

The long road and the promise

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The origins of the conflict in Colombia lie deep within the longer history of conflicts over land as well as the repressed memory of the dissolution of ties between traditional, ethnic or rural communities and their surrounding environments. The FARC began as a self-defence peasant movement which evolved into a leftist, ruralist guerrilla. Today it aligns itself ideologically with ruralist and communitarian demands, undoubtedly diluted by time, the war, illegal economies and realist politics in Colombia. As for the more recent iteration of the conflict, as well as of the attempt to resolve it by means of a Peace Agreement, the question concerning the impact that such longer and traumatic history may have had upon the country's institutions became of paramount importance.

This is how the question was identified by Sergio Jaramillo, today's High Commissioner for Peace to the Colombian Government, back in 2006:

"There is a crisis in the Army (...) It is explained by its uncontrolled growth, and by the wrong structure of incentives that has been imposed upon its members. In less than four years the Army went from 181,000 men to 241,000. To fill the resulting gap more than men and arms are needed. First of all, you require well educated officers, but the minimum time required to form a Captain is ten years. There just hasn't been enough time to properly educate the required number of officers and as a result of that many battalions operate without proper leadership (...) Under pressure, the order to open fire has been given by someone lacking instruction and experience (...) There is also an inordinate amount of pressure to produce an ever higher body count among the enemy's ranks (...) At least since Vietnam it has been known that pressure to raise the body count is the most certain way to lose in an internal conflict, since in this case victory has to do with achieving the goal of protecting the civilian population rather than annihilating the enemy."¹

Already in 2006, Jaramillo was bringing his analytical and critical skills as a philosopher to bear upon the issue of the mid- and long-term effects that a conflict as prolonged as the Colombian one would have on the ethical framework as well as the legitimacy of Colombia's legal and democratic institutions. The war in Colombia was not only already quite costly in terms of resources as well as the dignity and

common good of its inhabitants. Moreover, it was becoming "counter-productive". Put simply, the more Colombian institutions tried to confront and annihilate their purported enemy, the guerrillas, and contain their violence, the more Colombia's institutionality engendered evils of its own that threatened not only to undermine its claim to democratic legitimacy but also unleashed further, increasingly longer and more lethal cycles of reciprocal violence. The long war was reshaping the spirit of Colombian political institutions, and perhaps also the general will and the spirit of Colombians themselves. It was becoming more deeply engrained, addictive.

It would be fitting to think that this innovative perspective, which invites us to focus not just on the alleged external causes driving the conflict (foreign ideologies, competing geopolitical agendas, and so on) but rather refreshingly on the internal dynamics of the war, and if you like its unintended consequences paradoxically running against the best intentions of policy-makers and the protagonists as well as the spectators of Colombia's theatre of war, has brought about a crucial change of standpoint. Such a switch of standpoint has had the potential to transform Colombia's establishment in general, and in particular the given way the parties in conflict as well as, progressively, more and more Colombians, had seen the war and themselves in it. Arguably, it transformed the way crucial characters in Colombia's long and tragic drama, such as the current President of Colombia, saw the war as well as their own role in it and the future of the country.

Between 2006 and 2009, Jaramillo the philosopher, diplomat and security advisor became Vice-minister to then Defence Minister Juan Manuel Santos, in charge of human rights and international relations. Together, they understood the need to contain the internal evils that were having such a corrosive impact upon the security sector as well as other crucial elements of the democratic apparatus: from so-called "false positives" in the Army (civilians being targeted by the state's security forces and passed as guerrillas' body count) to "para-politics" in the Legislative (the apparent influence or actual presence of far right-wing paramilitary militias and their spokespeople in Congress as well as in local-level politics). The new visibility of this dimension of the conflict changed the way in which some of its most decisive actors framed it,

¹ Sergio Jaramillo, "La crisis subterránea del ejército", in *El Tiempo*, 11 June, 2006, available at <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2061221>

and conceived of their own role in the theatre of war.

