent disappearances of militants or persons close to them and forced detention in underground jails.¹⁵

Returning to organisations of the left, clandestinity was an element in the popular struggles of the social movements, political parties and armed socialist movements in the region. The very fact of their illegality during some periods and of some of their forms of struggle speaks of the constant presence of clandestine modes of organisation, activities and militants.¹⁶ It was also a phenomenon or experience

of militancy that was embraced as a sign of commitment and/or safety, making it a clear dimension of belligerent political action.¹⁷

Moreover, beyond definitions, there is the realm of meanings. In both researchers' words and in testimonies, the meanings attributed to clandestinity, particularly as an experience, can be found either because they are explicitly mentioned or because they can be construed. For example, Robles calls clandestinity a borderline experience; Silveira Castro, reviewing Acselrad's book, speaks of 'something akin to a self-exile' in describing the experience of clandestinity; and extrapolating from Timo Schaefer's comments on militancy, clandestinity may be a 'deliberate worldlessness' as the militant leaves behind the familiar milieu to (be able to) participate in the transformational cause.¹⁸ All of these representations and imaginaries express a potential harshness; in retrospect, it can often be hard to think that it was ordinary people who followed this path, either with the strength of conviction or of force. Yet it would be wrong to presume there was no joy, hope or satisfaction in these experiences. It was, after all, a large part of *l'esprit du temps* for a considerable group of people throughout the world.

Clandestinity in organisations and the experience of clandestinity¹⁹

During the Cold War, political organisations or parts of them resorted to clandestinity by transforming their entire structure into an underground one, creating clandestine sections or moving existing sections into the underground. From these platforms, and within diverse national and international contexts, organisations and individuals forged a culture of clandestinity to undertake different actions and activities.

In this section I present various reasons underlying an organisation's decision to resort to clandestinity as well the militants' experience of clandestinity; each of the elements explained are illustrated by a historical example from different parts of Latin America and other diverse sources. To the present-day reader, these factors may seem little else than an analytical list to make sense of the issue, but it behoves us to remember that these elements involved risk, secrecy and the protection of one's own life or those of others.

Still, why would an organisation need or want to go underground? Often, first and foremost, to exist – or continue to exist – regardless of the conditions of the organisation's particular context. This continued existence translated into two types of motivations to adopt clandestinity: defensive and offensive.²⁰ The first aimed at being able to respond to threats posed by the state; the second, to be able to engage in new forms of action.

State repression or threats of repression in Cold War Latin America may have included all, or some, of the following elements:²¹ institutionalisation of increased surveillance rules to monitor protest; criminalisation of militant activities; and use of undercover intelligence techniques such as harassment, infiltration and close surveillance, all of which spurred, or may have spurred, a defensive type of clandestinity. Apart from the need to evade state repression, an important defensive motivation for an organisation to have adopted clandestinity was, as mentioned earlier, safety. On the offensive side, the underground is likely to have provided militants with the ability to undertake logistical, political and military actions. In what follows I comment briefly on each of the elements mentioned here.

Numerous states institutionalised surveillance to monitor protest from roughly the 1960s to the 1980s. Think, for example, of the dictatorships of the Southern Cone. However, these types of surveillance did not always go hand in hand with a military regime. Aguayo's research on the Mexican Federal Security Directorate (*Dirección Federal de Seguridad* or DFS) documents how, between 1964 and 1985, this state agency institutionalised stringent covert activities – infiltration, telephone tapping and close personal surveillance – leading to the illegal capture, forced disappearance, torture and assassination of persons deemed dangerous to the regime.²² Together with this augmented surveillance, and to provide an aura of legitimacy – or, indeed, create a legal armour – for the state agencies' actions, the criminalisation of militant activities was another part of the states' repertoires in the Latin American Cold War. Once more, the example of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone come to mind, with their establishment of a state of exception (*estado de excepción*), including curfews and the suspension of some fundamental rights, such as the right of reunion or of free mobilisation, both of which had the potential to hinder militants openly demonstrating or organising gatherings.²³

Harnessing undercover intelligence techniques so as to better target persons or organisations as objects of state repression was also a common feature of the policing of the day. Interestingly, for example, in their article about Mexican state policies between 1978 and 1982 vis-à-vis the Central American region,²⁴ Vázquez and Campos describe the repressive measures of the López Portillo regime, whose 'security institutions – army, the diverse police corps, migration authorities and the Federal Security Directorate/*Dirección Federal de Seguridad* [a type of secret political police] itself – doubled the monitoring and following-up of the political and conspiratorial activities of resident or in-transit Central Americans ... Mexican security forces persecuted, captured, jailed, expelled, and sometimes presented [these militants] before their respective governments.'²⁵ Under circumstances such as those described above, it is not surprising that organisations and militancy proceeded with caution by turning into clandestinity.

Apart from the need to evade state repression, defensive motivations for an organisation to have adopted clandestinity are safety and the ability to undertake logistical, political and armed actions. Safety was an important structural reason behind adopting clandestinity. The protection of the organisation included safeguarding the legal identity of militants and collaborators as well as the composition of the organisation's internal structure. Many elements may have remained hidden from militants, with only a small number of members of the hierarchy with knowledge of the whole organisation and all its activities. It seems that the complexity of the context and the nature of the organisation would have been key to the simplicity or difficulty of establishing and/or developing underground tasks. Take, for example, the case of the Argentinian Montoneros,

which adopted a cellular structure with units which knew only the minimum necessary for their efficient functioning ... the 'cells' in this case were the military commandoes ... formed by four or five combatants operating in a given territory ... Each cell had a chief who gave orders and who, in theory, was the only one who could contact each of the members of the cell, which shows the hierarchical nature of the organization.²⁶

Note how strict this organisational scheme appears to be, highlighting the military and vertical nature of the guerrilla group. One imagines that trust and commitment must have played an outstanding role in allowing for such compartmentalisation – which perhaps is at play even today. More open structures like political parties or popular fronts probably organised clandestine activities in a looser way.

