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Rebels at War, Criminals in Peace: A Critical Approach to Violence in Colombia

Sebastián Ronderos and Daniel Marín-López

This essay explores the meaning and significance of the Colombian peace agreements reached by Juan Manuel Santos's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) on 24 November 2016 vis-à-vis a significant organizational shift within the national armed conflict and territorial dispute. By conducting a critical exposition of the armed conflict in Colombia, this essay contributes to the debate surrounding the (ex-)guerrillas' demobilization and disarmament, highlighting the relevance of ideology for analyzing changes in the dynamics of violence in the so-called postconflict.

Key Words: Armed Conflict, Colombia, FARC, Guerillas, Ideology

In an interview, Gabriel García Márquez recalled how he had long desired to write a book in which everything happened: a story that would contain many others and through them reveal the innermost aspects of the dramas and dreams of Colombia's history. At the time, he imagined a tale set in a house that would serve as a larger-than-life daily version of a forgotten story, condemned to endless repetition. Years later, this household would take the name of Macondo, giving rise to a fantastic collection of Colombia's most extreme human enigmas. By drawing on the civil wars of the nineteenth century and the escalation of bipartisan warfare after the assassination of the popular leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (in 1948), García Márquez (1967) depicted the endless exhaustion arising from a violence that never ceased in a place that knew nothing but violence. Every effort to appease the passions, silence the rifles, and bring about reconciliation invariably marked the prelude to a new uprising:

Ten days after a joint communiqué by the Government and the opposition announced the end of the war, there was news of the first armed uprising of Colonel Aureliano Buendía on the western border. His small and poorly

armed force was scattered in less than a week. But during that year, while Liberals and Conservatives tried to make the country believe in reconciliation, he attempted seven other revolts. (75)

Evicted and battered, having seen seventeen of his sons perish after losing thirty-two civil wars, the weary Aureliano Buendía finally realized the overwhelming need to put an end to such a bitter war. However, one loose end remained unnoticed in the unleashing of new struggles through constant changes in the means of confrontation, and at its core were inextinguishable political grievances that resurfaced vibrantly. Macondo was a powder keg ready to flare up into a bonfire:

When he [Aureliano Buendía] said it he did not know that it was easier to start a war than to end one. It took him almost a year of fierce and bloody effort to force the Government to propose conditions of peace favorable to the rebels and another year to convince his own partisans of the convenience of accepting them. He went to inconceivable extremes of cruelty to put down the rebellion of his own officers, who resisted and called for victory, and he finally relied on enemy forces to make them submit. (87)

By appealing to the imagination, García Márquez emulated the failed implementation of the peace agreement negotiated between General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla and the Colombian liberal rebels commanded by Guadalupe Salcedo in 1953. The precariousness of this amnesty and its inability to contain the hatred engendered in political violence was seen early on. Many dissidents were killed after it was signed (Salcedo himself among them). This undermined the stability of the agreement and laid the ground for a persistence of political violence through the organizational transformation of *liberal banditry* into *guerrilla warfare*.

Through his magical reconstruction, García Márquez attempted to reveal the fundamental explanatory logic of the reproduction of Colombian violence, which increased against a backdrop of social eruption that swept the entire continent. Latin America was witnessing the sudden establishment of a de-facto dike that abruptly delineated its antagonistic frontiers. On one hand was the Cuba of the First Declaration of Havana, signed on 20 September 1960, which exemplified the possibility of reaching the “promised land” through popular will, something regarded as attainable in the Caribbean and that could be replicated throughout the continent. On the other hand was the Alliance for Progress, an imperious attempt by the United States to limit the Havana Declaration’s applicability.

However, the local Latin American elites were gradually losing control of their national leadership and unyieldingly increased the use of repressive state apparatuses to exercise their domination. This was often marked by the sponsoring of electoral fraud and the physical elimination of adversaries. Colombia epitomized the repressive state during the 1960s and 1970s through a political system known as the Frente Nacional (National Front), in which the political elites from the traditional conservative and liberal parties shared power (Gutiérrez Sanín 2007).

This situation perpetuated the conditions for popular attempts to seize power in pursuit of freedom. The various Communist Parties throughout the continent assumed a leading role in organizing such attempts (Pizarro Leongómez 2006). Many, such as the Venezuelan and Guatemalan Communist Parties, believed armed struggle was the only feasible way of achieving political transformation. Others regarded democratic legitimacy as a vitally important condition for any long-lasting process of social change and took part in the institutional dynamics of electoral dispute. This was the case in Chile and Argentina. The Colombian Communist Party (PCC) opted for a military strategy of sustained armed actions accompanied by the electoral dynamics of democratic disputes within formal state institutions. It called this approach *the combination of all forms of struggle* (Pizarro Leongómez 1991; Ferro and Uribe 2002; Ortiz 2005).

