

Subjects suffering in resistance: an approach to the subjectivities of the Colombian armed conflict.

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Introduction

In this paper we report on the results of an investigation carried out with peasant communities in the Department of Antioquia, Colombia.¹ This research grew from a critique of the biomedical model's shortcomings in accounting for the relationship between political violence and mental health in the medium and long term.² This dynamic is especially relevant in the Colombian context where, after decades of armed conflict, a transformation has begun following the signing of a peace treaty and negotiations with the country's two last remaining guerrilla groups.³

Questions about the relationship between mental health and armed conflicts are not new; they appeared after the First World War, gaining full legitimacy after the establishment of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁴ Within this literature, there has been a

tendency to give greater relevance to clinical and epidemiological studies that explore short-term effects, with an emphasis on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric diagnoses.²⁻⁴ Unfortunately, such research has neglected pressing questions⁶⁻⁸ concerning the subjectivities that take shape in the medium and long term horizons of prolonged armed conflicts.⁵

A context of violence

We sought to answer these questions by working with peasants from a municipality in the Department of Antioquia. This area was considered iconic because its profile is similar to that of most rural areas in the country. During the last forty years, this territory was characterized by the presence – at times, simultaneously – of guerrillas and paramilitary groups; long periods without the presence of state institutions; and marked growth of marginalization and dispossession related to the unfulfilled promise of agrarian reform. The main cause for this constant tension is an agricultural development model that privileges agro-industry, as well as other extractive projects, to the detriment of traditional peasant ways of life. This territory has also undergone the implementation of programs and projects stemming from the bilateral agreement between Colombia and the United States, known as Plan Colombia.⁹

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² Construcción de una memoria colectiva, campesina y femenina sobre el alimento: saberes y practicas productivas y de cuidado familiar, Argelia, Antioquia, Colombia 2014-2015 y Significado de la salud mental para un grupo de mujeres que han vivido en contextos de violencia política en dos subregiones de Antioquia, Colombia 2015-2016.

³ Acuerdos iniciados en el año 2012 con las Fuerzas Revolucionarias de Colombia FARC, cuya firma se perfeccionó en 2016 y los procesos de negociación formalmente inaugurados con el Ejército de Liberación Nacional en 2017.

Goals of the study

Focusing on the daily lives of people and territories, we sought to identify the way(s) in which 1) they experienced and perceived reiterated events of political violence; 2) the way(s) in which they integrated these experiences into their lives; 3) the meanings assigned to them; 4) the practices and knowledges, daily resistances, and the familial and neighborly relationships they built. We consider mental health a relational dimension of historical nature, rather than an individual condition.¹⁰ It is a collective condition constructed through the everyday negotiation of conflict that occurs in the context of social relationships and ties. We depart from the premise that political violence in Colombia has permeated both intimate and public life,¹¹⁻¹² affecting its material and symbolic support systems, as well as its social fabric and networks. We adopted a longer-term historical perspective in order to understand the structuring of political violence by economic and social dynamics that are expressed in everyday experiences. Our intention was for the large and small-scale dimensions of the phenomenon to be perceived as having complementary, rather than independent, effects on mental health. We also consider that pathology is not the only possible response to violence. On the contrary, it is possible for violence to produce and enhance agentic capacities in those who experience it.¹³

This comprehensive framework guided our engagement with emerging subjectivities in the context of prolonged political violence. The main result of this approach is the notion of suffering-resisting-subject. It provides a conceptual base to express the ways in which individuals and families reconstruct and re-inhabit their daily lives. Furthermore, it captures their desire to uphold the autonomy and dignity of personal and social spaces, thus affirming that it is possible to suffer without disappearing as subjects.¹⁴ Even those who suffer have the capacity to appropriate their own actions and circumstances. That is, they are able to take charge of their daily time and space and to follow an ethical personal agenda that aims to build new moral and aesthetic life experiences with tangible political repercussions.

