

*In the bottom of the biggest mystery of South America
Colombia, The Silence of the Lambs*

A seemingly impossible to decipher country. Where no cycle is really closed, and everything changes to remain the same. The liberation of Ingrid Betancourt, FARC leader's death, the "success" of President Uribe's politics, are merely a cover for a reality that never wants to show what it is.

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In Bogotá it virtually always rains, and it is also pretty cool, but we are close to the equator. "Eternal Fall", Enzo Baldoni called it this way in his latest book-reportage ("Lead and tenderness"). Bogotá is quite modern, clean and tidy. A quiet city. Compared to Caracas, it seems to be Switzerland. Yet this is the capital of drug traffickers' country, the country of FARC, Ingrid Betancourt, and everything else. Hard to find similarities with South American imagination. The famous Latin passion? People are friendly, lovable, but never over the top, on the contrary, quite formal. The indigenous presence is hardly felt, just as Afro-Colombians. Nothing to do with the colors of Brazil, nothing to do with the Andean poverty. Colombia seems to have no definite image. It does not even try. Colombians, who travel abroad, are resigned to being seen as the inhabitants of the cocaine country, border controls make them feel always potential drug dealers. They know that things are not like this, they feel obliged to say that Colombia (or Locombia, consonant game with "loco" or "crazy", to express the impossibility of understanding the nation) is also a beautiful, relatively prosperous, at least compared to other South American states, with a good cultural life, modern and open to change country. In international polls on happiness, Colombians stand out in first positions, close to countries such as Denmark or Switzerland. Perhaps only Italians, mostly southern Italians, can understand a perception such ambiguous, almost schizophrenic, of reality. "The fact is that Colombia works" says Chilean journalist Fernando Cardenas, who has lived and worked here for years. "Colombian is awake, dynamic, and above all practical. He wants hasty and forceful solutions that here, unfortunately, often become violent solutions".

Here is lesson number one: usually, the state holds "the violence monopoly". In democratic regimes, the monopoly should have very strict limits imposed by law. In military regimes the violence is turned against political real or imagined opponents, and guarantees, anyway, the established order. In Colombia, it does not work this way. For this reason, Colombia has never experienced a true military dictatorship in its nearly two centuries of history. Similarly, Colombia has never been, and is still not a true democracy, even though almost everyone pretends otherwise, starting with U.S. government.

What was Colombia and what is it now? A vast and sparsely populated country, at least until the first half of the twentieth century, with a weak state dominated by a strange, Machiavellian oligarchy, clever to exploit every kind of conflict to preserve the status quo. A country that pretended (and pretends) to be developed and civil in the area of Cordillera, its urban backbone while it takes its animal spirits on the vast countryside and forests, conquered with such a ferocity as, compared to it, the legendary Far West is just amateurish stuff.

The private conquest of the national land. Here is a secure password to understand the infernal labyrinth of Colombia, where nearly nothing is as it looks like at first sight. A historical and geographical key to understanding, which runs through all the events (ie, the various cycles of violence) to reach, more relevant than ever, today.

Colombia always makes decisions in the city and war in the countryside, in Eastern Plateaus, Western and Southern forests, which once belonged to the natives and, partly, to the descendants of African slaves. No coincidence that Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are now the only ones that claim collective ownership of land. All other campesinos usually have a drastic alternative: be subject of the power of the strongest one, or take up arms paying the consequences. Because at the end, with few exceptions, they are destined to become cannon fodder in a war fought

by poor people, with divisions often within the same families, but always controlled by the rich. It may seem too schematic, but the first 100-150 years of Colombia (created by Bolivar) political history is made by the conflict between conservatives and liberals. Two sides of same coin, the political expression of popular oligarchy. Ideological differences almost non-existent: liberals a bit more laic, or rather a bit less Catholic, with the left wing that reaches the legendary Manuel Marulanda "Tirofijo", the founder of FARC. Historically, there is no political life outside the two parties, which can replace the idea of citizenship with that of the affiliation to a party (so, in Colombia, everyone came from a liberal or a conservative family). Conservatives and liberals assure themselves mutual needs battling fiercely, and they can maintain the status quo as well. Bitter enemies and strong allies: it is only the first and most striking Colombian paradox. Another paradox concerns "democracy": in Colombia you vote and fire with the same ease. For over half a century every president has finished his regular mandate, following the punctual rhythm of elections.

Colombian army, until the advent of Plan Colombia, was one of the weakest on the continent, and it had a smaller budget, on average, than any other South American country.

