

Colombia on The March? The Media, Hegemony and the *Manifestaciones* of 2008

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Resumen

Basado en una concepción particular de los estudios culturales, tal como el análisis de la hegemonía, este artículo pretende ofrecer cierto esclarecimiento acerca de cómo el consentimiento a la coerción se gana en Colombia. El papel de los medios de comunicación en ganar este consentimiento es teóricamente discutido en breve, y luego, en un esfuerzo por llevar la teoría a la práctica, se analizan las representaciones mediáticas de las manifestaciones contra las FARC del 4 de febrero y 20 de julio de 2008, tomadas de los periódicos más importantes de Colombia, *El Tiempo* y *El Espectador*. Muestro cómo estas representaciones podían contribuir a ganar el consentimiento a la coerción en Colombia en la medida en que codificaban las marchas en los términos del nacionalismo (*nationism*)—un neologismo explicado y justificado en el texto—. Luego, analizo la representación en *El Tiempo* de otra marcha, que tuvo lugar el 6 de marzo de 2008, y fue dirigida no contra las FARC solamente, sino también contra todos los agentes de la violencia, incluido el propio Estado. El hecho de que esta marcha no fue codificada en términos de nacionalismo nos permite sacar conclusiones sobre la forma como el consentimiento a la coerción se gana en Colombia: a través de la implementación restrictiva de la idea de la nación con el fin de construir comprensiones distintas de quién y qué es, y no es, importante en Colombia.

Palabras clave: Colombia, nacionalismo, hegemonía, marchas, FARC, prensa.

Abstract

Based on a particular understanding of cultural studies as the analysis of hegemony, this article seeks to provide some understanding of how consent to coercion is won in Colombia. The role of the media in winning this consent is theoretically discussed in brief, and then, in an effort to put the theory into practice, I analyze media representations of the *manifestaciones* against the FARC of February 4 and July 20 2008, drawn from Colombia's leading newspapers, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. I show how this representation could contribute to winning consent to coercion in Colombia insofar as it encoded the marches in the terms of nationalism—a neologism explained and justified in the text. I then analyze the representation in *El Tiempo* of another march, which took place on March 6, 2008, and was directed against not just the FARC but all agents of violence, including the state itself. The fact that this march was not encoded in the terms of nationalism allows us to draw conclusions about the way consent to coercion is won in Colombia: through the restrictive deployment of the idea of the nation so as to construct distinct understandings of who and what is and is not important in Colombia.

Keywords: Colombia, nationalism, hegemony, marches, FARC, press.

Consent and coercion in Colombia

As Michael Bérubé (2009) has recently argued at length, cultural studies is best thought of as a multifaceted and ongoing attempt to analyze hegemony, to analyze how actual consent to a certain configuration of social relations, in which some are dominant and some are dominated, is won. The term hegemony signals that not only is the decisive consent of the major part of the populace never won once and for all; it also alludes to the fact of provisionality, of inconstancy: hegemony is not some sort of end point, but more appropriately thought of as a constant undertaking, an extensive effort that includes many participants, to produce, maintain or extend consent to a problematic (to the extent that we can always talk about dominated and dominant) state of affairs.

While cultural studies have taken quite enthusiastic root in Colombia (see, for example the collected essays in Lobo, Cedeño and Rutter [2012]), the validity of the concept of hegemony in the Colombian case has not been clearly established. This uncertainty is based upon the observation that, even if the country's history manifests a certain stability, a certain continuity, this cannot be explained in terms of leadership on the part of the ruling classes and consent on the part of the led. Rather, it has to be explained in terms of an all too glib resort to coercion on the part of the rulers, and, when faced with death, submission on the part not of—strictly speaking—the led, but of the dominated. Thus, one cannot speak of hegemony in Colombia, at least not in the sense the term has been employed since Gramsci and especially by the field of cultural studies (Bérubé 2009). Consent has never been won in any active sense; there has simply been no other choice than to comply, which is a different state of sociopolitical affairs altogether. Though this appears to be an interestingly provocative point of view, it does not really stand much scrutiny. The fact of the matter is that even in relations of coercion there will exist some degree of active consent by some of the people involved in doing the coercing. Agents of coercion are not all cut-throat mercenaries, selling their services to the highest bidders; they are not all victims of the dull compulsion of economic necessity; some—a good number, no doubt—do what they do because they are convinced of its value, of the need to do it, and of the correctness of doing it. But perhaps more importantly, there will always be other active consenters: there will also be active consent on the part of many not directly involved in coercion, but who benefit—or believe they benefit—from it. In this article I analyze how consent to acts of coercion—essentially, illegitimate killings of Colombian citizens—by Colombian state and para-state forces is won. To do so I show how a sense of nation and of national will was constructed in two of Colombia's leading print-media outlets, in their coverage of a series of marches that took place in 2008. Two of these marches were against the