Methodology

This case study, conducted between 2010 and 2013 in the municipality of San Francisco in eastern An-

tioquia, combines biographical and ethnographic elements, aiming to uphold a balance between flexibility and rigor. 16 15 The life stories of twenty elderly peasants willing to narrate their lives were reconstructed. Tables 1 and 2 represent ordinal and nominal variables related to some of their socio-demographic characteristics. Our triangulation of techniques included 1) a review of the regional and national press in which we gathered detailed data on political violence events within the municipality from 1989 to 2012; 2) family surveys completed in home visits to 36 families; 3) interviews with six leaders related to reputable local organizations (Community Action Boards, Victims' Association, local government and health authorities, and two focus groups, made up of elders who had lived most of their lives in two previously identified rural areas).

The focus groups

These were held at the beginning of the process and were aimed at exploring the settlement process of these territories, in addition to developing empathetic relationships with the inhabitants of the two selected areas. In a series of 16 community workshops, a collective narrative was woven which explored the questions that gave rise to the settlement process. This collective story was then given a symbolic materiality woven with threads and needles. [4] Participant observation was made of domestic, agricultural and communal activities, with a corresponding recording of notes, memoranda and a field diary. We used the SPSS software packages, version 17.0 and Atlas Ti, version 6.2. We carried out a comprehensive analysis, in which we identified important events and their meaning in people's lives, as well as a thematic analysis guided by our research goals, 17 complementing our empirical findings with a literature review. This was considered a minimum risk research, 18 and was endorsed by the

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of the participants: ordinal variables.

	Mini mu m	Maxi mum	Avera ge	StD
Age	18	78	42.5	34
Children	0	12	4	4
Years of Resid ency	3	68	31.4	19.7

Ethics Committee (Act No. CEI-FE 2011-2) and by local community organizations.

Results

The Infiltration of Suffering into Everyday Life

Normality is generally identified by its relationship with the known, the obvious, the unquestionable, that is, subjects which cannot be questioned or reflected upon. It is constructed by patterns of repetition and ritualization that establish a logic of normality and naturalness. From this, people infer what can be considered legitimate, necessary, and true,¹⁹⁻²⁰ regardless of the possibility for innovation and change. This tension between the conservative and the creative was present in the decades of coexistence with armed groups.

Only one of these armed groups had a presence that proved useful in the resolution of local family problems. This, due to the fact that their interaction with the community consisted of approaching neighbors and relatives, interweaving their kinship networks through closeness or filiation, rather than for ideological reasons. Towards the end of the century, the territorial dispute between guerrillas marked a moment of profound suffering for the peasant population, intensified by the entry of paramilitaries and by the state's military actions.

The paramilitaries imposed new rules and disrupted daily routines, such as consumption, mobility, conversations, and schedules:

If I was carrying more groceries than usual, it meant I was carrying food for the guerrillas. If I wore hiking boots it meant I was in the guerrilla or I was delivering for them. If I had a gas tank, because I had changed my wood stove for a gas one, then it meant I was taking it to the guerrillas (E5Dh: man of 38 years, born in the municipality and lived there all his life, completed high school, employed, two forced displacements).

The paramilitaries created impossible norms that turned any word, gesture, or behavior into a risk. This generated the perception of living in a chaotic and uncertain world and, hence, the rupture of the predictability and naturalness of the everyday.

As community members were dislocated from their own personal and collective meanings, various unexpected events installed a climate of uncertainty. Among these were 21 forced displacements,⁵ accidents and incidents involving anti-personnel mines, and joint military operations between paramilitaries and state forces. The settings and practices of daily life were transformed: community members passed from a "consensual" coexistence, to one in which they were either guerrilla collaborators or paramilitary informants. In this way, mistrust and fear made their way into daily life.

The population decreased. From 9,512 people in 1999 to 5,790 in 2005; of 44 footpaths, 14 remained abandoned and mined in 2009, 22 affecting family and community life. Interrogations, requisitions and accusations occupied spaces that had previously been unremarkable:

In the seven hours that it took me to walk from X to here, I would encounter the guerrilla and, further on, the army and the paramilitaries.⁶ (E3Ah: 68-year-old man, locally born and lifetime resident of the municipality, incomplete primary education, day laborer, three forced displacements).