The PCC found fertile ground for these organizational developments after a victorious resistance by “self-defense” groups, which aligned various peasant forces in southeast Colombia and established the founding myth of guerrilla warfare after Operation Marquetalia. The rebels, under the leadership of Pedro Antonio Marín (nom de guerre: Manuel Marulanda) and Luis Alberto Morantes Jaimes (nom de guerre: Jacobo Arenas), unified the grievances of the rural dispossessed and occupied the regions of El Pato, El Duda, and Guayabero (jointly known as Marquetalia in the local argot). On 18 May 1964, 48 rebels were cornered by 16,000 troops from the Colombian army, which was attempting to eradicate the self-defense groups and regain control of the area (Phelan 2019, 838).

The Colombian military has repeatedly denied U.S. participation in the so-called operation, formally named Plan Lazo. The officials claimed to have adopted the term *lazo* (“tie” in Spanish) because they intended to use siege tactics against the rebels. However, Dennis Rempe (2002) reveals how this plan was crafted on Washington’s post-Cuban Revolution counterinsurgency structure promoted by the Kennedy administration under the Alliance for Progress label. The term *lazo* was said to originate from a misreading by local officials of the acronym LASO, short for Latin American Security Operation. As Ferro and Uribe (2002, 34) stress, from that day on, the Colombian struggle would no longer rest solely on the idea of self-defense, as the Marquetalia resistance had provided the movement with a more structured ideology that unified the rebels under the banner of a revolutionary guerrilla force. This is apparent in the words of FARC leader Jacobo Arenas ([1967] 2019, 28; our translation) that, despite the bloodshed, “the ‘operation’ [against the self-defense groups] provoked the most formidable national movement of solidarity and inaugurated a new stage of revolutionary struggles in Colombia. The agrarian movement of Marquetalia became a guerrilla force with a revolutionary program, and today it is much stronger and more superior than it was before the aggression.”

Although *the combination of all forms of struggle* was established by the PCC in 1964, the FARC was formally instituted at the guerrillas’ Second Conference in 1966 (Pizarro Leongómez 1991). García Márquez wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

during this sort of interregnum of violence, when bipartisan confrontation refused to die and when guerrilla warfare had yet to be born. García Márquez seemed to spot within Pinilla's "failed negotiations" of 1953 the unequivocal sign of a change in political violence that was taking shape by the time his Nobel Prize-winning novel was finally published (in 1967).

Half a century later, Colombia is once again at a crossroads for analyzing its fate. By signing the *Final Accord for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Durable Peace*, historical steps have been taken toward putting an end to the armed conflict. Yet the elites' negligence in implementing the accord, and their omission of (or even support for) paramilitary territorial expansion, have opened a vacuum of authority in different regions. The elimination of political groups has led to a restructuring of various armed criminal forces.

We argue that the affective-mythical dimension is pivotal for understanding any organizational character and its real meaning within concrete social spaces of inscription. We believe that this analytical potential harbors productive insights into the transformation of violence in Colombia. Therefore, the present essay will rely on the Essex school of discourse theory. Its focus on the affective significance of ideological structures provides a specific framework for examining the logics behind the institutionalization, contestation, and sedimentation of social practices and regimes (Howarth 2013). By relying on a "retroductive" form of reasoning (Glynos and Howarth 2007), description and explanation/critique of the FARC's demobilization can be linked, thereby making sense of the transforming dynamics and structures of intrastate violence.

Problematizing the Organization of Violence

To understand its impact on the current dynamics of territorial disputes, this essay will explore the meaning of the demobilization process after the peace agreement reached by the Juan Manuel Santos government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC) on 24 November 2016. To this end, we will first reconstruct certain constitutive features of the FARC as a politico-military organization, thereby providing a clearer understanding of key inherent characteristics of violent and contentious dynamics. We will further examine the process of this demobilization and disarmament, highlighting the most striking features to analyze the implications for the correlation of forces and logics of criminality in the so-called postconflict.

To a certain extent, over the decades the last three generations of Colombians have either witnessed or featured in the changing conditions of war, which range from bipartisan violence in the 1950s to guerrilla warfare against elites in the 1970s and 1980s to the violence of drug trafficking in the 1990s, with confrontation between guerrilla factions, the state's security forces, criminal gangs, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers.