Clandestinity was the avenue followed by many organisations in order to pursue their aims, which included logistical, political and armed activities, under conditions of varying state repression. A clear example found in the literature about Argentina illustrates the moment when the Montoneros, a controversial guerrilla originally linked to Perón, went underground as a result of the creation in 1973 of the extreme-right paramilitary group Argentinian Anti-communist Alliance, or Triple A, whose goal was the annihilation of leftist militants:²⁷ 'In the year 1974, facing the offensive of the Triple A, Montoneros decided to resume armed struggle and "go into clandestinity"'.²⁸ This decision caused the fall of many base-militants (those who did not form part of the inner core of the organisation) who, ignorant of the move, were left without contacts or protection. Montoneros continued to exist in this fashion up until the early 1980s.

Clandestine activities were a central part of the long-term operations of many socialist organisations in the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America; they also shaped organisations' decision-making processes. There were strong organisational and tactical reasons to adopt the practices and culture in the face of surveillance and repression.

Turning to the individuals, within the experience of clandestinity the personal converges with the social, and it is here where the role of clandestinity as part of the culture of militancy of the period may be better understood. I have resorted to diverse testimonial literature – sometimes including fictional accounts or historical/fictional ones – to sieve through and present the core elements that constituted the experience of clandestinity in Latin America during the Cold War. However, stress must be placed on the utmost relevance of context. Each national or local instance surely influenced how every involvement was lived.

In their article about the clandestine experience of Uruguayan members of the Communist Party in Argentina, Ana Diamant and Silvia Dutrénit pose the harsh question of whether discourses around clandestinity – as an experience – belong to a single witness. The authors go on to say that even when actions were shared, the experience was undergone in solitude: 'an incomparable experience for the

self, an unknown one for many, and an opportunity to question one's subjectivity for all [those providing their testimonies]'.²⁹ Besides pointing to the difficulties inherent in recreating the underground as history – although not as culture – the idea presented by the authors works well as an introduction to the points posed, as a kind of catalogue to think about the experience of clandestinity among Latin American militants of the latest period of the Cold War.

The obvious counterpart to the – schematic – discussion of the reasons that an organisation may have had to turn to the underground was that some militants had to furnish, so to speak, the organisations' underground structures or perform their underground activities. Those who accepted conditions of clandestinity must have shared a commitment to the goals and ideological frameworks of their organisations – they already were militants – even when often the reasons to commit to one organisation or another were probably more emotional than cognitive.³⁰ Regardless of their class (maybe one of the most important markers of difference at the time), ethnic origin, sex or gender, militants accepted conditions of clandestinity of their own volition or when asked to by some figure of authority, perhaps fully or maybe just to perform specific tasks.³¹ Others needed to go underground due to governmental persecution.

The stories behind the way some militants adopted clandestinity, either partially or completely, are pertinent here. In testimonies and literature, I have found that narratives about this range from playfully mentioning this experience to serious consideration of it. Going underground often meant a point of no return in terms of the commitment that militancy would signify from then on, as militancy and loyalty to one's organisation would now be paired with cutting out relations and integrating secrecy as a central aspect of one's life. Representations of clandestinity also emphasise the fact that some militants entered into it of their own accord; others were forced to by repression.

I will use three examples to provide a range of experiences of the individual in the face of clandestinity at the time. The first is descriptive of a double life; the second shows how an unexpected occurrence prompted a militant's imminent passage to the underground; and the third example suggests a seamless passage into clandestine activities.

In an article describing the profiles of some of the women searching for their missing children, disappeared during the years of the (still) so-called Dirty War in Mexico, we find the story of Isabel. Her son was a militant in the Mexican state of Jalisco when he disappeared. She, in turn, joined the Eureka Committee, an organisation of families looking for their disappeared children. Her son led a double life:

As a student, her son had participated in the FER [*Federación de Estudiantes Revolucionarios*; an organisation that grouped together many students who would later join different armed organisations] which was at odds with the violent task force of the FEG [*Federación de Estudiantes de Guadalajara*; a government-backed organisation aimed at hitting the democratic students' organisations]; in 1977, he led a public life and a clandestine one, since besides being a physical education teacher at a rural public elementary school, he was a militant of the *Fuerzas Revolucionarias Armadas del Pueblo*/FRAP.³²

In the story of Nieves Ayress, a Chilean female militant working with a popular grassroots organisation in the town of La Legua, Chile. After the coup against Allende in 1973, an infiltrated security agent posing as an Argentinian ERP militant convinced 11 inhabitants of La Legua to take up arms, 'to resist repression. Despite the objections Ayress herself remembers to have brought up against an uprising, as right then it was doomed beforehand ... their lifeless bodies were found by late December 1973, bearing unquestionable marks of torture. Immediately Ayress abandoned her university classes and went underground.'³³

Indeed, the particularities surrounding this step are probably as varied as the contexts and types of organisations; we may even consider that, for some, becoming a militant already included some kind of unconditionality, and that clandestine activities came with this territory. As a case in point, Olga Avilés, a Nicaraguan militant of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* or FSLN), in an interview given to Jilma Romero, talks of how her entry into clandestine activities came very naturally around 1966–7: 'when I devoted time to these tasks [militant activities demanded by her contact – Carlos Fonseca, who later became an outstanding leader of the Nicaraguan revolution] I never hesitated. That is why they so easily integrated me to clandestinity. Many clandestine endeavours, with clandestine people.'³⁴

The experience and culture of clandestinity for individuals included distinct immersions that went to the core of identity and personal relations, such as adopting a new name and changing lifestyle.

A change of name

Militants regularly used a different name within their organisations and while performing their organisation's work. Their pseudonyms hid their legal personalities for security reasons. Often this other name was the only thing known about the militant. Information such as their real names, home addresses and/or professional or employment data – wherever it applied – was not shared. Depending on the context, it may have been that there was no need or pressure to disclose 'more than necessary' about the militant's legal identity. These names were either given by someone else in the organisation, or chosen by the militant themselves. It was not uncommon that names chosen were an homage to some political figure the militant admired: 'my pseudonym was Demetrio', Tomás explained, 'in honor of the [Mexican] railroad workers leader.'³⁵

Often pseudonyms are all that is remembered of well-known, historically transcendental political militant figures, such as Tania, the woman guerrilla who went to Bolivia with Ché Guevara, or Marcos, the Mexican spokesperson during the early years of the neo-Zapatistas in Chiapas. In the latter case, learning who Marcos was in 'real life' (his legal personality) became an important issue for Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000).³⁶ Learning the leader's name allowed for the possibility of launching a judicial persecution.