FARC and the practice of kidnapping; the other was against all the violent actors—including the Colombian Armed Forces and Colombia's paramilitary organizations. My argument is that the representations and coverage of the marches helped construct a sense of nation and a national will in opposition to the violence of the FARC, but they actively nationalized and thereby excused the coercive violence of the state in maintaining Colombian social relations. These relations themselves are constituted in part by a large degree of structural coercion. Drawing on the government's own *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* (DANE), González (2009) reports that recent studies show 46% of the population living in poverty—about twenty million Colombians. The poverty line is drawn at a monthly income of 280,000 Colombian pesos—about 140 USD. Of those twenty million living in poverty, seven million are classified as indigent, surviving, somehow, on less than 140,000 pesos monthly. As for the basic economic structure, Richani (2007) reports that,

the narco-bourgeoisie and its paramilitary branch have contributed to the development of a rentier-based political economy in the rural areas that is based on land speculation, extensive cattle-ranching, services and cash crops (African palms, coca, cocoa and flowers) geared to international markets. According to the Colombian Institute for Land Reform (INCORA), about 48% of the country's most fertile lands are in the hands of the narco-bourgeoisie, which makes this faction the most powerful in the rural economy, consequently shaping its mode of production and development. In sharp contrast, 68% of small landowners own only 5.2% of these fertile lands. (411)

There is, then, a degree of coercion built into Colombian social relations. We see a country deeply divided in terms of wealth, income and as a consequence, opportunity, education and health, in short, in terms of subjective autonomy and quality of life. However, the specific analysis offered here is of the winning of consent to the more literal forms of coercion authored by the state and its paramilitary supporters.

The role of the media

In attempting to understand how consent to coercion is won, attention to the role of the media may not be sufficient, but it is certainly necessary. We live in a mediatic world, a world in which our knowledges and understandings are extensively influenced by the media. What Hall could affirm in 1977—"the whole gigantic complex sphere of public information, intercommunication and exchange—the production and consumption of 'social knowledge' in [modern] societies ...—depends on the mediation of the modern means of communication" (1977: 340)—is now only truer. What counts as public information—what Berger and Luckmann (1966) once called the common stock of knowledge —, what delimits the field of intercommunication and exchange, is structured in large part by the media apparatus. Much that could be information is actually left aside, purposefully relegated to the margins. Information, as Nørretranders (1999) has argued, only emerges as "exformation" is created, as something else is excluded or ignored. To say, perhaps somewhat redundantly, that the media mediate our knowledge is to acknowledge that the media are responsible for "providing the images, representations