Since the nineteenth century, the unequivocally constant factor has been the dispossession of entire populations plunged into despair and helplessness as the traditional elites have attempted to uphold their position of power. Centuries of violence perpetrated the exodus of a people from their customs and traditions, alienating them from their own memory in a pattern of uprooting. This social displacement has been crude and extreme. As described by Rochlin (2011, 717), fierce local feuds and confrontation between liberals and conservatives during the 1800s resulted in the largest civil war in Latin America in the nineteenth century (War of a Thousand Days, 1899–1902):

Somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000 Colombians lost their lives during that imbroglio. That exhausting ordeal appeared to deflate the country's propensity toward violence until another horrific round of carnage slowly simmered and then boiled over with *La Violencia* during the period 1948–1958. At least 200,000 Colombians lost their lives in that final contest between the Liberals and Conservatives. With *La Violencia* behind it, Colombia during the 1960s continued to witness the highest rate of violent deaths in the world.

Between 1958 and 2010, close to a million people were killed, and another 7.5 million were displaced internally (Unidad para las Víctimas 2020).

The expectation of a significant reduction in the levels of violence after a negotiated agreement therefore appeared reasonable, especially since the peace process laid down the common establishment of regulations and institutions, allowing for investigation into and mediation of social conflicts and the elimination of the zero-sum game assumed in warfare. Colombia seemed to confirm this logical derivation, as it witnessed overwhelming reductions in forced displacements, kidnappings, victims of antipersonnel mines, and murders of both civilians and (ex-)combatants in the immediate postaccord period.

However, studies in the analysis of long-duration conflicts raise the alarm, showing that over 60 percent of armed conflicts worldwide relapse into violence five years after their “resolution” (von Einsiedel et al. 2017). Some scholars stress the vulnerability of the process when it involves disarming only one of the conflicting parties (Walter 1997). Others pinpoint the axial importance of identifying and controlling possible spoilers to the agreed agenda (Stedman 1997; Nasi 2006). For their part, Forman and Patrick (2000) focus on the need to secure the domestic and international resources required to guarantee the implementation of peace agreements. Galtung (1998) and Lederach (1998) insist on the importance of establishing a coherent framework in the promotion of reconciliation among civilians affected by a conflict. Clumsy application, incompetence, or lack of mutual political will throughout the implementation of a negotiated peace agreement can result in the transformation and intensification of violence.

Although the field of conflict studies has achieved significant milestones in understanding complex, contentious dynamics, this literature seems to reproduce a

mechanistic point of view in relation to violence, often taking violence as a mere epiphenomenon of the undercurrents of the economic sphere or as an irrational symptom that invariably indicates a fault in the formal state's institutional framework, distancing it from its political character. In conflict studies' mainstream literature, the conundrum of peace can be unlocked by discerning (and unravelling) passions from rationality, installing stability through mere normative rationality. Ultimately, this view takes the link between ideology and affect for granted and does not attempt to (theoretically or empirically) explain the connection in any manner. By bridging this gap, one can conduct a critical exposition of the armed conflict in Colombia from an affective viewpoint of ideology (Glynos and Howarth 2007), accounting for the structure and agency of the FARC, the affect surrounding it as a political and military organization, and the impact of the guerrillas' demobilization and disarmament in the current dynamics of violence.

A Discourse-Theory Approach to Violence?

From the margins of Marxist theory—mostly drawing on the works of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser—Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed a conceptualization of *discourse* whose scope is not restricted to a purely linguistic phenomenon. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) established that all objects and actions have a meaning constituted by systems of significant differences. This array of various interacting signifying elements gives way to wider discursive structures that ultimately formulate explanations for (and constructions of) social life. Yet, as no representation of society is ever capable of capturing the totality of social experience, any form of representation is always limited and can therefore be challenged (112). As aptly put by Glynos (2001, 197), “From this perspective, the opposition is not between representations of society on the one hand and society as such on the other, but between representations of society and the failure of representation itself.” Therefore, if discourse for Laclau and Mouffe refers to the structures of symbolic systems that shape every social formation, then the task of discourse analysis is to examine their political construction and function, as well as the concrete conditions allowing their existence.