Although it was located in the continent of coups, which made international the word *golpe*, Colombia has never had a leader like Pinochet or Videla, like Somoza or Noriega. Yet, in no other Latin American country, it has ever recorded such a high level of political violence.

The statistics of death in Colombia are unbelievable. Just in the historical period known as *La Violencia*, the decade 1948-1958, 280 thousand people were killed. More recently, in the second half of the eighties, the party of the Patriotic Union (UP), born as a political expression of FARC, saw about five thousand representatives murdered in a few years: for this reason the journalist Steven Dudley, to tell the story of UP, talked about "political genocide" in his book "*Armas y urnas*". In the nineties, there was an average of four thousand political murders per year, ie eleven per day.

The Colombian horror seems to have no limits, not only in huge amounts of deaths, but also in cruelty of methods. "During *La Violencia* - Dudley writes - a paramilitary soldier known as Sangrenegra ("Black Blood") drank several liters of his dead opponents' blood, to prove his determination; another known as Carnicero ("butcher"), hung his victims to a tree before cutting their face". In more recent times, people cut up with a chainsaw has become common practice. A team of paramilitary forces commanded by General Del Rio, started to play football with the head of a victim. And last year, the killer of Ivan Rios, one of the leaders of FARC, brought to the government a guerrilla's cut off hand as proof of the mission accomplished.

"The atrocities are mostly part of neighborhood relationships" writes French historian and sociologist Daniel Pécaut, talking about the period of *La Violencia*. A period that most people lived as "a sum of scattered events that take place in microspaces. *La Violencia* can not be, therefore, easily told as global history". He adds: "memory soon changes in a phenomenon almost without history, without origin or end. In short, a traumatic phenomenon doomed to repeat. "Many people call it "the politics of anesthesia", and Dudley explains it simply: "There are too many deaths, so people will simply turn the page, stop to feel. The easiest way to live with the daily violence is simply ignore it". From repression to repression, it does seem that every step of the infinite Colombian conflict is connected to the previous, seamlessly, in a sequence that is poorly connected to the history of other South American countries, and less than ever before, lends itself to ideological reading (typically European).

Let's return now to the first issue, the land issue, with the great movement of peasant demands in the thirties. There is a popular leader who embodies the aspirations of the campesinos and fights with great courage for a radical agrarian reform: Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. Gaitan is a liberal rebel, his faction is called "revolutionary left", but we define it simply populist. Gaitan was going to win the following election, according to everyone's prevision, as he was assassinated on April 9, 1948. The raging crowd find Gaitan's killer and wildly lynches him, then it goes wild against the government and its representatives. The conservatives in power responded with a brutal repression, which aims to destroy liberal opponents, communists, union leaders and farmer organizations.

The massacre, which will last for ten years (*La Violencia*, in fact) and soon takes the form of an everyone against everyone war, starts. Every political category is off: the civilian president, Laureano Gomez (conservative), is actually a ruthless fascist dictator, steeped in Catholic bigotry; while the soldier who takes his place by force (1953), unique in history of the country, General Rojas Pinilla, who was also very hard against all opponents, is seen as a "savior of the fatherland", and many years later he will be the hope of a victory of the "left" (the ANAP, a populist coalition). The general is in his turn divested of authority by the Colombian oligarchy. This is another constant point of Colombian history to bearing in mind.

Then, as if by magic, the National Front is formed, the perfect divider pact between liberals and conservatives, which in 1958 put an end to this tragic period, leaving all unresolved issues that the poor Gaitan deluded himself to handle.

The bloodbath is useless: the end of *La Violencia* does not mark a "before" and "after", does not imply any significant change, it shows only a shift of antagonisms. Not surprisingly, one of the toughest farmers up in arms at the time, Manuel Marulanda, who from the ranks of the Liberal Party had come close to the Communists, having resist with a handful of companions to the repression ordered by the government, founded in 1964 an armed group that will make history: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The legendary FARC. He calls himself "Tirofijo" (sure shot) for his skills as a sniper and his fierce, typical of the survivors determination,. But FARC at that time count very little, certainly less than other guerrilla groups that have been formed in the wake of Cuban revolution, for once at least in tune with the rest of Latin America's historical times (all the revolutionary guerrilla wars in the Continent was born in the sixties). The advent of guerrilla armies (a Cuban-inspired one, a Maoist one, and FARC, which would be Marxist-Leninist, the armed wing of the Communist Party actually following its own path) does not change practically nothing in Colombian reality. It takes more than that to undermine the establishment of the country. General Rojas Pinilla may be successful, with his Alianza Nacional Popular (ANAP) for the 1970 elections, but the old liberal rogues and conservatives snatch his victory by blatant electoral fraud, and nip the attempts of revolt in the bud. For the second time, Colombia loses the opportunity to democratically change the status quo. The third opportunity will present itself in a year and a half, in 2010, but we shall see later.

