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Notes From the Field: Rebuilding Lives Among Memories of Violence

Abstract

Colombia has been the site of one of the world's longest internal armed conflicts. Its population has been trapped between different armed groups, who in their struggle for control over land and resources have uprooted millions of people. After the demobilization of the country's paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) in 2006, many people have started returning to the land from which they were displaced. A land restitution and reparation program was adopted in 2011 that is now, slowly, returning land to its original owners and assisting people in the difficult process of resettling. This paper describes how people in two communities in Colombia's Magdalena Department are attempting to rebuild their lives among memories of fear and violence, and in conditions that reflect the severe structural inequalities that many people still continue to suffer today.

Keywords

displacement, Colombia, heritage of violence, structural inequality, post-conflict reconstruction

Author Biography

Sanne Weber is a PhD candidate and Research Assistant at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (Coventry University). Her research aims to analyse how conflict affects gender relations, whether and how transitional justice mechanisms are capable of addressing and transforming gendered and other structural inequalities, and how transitional justice mechanisms can better respond to the needs and demands of survivors of conflict. Previously, she worked as a researcher and project coordinator for human rights organisations in Guatemala on projects related to gender-sensitive transitional justice and the prevention of violence against women.

Introduction

Colombia's internal armed conflict is one of the world's longest, spanning more than four decades. The causes of Colombia's conflict lie in extremely unequal land distribution and poverty, which led to the foundation of left-wing guerrilla groups including the FARC, ELN and several smaller movements in the 1960s¹. Originally built on communist ideology, this was diluted over the years as the organizations increasingly began to fund their operations through illegal activities such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, and extortion (Theidon 2009; Burbidge 2008). In order to defend themselves from guerrilla groups, large landowners established paramilitary "self-defense" groups. These paramilitary groups united in 1997 to become the national level organization AUC². This organization has not only been responsible for serious human rights violations³, but also became increasingly powerful as an economic, social, and political force, especially at the local level where in some places the local government was infiltrated and co-opted by the paramilitary and their accomplices⁴ (Theidon 2009; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2014).

¹ The FARC, (FARC-EP in full: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo* or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army) was founded in 1964 as rural guerrilla group with Soviet Union backing, intending to defend rural peasants. The ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* or National Liberation army) was founded in 1964 as well and was originally backed by Cuba. Other, less powerful guerrilla movements have been the EPL (*Ejército Popular de Liberación* or Popular Liberation Army) formed in 1967 with support from China and M-19, most of whom have demobilized (Burbidge 2008).

² AUC stands for *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.

³ In 2013 the Justice and Peace Process which aimed to demobilize the paramilitary and establish the truth about their crimes had received confessions about 39,546 crimes committed, including more than 25,000 assassinations and over 1,000 massacres, as well as enforced disappearances, forced displacements, kidnappings and sexual violence. For more information see <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-12490495>.

⁴ An example of this cooptation was the Pact of Chibolo of September 2000, in which 400 local politicians and people aspiring to obtain a political position in the Magdalena Department agreed to support certain candidates for the regional government, in return for favors by the paramilitary (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2012).

Guerrilla groups, state armed forces, and paramilitary groups (until the demobilization of the latter), have disputed control over territory, used large-scale human rights violations against the civilian population to control land, and have caused massive displacement flows. It is estimated that around 6 million Colombians were forcibly displaced between 1985 and 2013 (CODHES 2013), while other crime rates were also elevated. Estimates suggest that over 200,000 people have been killed between 1958 and 2012 (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013), while 15,000 to 50,000 people have been disappeared and over 25,000 have been kidnapped since 1963 (Summers 2012).

The paramilitary AUC continued operating, often in close collaboration with the state, until they were demobilized through the Justice and Peace process⁵ that commenced in 2005. This process involved amnesties and reduced prison sentences in return for paramilitary collaboration and participation in a truth and reparation process (Burbidge 2008; Diaz 2008). At this moment, Colombia's government is finalizing peace negotiations with the FARC. The current proposal outlines alternative restorative justice sentences for both the FARC and the military, in return for their collaboration and participation in truth-finding and reparation efforts and making a commitment towards non-repetition.

Researching among memories of violence⁶

In spite of the conflict, Colombia's economy has continued growing, leading to what could be called two Colombias (Pearce 1990): one, built upon the success of Colombia's economic management, sits juxtaposed to the reality experienced by a large part of Colombia's population where basic economic and social needs are largely unmet.