and ideas around which the social totality ... can be coherently grasped as a whole" (Hall, 1977: 340). The media tell us about others, but also about ourselves; about our world and theirs, about the world itself. The media, then, will be crucial in the provisional success of any hegemonic project, in so far as they produce an understanding not only of how the world is but also how it ought to be, leaving out alternative understandings and possibilities. Bourdieu, as a result of his researches into the reproduction of stratified and hierarchical social relations, has found that people are disposed to put up with a lot more grief than one would expect because they internalize the disagreeable world as the way the world should be. They end up identifying with it, even if what they are identifying with is their own domination. He argues that this has to do with the way human consciousness is structured by the conditions in which it takes form: "If the social world tends to be perceived as evident and to be grasped ... with a doxic modality, this is because the dispositions of agents, their habitus, that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of an internalization of the structures of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1990: 130-131). The media is important here because, as Hall observes, "[e]vents on their own cannot ... signify: they must be made *intelligible*" (1977: 343, Hall's emphasis). Events must be encoded, which means they must be codified in a way that allows for the public to understand them in what, from the point of view of a certain social configuration, amounts to the right way, the only way, to understand them. The media "*structure every event they signify, and accent them in a manner which reproduces the given ideological structures*" (1977: 344, Hall's emphasis). Such ideological structures are among the structures we, as Bourdieu points out, internalize. Our immersion in media that reproduce the structures of the social world, leads to the internalization of those structures, to the evidentiary status of the social world, to identification with it. We can thus talk about the media's "ideological effect", its role in the "production of consensus, the construction of legitimacy" (Hall, 1977: 342), its role, in other words, in the process of hegemony.

To translate this theoretical argument into the terms of this article: the media will play a significant role in producing, in Colombia, a certain ideological field, a certain matrix of information and understanding, that contributes to consent being won and that secures the basic Colombian structure of domination. Therefore, any analysis of how consent to violence has been won in Colombia will need to look at the role played by the media, its contributions to the structuring of social reality, and the relation between the media and social agents. To that end, I now want to reflect on the media coverage of two marches that took place in Colombia in 2008, one on February 4, the other on July 20. Though the marches took place during the period of Álvaro Uribe's second presidential period, I analyze the representations of them from the point of view of a longer-term hegemonic project of which *uribismo* is simply a moment. This is not to ignore or overlook the particularities of the Uribe regime, about which there is much to be said. Still, here I prefer to study the representation of the marches from a perspective that keeps in mind the longer-term continuities of the attempt to secure the fundamental coercive social relations of dominant and dominated, on the basis of a more properly hegemonic articulation between leaders and led. In other words, I recognize that there are

dominated sectors that do not consent to their position and that violence is needed to keep them in their place (discussed below). But I also insist that other sectors—led sectors—are won over to consenting to the lot of dominated—whom they do not recognize as being dominated, whom they mis-recognize as being either legitimate objects of violence or as being the same sort of more or less autonomous agents as they believe themselves to be.

Obviously, in an article of limited length I cannot focus on all the dominant media outlets in Colombia. I restrict my attention to representations in Colombia's leading newspapers, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. It is commonly understood in Colombia that these newspapers are competitors, and that while *El Tiempo* is more sympathetic to the government, *El Espectador* is more critical and oppositional. This is not to suggest that the former is simply an organ of the government. It unflinchingly reports scandals and other news that shines an unflattering light on those in power, and employs columnists highly critical of the government; but it also can be overly friendly to the government. With regard to its reporting on the marches, it was perfectly in tune with dominant perspectives, as well as crucial in constructing them, and most of my focus is on that paper. Less focus is on *El Espectador* for the reasons that at the time of the February march it was only a weekly, appearing on Sundays, and additionally, even though it became a daily by the time of the July march, its coverage was much more restrained than that of its competitor. But the conclusion that will emerge from studying both newspapers' representations will nonetheless confirm Hall's view of the way the media—despite their differences—nonetheless tend to converge in reproducing the dominant ideological matrix of understanding and, by extension, the basic structure of domination. As he argues, "though events will not be systematically encoded in a single way, they [the distinct media outlets] will tend, systematically, to draw on a very limited ideological or explanatory repertoire; and that repertoire ... will have the overall tendency of making things 'mean' within the sphere of the dominant ideology" (Hall 1977: 343). I should also note in passing that the coverage of Colombia's two main glossy weekly news magazines, *Cambio* and *Semana*, was, while not overly effusive, still celebratory, complementing the dominant representation of the marches, thus further confirming Hall's argument. These four outlets, different and free to produce what ever discourses they choose, nonetheless collude—albeit without any conscious intention—to produce a coverage of the marches that allows only one possible way of seeing or understanding the world, producing the ideological effect of legitimacy and winning consent to coercion and the basic relations of domination in Colombia.