So, while the rest of the continent, with the exception of Venezuela, is ruled by the army, everything goes as usual in Colombia: the guerrillas tend to get stronger (and fight each other for the control of territories), but they basically remain a rural phenomenon, the protagonists of a low intensity rather remote and almost internationally unknown conflict. If anything, the new armed movement M-19 (where 19 indicates April 19, 1970, the day of election snatching against Rojas Pinilla's ANAPO) receives the greatest acclaim of the people, thanks to a series of spectacular blows, no bloodshed, against the symbols of power. In short, in the early eighties there seem to be the conditions for a general peace agreement, insomuch as President Belisario Betancur, having proclaimed an amnesty, begins negotiations with the guerrilla movements. But in Colombia what officially happens does not correspond to what happens for real. And in fact, Colombia is definitely converted into drug trafficking.

Cocaine trafficking replaces the one of marijuana during the seventies, exponentially multiplying profits. The several guerrilla armies, which are financed mainly with kidnaps (another sad tradition in Colombia), begin to perfect their system of "taxation" (read: extortion), by imposing gradually more exorbitant fees to cocaine smugglers, which the more they become powerful, the less they accept control of the territory by the guerrillas. The State, in those areas, is absent. Everything is done through agreements between the involved characters, and whenever an agreement is not respected there is a massacre. But there can be no doubt about one thing: Colombia, as it was said at the opening, "works". Because the game of the official power follows, at the top, the same not explicit rules: everyone deal with everyone, always, by the typical methods of criminal organizations: where money are not enough, here comes the terror. No wonder, then, that during the eighties, Colombian parliament has some particular members: so some leaders of FARC, as Ivan Marquez, as the drug boss Pablo Escobar.

It is Colombian democracy. Following the electoral processes or political reforms (such as the advent of the new Constitution in 1990, much more liberal than the last one) is only to not see the deep processes that cross the country. And once again they concern the land ownership. When the boom of cocaine started, Colombia refined and marketed the product (coca paste) that came from Bolivia and Peru. In the early nineties, however, the country became the world's largest producer.

What did it mean? At that time "drug dealers had acquired more than 270 million hectares, equivalent to one third of the most fertile land in the country" (S. Dudley, "Armas y urnas") and they became, among other things, the most powerful breeders of the country.

The phenomenon of the paramilitary armies (ie the "right" armed response to the "revolutionary" guerrillas), which not coincidentally is developed at this time, is the simple struggle for territorial control. Of course, the fight against "subversives" or against "communism" (always good label for the USA protecting their corporate) provided the official legitimation to the bosses in front of the establishment, and provided to the State (ie the army, often humiliated by the guerrillas) the possibility of doing the dirty work without many repercussions. Not only that: the territorial control is also electoral control; no coincidence that dozens of members of parliament elected in the conflict regions (which are also the poorest and most abandoned) obtain embarrassing percentages of agreement, and tend to endure for life. Colombia, as it has been said, it works.

But the peculiarity of the eternal Colombian conflict is better understood by personal stories, biographies of the protagonists. It is clear that violence is on the one hand, a perverse form of social redemption, on all sides (guerrillas, drug traffickers, paramilitaries). On the other hand, it perpetuates and exacerbates the feelings of revenge, giving a personal implication to an armed conflict that claims to be "political".

Take the case of Alonso de Jesús Baquero, known as "El Negro Vladimir". Peasant's son, he enters the guerrilla when he is 13, led by misery, like so many other kids in rural areas. Not even 18, he is already a team commander of FARC. He is tough, courageous, a perfect soldier. "They take a young and turn him into an aggressive being", he tells to the journalist who interviews him in prison. "El Negro Vladimir" falls in love with another guerrilla, nom de guerre Berta, and obtains permission to form an union. Bertha becomes pregnant, however, and FARC, in these cases, do not admit exceptions: the child is entrusted to grandparents. Berta is not in and escapes with her son, knowing that the betrayal was equivalent to a death sentence. "El Negro Vladimir" is punished for the escape of his girlfriend. At the first opportunity, he also escapes and reaches Berta and their son in Puerto Boyaca, where the mayor, with the generous contributions of Texaco, was organizing a paramilitary group. After receiving a new indoctrination, "El Negro Vladimir" becomes one of the most ruthless killers ever seen in action. He admits more than 800 murders to the judge who will sentence him to thirty years in prison. A good part of the massacres of unarmed members of UP party must be up to him. But often "El Negro Vladimir" finishes only the work done by other paramilitaries: "Tortures were so cruel that many prisoners went mad: killing them was a favor."