In conversation, one source close to Juan Manuel Santos put it to me in the following terms:

“What happened to Santos could be described as analogous to what happened to Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. He was a Minister of Defence, convinced about the importance of applying full military pressure on the guerrillas, in accordance to the policy of democratic security he had helped develop as a member of the then current administration. And yet, when the cost of the war was revealed to him while in office, not only in terms of the untold suffering visited upon countless Colombians, including the military, but also as a corrosive contagion spreading throughout all sectors of the country’s life, private and public, social as well as political, then he realised enough was enough.”

Even while the guerrillas were being hit the hardest, thanks to the growth in men on the ground as well as access to more sophisticated weaponry and intelligence, Colombia was losing the war. This should be understood in a two-fold sense: on the one hand, in the sense that Colombian institutions were becoming less capable of protecting its civilian population, as the proliferation of cases of “false positives” among the armed forces demonstrated, while at the same time such institutions and the very spirit of law and democracy among functionaries and citizens was being corrupted from within. Following up from this, on the other hand, both institutions and the citizenry were becoming more and more dependent on the rhetoric and mimetic nature of unleashed violence. War had changed the core identity of many Colombians, their sense of self and otherness, but also the extent to which such a sense of self was reflected by legal and political institutions making them more, or as it turned out, less able to recognise not only reciprocity but alterity and otherness just as well.

The Road to Reconciliation

It wasn’t the first time in the more recent history of the Colombian conflict that someone had observed the damaging impact that the vicious circularity of the war was having upon democratic institutions as well as on the core identity of Colombians; how stereotypes were being formed and reinforced (especially that of rural Colombia versus urban Colombia, but also Law and Order versus Lawlessness and terrorism, Yes versus No, etc.), how empathy developed, and how such things might be rewired to advance peace.

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a group of students and young academics working interdisciplinarily between philosophy, communications, law and sociology, as well as religion and religious anthropology, were startled by the seemingly unending chain of assassinations of community and political leaders; chief among them the obliteration of the

almost entirety of a political party of the democratic left named the Patriotic Union, which was itself part and parcel of a peace process initiated early on with the FARC, but also union and environmental activists, female community leaders and ethnic communities, as well as leaders of the liberal centre-right who favoured non-violence and change.

Drug trafficking was an important ingredient of that volatile mixture; indeed, it was crucial insofar as it provided an image of the political economy of the Colombian war in terms of reflection and causation. However, important as it was, drug trafficking as a contributing element to the conflict was not one that carried with itself the force of necessity. Thus, for instance, as the students and activists of the 1990s travelled around the country they had to recognise that for all the wealth that was being produced by the trade in narcotics, which was fuelling arms deals as well as destructive systems of incentives within the ranks of both the guerrillas and the state forces, civilian and military, the peasants themselves were not becoming richer. If so, then drug trafficking was most certainly neither an element that would be sufficient to explain the political, even identitarian nature of the violence being unleashed on so many Colombians across the entire geography of the country, nor one that would help understanding rising polarisation.

Out of that group grew the 1990s student movement that came upon the initiative of a popular mandate to call for a constitutional convention that would counter the tide of polarisation and institutional delegitimation. The result was the 1991 Constitution, widely held as the platform upon which a long-lasting peace could be built.

What happened to Santos could be described as analogous to what happened to Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus

All we are saying is give Peace a chance: Colombians gather in Bogotá’s Candelaria district the week after the plebiscite



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Opposite:
Knowing me, knowing you: Colombia's Minister for the Post-conflict, Rafael Pardo with FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño, aka 'Timochenko' during an earlier, failed attempt reach a negotiated settlement

Less known is the fact that the process of mass mobilisations and grassroots movements' empowerment, brought about by the emergence of the student movement, was itself an attempt by the citizenry to get the parties in the conflict to move closer towards the achievement of a Peace accord. Members of the student movement decided to use institutional if not altogether formal channels to make this rapprochement possible.