Under the label of post-Marxism, these seminal reflections came to constitute a field of research in its own right. Not that the discourse-theory approach has remained untouched by criticism: as it derives from Marxist perspectives, concerns arose over its abandonment of economic analysis, with critics asserting the need to consider both the political and economic dimensions (see Diskin and Sandler 1993). However, rather than presuming a sort of analytical imperialism that would emphasize politics at the expense of other layers of social life, we believe discourse theory can construct productive insights, allowing further analysis through interconnections with different social dimensions (and fields of research).

And discourse theory's importance assumes a dominant role when one notes the limited attention given by analysts and commentators to the affective and ideological significance of those players with a stake in the Colombian armed conflict, particularly when it comes to the FARC. Far from the rationalist perspective (and normative focus) of conflict studies, discourse theory takes the affect as a constitutive feature in the construction of social experience (Ronderos 2021).

When normative debates on peace and violence are put aside, ideology comes to the fore as a key aspect of social dynamics, with profound analytic potential. The invocation of the term ideology within discourse theory refers not solely to the principles and ideas present in an organization, party, or movement but also, perhaps more importantly, to the way subjects and collectivities affectively engage with these institutions (Glynos 2020). The affective turn in discourse theory emphasizes the function of ideological discourses as a form of emotional investment and mythic attachment (fantasy-constructed narrative) in different kinds of social representation (see Laclau 2005; Glynos 2008; Glynos and Howarth 2007). The myth functions as a means "to 'cover-over' or conceal the subject's lack by providing a fantasy of wholeness or harmony" that, when successfully installed, can crystallize collective social imaginaries and ignite (or prevent) social change (Howarth 2013, 247). To grasp the emotional significance within discursivity, the analyst must develop thick descriptions and fill in the gap between biography and representation. This is precisely what we intend to explore in the organizational structure of the FARC.

We will rely on discourse theory and insightful contributions within Marxism to construct a cross-fertilization for analyzing contemporary armed-confrontation dynamics from an affective perspective of ideology. In concrete terms, we are interested in examining the affective dimension of discursivity as an underlying investment that exhibits particularities of ideological significance, highlighting the myth's role in such a discursive articulation (Laclau 1997; Howarth 2013). By referencing (post-)Marxist insights on ideology, we aim to unblock meaningful elements surrounding the FARC and their analytical relevance for understanding vital political logics being enacted within the transformation of violence in Colombia.

The FARC at War

The Colombian armed conflict underwent a transition from a "guerrilla force without a war" to a "guerrilla force with a war," and 1978 is regarded by several authors as the turning point between these phases (Pizarro Leongómez 1991; Ferro and Uribe 2002; Gutiérrez Sanin 2004).

After a huge social mobilization in the *Paro* ("strike") of 1977, a second wave of rebel leaders such as Luis Édgar Devia (nom de guerre: Raúl Reyes) joined the FARC and made the organization a stronghold in southeast Colombia. This same period marked the apogee of the coca-growing economy, on which the

FARC—consisting of about six hundred members—was dependent in the mid-1980s. This became its primary source of financing, accompanied by recurring kidnappings, racketeering, bank raids, blackmail, and extortion. During the 1990s the FARC experienced strong growth in its sustained confrontation with the Colombian army (from 94 confrontations in 1990 to 697 in 2002). It also consolidated its involvement as a full-fledged drug cartel in a highly profitable illegal market (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004, 265). This remarkable expansion was accompanied by a decline in civilian support for the rebels as the conflict reached brutal levels of noncombat victimization. The FARC significantly increased its involvement in the number of massacres and victims, yet it was still outdone by the brutal paramilitary alliance backed by important segments of the elite.

A major strategic shift is observed in the literature on the FARC's territorial expansion. Echandía (1999) noted a strong causal relationship between the beliefs and grievances of the locals and occupation by guerrilla forces, as the FARC initially sought to expand its influence by establishing order and control over regions in which the absence of authority presented favorable conditions for its political agenda. However, Pizarro Leongómez (2006) stated that, from the 1980s onward, the FARC started expanding into regions that were economically profitable (i.e., regions producing/extracting bananas, gold, oil, coal, and coca). The guerrillas' strategic plans were strengthened by the appropriation of these substantial resources. By the early 1990s, the FARC had expanded its guerrilla fronts throughout the country, extending the space of militarized territory and more or less successfully dispersing the National Army. This marked a shift from *guerrilla warfare* to a *war of movements*.

Following the government's attack on the FARC's high-command secretariat in La Uribe on 9 December 1990, a "full-scale war" was in full swing. The rebels began concentrating forces in the south, particularly in the departments (political-administrative regions) of Putumayo, Guaviare, Nariño, Caquetá, and Meta. This would give rise to a pivotal military realignment. After the Eighth Conference in April 1993, regional blocks and adjacent commands were created as part of a mobile campaign, expanding throughout the country and turning inhospitable zones into strategic rearguard areas.