⁵ The Justice and Peace Law, adopted by Colombia's Congress in 2005 and approved by its Constitutional Court, provides reduced prison sentences of five to eight years for demobilized members of paramilitary and guerrilla groups. In return for this, they needed to confess the crimes they had committed and contribute to the reparation of the victims. If the demobilized were found not to have told the complete truth, the reduced sentence would be converted into a normal prison sentence (Burbidge 2008). The process has however been extremely slow. Few demobilized paramilitary have been convicted, while truth seeking has been limited. The process has moreover been hampered by the extradition of 14 key paramilitary leaders to the US on charges of drug trafficking in 2008 (Aponte-Cardona 2008).

⁶ For the purpose of this article I understand the concept 'memory' as the result of the process of remembering past experiences, situations, persons, etc. Since remembering is a process, this means that memories can change, that memories can be quite different from the reality, and therefore also that people's memories of the same event can be very different and that there can be conflicts over memory. Memory is a subjective process that is never fixed, and is subject to the process of remembering and forgetting (Nora 1989; Jelin 2003).

The latter narrative about Colombia is an apt description of the two villages that form the basis of my research.⁷ These two villages, located in the center of the Magdalena Department, were the center of the power of Rodrigo Tovar Pupo. Tovar Pupo, alias “Jorge 40”, one of the key paramilitary leaders in this region, had his military base here. The land, prime cattle territory, was occupied as a means to control the local, regional and national economies and was used by “Jorge 40” to keep cattle stolen as war “booty” and to enable him to control strategic drug trafficking routes (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2012).

In 1997, the villagers were gathered by “Jorge 40” and told to give him and his paramilitary comrades the land. They were given eight days to leave, after which their safety could not be guaranteed, as they would be putting themselves in the middle of a conflict. Through negotiation they managed to extend the period to 15 days, but after the pastor was killed a week later the majority decided to flee, taking whatever they could carry. Many people told me how they lost their livelihood since they had to sell their cattle for very low prices, while the chickens and other farm animals—which provided not only food but also economic currency—had to be left behind or died during the exodus. Different people in these villages have told me this story, often in almost identical ways, or repeating the same story on different occasions.

During their displacement, the villagers—once a united community, at least in their memory of the past—were spread across the Colombian coastal region and even Venezuela. In the stories they told me they recalled the hard work; the suffering of trying to survive in the city as farmers; the difficulties of providing food and schooling to their children; and their fear of denouncing their displacement, rooted in the fact that most state institutions in the region were infiltrated or coopted by the paramilitary and their accomplices.

⁷ These two villages form part of the municipalities of Chibolo, Sábanas de San Ángel and Plato, located in the center of the Magdalena Department. They are inhabited by approximately 150 families, whose means of subsistence is cattle farming. Most of the people living in these villages were displaced, either from these same villages or from other places in the coastal region. In one of the villages an association was formed upon the return to the land. In the other village, three separate associations exist, divided along different parts of the village. The previously close ties to national-level farmers’ organization ANUC-UR (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Unidad y Reconstrucción* or National Association of Farmers – Unity and Reconstruction) were damaged as a result of the conflict. The fieldwork, conducted over a nine month period, uses a feminist approach, using ethnographic and participatory visual research methods to understand people’s experiences and expectations of the land restitution and reparations process and to analyze the impact this process has on gender inequality. The data on which this short article is based was collected between August and December 2015. The land restitution and reparations process were put in place after the adoption of the ‘Victims’ Law’ in 2011.

In March 2006 “Jorge 40” and the paramilitary unit that he led were demobilized as part of the aforementioned Justice and Peace process (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2012). With the help of a sympathetic leader from the nearest town, villagers managed to contact each other again and, in 2007, decided to return to their land. This return was community inspired, without any form of facilitation or accompaniment by the state. This was the start of the difficult and lengthy process of rebuilding their lives and communities. Villagers labored on their overgrown plots of land to make them suitable for cattle grazing again; they reconstructed the houses that had been burnt down by the paramilitary; and they began to rebuild the community that had been separated during the ten years of displacement.

Visible memories of violence⁸

For people familiar with the history of these villages, it is possible to recognize visible signs of past violence. The most obvious is the wooden chalet-type house used as a community center in one of the villages. To be fair, the house is not a memory of violence as such, but a completely remodeled version of it. This house, called *la Casa del Balcón* or the House with the Balcony is known widely in the surrounding area for its uncharacteristic design. Built by the original landowners, it has played an important role in the community. The people initially lived in this house when they occupied the land in the 1980s – supported by the farmers’ movement ANUC-UR⁹ which promoted a process of land “invasions” in order to redistribute farm land more equally (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010). When the paramilitary arrived, the house acted as their military control base. Upon villagers’ return after displacement, community members once again lived in this house while rebuilding their houses. The house is of historical significance for the locals, and when President Santos visited this village some years ago; he offered the remodeling of the house as a reparation measure for the community.