There were thus several important elements surrounding having a secret name and keeping it undisclosed, both one's own and that of comrades (*compañeros/as*). Whereas today some may perhaps share the pseudonym they used, it is less likely that a former militant would volunteer the pseudonym of others or what they were used in connection with.

Identity issues related to having more than one name are a common theme in the literature. When militants found themselves fully immersed in a clandestine life, the persona that came through could be in conflict with the 'original' or 'moral self'.³⁷ This is probably why – even when there may have been no conflicts between identities – clandestinity has been described as a *mise-en-scène*, a dramatised performance.³⁸ And this also suggests a reason for the silence around the underground as lived experience in the historical record. 'Clandestine militancy, with its multiple characters, moved through the cities as if in a theatre scene ... having successive or simultaneous socialisation experiences in different groups ... Social actors would therefore be plural ... There would be a fragmentation of their "selves" and of their experiences.'³⁹ It is hence possible to imagine that, in this fragmentation, the militant, the subject of the experience, in the future chooses to elicit solely that which suits the person presently testifying or participating – in analyses, or historical reconstruction.

Méndez writes a compelling description of the fusion of identities and what it provoked in the militant in her testimonial novel, *De seudónimo Clara*:

I didn't understand a thing; I only felt the earth sinking under my feet. I returned to the place where the typist was; she made me recite – aloud – the document she had produced. I repeated my full name, age, address, phone number, the names of my father and mother. I realized, for the first time since six in the morning, that it was I who was there, not Clara, even when Clara had done everything that put me there. I looked at Clara's shoes and felt pity for myself. Clara was my sister. The dark sister of my wishes for social redemption ... she was the one with conviction ... Now she hid. I had to hide her and adopt the face of Nora Carolina, my baptismal name and say 'here Miss!'.⁴⁰

It is while captive in the hands of the infamous and feared Salvadoran national police that her two names are fused. Her vulnerability is greatly enhanced as the police can – and will – attack her family members as part of her torment. In the first days of her captivity, submitted to sessions that Méndez describes with metaphors, forcing the reader to imagine the worst, and after being injected with an unknown drug, Clara – her pseudonym and main character in the fictionalised account – naked, feels she is in a red elevator moving up-and-down when 'from a room, hidden [in the elevator's] right internal wall the voice of my mother – in a defeated tone – and my grandmother's crying emerged'.⁴¹ The author ponders the practical meaning and the personal significance of the discovery of her legal personality. In this specific case, Nora Méndez, the author and former militant, chose to recount her life from the distance of a

fictionalised written record. When the cost of being captured – and exposed – expands beyond the individual militant, endangering others dear to her, would it not be one more incentive to maintain the clandestine outside the reach of (the personal) historical renditions?

Changing lifestyle

Life outside the legal and public sphere of the militant could take on several modes, including the adoption of a fully new and different way of living. A fictional backstory and persona (*leyenda* in Spanish) would be created and learned by heart to benefit the needs of the group. The *leyenda* may have included other group members, each playing a role. These people would have lived in a socially open environment, side by side with others, such as the former militants Acselrad interviewed. These were basically middle-class people in Rio, who moved to marginal zones of the city when they became clandestine to continue their struggle against the dictatorship (1964–85). He explains:

The militants that adopted clandestinity broke ... with that which we could consider their 'daily lives', experiencing moments of invention, audacity and transgression. Meanwhile, [with that break they substituted their former daily lives] with another equivalent [one which, given their need to be protected from the state's repressive forces], supposed their insertion in another set of habits ... under new conditions and contexts.⁴²

Yet another more drastic change of lifestyle would be to adopt a completely closed existence, living fully in the underground. Again, this happened individually and with others, and followed organisational needs as much as the need to hide from persecution. A good example is that of Pereira, an Uruguayan communist militant who had to suddenly escape when his name appeared in the national 'wanted' list. This is how he remembered it:

and suddenly it appears, in that radio and television chain, with a voice and music already terrifying ... it shows, among those wanted that day, my name and my picture. There was no doubt. The picture belonged to my identity card, which produced a real shock in me, right there, at the moment. You know, whereas – in theory – we were prepared ... a whole different story was to see your picture in a communiqué with terrifying music ... and the question of whether I should go back home ... a clandestine life immediately ensued and I ended up in Buenos Aires by September 1974.⁴³

From his new clandestine position in Buenos Aires, this militant was part of the Uruguayan Communist Party's structure, undertaking tasks between the interior and the exterior of Uruguay.

Potential isolation or sense of isolation

The fact that practically no one in the militant's organisational circle knew anything of the person could have produced a sense of isolation, at least inasmuch as the militant had not yet developed a close circle within the organisation. When struggles lasted for a long time, other militants took the place of family, but each one was nevertheless tied to their family of origin. To comprehend how this situation played out would probably need to be approached on a case-by-case basis; nevertheless, some results of this absence of information regarding 'who' the militant was could be the impossibility of informing their family in case of illness or death, or the burden borne by the militant in view of the social dissociation. For instance, in his article about Mexican internationalists participating in Central American struggles, Ibarra notes that there were an estimated 500 Mexicans who participated in different tasks and structures of the Salvadoran Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* or FMLN; the alliance of five leftist organisations which fought a civil war between 1979 and 1992) in war fronts in different countries, of whom 20 died in combat in the 1980s. '[They] died as anonymous heroes who were never identified by their families due to the harsh conditions of clandestinity and compartmentalization.'⁴⁴

Observance of codes of security

Security codes and instructions had to be installed by the organisation, and it was typically the case that militants had to comply strictly with them. Everyone's security would have been – or was – compromised

if and when observance was broken. This is an issue where the militants were constantly put to the test as any shortcoming might potentially endanger the lives of their comrades. There is a fictional example that brings the topic up quite graphically: Benedetti's *El cumpleaños de Juan Ángel*, a novella written in verse, is about how his male character joins a guerrilla organisation. It ends when a rookie member of the organisation is followed to a safe-house by the police, forcing the clandestine collective to disappear into the city's sewerage system – an explicit metaphor of the underground: ““You were followed, moron,” Luis Ernesto brutally tells Agustín [the newcomer]. “You were followed kiddo,” Marcos tells him softly, and smiles with resignation.”⁴⁵

In a different example, included in the testimony of a former militant of the Argentinian Workers' Revolutionary Party/People's Revolutionary Army (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores/Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* or PRT/ERP). The former militant from a working-class background in the province of Tucumán speaks of the unguarded ways in which many treated sensitive information in the party, leading to captures and incarceration:

The great liberalism [he means lack of discipline] that has characterized us throughout this process, all of us ... I think from the General Directorate to the last soldier. And if there have been *compañeros* who respect security, it has been observed in some areas, and in others ... a disaster. This is, I think, one of the reasons there have been so many losses, so many people have been jailed due to foolishness.⁴⁶

The silence that continues to surround clandestinity, then, perhaps still responds to the codes of safety and compartmentalisation pre-eminent in the Cold War years. Having experienced the consequences of safety breaches may still operate, hushing former militants into the same culture of secrecy.