Then a spokesperson for the student movement, I talked to members of the FARC secretariat using a short wave radio located in one of the offices of the basement of Casa de Nariño, the presidential palace in Bogotá. We issued an invitation to them to lay down arms and participate with representatives of their own in the discussion and writing of the new constitution that would be the end result of a process that had begun as a bottom-up initiative, and in that respect, was entirely different from previous initiatives, all of them coming from the top and thus perceived as exclusionary. Those exchanges and the real possibility that FARC representatives would share responsibility for the reconstruction of Colombian institutions, together with the wide variety of shades of the socio-political spectrum, made it very clear to everyone that putting an end to the conflict would have to involve some kind of non-exclusionary power-sharing mechanism.

That is the first element of the legacy of the mass mobilisations of the 1990s that directly informed the current peace process. Luis Fernando Velasco, then President of the Colombian Senate, referred to that precise element during an interview on the current Havana process conducted by *FIRST* Editor Alastair Harris a few weeks ago in Bogotá:

"The Senate in particular and Congress as a whole told the Executive to conduct a negotiation with the guerrillas under the understanding the it would accept that agreement, for what is really at stake here is the need to end the war. This was a significant political gesture, altruistic and generous, insofar as it means that Congress is shedding some its powers to determine such issues, trusting them in the hands of our negotiators (...) What will go down in the history of our institutions is that this Congress had the generosity of spirit to engage in the gesture of giving away its powers and create the legal framework that would generate trust between the negotiating parties, especially the others, the guerrillas. This is a legal framework that in the end will result in some kind of power-sharing structure. After all, that is the point of a peace process: at bottom, a peace process is about telling the other 'look, you have tried to take power by means of force. You will now have the possibility of entering the stage, sharing the space of power. We are going to open up such spaces for you to gain power without the need of weapons'. Quite obviously, when

you are opening up such spaces, you are giving away spaces that, in some sense, were yours before."²

To get to peace means thus to shed one's own powers and to re-describe the values attached to them without being forced to renounce the "sacredness" of such values. In short, to re-wire behaviour, to get from lack of trust and prejudice to trust and the transformation of one's own self from the point of view of the enemy's. As Velasco observes correctly, this is not an easy task. Such kind of move requires generosity of spirit; it requires us to understand what really works in changing behaviour, not theirs but one's own. It requires asking the difficult question "what are our most sacred values?" and the much more difficult gesture of letting go of the part that might link some of those values with the habits and mimetic practices that make war "addictive". It takes greatness, as Velasco pointed out.

Arguably, such was also the greatness of the student movement of the 1990s and the spirit of the 1990 Colombian Constitution was infused with such greatness. This is the second part of its legacy to peace-making in Colombia. Perhaps that is why the 1990 student movement became the reference point for the recent mobilisations that brought together urban student organisations and indigenous as well as peasant rural movements after the 'No' vote of 2 October 2016. At the time of writing, these grassroots organisations are moving closer to a key achievement: they are blending urban and rural movements and concerns, thereby breaking the spell of the rural-urban stereotype and duality that has marked so profoundly the destiny of the Colombian conflict. In doing so, they're morphing into self-organising assemblies and peace-making "negotiating tables" that replicating and multiplying the Havana process among and between grassroots, ordinary Colombians who were relatively absent from the proceedings in Cuba. These might converge with institutions such as Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC) and Cabildos Abiertos, which given their legal configuration and their wide spread throughout Colombia (there are 80,000 JACs, democratically elected, which perform mediating work and can already count with some 15,000 trained mediators) can provide the grassroots and institutional basis for the more or less swift reconsideration, renewal and approval of the Havana accords in response to the 'No' vote of 2 October, thereby salvaging the process.

The Promise – and the Prize

The generosity and hospitality referred to above in relation to Congress and grassroots mobilisations, which may steer the peace process to its desired conclusion, resonates with the change of standpoint among key members of Colombia's political elite about the consequences of the war, as well as the change of perspective on the side of the guerrillas.