The march of February 4

The march that took place on February 4, 2008, was convoked when a cache of video recordings and letters of some of the FARC's hostages were intercepted by Colombian security forces. Excerpts from the videos and letters were quickly disseminated via media outlets and one could not help but be moved by the sight and by the words of these victims: frail, emaciated, forlorn, desperate, but somehow still composed and forceful. Included among these various proofs of life was testimony from Ingrid Betancourt, the once-presidential candidate who had been

kidnapped by the FARC on the campaign trail, as well as from three US contractors whose plane had crash-landed in FARC-controlled territory during anti-narcotics operations. The public was outraged by what it saw and read, as if it had never really understood the toll kidnapping and years of jungle-hiking on the most limited of rations would take on people. A Facebook user proposed a march against the FARC and the idea caught fire. All sectors of civil society signed on. It was as if a nation had awoken, shaken off its lethargy and finally manifested itself. This, at least, was the narrative that was generated as events unfolded. It all culminated in a march—*una manifestación*—that had little precedent in Colombian history, a march that seemed to involve not only all of Colombia, but Colombians and their allies throughout the world. It gave voice to a quite simple set of demands, chanted, worn on t-shirts, proclaimed on banners: No more, no more kidnapping, no more FARC (*No más, no más secuestro, no más Farc*).

The day after the march of February 4, *El Tiempo*—a broadsheet—dedicated almost six complete pages to reporting on it. Additionally, the day's editorial took the march as its theme, as did one opinion column, as did the letters to the editor. The reporting emphasized the number of marchers and the purpose of the march: rejection of the FARC and of kidnapping. The headline on the first page declared: "Something never before seen" (*Algo jamás visto*). The photograph on the front page is taken from on high and shows an expanse of the city's financial center filled with people. No particular features are distinguishable; one only sees a mass. The caption informs us of the precise moment we are seeing, 12:35pm, and that we have before us an image of "thousands of people ... expressing their rejection of the violence of the FARC" (*Algo jamás visto*, 2008: 1-1). It is thus made quite real for anyone who might have missed it. The second page carries the headline: "Bogotazo to the FARC" (*Bogotazo a las Farc*) and its focus is another photograph of a mass assembled in the *Plaza de Bolívar*, again with a caption informing the reader that we are seeing a "protest against the FARC" (*Bogotazo a las Farc*, 2008: 1-2). The reader will perhaps be aware that the Bogotazo was the phenomenon that occurred after Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was murdered in downtown Bogotá in 1948. Residents of the city poured out into the streets and went on a rampage of impotent destruction, having more or less witnessed the oligarchic ruling powers in Colombia destroy any hope of a far-reaching popular mobilization against their continued reign. The notion of a popular uprising, this time not against the oligarchs but against the FARC, is thereby brought to mind with the headline. The third page again emphasizes the number of people involved, not only with a third image of a mass of marchers filling up—overflowing—an urban space (this time in Medellín), but with the headline "In the plazas a soul could not fit" (*En las plazas no cabía un alma*) (2008: 1-3). Additionally, the first six pages of this edition of the newspaper carried over twenty-six smaller photographs of the previous day's events, all of them showing signs and people explicitly rejecting the FARC. The text proper emphasized this theme and also the idea that what was being witnessed was a new wave of citizen participation (see specifically "Tres preguntas sobre las marchas ..." [2008: 1-5] and "Las 8 lecciones ..." [2008: 1-5]) after so many years of apathy.

The paper's editorial was titled, "Take note, sirs" (2008: 1-16), the "sirs" in question being the FARC leadership. The editors

inform them—and the readership in general—that yesterday “a human sea literally [sic] invaded the Plaza de Bolívar” (2008: 1-16). They remark upon the “civic consciousness of a country” (2008: 1-16) and the fact that the “principal perpetrators” (2008: 1-16) of the violence had been singled out for once. (This is important because we will see below that the FARC are not in fact the principal perpetrators.) It affirmed, addressing itself directly to the FARC (but again, also to the readers): “Yesterday, an entire country condemned you in the streets” (2008: 1-16). In short, the coverage and the editorial combine in a representation of an entire country, that is to say, a nation, united in expressing its general will, that the FARC are the problem to be solved.

