Chapter 18
Reconstruction of Historical Memory In The Midst Of the Armed Conflict in Colombia:
Questions, Reflections, Difficulties and Learnings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to reflect upon the construction of historical memory in Colombia from an institutional framework and in the midst of an armed conflict that does not cease. The objective is to discuss the difficulties that emerge in this type of research when conducted under the political, conceptual and methodological parameters of a public entity. Therefore, three contexts that influenced the development of the research are analysed (institutional, social-political and scientific) and then the limits and difficulties that these implicate are exposed. Finally, a series of recommendations are presented as well as the learned lessons that should represent a contribution for future work related with the reconstruction of historical memory in contexts of violence and armed conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Colombia has experienced one of the longest and most violent armed conflicts in the world. For more than 50 years a large proportion of its population has been affected by this conflict that has resulted in the loss of family and friends, life projects, territories and cultural expressions. In practice, the armed conflict expresses itself in murder, kidnapping, forced displacement and other forms of human rights violations. In this country, war has become a structural element of everyday life, with violence as a determining aspect of how people live in a large part of rural and urban areas.

Over the years the conflict has become more complex in regard to the participation of diverse protagonists coming from the drug-trafficking business, corruption and other mechanisms of criminality. In addition to this, leftist guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the Government have transformed the conflict into an internal conflict with no ideological reference other than the unjust enrichment of such groups. The consequence of all this has been the configuration of a diffuse context in which there is no clarity in terms of motives and actors. This scenario, in combination with an intensification of violent acts and therefore a significant number of victims, has overwhelmed the Government´s response.

Indeed, the levels of violence reached at the present time are unprecedented as they are characterized by extreme cruelty, dehumanisation and the denigration of the human being. These experiences have marked not only the lives of the victims but have also determined the lives of Colombians and the way the country works. The Colombian Government has tried throughout its history – without any success until now – to achieve peace and consolidate a democratic society.

For example, in recent times Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) undertook the demobilisation of paramilitary groups during his Presidency through the Law of Justice and Peace (*Ley de Justicia y Paz –Ley 975- Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2005*). This involved groups confessing to their crimes in return for reduced sentences being handed down and ex-combatants being given the chance to reintegrate into society. This law was laid out through transitional justice with the aim of achieving peace in post-conflict Colombia. At the present time, President Juan Manuel Santos´s administration (2010-present) has been conducting conversations with the group known as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the *FARC. The aim of these peace talks includes the* creation of accords that will lead to the laying down of arms. Additionally, the Colombian Gov-

ernment has claimed it has initiated conversations with the second largest guerrilla group known as the ELN (National Liberation Army, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* in Spanish), to join the attempt of reaching a peace agreement.

These initiatives have contributed to the mobilisation of a discourse that supports the transition of Colombia towards the end of the conflict, seeking to place the victims at the centre while the armed conflict has not been solved. However, in Colombia victims have acquired prominence in diverse processes that seek to repair the harm caused by violence, as well as to guarantee rights to truth, justice and reparation and reconstruct the historical memory. The intention is to know what happened, why it happened, who the perpetrators and the victims were, and what actions can be taken to prevent this violence from happening again.

The Colombian Government has deployed a series of efforts to meet the demands of the transition from the armed conflict into the consolidation of a democratic society or, to put it another way, the requirements that imply moving from war to peace. Thus, institutions have been created with the objective of assisting victims in dimensions such as psychosocial, economic, material, symbolic and access to justice. Efforts have also been made to create reliable databases that give a real account of the actual number of victims, the violent acts and the perpetrators. Work and action is ongoing to restitute land to people who have been victimised by forced displacement, to promote the return to the land and generate the conditions to end forced displacement. Finally, the need to rebuild the historical memory of the conflict has been emphasised in order to document the violence, dignify victims (by giving them names and faces) and conduct a symbolic reparation process.

Nonetheless, what is exceptional about this case is that these efforts have been carried out while the conflict is still ongoing. This stands in contrast to previous experiences where this process is carried out in the post-conflict phase when distance from the violent past can be taken and advances towards

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