Resistance as normalcy

Suffering hampered the restructuring of everyday life and its transformation, the weaving back of broken threads. It became necessary for community members to question the multiple forces of power and domination through resistance and opposition, in order to be acknowledged as civil actors, differentiated from the armed groups. Many resistances were silent and subtle, carried out in the sphere of intimacy; their value lies in that they were not naive or random, but intentional and strategic modifications. Other actions openly challenged the relations of domination, the pressures of the armed groups, their norms and controls:

From the very beginning, I did not like the armed groups. That's why at the moment I told them that I would rather die working the land, than take on a destiny such as theirs. They did not say anything to me again (E17Rh: a 52-year-old man, born in and residing all his life in this municipality, incomplete primary school, small independent producer for family consumption, two forced displacements).

These initiatives, some undertaken collectively and others individually, reinforced the value of collective action. Within the context of family life, for example, protection strategies were deployed through child-rearing practices that emphasized certain attitudes towards armed groups, weapons, and ways of handling conflict. Neighbors collaborated to develop daily maneuvers to avoid or counter risk. These apparently simple cognitive and practical processes, through their pragmatism, became forms of collective protection. Examples included volun

- tary "curfews," avoidance of black and green garments, and gathering as a group to pray. People used their cunning and wit to gain the advantage in their interactions with armed agents. Typically this involved false submissiveness and white lies²⁵:

Sometimes, we had to tell them that the guerrillas had been there, without really having seen them, so they would let us pass [...] People had to lie to the paramilitaries so they would allow them go home. They knew that if they said: "I did not see anyone", they would be tied up, detained, and beaten (EIAh : 42-year-old woman, born in the municipality and life-long resident of the municipality, incomplete primary education, housewife, 2 forced displacements).

Peasant resistance circulated through neighborhood and family networks, consolidating a shared understanding of the experience that clearly served a protective function. The phrase "*Many would tell them what they wanted to hear*" synthesizes the legitimation, through ritualized repetition, of a transgressive rupture with the domination of everyday life.

However, these strategies proved limited in their effectiveness. In a context of accelerated change, such as the ones described here, social practices rapidly lose their potential effectiveness. They demand the constant rethinking and continuous reinvention of everyday knowledge.²⁰ The "staging" of peasant resistance involves the enactment of stereotyped roles which fulfil the expectations of those in power, all the while showing the inability of the dominator to gain full control. Such performances demand repetition and refinement in order to make the staging believable and to hide the skillful way in which submissiveness and adulation allow the dominated aim to obtain their ends.²⁵

These tales of feigned submissiveness, common among peasants, are masterpieces of skillful "theatrical" games and of creative potential. Although they do not lead to a definitive break with the schema of domination, they do affirm a capacity to subvert them. They deny the passivity of those who suffer, attributing to them the possibility of challenging the powers responsible for their suffering. Resistance is thus embodied in the subject who suffers and, at the same time, in the spaces and exercises of power through which this subject resignifies and modifies the experience of domination, recovering or reconstructing new social spaces.

Discussion

According to Das,²⁴ one way we can think about subjectivities is through understanding the construction of our own temporalities. Temporalities that, rather than being linear, are cyclical. Social rhythms oscillate between times of occurrence and times of narration. We look at time as subjective and characterized by a plurality that conjugates the passage of time with its reliefs, memories, silences, oblivions and happenings. This plurality becomes actualized in the present and in social networks, while configuring or allowing the emergence of multiple subjective processes. The subjectivities woven in the interface between individual experience and the collective construction of meanings and purpose do not presuppose uniform processes. Instead, we find multiple and even contradictory constructions, shaped by various affective and emotional tonalities. These stories are far from adopting a binary model that labels sufferers as "good" and perpetrators as "bad". Rather, they exhibit a series of fragmentations and contradictions that, through the circulation of a polyphony of discourses and practices, serve to demystify the singleness of suffering-subjects' subjectivity.