Phelan (2019) highlights a key point for understanding the cohesive organizational structure of the FARC, associated with its political agenda. After Marquetalia, the bases of the FARC's objectives were outlined in the *Agrarian Programme of the FARC-EP Guerrillas*, which was deeply rooted in the historical peasant struggle for land. As such, the FARC's grounding political structure developed from grievances expressed through the local experience of "self-defense" and not as an intellectual (and merely strategic) impersonation of a foreign experience, which was the case, for example, with the National Liberation Army (ELN), which originated from the attempt to create the same intellectual spark in Colombia that ignited the military dynamism of the Cuban Revolution. As aptly put by Gutiérrez Sanín (2004, 275): "The self-defense ideology is powerful within FARC because it

operates in the intersection area of biography and history, giving the FARC members the tools to interpret articulately their personal experience in a bigger explanatory frame of collective destiny.”

This local articulation would undeniably broaden itself, as the FARC further elaborated its *Agrarian Programme* at the guerrillas’ Eighth Conference in 1993. This is the point when the guerrilla and the more orthodox Marxist views of the PCC definitively parted ways, with the latter’s focal influence, represented by the figure of Gilberto Vieira, taking over. Vieira was a cofounder of the PCC in 1930 and served as general secretary from 1947 to 1991. He was one of the first Latin American communists to hail the character of Simón Bolívar through a non-reductionist perspective, approaching Marxism as “a science, not a dogma” (Harnecker 1988, 3). Vieira headed a de-Stalinist and Leninist reconstruction of the PCC in the 1940s, redefining a dogmatism that he believed had held back the revolutionary potential within the Latin American context.

This view was explicitly assumed by the FARC two years after Vieira left his position as the PCC’s general secretary. The guerrillas then drew up an ideological morphology structured around grievances embedded in agrarian self-defense struggles since the 1920s combined with a Bolivarian construal of sovereignty vis-à-vis Marxist-Leninist principles, both unambiguously shown in the introduction to the FARC’s Eighth Conference statutes: “The FARC-EP apply the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism to the Colombian situation and are governed by their Strategic Plan and Revolutionary Program, the conclusions of their National Conferences, the Plenums of their Central General Secretary, and their Internal Regulations; they are inspired by Liberator Simón Bolívar’s revolutionary thought on anti-imperialism, Latin American unity, equality, and popular well-being. They also advocate the creation of a genuine Bolivarian Army” (FARC-EP [1993] 2019, 7; our translation).

FARC leaders were aware that any ostentatious enjoyment of wealth would weaken the guerrillas’ unity and combative capacity and would establish regulatory and bureaucratic constraints on the combatants. Guerrilla members received no form of individual income, with no regular wage, no share of the spoils, no family life, and no real hope of escaping the war. They had committed themselves to a lifetime of fighting only avoidable through death. Nevertheless, the FARC at an early stage built an organizational capacity that allowed for an unending conflict: “Despite this, FARC’s members generally fight with great verve. There are exceptions, but as a rule their behavior in combat exhibits both skill and motivation against opponents endowed with better technical means. On the defensive, they do not fall apart, and only at the margin does the group suffer defections” (Gutiérrez Sanin 2004, 271).

These points display a trait of the guerrilla acknowledged by few, against the standard image propagated by mass media through the decades, which presents the Colombian insurgency as caused by a terrorist organization, plainly criminal, whose expansion was only made possible by drug trafficking. In Althusserian

terms, the organizational character of the insurgency represents not only an “omission that has not been divulged, but, on the contrary, [it is] consecrated as a non-omission, and proclaimed as fullness” (Althusser and Balibar 1968, 31). But the FARC was far removed from this one-dimensional image portraying it as a narco-terrorist organization. The guerrillas maintained an ironclad hierarchical structure, with stable control of its commands, a permanent presence in twenty-five of the thirty-two departments at the national level, and the ability to implement international humanitarian law at a level comparable to that of the Colombian state. These conditions allowed the guerrillas to exercise control in their zones of influence, generating stability and territorial rulership, to a greater or lesser degree.

This is not to say that drug trafficking played no role in expanding the armed conflict and financial sustainability of the FARC as an organization, but at no point did it offer an ostentatious lifestyle to its members (whose casualties were systemically higher vis-à-vis the Colombian army). Economic incentives appear highly unlikely to explain how the FARC managed to remain cohesive for over half a century. Indeed, as the Colombian war became increasingly criminal, the FARC also strengthened its political character. How do we approach such a conundrum?