In reading or listening to testimonies by former militants who do touch on clandestinity, one finds a set of powerful emotions. It is relevant to note, though, that during the intense years of leftist militancy, emotions would not only have been set aside as political doctrine dictated, but also speaking of them would have been shunned, deemed a weakness.⁴⁷ At present, however, in the midst of the 'affective turn', we find former militants eager – or at least ready – to bring up their sensations and emotions as part of their narratives.⁴⁸

The emotional states I identify in the stories of clandestine experiences are only the tip of the iceberg. Deeper research would doubtlessly reveal a finer and larger range of feelings (which are personal) and emotions (socially rooted).⁴⁹ For the time being, four major strands of emotions appear: safety, fear, loss and satisfaction.

Safety often concerned the protection of people close to the militant, implied in their public life. It was understood that, if friends and family members did not know where and how to find a person, everyone was safer. This is true particularly of those who were militants under conditions of dictatorship such as in Argentina, Brazil or Uruguay. Safety also extended to the militant themselves and their activities and actions, as long as protection and safeguarding codes were observed and kept unbroken. Together with the relative safety of the underground, they experienced a constant fear of being caught. This was linked also to the fear felt for others, those close to the militant, whether in the family's intimate circle or *compañeros* in the organisation, for whom the consequences of knowing them could very often be terrible: 'the weight of fear on clandestine activities alerted you; you did everything perfectly.'⁵⁰

The sense of loss stemmed from breaking affective links when militants went into more intense regimes of clandestinity. In her novel about the takeover by the M-19 guerrilla of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 1985, Orrantia's protagonist – a composite of two real-life female members of the M-19 commando – searches for her legal identity card and places it in her pocket, so that she can be identified and her body delivered to her parents in case she fails.⁵¹ She muses:

I had not seen them in a long time, but supposed they were all right. They both were professors at the National University; their daily lives were repetitive and did not run risks. I asked myself what would they be doing now. Perhaps teaching. Maybe my mum would be making lunch, or maybe they would eat at one of the places in the Carrera Treinta [name of a street]. Last time I saw them my dad taught drawing and my mom, contemporary literature. Would they still be doing the same?⁵²

The protagonist is abruptly shaken from these thoughts by the sound of an explosion and returns fully to her post, prepared for battle ahead within the palace. In this simple gesture of remembrance, Marta

Orrantia, the author, offers a glimpse into the somewhat nostalgic moment of her withdrawal, showing how the inability to keep in touch with immediate family members was costly for militants, as was secrecy. Not sharing personal stories deliberately goes against the grain of our social being and creates a sense of loss.

However, and importantly, there was also joy and satisfaction to be found in joining what militants of the period chose as a – temporary or otherwise – life project. For many, militancy represented following revolutionary ideals that still held promise. In fact, there seemed to be proof of the promissory nature of those ideals in the form of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, the many socialist movements throughout the continent, not to mention Vietnam. This was a future projected for the better. An example of the expectations and universal nature of the revolutionary struggle militants fought for is found in Henríquez Consalvi's (known as Santiago) reconstructed diary that narrates the history of the underground Radio Venceremos in El Salvador, a broadcasting effort aimed both at reclaiming a space to 'correct' government descriptions of military actions and news, and also at providing the FMLN's perspective on the civil war's development. Santiago, a Venezuelan journalist and internationalist militant who had been tasked with creating the radio station, was asked to deliver a speech during the celebration of the second anniversary of the triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution, on 19 July 1981, as he had also been part of the FSLN. His diary entry reads:

We decided to celebrate the second anniversary of the Popular Sandinista Revolution; last night we manufactured white-and-red banners, signs and placards.

From the early hours of the morning numerous groups of settlers, combatant units and militia members arrived at the plains of Agua Blanca. This became the largest concentration we have ever seen in Morazán [one of the FMLN's rural fronts]. Hundreds of *compañeros* marched with FSLN and FMLN signs and a single chant: Farabundo and Sandino, same blood, same destiny! [*¡Farabundo y Sandino, misma sangre, mismo destino!*].

... it was my turn to say a few words; moved, I transported myself to my beloved Nicaragua. In each of the peasants' and combatants' faces listening to me, I saw Sandino, Julio Buitrago, Carlos Fonseca. All of them were somehow in El Salvador to remind us that the struggle for the democratisation of bread, health, school and land was a single universal struggle.⁵³

As well as the potential satisfaction to be gained from becoming a militant, there was, nevertheless, a certain complexity in the personal motivations for each joining militant or collaborator. This extended to furthering their commitment by going underground or by fulfilling clandestine assignments.

Are these feelings and emotions too personal to be spoken about today? Are they perhaps deemed too connected to a time in the past to be brought to bear in the present as part of the public record? Are others involved in these emotions in such a way that today former militants would rather not implicate them?

The culture of clandestinity and clandestinity as culture

If culture is a particular way of life, further seasoned with the more anthropological 'learnt set of traditions and ways of living, socially acquired, of those who make up a society, including their repetitive and established ways of thinking, feeling and acting' (namely, their behaviour),⁵⁴ militancy – and clandestinity as a probably inescapable aspect of it – was a tightly rooted culture for many throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century in most parts of the Americas. Taking into consideration once more the relevance of context – geographic and temporal – to point out how each case would have to be studied individually, there are nevertheless a series of elements common to a culture of clandestinity. With the aim of being analytical, and stressing how experiences would have been lived through in a fluid manner, and not in this rigid expository fashion, I have divided the factors of a culture of clandestinity into elements of coercion (regardless of the fact that most persons entered into militancies and clandestinity of their own volition) and elements of cohesion. The first set of elements is larger than the second.

