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Legitimizing violence
when the State is untrustworthy
Tales from Medellín

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This essay comes from the findings of a fieldwork conducted in Medellín in 2019[1]. It focuses on the structural issues that made violence a constituent element through the urban and social history of the city. In fact, the broken pact between citizens and the State made people arrange other mechanisms in order to sustain their life, and informality and illegality played an important role through the rapid demographic growth that started in the 1950s. These shortages to secure basic-need services in the rising peripheral communities by the local administration, left governance voids that brought the population to arrange also their own structures of security and justice, recurring to violence in desperate cases. Soon enough, these vulnerable citizens confront with non-State armed groups, urban gangs in particular, that offered alternative forms of fidelity and social order, violently imposing their law or legitimizing their presence by providing employment and other State-denied services. The result today is an urbanscape of several juxtaposed laws, where policemen are not considered reliable while those assuring security and justice might be urban gangs, whose position blurs the boundary between trusted authorities and life threats.

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Building Medellín through violence

When "La Violencia" started in Colombia (1948-1958) and the conflict escalated countrywide, people from the inner regions were forced to migrate to major urban agglomerations. Before that, land dispossession and labour exploitation affected part of these populations, as equivocal land titling laws favoured big land owners and colonial settlers to the expenses of peasants and indigenous populations (LeGrand 2016). Although the following agrarian movements claimed their land rights by occupying the stolen lands, the rising violence and the appeal of better wages in cities facilitated rural families' migrations. In those years, Medellín was facing an important economic crisis and the new-comers settled in the hillsides of the Aburrà valley, where the city takes place. Informal economy and black trades represented the main means of livelihood (Samper 2015). Local authorities attempted to halt the instauration of these settlements, but each time comunas were burnt and torn down, new ones were built, and the increasing migration flow facilitated the spread of new communities throughout the valley. Soon, the criminal market saw an opportunity in fulfilling the need for protection of these informal citizens as the illicit nature of their businesses also required territorial protection from State's eye.

Common bandits and small criminal networks were present since the 60s, working with a low profile and without recurring to an exaggerated use of violence. When cocaine entered the illegal market,

1 The fieldwork took place between July and October 2019. Seventeen non-structured interviews were carried out. For security reasons, some of them were conducted in covert mode (see Calvey 2013).

some of these groups turned into armed forces at the service of criminal entrepreneurs. Other armies came directly from marginalized contexts, such as the case of the galladas, youthful street aggregations not born with criminal means but trying to counter socio-economic exclusion (Melguizo & Cronshaw 2001). Peripheral and informal neighbourhoods transformed into protected narco-traffic hubs, where the underworld provided not only sources of income, but also offered more attractive life alternatives both economically and socially. In some cases, armed groups achieved trust from locals building housing and providing other public facilities, at times turning into political referee such as the case seen with Pablo Escobar. Other times these armed groups violently conquered a district, usually by overthrowing the previous ruling groups. Once exclusive holders of coercion, these armed actors could decide to apply strong repressive measures toward the community, especially when tensions among groups were high, or to limit violence in order not to lose people's consensus. In any case, non-State armed groups became the new uncontested law, and death became the ultimate punishment for dissidents.

One of the people I interviewed, a 50-year-old woman, still recalls the moments of that military intervention along with earlier ones, where many civilians were killed in the State's attempt to eradicate FARC members

The position of State forces and institutions was ambiguous during those years. On one side, they lost territorial control in large portions of the city to the point they were not allowed to enter certain areas. On the other, the growth of the narco-traffic industry turned into an instrument enabling political corruption, and that complicated the war against narco-traffic supported by the US (Samper 2015). However, after the fall of the Medellín cartel in 1993, an internal war started within the underworld, while the State directed its attacks toward the guerrilla cells, once they entered the city. Tactical alliances with other non-State armed groups, paramilitaries in this case, allowed the State to eradicate the leftist threat at the cost of civil losses: military attacks took place in the midst of informal environments and innocent citizens were killed during the operations. After 2002, conflicts and violence levels have drastically decreased, but the underworld is still having a diffused impact in Medellín in different ways (see Mauloni 2019). Spatial sovereignties here are shared (Agnew 2009) and fluid (Armao 2013), as gangs' conflicts are still active and turf geographies constantly changing.

State and citizens: a broken pact

Even before La Violencia, State hardly became reliable to the eyes of the marginalized population, as it failed in protecting peasants' rights in the countryside, and turned later into a repressive actor exerting violence toward second-class citizens (McIlwaine & Moser 2001). As in other cases in Latin America, the rule of law was seen as an instrument to preserve the privileges of the wealthier class while, for the oppressed, its enforcement symbolized an authoritarian tool that turned State forces into enemies (Pinheiro 1996). Several disappointments led people to delegitimize public force and institutions, and they took security and justice in their own hands, legitimizing the use of violence and justifying, in exceptional cases, their *derecho de matar* (right to kill). This situation facilitated the rise of non-State armed actors (urban gangs or drug lords) that offered protection and were also able to provide for other basic services denied by the State such as housing, energy and employment. As this world of crime presented itself as alternative, "the boundary marking what could be considered as socially legitimate was redefined" (Feltran 2020) and local population gave their trust and respect for these organizations.