Ideological structure must be stressed as a significant component through which the FARC maintained coherence and articulation over a broadly lucrative and criminalized extended civil war. Pehlan (2019, 5) clearly explains how the FARC’s political agenda had remained highly consistent since the movement’s birth. The guerrillas’ founding demands were kept at the core of the organization until its demobilization and were copiously referred to in the *Final Accord for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Durable Peace*. The FARC’s *Agrarian Programme* systemically urged the establishment of a broad rural credit system, property titles for tenant farmers and peasants, the provision of adequate health and education services in the countryside, the protection of indigenous communities, and land demarcation. Many of these items formed the core of the 2016 peace agreement’s first point, which dealt with comprehensive rural reform: “By reconciling key FARC grievances pertaining to agrarian reform, social justice, political representation for the rural population and those marginalized, and the nature of the country’s political system, the Agreement has also served to provide incentives and space for the FARC to pursue objectives democratically through its new political party” (Phelan 2019, 848).

Marquetalia, as a harsh displacement of agrarian-liberal social structures, had assumed a mythical role capable of stimulating and articulating nodal points between historical rural struggles, the potential enclosed in Marxist-Leninist theory (adapted to these particular conditions), and the anti-imperialist significance within Simón Bolívar’s legacy, together crystalizing a very peculiar ideological morphology. As expressed by Ernesto Laclau (1990, 30), the constitution of the subject is nothing but the “distance” between the undecidability of the structure and the

moment of decision; therefore, dislocation provides room for the rearticulation of different forms of (collective and individual) subjectivity, launching social change.

Such an articulation demands a great deal of awareness of the constructed nature of the social surface and of the “psychological” role taken by ideology to “organise” human masses” and give shape to “popular beliefs” (Gramsci 1971, 377). This undoubtedly provided the rebels with a strong structure of affective bonds, of a common identification endowed with a promising emancipatory potential delineating possible political horizons through concrete circumstances of struggle. Laclau (1997, 315), following Gramsci’s (1971) recognition of George Sorel’s conception of the mythical, took myth as a key point for theorizing the constitution of a social link. In Howarth’s (2013, 163) words, “The work of myth is to repair the dislocations experienced by subjects in particular situations by providing a new principle of reading of a situation.” Marquetalia can be seen as an example of this in the Colombian context, and the FARC’s organizational cohesion can therefore be explained as an effect of the skillful articulation of a mythical construction of collective identities. This mobilization of common affects was able, in turn, to structure a robust yet hermetic military and political force with firm principles and objectives.

It is worth understanding, however, how the ideological synthesis articulated after the events in Marquetalia assumed an ambiguous character in terms of military strategy, mainly from 1990 onward. As the PCC’s and the FARC’s ideological structures took a heterodox course to combat a restraining dogmatism that had held back the revolutionary process in Latin America, they failed to account for the complexity of the demographic realignment of the Colombian population (progressively urbanized, rooted in Catholicism, and subjected to the elites’ liberal-conservative hegemony). Following Gramsci (1971), consent in this situation was largely created and exercised within “civil-society” institutions (churches, schools, media, etc.).

Vieira’s conversation with Harnecker (1988, 14) also delved into this discussion. The former PCC leader stressed how the PCC’s split from the Chinese Maoists was due to a dogmatism that neglected the nature of social processes, with Mao’s postulate that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” emphasized pejoratively. Nevertheless, from the 1990s onward, the FARC seemed to take this Maoist catchphrase as its military maxim, gradually losing its more extensive and transversal social base. FARC support was eventually restricted to very specific social movements in their zones of influence, and this ultimately weakened the FARC’s capacity to defy the elites’ national leadership, particularly as the balance between the state and civil society began to change radically.

In short, this ideological component acted to cement the guerrillas’ internal structure. Yet, if such a mythical-affective structure enabled the FARC to sustain an armed confrontation, this structure was limited in its means for achieving ultimate success. Such was the conclusion that both the FARC and a section of the elite, headed by Juan Manuel Santos, would finally reach.

A War without a Guerrilla Force

Without doubt, the FARC repeatedly stated its willingness to find a political solution to the civil war, and it engaged in a series of negotiations at different stages of Colombia's political history. In the FARC's own words, "We were always committed throughout the different moments of our history to search for a political solution. That is why we initiated dialogue processes in La Uribe in 1984; then in Tlaxcala in 1992; later in El Caguán as of January 1999; and, more recently, in Havana since November 2012, having signed the 'General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Durable Peace'" (FARC-EP 2016).