Again, the grand command of a clandestine life or activity is secrecy. Secrecy/silence, silencing/concealment are the greatest demands made of the clandestine militant. Not meeting these *sine qua non* conditions could shake an organisation's structure or compromise the safety of others. The discipline tied to the urgency of this command entailed keeping safety measures – beyond simply not

giving information away – including using safe routes to arrive at meetings or safe-houses, not breaking isolation requirements and observing the hierarchies of the structure(s) that a militant belonged to. Olga Avilés, a lifelong militant of the FSLN, describes a safe-house and the activities that took place in it sometime during the early years of the Sandinista organisations. In an extended interview with the researcher Jilma Romero Arrechavala, Avilés responds to a question about the organisation's training and actions in urban areas:

We had safe-houses which acted as [training] camps, since these were places where people gathered clandestinely, secretly prepared militarily. They were taught shooting, arming and disarming weapons and explosives; safety, detecting being followed by the enemy, something that always happened. They were also skilled in creating delivery boxes [*buzones*] for [internal] communication purposes. All this shows, it was a military training camp in which we learned plenty of things.⁵⁵

Even though it is probable that this amount of illegal – and thus undisclosed – activity did not take place in other safe-houses (they may simply have been meeting places or lodgings), the aura surrounding them was probably enough not to want or need to remember details of their whereabouts or people in them or things said there.

Sometimes militants would consent to leaving life decisions – education, romantic relationships, child rearing – in the hands of the organisation's hierarchy, having made the commitment to devote their time to the ideals they were fighting for and to acquiesce to the leadership. We find an example in Nora Méndez's autobiographical novel when she describes how she and her boyfriend belonged to different organisations within the Salvadoran FMLN, and how his organisation condemned this:

Romanticism was everywhere. The 'felipes' [popular name to refer to the militants of the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* – FPL – one of the five organisations in the FMLN] had forbidden my boyfriend to see me; they didn't like their boy to be with an artist and cadre of the Communist Party. Shakespeare paled before our tangles. Ours was a revolution cut short, but still romantic.⁵⁶

Another interesting, and telling, example, again in the words of Olga Avilés – a relative of Augusto César Sandino, the hero after whom the FSLN was named – is how one of the leaders of the Nicaraguan revolution, Carlos Fonseca, educated and made decisions for a militant-to-be:

Carlos [Fonseca] learned that I had taken my niece, Fátima Avilés Sandino, into clandestinity. He did not like that a thirteen-year-old child ran any danger, which is why he made the decision to send my niece to study abroad, in Cuba. He was her mentor before the school; he'd go to oversee her development in school, he watched over her discipline.⁵⁷

The stress of living in underground circumstances made the culture of clandestinity a potentially tense and conflictive environment. For some militants, like Blanca of the Mexican LC23s, who had been close friends with the then leaders of her organisation, her deference to orders was tinged with occasional non-compliance, confident there would be no consequences. This was, she said, the only way to accept the harshness of her situation.⁵⁸ She may perhaps have been an exception, although other instances of rule infringement are found in the literature, and/or may even have been the norm, with a variety of organisational responses to these transgressions.⁵⁹ The expected unwavering discipline was the reason that militants were constantly watched over, lest there be information leakages leading to insecurity and capture.⁶⁰ These aspects of militants' lives were rationalised and justified by revolutionary ideology principles that were often understood within an unquestioned orthodoxy – a contradiction if one thinks of the fact that many leftist militants joined an organisation precisely due to their criticism of the status quo and the authorities.⁶¹ The quality and fidelity of a militant was often interpreted in these terms.

However, there are some elements that I identify as 'bridges' between coercion and cohesion. Some may appear paradoxical, such as fear and apprehension. In some contexts more than in others, militants existed in a permanent state of watchfulness. Always looking over their shoulders to avoid being followed, combined with whatever security protocols may have been in place in specific times and places, militants were likely to live in constant apprehension and even fear. Moments of more aggressive persecution by government entities constrained militants, potentially augmenting their

isolation. However, this dread was not felt only because of the foreseeable individual consequences the militant themselves could face, but also for the sake of the collective to which they belonged. This other collective identity enhanced a sense of belonging and reciprocal solidarity, which are sensations tied to cohesion. In this context, it is interesting to consider an interview I conducted some years ago. A male militant of the LC23s, speaking about the time he was captured, mentioned that the organisation had established a 24-hour period of strict silence if or when they were captured, to give the organisation time to take steps before the captive militant 'broke' and gave up information (making the assumption that everyone was prone to do so during torture).⁶² This instruction was probably common to many organisations existing under conditions of state repression.

Regarding the cohesive elements of the culture of clandestinity, both a dense solidarity and feelings of belonging tend to be stressed in testimonies or memories of militancy. A tight group identity surrounded militants, sometimes without their truly knowing many other people in their organisation. This was due to the salience of the collective, above and beyond the individuality of each and every militant. The ethos of the revolutionary stance dictated that militants' first commitment was towards the group – which in turn organised in the name of the people for whom the struggle took place.⁶³ Together with the tendency to romanticise going underground and the type of commitment it implied, an aura of heroism and selflessness could encompass the militant, legitimising their decision. Besides secrecy, observance and compliance produced what was then called 'revolutionary mysticism',⁶⁴ a personal quality admired by militants.

One last element I want to bring up regarding the culture of clandestinity – and indeed clandestinity as culture – is the shared vocabulary found in many instances of the retelling of clandestine experiences.⁶⁵ Some are dyads like 'opened/closed' to describe the contents of messages, types of meetings, information or location of places. There are also resignifications of existing common words, such as legend (*leyenda*), a fictional story about someone clandestine, used in lieu of true personal information. A synonym would be cover story (*cobertura*). Other words would be, for example, safe-house, as in this description of arriving at an urban guerrilla's cell meeting in 1975 in San Salvador: '[strict safety measures need to be followed] the enemy is on the lookout. Approaching the meeting requires several forms of checking. Before getting to the safe-house there are reference points where we have placed camouflaged countersigns in walls and light posts ... these mark if there is police surveillance'.⁶⁶ Other examples are: mailbox (*buzón*), a place agreed upon between militants as safe and good to leave information or things, and inserts (*embutido*), goods or material things into which other, secret goods or things are inserted to transport them. In this example of the creativity displayed in the use of *embutidos*, the author of *El día menos pensado* (a narrative of his experiences in the guerrilla camps in rural El Salvador) describes a conversation he had with another *compañero*, while in the front:

One evening I told him [Gerardo, the electronics engineer whose task was installing radio Guazapa in the Salvadoran rural guerrilla front] how we had smuggled radio Guazapa's transmitter into El Salvador in an audacious way ... the transmitter we placed in a colour TV, the coils in a washing machine motor and other cables were part of a luxury Fairmont van which travelled from Mexico to El Salvador, in June 1982. Years later I talked about this with the logistics group [of his guerrilla organisation, the Salvadoran RN, part of the FMLN], and laughed a lot at the *embutido* we had fashioned ... The reality was the mission had been successful.⁶⁷

To this list could be added another one dealing with ideological language – Marxist, Leninist, Maoist, Trotskyist, etc. – creating a ciphered means of communication.