² Luis F. Velasco, interview by A. Harris, recorded 22 July, 2016

They all, especially the political elites and their counterparts among the guerrillas had to shed part of their powers, political and military, to be able to sit down face-to-face in Havana, Cuba. For at least four years this face-to-face interaction allowed both parties to redefine their own selves in relation to the perspective of their declared enemies. Both parties gained awareness of the process and internal dynamics of the war, and its counter-productive nature. Arguably, such awareness broke the spell of the war and its inherent stereotype threats.

Much has been said about the “objective” side of the dialogues and its results, so we can only reference them: they’re contained in the Havana Peace Agreement, signed by both the FARC and the Colombian government in Cartagena de Indias on 26 September, 2016. What made it possible? Objectively speaking, one can cite changes in the surrounding geo-political environment, which demonstrated to the guerrillas that non-violent means could be conducive to getting to power in order to set a transformative political-economic agenda; the military pressure brought to bear upon the guerrillas; the effective accompanying role of international actors indicative to the parties of a process backed by sufficient political will; recognition of the economic impact of the war; acceptance of the intolerable harm done in terms of human lives being lost, the displacement of entire populations in the millions, the humanitarian catastrophe that had taken place in Colombia; and so on.

But let me finish with a reference to the “subjective” side, hitherto ignored but no less crucial. Rafael Pardo, today’s High Commissioner for the Colombian Presidency in charge of the post-conflict has been an exceptional witness of many peace attempts, including this one. A few weeks ago, he explained to Harris and his Colombian adviser, Johanna Zuleta, the detail of what was being achieved. Concretely speaking, the point of the peace process is the transformation of the life of peasants in rural Colombia, which as he put it, would be “equivalent to the reunification of Germany.”³ It entails creating a registry of rural property for some 2.5 million plots, building roads and infrastructure whose lack has been directly connected to the emergence of violence, the substitution of non-profitable coca crops by cocoa, the strengthening of community organisations, micro-credits, and a restorative justice process which had already begun.

This is in addition to the specific Jurisdiction for Transitional Peace, which aims at exposing the truth of the conflict and is limited in its jurisdiction by the principle that those actors responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes will be put in prison between 5 to 20 years, or face restorative rather than purely retributive justice. Achievements such as these can and have been questioned. Letting go of the war has been, still is, the most difficult challenge confronting Colombians as well as their institutions.

At the end of the interview with Harris, Pardo was asked what had made this process succeed where so many previous ones had failed. Rather than answering with words, Pardo grabbed hold of a picture taken 25 years ago: “Do you recognise the two young men facing each other in the photo? One is me”, said Pardo. “A handsome chap”, replied the interviewer, “the other has a rather striking beard.” “That’s Timochenko,” said Pardo identifying the commander of the FARC. The picture was a mirror. In the mirror, the image of one did not reflect the likeness of the other. Then Pardo showed him another picture of the same two men taken 25 years later, in Havana. “You must know each other better than you know yourselves,” Harris observed.

What Pardo was getting at is the crucial lesson of peace processes: when we face each other, the mirror does not reflect our likeness. But “that doesn’t prove there’s nothing to perceive.”⁴ The highest promise of Colombia’s peace process is not a contractual one (the objective points posited on the signed piece of paper, crucial though they may be). It is ethical, anthropological, xeno-sophical. The spirit of the promise is not to reduce alterity – the real life of peasants, of rural Colombia, of enemy combatants – for this is the stuff humanity is made of. On the contrary, it is to intensify and multiply the images in which we might not recognise ourselves, but which, precisely because of that, give us the unique opportunity to grow up and transcend ourselves. “In the name of FARC-EP, I ask all the victims of this conflict for forgiveness,” were the words that most resonated in Rodrigo Londoño, aka Timochenko’s, 26 September speech.

Such is the high promise of a new Colombia. ■

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³ Rafael Pardo Rueda, interview by A. Harris and J. Zuleta, recorded 12 September, 2016

⁴ Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*, ch. 1, cited by E. Viveiros de Castro, “The Untimely, Again”, in P. Clastres’s *Archeology of Violence*, trans. J. Herman, Semiotext(e), 2010, 14