Likewise, the context was favorable for the agreement not only because of the guerrillas' isolation in relation to the masses but because the FARC (though it still had the military capacity to extend the conflict for another half century) had been significantly reduced since 1998, by the modernization and realignment of the Colombian army backed by the U.S. military via Plan Colombia. Another factor was the abrupt expansion of paramilitary groups with wide support from local and national elites. So "the will and political decision of the Government of Juan Manuel Santos" presented itself as a convenient way out of an exhausting, contentious confrontation (FARC-EP 2016).

Yet additional elements can provide further explanations for understanding the FARC's move from war to peace, and here, we believe, the ideological remains paramount. Coming from a rural background, Manuel Marulanda had organized the resistance in Marquetalia and had become a legend after enduring the blow of the Operación. He had been responsible for coordinating political and military structures. His experience in the *campesino* resistance in the late 1940s had made him highly pessimistic about any mediated solution with the national elites, and the FARC's revolutionary propaganda had turned him into an inspiring leader. When Guillermo León Sáenz (nom de guerre: Alfonso Cano) became commander after Marulanda's death from a heart attack in 2008, a political solution to the armed conflict became the guerrillas' most desired objective. Cano, one of the few guerrilla leaders with an urban outlook, had less influence with FARC's more militaristic elements and profoundly believed that a political resolution with sections of the elite could be achieved.

This change of command brought about a swift change in the guerrillas' discourse, and a new consensus was reached within its military elements. The thirty-thesis manifesto that originated from the Tenth Conference epitomized the FARC's renewed understanding of revolutionary mobilization (FARC-EP 2016). For the FARC, this period of negotiations was a tipping point for at least three main conditions: First was the realization that armed confrontation had widened a gap between the political and military structures (favoring the latter). Second was recognition by the state of FARC political motivations, reinforcing conditions for a solution by dialogue (*salida dialogada*). Third was the Havana

process, which reinvigorated some courses of action that the FARC had historically formulated. For the guerrillas, the Havana process echoed the 1964 *Agrarian Programme of the FARC-EP Guerrillas* and the 1982 Eighth Conference, emphasizing unresolved issues such as land distribution (FARC-EP 2016). As a result, the agreement officially constituted yet another step in a long sequence of struggles that incorporated the signifier *peace* within a dialectical, discursive narrative of revolutionary coherence. The FARC's cohesion during the civil war was evident in its decisive resolution to put an end to the war. Only an organization with such a mythical-affective foundation could abruptly silence the same rifles that had fired across the Colombian landscape for over half a century.

Prior to the peace agreement, the FARC consisted of 13,302 members, including combatants, imprisoned guerrillas, and unarmed militia (Kroc Institute 2020, 57). After signing the agreement, the FARC demobilized 6,800 active members, dismantled its militia network, and handed 8,994 military devices over to the United Nations. These included state-of-the-art weapons such as Browning .50 calibers, AK-47 machine guns, and industrial-type mortars (an average of 1.32 weapons per combatant and 72 tons of metal in total). The FARC disarmament's arms-to-combatant ratio is unmatched when compared to other agreements to end long-lasting intrastate conflicts (Valencia 2017). Furthermore, any international model of successful demobilization assumes a remaining dissident faction of between 10 and 15 percent of former members. This is regarded as normal. The number of FARC dissidents—those who are still active—is estimated at between 800 and 1,200 combatants, somewhere between 6 and 10 percent of the overall number of its members. This fact takes on greater significance when one recalls that the dissident paramilitary faction amounted to around 22 percent in the aftermath of their agreements with the Alvaro Uribe Velez administration and is currently expanding rapidly throughout the country. In other words, the FARC has fully complied with demobilization and disarmament processes and has definitively ceased to exist as a guerrilla force (see Ronderos 2020).

On the other hand, the withdrawal of an armed player of such size and cohesion has created, in turn, a considerable vacuum of territorial authority. For decades, the FARC administered a system of regulation over licit and illicit markets through which other regional players acted. If 1978 marked a decisive transition in the armed conflict (from a “guerrilla force without a war” to a “guerrilla force with a war”), then 2017 marked a shift toward a “war without a guerrilla force,” creating a vacancy of command and authority over a population, resources, and territories.