Authors refer to chronic violence (Pearce 2007, Muggah 2012, Davis 2012) when describing these particular settings, where growing extreme social inequality and disjunctive democratization, the rise of organized crime and illicit trade and the enduring legacies of armed conflict and historic state

society, lead people to "look for protection in smaller, more reliable in-groups" (Adams 2012). In urban environments, the result is "a fragmented, ambivalent and hybrid cityscape with varying manifestations of the complex of poverty, exclusion, coercion violence and fear" (Koonings & Kruijt 2007), where the State has not only lost its monopoly over the provision of security, but also its power and authority (Davis 2009, Armao 2013). The normalization of violence is one of the consequences in these situations, and an example presented itself during a field interview in the district called Padro Centro.

Loud screams were coming from the street as a thief had been found in the midst of his coupe when the pedestrians started calling for the attention of the neighbourhood to stop the man. On his side, the *ladrón* (thief), stuck in the house he was robbing, was faced with two choices: risk his life knowing he would have probably been beaten if someone caught him, or wait for the police to come and pick him up. In the meantime, fifty people had gathered in front of the house:

> That is normal here (referring to Medellín), not really usual in this *barrio* but frequent in other areas. Here no one trusts the police and knows that justice will not be made. [. . .] If someone attacks you, do not shout for help but scream *ladrón*. No one likes to meddle in other people's problems but the community is united against some things. (Student, 22 years old, commenting the mentioned scene).

Although this episode of violence does not reflect the everyday of Medellín, nor a widespread behaviour of its citizens, it underlines the lack of trust between citizens and public authorities that automatically rely on other mechanisms to assure justice.

Security and justice in the midst of controlled environment

Especially in the early 2000s, several initiatives promoted by the local public administration tried to repair the State's lacks by aiming to redefine its role and its duties as a service provider. For example, the improvement brought by the Metrocable[2] and the Urbanismo Social[3] facilitated the mobility of the remote communities with the broader city and furnished public spaces and services to build a sense of citizenship and a feeling of belonging in a larger community. However, people from the *comunas* still feel ambivalent towards public institutions due to its multi-faceted nature shown during the years.

That is the case of *Comuna 13*, where Operación Orion took place in 2002. One of the people I interviewed, a 50-year-old woman, still recalls the moments of that military intervention along with earlier ones, where many civilians were killed in the State's attempt to eradicate FARC members. According to her, the municipality has not formally apologized for these as well as other crimes, of which pain is still vivid in the citizens' memory. The presence of non-State armed groups, on the other side, also posed a challenge for the life of the community. Since the very first moment "they came", several agencies of violence ruled over the neighbourhood, whose repression and degree of violence changed accordingly (Rozema 2008). People became used to the presence of non-State armed groups and, although they were not accepted as leaders for many, it is through them that security is still guaranteed today. Around the Graffiti Tour[4], for example, locals were allowed to have businesses only if under the payment of *vacunas* (tax): "As long as you follow the rules, nothing happens to you" otherwise "you know what happens." The same interviewee also admitted she felt safe knowing someone was watching over her, because her belief was that in any case the police would do nothing.

2 Gondola lift system developed across the valley and reaching the most remote communities.

3 An historical moment for Medellín started in 2004 characterized by strong infrastructural interventions in marginalized neighbourhood aiming to tackle both poverty and violence.

4 The Graffiti Tour is a tourist attraction built along a series of art-works. It represents an important source of income for locals that arranged a tailored tourist infrastructure through the path.

These considerations were shared among people in similar contexts, and many of the interviewees mentioned rape when talking about personal security: "If your husband beats you and you go to the police, you know nothing is going to happen. If you go to them you know something will happen." (Municipal worker, 36 years old). The same informant, working in the neighbourhood of Villatina, admitted that "in this neighbourhood police do not enter. They are rarely seen here and if they come is just to negotiate with gangs [. . .] The whole system is corrupted here. People trust gangs. Just here, the barrio 'La Liberdad' was built with the help of M-19. In this way, their power was legitimized." Non-State armed groups were then able to build their image as life supporters by helping people building their houses when abandoned by the State. With time their role became so powerful that locals accepted their violence as the modus operandi, and sporadic episodes are still occurring today. Police forces, by paying gangs in front of everyone's eye to "keep an apparent peace", just reinforce the image of an amphibious State (Montoya Restrepo 2014).

Closing reflections

In the history of Medellín, State and its forces have hardly represented trustworthy allies for the marginalized citizens and their violence, whether in form of expulsion or direct attack, drew citizens away from the State. As an entire social world was put aside, another one presented itself as an alternative, especially within the informal communities where other actors became exclusive holders of coercion. If in some cases non-State armed groups violently repressed the population, in others they represented the only reliable device to assure territorial protection and justice for the excluded. Despite that, criminal groups and vulnerable citizens cannot be considered as allies (de Souza 2009) as groups' socio-economic violence is just meant to preserve the gangs' status-quo (Moser 2004). In these spaces violence is generally condemned, but its use becomes legitimate in the quest of justice, and so is the use of gangs under certain circumstances. It is through them that this legitimation takes shape, and so is people's right to kill when fatal sentences are commissioned. After all, "violence justifies violence"[5], and that makes violence a self-reproducing phenomenon. Furthermore, the shared consciousness of gangs as sicarios works as a self-control device within communities.

5 Previously mentioned informant.

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