Conclusions

This article has been an initial effort to systematise and understand the underground and its organisational and personal operations. It has also been an exercise in conceptual and theoretical reflection on this ever-present, though mostly silent, characteristic of the cultures of militancies, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America, but which was nevertheless a fact throughout the twentieth century for revolutionaries around the world.⁶⁸ This initial reflection has brought to the surface questions that persist and merit further discussion. For example, the problem

of leaving a clandestine life is relevant, particularly in regard to the present-day biographies of former militants and their legacies. Was it as simple as 'breaking up' with the organisation (an act that is, indeed, never simple)? Was it a natural ending because the revolutionary movement succeeded (as in Nicaragua)? Was it another kind of natural ending because the movement failed? Did it end because the militant was captured and their two names/identities were fused (with potentially ghastly consequences)?

However – and with those questions yet unanswered – the theme that for now raises the most intriguing question is that of the lack of conversation around clandestinity as an experience. The absence of reflection on this central part of militants' lives, which had great consequences for those surrounding them, is puzzling. The nature of clandestinity is the first obstacle to researching it: there are fewer traces in the historical record. Indeed, the disciplined commitment to being a militant – with underground tasks or lives – translated into secrecy, especially when security, freedom and lives depended on it. For militants accustomed to keeping their activities, their contacts and their *modus operandi* hidden, it is possible that, consciously or unconsciously, a silence still prevails. Secrecy is part of the political culture as doctrine, but it can also be 'a means to save one's soul and psyche'.⁶⁹ It may be a way to avoid identifying with that other person (clandestine identity) and to keep fulfilling the command of secrecy as a safeguard for one's present-day subjective integrity. Or, it is maybe a way to protect others – a 'pact of silence', as L. Uranga, a former Mexican woman guerrilla and today a vocal feminist, said – to prevent criticism of former (male) struggle *compañeros*.⁷⁰

One more way to comprehend this vacuum may be related to the general failure of the revolution and its combatants, at least when measured against past expectations.⁷¹ Had this been more of an epic moment – regardless of the episodes of epic narration found in some testimonies – would we learn more about clandestinity? Would we need to?

In reviewing Acselrad's work, Silveira Castro writes that the experience of clandestinity has been so evanescent that there has been no opportunity to furnish it with meaning. Indeed, as we necessarily lack a written record of that time, what we may learn of this experience today depends on what former militants communicate. And this depends on what they remember, on the moment of reconstruction or enunciation, on potential omissions and a 'targeted forgetting'.⁷² This forgetting may be also phrased as things we don't want to know but know nonetheless; Freud called this wish to unknow what we know 'motivated forgetting', which can be conscious or unconscious.⁷³

It is not uncommon that the lapses in the stories of people offering their memories of militancy and clandestinity fall within issues of time, timing, duration and chronology. Diamant and Dutrénit link this to the trauma of the self-exile that clandestinity represents, a 'small death' in leaving one's public life.⁷⁴ Perhaps narrations of clandestinity as such still await resignification, both as a collective and as a personal experience.

It is undeniable that clandestinity was a central part of the cultures of militancies in Latin America, experienced by thousands of women and men – we may never know how many – and indirectly affecting thousands of families. It should therefore find an important place among the historical efforts to piece together a nuanced and more complete understanding of the experiences and cultures of the Cold War. Life histories, oral history and the biographic genre are possibly the only means to uncover its contours and enter into its codes.⁷⁵ Today, half a century after these experiences, it is unclear what historical sources may already have been lost forever. It behoves historians of the culture of the Cold War to take clandestinity seriously and to uncover its multifarious histories, lest the silence wrought by necessity reproduces the culture of clandestinity in the discipline.

Notes

¹ Rayas, 'Subyugar a la nación'; Rayas, *Armadas*; Rayas, 'Subjugating the nation'.

² Notable exceptions are Della Porta's *Clandestine Political Violence* and Acselrad's *Sinais da fumaça* (thanks to Michael Rom who brought the latter book to my attention). However, and despite the considerable light they shed on clandestinity and ideas they provide for a dissection of cultural elements inherent in the phenomenon, the scope of both works is far from encompassing a general view applicable to comprehending the texture of clandestinity. For one thing, Della Porta's important work deals with political violence (such as has been deemed terrorism, a term she does not favour), comparing organisations that span aims as diverse as ethnic nationalism and the goals of the extreme radical left, to name a couple of her examples. Acselrad's surprising work, meanwhile, leans more towards my interest, developed here, as it covers the Cold War in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. His is an approach based on a social geography interested in how the necessary withdrawal

of middle-class militants into poorer neighbourhoods in Rio during the dictatorship, as well as their adoption of clandestine personalities for safety and continued militancy, affected the city and the militants' relationships and perceptions.