In the case we have studied, multiple appropriations emerged from this interwoven fabric of suffering and resistance. Some are imbued with religious meaning, interpreting suffering in terms of divine trial, guilt and resignation. Others connect such experiences with the battling forces of a globalized world whose national and transnational economic interests have reached their territory. Other nuances include a "morality" that considers "a dose of death" to be necessary for the maintenance of order, or the importance of experience as a prerequisite for the enjoyment of state subsidies and recognition of citizenship. Within this diversity there appear complaints, pity and heroism, as well as a rupture with the naturalization of historical exclusion, which is interrogated through concrete political practices.

Conclusions

We adopted the notion of subjectivity as a way of understanding the experience of the peasant/subject who suffers while, at the same time, resisting in the midst of armed conflict and poverty. In doing so, we avoided the narrowness of labels such as the medical notion of "traumatized" or the legal notion of "victim." We do not seek to ignore or minimize these labels in making claims before the State and its institutions. Rather, we call attention to the risk of

homogenizing the experiences of the armed conflict and, concomitantly, weakening the political practices of its subjects. Pedraza²⁶ points out that the concept of subjectivity also allows for agency. That is, it considers the multiple ways in which the subject manages to modify herself and act on her environment through her own self-understanding. This allows the subject to lay claim to experiences, feelings and emotions, insofar as they allow her to give meaning to her experience.

These polyphonic subjectivities, heterogeneous and hybrid, intersect in the notion of the suffering-resistant-subject. They show how, even in the midst of great emotional stress, it is possible to build spaces of autonomy that, no matter how small and/or invisible, give a place to suffering and those who suffer.

The peasants' active resistance transformed some of the conditions of their micro-social spaces into a manifold spectrum ranging from subjection to rupture, demonstrating that the forces of domination did not totally co-opt the subjects. Rather than simply accepting the impositions of those in power, the peasants also possessed the potential to destabilize them.

During a historical moment such as the one Colombia is going through, it is important to recognize the simultaneous suffering and resistance of subjects. The suffering-resisting-subject is not a sick person, a victim or a survivor; rather, she is an ethical subject with a political project that responds to orders of domination through the affirmation of her own dignity.

By inventing new everyday ways of building their lives and inhabiting their world, by deciding and by choosing, these subjects deploy an ethical project that, in turn, becomes a political act. By transforming our way of living, thinking, and relating, that is, by transforming ourselves, we contribute to transforming the world in which we live.²⁷

According to Furtos¹⁴ a new mental health paradigm proposes that she who suffers, does not disappear as an active subject in the private and public spheres. Consequently, the notion of the suffering-resistant-subject alludes to a creative and active human being that constructs her own history. Her simultaneous experience of suffering and resistance signals the impossibility of reducing humans to a body or a brain without subjectivity.²⁸ Although the subjection imposed by various orders on peasant life cannot be denied, this research demonstrates how it exists in permanent tension with autonomy

and creativity. In the face of rupture, contradiction, chaos and uncertainty, these men and women actively constructed sense and meaning in ways that prevent their annihilation and allow them to construct their subjectivities on the basis of their capacity to choose, rupture and take action.²⁹ Additionally, the notion of subjectivity allows us to understand particular experiences from a political perspective that takes into account social and community responses. The current processes of recovery and rehabilitation of everyday life are characterized by an urgency to understand the political apart from the state and institutionalism. Instead, they seek to focus on the field of micro-social processes: the personal, the emotional and the daily encounter with others. This, without a doubt, is a challenge for Colombian society as a whole.

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Table 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the participants: nominal variables.

	N	%
Gender		
Male	9	45
Female	11	55
Education		
Unfinished Primary	11	55
Primary	2	10
Unfinished Secondary	4	20
Secondary	2	10
Illiterate	1	5
Civil State		
Single	4	20
Married	9	45
Free Union	2	10
Divorced	3	15
Widow	2	5
Origin		
San Francisco	14	70
Remote Eastern Municipalities	6	30
Displacements		
Once	7	35
Twice	9	45
Thrice	4	20
Occupation		
Employee	1	5
Temporary Farm-hand	3	15
Family Rural Producer	14	70
Small Independent Rural Producer	2	10