⁸ My field notes form the basis for the data described in these sections of the article.

⁹ ANUC-UR stands for *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Unidad y Reconstrucción*: National Association of Farmers – Unity and Reconstruction.



Image 1: La Casa del Balcón' after it was renovated by the government as a reparation measure. Photograph by author.

The house was stripped down and rebuilt, presenting a rather strange image of a fancy wooden chalet on what could be seen as the village square. Next to it are the sheds in which most of the villagers live. These were constructed as temporary emergency housing by a religious organization, designed to last three years. They are still in use eight years later.¹⁰ The wooden chalet itself looks beautiful on the outside, yet has been invaded by bats, producing a stench that makes it impossible to use the second floor of the house. In addition, because of the hot climate the majority of community meetings are held 50 meters away, under the shade of a large tree to avoid the suffocating heat of the indoors, as there are no fans or electricity in the village.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, lack of adequate housing is a continuing problem for internally displaced people in many post-conflict situations. For information about the situation in other post-conflict situations, see <http://www.internal-displacement.org>.

Not everyone approves of the decision to remodel this house. This is because it is clear that the government spared neither cost nor effort to restore it while the village still lacks running water, electricity, adequate health care and education services – like many other rural parts of Colombia, where the presence of the state has historically been minimal (Pearce 1990). Several villagers told me they would rather have seen the money invested in improving basic village infrastructure rather than on remodeling “Jorge 40’s office”.

Another visible memory of past violence are the sets of concrete cylinders located in different spots across the village. These formed part of a sophisticated water system whose construction was initiated and almost completed by “Jorge 40”. The intention was that ground water would be pumped up, stored in large cylinders and transported across the village to lower cylinders that would serve as watering troughs for cattle. Upon demobilization the paramilitary filled the wells and larger cylinders with stones, rendering the system useless to the returning community members who have no resources to repair the damage or purchase the pump and tubes needed for the system to work.



Image 2: Water tanks built by the paramilitary are not functioning, giving only the illusion of prosperity. In the background the health center, which lacks medicine and is only infrequently attended by the nurse and doctor. Photograph by author.

In spite of the government having initiated efforts of individual and collective reparations, repair of this water system is not amongst the proposed measures. At the same time villagers have experienced several difficult years of drought caused by insufficient rain. Their cattle do not have enough grass to eat or water to drink, causing them to produce less milk or even die, thus severely impacting the farmers' income. Many people complain that the government does not respect or help poor farmers; if it did, the government would have created wells for their cattle to drink, since "water is life". This makes these remnants of the paramilitary heritage an even more ironic visual symbol of not only past violence, but also present hardships.



Image 3: Watering troughs for cattle, without access to water. Photograph by author.

Invisible memories of violence

Beyond the visible impact of the violence, the invisible impact is even more present and apparent to those who visit the villages for a longer period of time. Almost every person I have spoken to mentioned that these two communities used to be very united, helping each other out where there was illness, holding weekly community meetings to discuss the well-being of the community as a whole, and with active women's groups that no longer exist. This is how villagers remember their community before displacement, although memories can become romanticized as people reflect back on the past.

The unity they remember was lost as a consequence of displacement. Having been forced apart, the differences formed through years of difficult experiences have created division and distrust. While some are better off and seen to have had better access to the little state assistance that has been provided, I often hear people question the veracity of other villager's stories: "they were not even here when we were displaced", "he was still a kid when we were displaced, so why should he now lead the reparation process?" or "they don't tell the complete story". Rather than being united by their shared experiences, memories of past violence seem to divide these communities. Most people say they regret this perceived change in community spirit, with people now only concerned with their own wellbeing, rather than the community's. This sense of unity and solidarity is hard to repair. It might be an intentional result of the displacement, meant to break the strong farmers' movements that presented a risk for the large landowners whom the paramilitary protected.

In the memories of the people I spoke to, their communities were united, yet now three major groups can be discerned. The first group occupied the lands in the 1980s and is known as *los luchadores* (the fighters), who fought for the land as part of a peasant movement. The second group, *los compradores* (the buyers), bought their plots of land in the 1990s and experienced displacement just like the *luchadores*. Being able to buy land indicates the often better financial situation of the *compradores*, which has become more evident after their return. This group has become more influential in terms of leadership after the communities' return, creating discontent among the *luchadores*.