Death without Interruptions

Those who have ever challenged the Colombian political and economic elites and have then subjected themselves to an amnesty granted by these elites have paid a

fee in blood. There are no exceptions. These include the legendary liberal rebel Guadalupe Salcedo—whose death was for García Márquez one of the detonators that fueled a continuity of violence in the late 1950s. Other examples are the annihilation of the Patriotic Union (UP), when more than three thousand members were systematically assassinated in what amounted to a political genocide, and the death of the charismatic commander of the M-19 guerrilla force, Carlos Pizarro Leongómez. Each and every one paid the price for the desired peace and social justice—which have yet to be attained—with their lives.

Although a long time has passed, some of Colombia's problems remain the same. At least 132 FARC ex-combatants and 35 of their relatives have been killed since the signing of the agreement (INDEPAZ 2019), a scale 23 times higher than the national homicide rate (Kroc Institute 2020, 13). If the beginning of 2017 pointed toward a reduction in violence, 2018 set a pace for the reverse trend. Since the signing of the peace agreement, more than 702 regional leaders have been assassinated across twenty-eight of Colombia's thirty-two administrative departments, with 2018 as the peak year (INDEPAZ 2019, 9). Of these, 499 were associated with peasant organizations, indigenous and African-descended communities, environmentalist movements, and communal agrarian struggles over land, territory, and natural resources, representing 71.08 percent of the total number of homicides (24). Most of the killings have taken place in areas of historic FARC influence and high levels of poverty.

The guerrillas' demobilization has been a new social dislocation that has altered the fundamental reality of war, making room for communities to organize and promote local initiatives of collective action. Indeed, "social dislocations may lead to the construction of new collective wills and political forces, which can link together different agents that may bring about or stall social change" (Howarth 2013, 162). In parallel, the elites, organized within the state, have shown an unwillingness to encourage institutional capacity in former FARC zones of influence.

This social scenario has created the perfect situation for a dispute between local landowners and criminal factions—many stemming from paramilitary groups conveniently forgotten in the peace agreement, despite the FARC and civil organizations warning the government of their increasing military actions throughout the country. These factions' main targets have been the newly organized communities and their forms of (individual or collective) leadership. The current confrontations are largely motivated by control over territory and over coca crops, suppliers, traders, and trafficking corridors. These have been focused on the departments of Meta and Guaviare—with their river access to the Amazon (along the Miraflores-Vaupés axis) and Venezuela (through Guainía and Vichada)—and on the repositioning on the Pacific coast of Nariño and Cauca.

Guarantees in the truth, justice, and reparations process have been undermined. The current government steadily opposes transitional-justice mechanisms such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Truth Commission and

claims that these institutions “seek impunity for narco-terrorists.” The government is now aiming to impose greater penalties on ex-guerrillas, forcing the extradition of their most visible leaders through false accusations. This was revealed in the case of FARC spokesperson Seuxis Pausías Hernández Solarte (nom de guerre: Jesús Santrich; see Insight Crime 2021). The government at the same time provides incentives for ex-combatants to return to clandestine activities. Many of them now put their combat experience at the service of the newly organized armed structures that occupy the FARC’s historic areas of influence (Johnson and Vélez 2020).

Like the biblical hurricane—impatient, full of voices from the past and murmurs of former generations—whose anger transformed García-Márquez’s Macondo into a whirlwind of dust and rubble, Colombia’s status quo remains trapped in recurrent events, perpetuating a nostalgia that will perhaps extend itself for a hundred more years of solitude.

Conclusions

The present essay has undertaken a critical discursive analysis of the FARC from an affective viewpoint of ideology. By constructing a thick description of the FARC’s trajectory and of its mythical structuring as a political and military organization, we have drawn vital explanatory logics that may explain the guerrilla group’s cohesion over a long period and within an increasingly criminalized context.

The construction of this critical exploration of the FARC has also allowed us to explain vital conditions for its transit from war to peace and to further assess the impact of this transit vis-à-vis the transformation of violence dynamics. This analytic move—almost completely overlooked in the mainstream literature of conflict studies—has shown a prodigious explanatory capacity for understanding both evocative elements within the relationship between affect, discourse, and agency and also the effect of such mediation in concrete areas of analysis.

As a result, we believe the in-depth study of the discursive composition of organizations in how they structure their own ideological (and affective) significance can contribute significantly to the explanation of contentious social dynamics. Rethinking (post-)Marxism and further exploring (and exploiting) its critical potential for conducting political and economic analysis will greatly benefit the study of armed confrontation and social struggle.

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