- ³ The diversity of organisational possibilities and examples present in Cold War Latin America is large and will not be discussed here, regardless of their potential consequence for the topic at hand.
- ⁴ Significantly, clandestinity and sometimes even militancy were not totalising experiences, except for those people who made a decision to devote their lives in full to a revolutionary cause.
- ⁵ A 'generational obligation', as Michael Rom's informant mentioned. Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life histories and cultures of militancies'. Progressive in this context refers to defending and/or participating in liberal leftist political agendas.
- ⁶ For the cultural shifts of the times, see, for example, Dubinsky et al., *New World Coming*; Zolov, *Refried Elvis*; Cosse et al., *Los 60 de otra manera*.
- ⁷ 'El zenzontle pregunta por Arlén' is about a young woman who fought the Somoza regime alongside the Sandinistas; it is one of the possibly hundreds of songs that Latin American youth lived by in those years. By way of a random example, in a recent conversation with a fellow swimmer, a man in his early seventies, I happened to mention that I was researching clandestinity. This laid-back, professional mathematician, working for a state institution, immediately recounted his brief, but memorable, time of being clandestine in his youth. A few more people in his age group, most of them men, also remembered their stories. Costa-Gavra's film *Estado de sitio* is about a political abduction by Uruguayan guerrillas. It was released in the 1970s, featuring music by Greek musician Mikis Theodorakis, and became very popular. Mario Benedetti (1920–2009) was a Uruguayan poet and novelist, whose work reflects both the political turmoil of the Cold War and his progressive – yet romantic – perspective. He was exiled between 1973 and 1983. See Benedetti, 'Poemas del Alma'.
- ⁸ Even when other types of organisations (including state agencies) and operations resorted to or may have resorted to clandestinity, those instances are beyond the scope of this article.
- ⁹ In most cases I provide a single example to illustrate a point made.
- ¹⁰ By militancy I understand the active dedication to a cause or idea, usually in a group. This dedication may imply being willing to become involved and even make sacrifices for the cause.
- ¹¹ Mentioned in Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life histories and cultures of militancies'.
- ¹² However, it is interesting to note, for example, how Draper invites us to break the 'bond between memory and atrocity' to give prominence to a politics of memory that emphasizes 'collective processes of emancipation'. See Draper, *1968 Mexico*, 3.
- ¹³ Also called 'motivated forgetting' by Freud. 'A desire to unknow what we know ...', mentioned in Levy, *The Cost of Living*, 108.
- ¹⁴ 'Kept secret or done secretly, especially because illicit', *OED*. Accessed 15 September 2023. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095614632>. 'Secreto oculto, y especialmente dicho o hecho secretamente por temor a la ley o para eludirla', *DRAE*. Accessed 15 September 2023. <https://dle.rae.es/ clandestino?m=form>. Interestingly, *clandestinity* is not an acceptable word in the *OED*, even though the Spanish equivalent – *clandestinidad* – is accepted by the Royal Spanish Academy.
- ¹⁵ An extended explanation can be found, for example, in Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*, 52–89.
- ¹⁶ Interestingly, for instance, the film *Neruda*, directed by Larraín, deals with the poet's activities when the Chilean Communist Party goes underground in 1948. This is but one example of the many times communist parties resorted to clandestinity throughout the Americas.
- ¹⁷ We must not leave aside the fact that clandestinity, in the framework of the Cold War in Latin America, was often a response to repression as well as to the general lack of political institutions in which to participate.
- ¹⁸ Robles, 'Memorias de la clandestinidad'; Silveira, 'Sinais da fumaça', 167 (see note 2); Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life histories and cultures of militancies'.
- ¹⁹ Besides the reasons a group may have had to take to the underground, an element to consider in order to understand – even if schematically – clandestinity in Latin American organisations and movements during the last part of the Cold War is the circumstances in which they existed. In a nutshell, these contexts or circumstances may be: if there was an open civil war in the country, as in the cases of Nicaragua (late 1970s) and El Salvador (1979–92), when actions took place clandestinely in order to overthrow – or attempt to overthrow in the case of El Salvador – the authoritarian regime. Some of the organisation(s) represented an armed opposition, regardless of its size and capabilities, as in the case of many such movements in Argentina (for example, Montoneros, ERP), Uruguay (for example, Tupamaros), Chile (for example, MIR, FPMR), Bolivia (for example, ELN), Mexico (for example, LC23s, MAR) and Peru (for example, Sendero Luminoso), to name but a few, where there was never an open declaration of war. They operated under conditions of state terrorism or dirty war (another area I will not get into). Again, several countries in South America, in which there were dictatorships, come to mind such as Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina and Paraguay. Both rural and urban political work took place under conditions of state authoritarianism. Examples would include Mexico during the late 1960s to the early 1980s, Guatemala during several periods throughout the twentieth century, the Dominican Republic under Trujillo, among others. (For more information about these armed groups operating during the Cold War years in Latin America, see Ríos