After the demobilization of the paramilitary, some villagers decided not to return either for fear of renewed violence, or because they had become settled in their new homes. Therefore, there is also a group of new villagers who bought their plots of land after the displacement, called *compradores de buena fe* (buyers of good faith), indicating they obtained the land legally and in agreement with the community. Some of these post-displacement buyers moved to these communities after having experienced displacement elsewhere themselves. Nevertheless, as the community commented in a focus group (November 2015), this group of new buyers is not well integrated within the community, participating less in community activities and the farmers' association, which are the spaces people mention as key aspects of their previous unity. These divisions among the community are also evident in the organization of community celebrations, where different groups disagree about which date is most significant for the community, and at election time, when division becomes evident through the support of different candidates in the clientelist local electoral system and in the façade of democracy.

For outsiders like me, it seems that the notable absence of basic development services in these villages makes this lack of community cohesion and organization even more acute. Strong community organization and affiliation to a larger farmers' movement like in the 1980s could help to press for urgently needed basic conditions of health, education, and safety. Access to health care is limited. Only one of the villages has a health center, with limited and infrequent staffing and no medicine. These communities can only be accessed by dirt roads that become almost impassable after heavy rain. This not only limits the possibilities to reach the nearest small town in case of medical emergencies, but also means teachers are often unable—or unwilling—to come when it has rained, while village schools are too small to accommodate all children.



Image 4: A road after it has rained. Photograph by author

Most houses do not have bathrooms or even basic latrines, and most people bathe in communal wells, risking being bitten by snakes and other animals. This lack of basic amenities means that it is almost impossible for most people in these communities to structurally improve their living conditions, hampering their dream of the formation of a dairy cooperative.

Safety is also a concern, as there is virtually no police presence in these villages and people feel unprotected against theft or other forms of common delinquency. This is an example of the historical absence of the state in the economic and social development of rural Colombia. The state's commitment to economic liberalism leaves many people excluded from economic development, reflected in the 57.5% of

Colombia's rural population living in poverty and the 23% living in extreme poverty¹¹ (Pearce 1990; Amnistía Internacional 2014). This is particularly grave in the case of communities displaced as a result of the lack of protection of the state. The state should rather demonstrate a clear commitment to their protection and towards the rebuilding of confidence in the state. In these villages the closest representation of the state is the municipal council and the mayor. Nevertheless, after elections mayors have generally been conspicuous by their absence and by the many broken promises of installing electricity and improving the road. Community members feel that these local politicians have not taken them seriously. In January of last year new mayors took office, and hopes are high that they will produce the changes promised. It is too early to conclude on this matter.

Memories of violence versus present injustice

Working in these villages, it is soon apparent that memories of the violent past still play an important role in these communities today. Not a day goes by without people mentioning the displacement. However, it is also striking how the current situation of these formerly displaced farmers continues to be characterized by a lack of attention from the state in terms of their basic socio-economic rights. People's everyday concerns are the lack of safe drinking water, the lack of medical care, and the failed harvests because of the drought. The people in these villages continue to feel unprotected and unrecognized by the government, and perceive it does not respect or protect its peasant population. People often mention the visit that the President made to their village in 2012. He then promised them they would have their land titles back within a year and that the roads would be improved, among other things later included in official reparation and other plans by different state institutions. These plans and promises have raised high expectations among the people, but without results nor clear time frames after several years, they have not helped to restore trust in the state.

At the same time, as some people I have spoken to admit, people have adopted a passive attitude, waiting to be helped by the government. This seems to be quite a change compared to their hard work building their communities from scratch in the 1980s as some of the *luchadores* have told me. Perhaps this is another characteristic that the displacement produced: demotivation and passivity after having lost everything that they worked so hard for.

¹¹ These numbers, cited by Amnesty International, are provided by Colombia's National Statistics Department. Although it indicates that these numbers refer to "monetary poverty" –not taking into account other ways to measure poverty– it does not indicate the income below which a person is considered to suffer poverty or extreme poverty.

Violence does not stop once a conflict ends, since although physical violence has ceased after paramilitary demobilization in this region, structural violence continues through the inequality that people still suffer. The images in this article intend to reflect how these old and new memories of violence merge through the everyday difficulties that people continue to experience. Direct and structural violence are closely related, and people who have suffered violent conflict are often reminded of this not only through memories of past violence, but also through their present situation, in which their expectations and hopes for a better life are still unmet.

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