Castano brothers, founders of terrible "AUC" ("Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia"), Colombia's largest paramilitary group, were a small landowner's sons, their father was kidnapped by FARC. Having paid in vain twice the ransom for the father (who probably had already been killed), declared eternal war to "subversives". Their personal hatred was a sort of ideology: after all, every paramilitary phenomenon is closely related to the drug dealing and occurs with the constant coverage by the army and the government. For many poor children the chance to join the Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug trafficking organizations, the regular army or the police are virtually identical, the manpower to violence never lacks.

In short, everything mixes and mingles in Colombian war, to remain unchanged in substance: the economy grows, the national currency is stable (Colombia has never experienced the inflationary phenomena typical of the rest of South America), the rich stay rich, the poor remain poor. Colombia "works". For this reason it has remained unchanged until now.

President Uribe, after the success achieved during 2008, with the hardest blows to FARC, the liberation of Ingrid Betancourt, the increased security in cities and the official demobilization of

paramilitaries, would make us believe that the military response was winner (thanks to dollars of Plan Colombia strongly wanted by Washington to "reaffirm the presence of the state" on the all Colombian territory and eradicate both guerrillas and coca production).

Officially the country is out of the wood, the internal conflict is almost finished, the politics of the so-called "democratic security" triumphed. Most national and international media have helped President Uribe to claim this version. But this version is just a cover, it is the further Colombian repression. To understand it without the slightest ambiguity, we just have to move from the area of the city where the conflict actually takes place. From Bogota to Chocó, for example. One of the poorest and least populated regions, miles of forest (and mines) that overlook the Pacific. The darkest area of Colombia, because here the vast majority of the population is made up of Afro-Colombians, even if there is a strong indigenous minority.

Viewed from the perspective of refugees of Villa Espana, outskirts of Quibdò (regional capital), the policy of "democratic security" of President Uribe and his alleged successes are only "a solemn lie" in the words of Father Albeiro, an exponent of one of the most committed and progressive dioceses of Colombia (the exact opposite of the Catholic Church leadership, which is conservative and passive). There are not opinions, or moral judgements. There are the figures to belie the optimism of the regime, which unfortunately goes well with the sad conformity, to not mention the fear of many Colombians (too many). If there is a world ranking in which Colombia really emerges is the one of internally displaced persons ("desplazados"): they are over 4 million. It means that one in ten Colombians was driven out from his home and his land, he lost everything he had, always carrying the indelible mark of an absurd violence.

The beneficiaries of terror are a lot: from the old and new paramilitary and drug trafficking bosses to the large agricultural corporations (such as "Chiquita") and mining ones (such as the "Ashanti Gold"), to the State that has a lot of mega-projects in these areas. Ie, Colombia growing at five-six per cent per year.

The losers are always the same: blacks, indigenous people, peasants, who then often go to swell the ranks of the urban underclass. So drugs, prostitution, petty crime, misery. All people who do not vote, or vote blackmailed, or sell their share of "popular sovereignty" for 20 dollars. No coincidence that elections in these areas inevitably reward the bad guy of the history, mostly followers of President Uribe, and often linked to paramilitaries. But they are starting to slag their former protectors. They are the unexpected effects of an aberrant law, strongly supported by Uribe, the one called "Paz y Justicia", which, in the name of the alleged national reconciliation, offers to those who confess their crimes in the civil war a ridiculous sentence: eight years of imprisonment. The truth that few people agree to recognize is emerging in court, and is going to erode Uribe's consensus, painted by the usual polls as a plebiscite.

Maybe something is changing even in Colombia until now entirely detached from the tide of the left that has swept South America. Maybe the next election, in 2010, the third historical opportunity to permanently get rid of liberals, conservatives and various "Uribist" will recur. This time without the possibility of tricks. Carlos Bula, Secretary of Alternative Democratic Pole, the left opposition, is a strong believer: "People in this country feel when real change is at stake, and it has been with Gaitan and in 1970: we will win the next election, even if Uribe could be able to run for a third time". If it is, we can begin to really talk about peace. Because, eventually, Colombians know that they are virtually held hostage by those who have maintained for decades the permanent war. But as a woman of Bogotá simply says, "they are 40 thousand, we are 40 million". And no one can deceive a people forever.

Cesare Sangalli