- Sierra and Azcona, *Historia de las guerrillas en América Latina*; Marchesi, *Hacer la revolución*; and about México, Glockner, *Los años heridos*. For a discussion on state terrorism, see Garzón Valdez, 'El terrorismo de estado'.
- ²⁰ I thank Timo Schaefer for this insight. An anonymous reviewer suggested another relevant way to make this distinction: coerced versus voluntary, which would perhaps, in turn, help towards reviewing a clandestine experience. Whereas it is doubtless an idea worth pondering further, I find that, at first sight, it would be difficult to determine the distinction – short of the underground militant's own reflection – in a series of 'real-life' historical situations. It may be that, for instance, under a military dictatorship, some forms of action had to be undisclosed by force, and that, in the same circumstance, someone chose to resort to secretive actions.
- ²¹ I found inspiration in Della Porta et al., 'Disappearing social movements', to dissect some of the diverse elements found in clandestinity in organisations even when their material deals with contexts quite different from those in Latin America. Those were nevertheless useful to consider and translate into another context.
- ²² See Aguayo, *La charola*, chapters 4 and 5.
- ²³ For a description of one such situation, in Central America, see Belli's autobiographic *El país bajo mi piel*, chapters 20 and 21, where she narrates the hardening of Somoza's regime after a kidnapping by members of the FSLN.
- ²⁴ In a nutshell, the FSLN ousted the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979, and the first unitarian umbrella organisation in El Salvador was created in 1982. All the while, Mexico sustained an open-door policy regarding acceptance of militants from both nations; it was a well-known fact that they also organised from Mexico.
- ²⁵ Vázquez and Campos, 'México ante el conflicto', 30–1. Author's translations throughout the article.
- ²⁶ Osuna, 'Entre la "legalidad"', 110. An article featured in *El País* offers a summary of the Montonero's development up to the mid-1980s. See also Ares, 'El ocaso de la guerrilla'.
- ²⁷ There is a comprehensive summary describing the history and aims of the Triple A in the Spanish newspaper *El País*. See *El País*, 'Argentina se enfrenta'.
- ²⁸ Osuna, 'Entre la "legalidad"', 92.
- ²⁹ Diamant and Dutrénit, 'Vivir clandestinos', 8, 42.
- ³⁰ See Della Porta et al., 'Disappearing social movements' and Parkinson, 'Organizing rebellion'.
- ³¹ Latin America's leftist movements and organisations commonly operated under a Marxist ideology, for which class was a basic category. Many groups espoused the logic of the class struggle, and many militants assumed to be in these movements and organisations were fighting for the proletariat. In this, the class origin of militants was usually dismissed as an obstacle to participation, even when the attitudes of some militants were criticised as being *bourgeois* (the class opposed to the proletariat in a classic Marxist reading). Observations gleaned in fieldwork and gained through readings.
- ³² Carvajal, 'Ellas son fuerza', 42.
- ³³ Kaplan, 'Género y memoria histórica', 14.
- ³⁴ Romero, 'Destacada militante', 34.
- ³⁵ Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa headed a railroad workers' strike in Mexico in 1958 and were incarcerated. Their release was part of the 1968 student movement's demands. The quote comes from an informal conversation with a university professor, age 68, December 2021.
- ³⁶ See Rico, 'El presidente mexicano'.
- ³⁷ Parkinson, 'Organizing rebellion'.
- ³⁸ Acselrad, *Sinais da fumaça*.
- ³⁹ Acselrad, *Sinais da fumaça*, 165.
- ⁴⁰ Méndez, *De seudónimo Clara*, 17.
- ⁴¹ Méndez, *De seudónimo Clara*, 29.
- ⁴² Acselrad, *Sinais da fumaça*, 15.
- ⁴³ Interview with Roberto Pereira in July 2014, quoted in Diamant and Dutrénit, 'Vivir clandestinos', 39.
- ⁴⁴ Ibarra, 'La solidaridad', 277.
- ⁴⁵ Benedetti, *El cumpleaños*, 96. Benedetti himself was a militant in his country, Uruguay, from which he fled after the coup of 1973. Most of his work is committed to the leftist ideals and struggles of the times. A literary critic says of *El cumpleaños de Juan Ángel* that this *bildungsroman* 'becomes the collective testimony of the struggles and ideals of a whole generation of Latin Americans'. See Chen, 'Novela de aprendizaje'.
- ⁴⁶ Pozzi, "'Lo que yo viví'", 188.
- ⁴⁷ In her brief testimony during an 'Encounter of Mexican women former guerrillas' in 2003, Bertha Lilia Gutiérrez, who had been a militant in the Mexican guerrilla Ligas Comunistas 23 de septiembre, said, as a closing remark, 'I want to emphasize what I consider to be a most important issue: during the militancy years there were moments in which I felt it was forbidden to cry, mourning could not be lived in full, crying for our dead loved ones was a luxury we could not afford without running the risk of being called "petit bourgeois", it was as if the emotional world had been cancelled'. See Aguilar, *Guerrilleras*, 73.

- ⁴⁸ See, for example, Arfuch, 'El "giro afectivo"'. This affective turn combines with the subjective one. Both have legitimised – as a wave, an epochal trend – touching upon these aspects as worthwhile for the acquisition and furthering of knowledge.
- ⁴⁹ Ahmed quoted in Arfuch, 'El "giro afectivo"'.
⁵⁰ Testimony in Diamant and Dutrénit, 'Vivir clandestinos', 47.
- ⁵¹ Marta Orrantia, a Colombian writer and journalist, wrote *Mañana no te presentes* about the takeover of the Palace of Justice in Bogota, the capital city, by an M19 guerrilla commando. Their aim was to force Betancourt, then Colombian president, to enter into a dialogue with them. Orrantia based her novel on extensive research.
- ⁵² Orrantia, *Mañana no te presentes*, 59.
- ⁵³ Henríquez, *La terquedad*, 80.
- ⁵⁴ Harris, *Anthropological Theory*.
- ⁵⁵ Romero, 'Destacada militante', 28. While I find this to be a good retrospective compendium vis-à-vis other narrations, the militant's description lacks the sense of gravity surrounding other testimonies dealing with safety measures in clandestinity.
- ⁵⁶ Méndez, *De seudónimo Clara*, 61.
- ⁵⁷ Romero, 'Destacada militante', 26.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with Blanca, summer 2006.
- ⁵⁹ There is an interesting example of an organisation's behavioural expectations in regard to personal relationships between militants and the outcome of non-compliance in Cosse, 'Infidelidades' (thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this and other materials).
- ⁶⁰ In Belli's notable autobiography, *El país bajo mi piel*, she describes how, even after the FSLN's triumph in Nicaragua, but while the country was still under the close scrutiny and potential increase of attacks by the USA, the hierarchy of the FSLN 'suggests' her personal attachment to a US journalist may be risky – supposing she leaks some classified information – and it forced her to end this romance (which she later revives). See Belli, *El país bajo mi piel*, chapter 17.
- ⁶¹ See, for example, Mallon, 'Barbudos, warriors and rotos', 190–1.
- ⁶² Interview with Manuel, spring 2006.
- ⁶³ For a detailed revision of the 'revolutionary morals' and the split between the individual and the collective, see Vidaurrázaga, 'La escisión'.
- ⁶⁴ A concept introduced by Carlos Mariátegui. According to Löwy, 'Communism and religion', 72, 'it refers to the spiritual and ethical dimension of socialism, as well as faith in the revolutionary struggle, absolute commitment to the emancipatory cause, and the heroic willingness to risk life itself'.
- ⁶⁵ In her impressive work, Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, shows how state terror drew on language to eliminate clandestinity (thanks to Jacob Blanc for pointing out this bibliography).
- ⁶⁶ Quan, *El día menos pensado*, 13.
- ⁶⁷ Quan, *El día menos pensado*, 12.
- ⁶⁸ Lenin's own clandestine period seems to be well documented.
- ⁶⁹ Diamant and Dutrénit, 'Vivir clandestinos', 39.
- ⁷⁰ CEIICH, Coloquio 'La tinta y el fuego'.
- ⁷¹ Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life histories and cultures of militancies'.
- ⁷² Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life histories and cultures of militancies', contribution by M. Rom.
- ⁷³ Mentioned in Levy, *The Cost of Living*, 108–9.
- ⁷⁴ Diamant and Dutrénit, 'Vivir clandestinos', 20.
- ⁷⁵ In retrospect, it comes as no surprise that biographical fiction treats this aspect of militancy with more latitude.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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