As mentioned above, at the time of the February 4 march *El Espectador* was still a weekly. On the Sunday before the march, it nonetheless became not a news organ but a promoter of the march, with this headline: “Freedom! for all the hostages” (“¡Libertad! para todos los secuestrados”) (2008: 1A). In a sense we are talking about a march foretold. The second page announces: “Colombia rises up against kidnapping” (“Colombia se levanta contra el secuestro”) (2008: 2A), even though nothing had actually happened yet. Meanwhile, the edition that came out on the following Sunday was reduced to silence regarding the march, as if recognizing that everything worth saying had by now already been said. Still, the point was taken: what was to happen on Monday, February 4 was a march by the nation—*Colombia* rises up, we were told—against the kidnappers, that is, the FARC.

The march of July 20

A second march against kidnapping and the FARC was planned for July 20, 2008, Colombia’s Day of Independence. This march was given a huge boost by the fact that the quite incredible military *Operación Jaque*—Operation Check—produced the rescue of 15 kidnap victims, including those whose proofs of life had been previously intercepted and broadcast, inciting the February march. Especially notable was that among the fifteen were Betancourt and the three Americans. The operation, which, against all norms, employed the symbol of the International Red Cross in its subterfuge, involved contacting the FARC and convincing the leadership that the International Red Cross would transport their hostages to a different location, a location more secure for their continued captivity, if, as part of the bargain, it could tend to their medical needs—which is the central mission of the IRC. Once the “IRC” helicopters were airborne with the hostages, the “aid workers” revealed their identities to the hostages, and announced that they were now free. No doubt those rescued and the rescuers had little thought for the long-term consequences this subterfuge would have. Having hijacked—one is tempted to say, kidnapped—the IRC symbol, the government of Colombia has potentially debilitated the future efficacy of that organization. Nonetheless, not too much was made of this; the media and the public preferred to focus on the ingenuity and brilliance of the operation, and another march against kidnapping and FARC, but also for freedom, was given impetus.

As if taking its cue from the earlier *El Espectador* “coverage” of the February 4 march, the very morning of the day on which the July 20 march was to take place, the headline of *El Tiempo*

yelled “¡Libertad!”, while a sub-headline announced, before anything had even happened, that “All of Colombia marches today” (“Colombia entera marcha hoy”). The content linked to these grand affirmations was terribly certain of itself: “Patriotic fervor and the imperative desire that the kidnappings end will make people pour out into the streets” (“El fervor de patria y el deseo imperativo de que se acaben los secuestros harán que la gente se lance a la calle”) (“¡Libertad!”, 2008: 1-1). Instead of reporting the news, the newspaper appeared to be committed to inciting it. The number of pages devoted to promoting the march, to getting people out into the streets, was between four and five in total. The day after this march the headline proclaimed: “More Colombians than ever” (“Más colombianos que nunca”, 2008: 1-1), as if it were a simple fact that the number of marchers exceeded that of the February march; the main image was again of an insistent mass, this time carrying an elongated Colombian flag whose beginning and end were not visible in the frame, suggesting something like transcendence or infinity. The pages—between eight and ten, taking advertising into account—dedicated to reporting on the march that by now had taken place were collectively entitled, “The cry of freedom” (“Grito de libertad”). Included in the paper that day were more letters to the editor and an editorial itself titled “El grito de libertad”. The lead sentence of this asserted “Colombia again spilled into the streets yesterday, on another historic day, in order to repudiate kidnapping” (“Colombia se volvió a volcar ayer a las calles, en otra histórica jornada, para repudiar el secuestro”) (“El grito”, 2008: 1-24). Having initiated its reporting by affirming that more Colombians than ever had taken to the streets, the editorial now admitted the obvious, that it was, in fact, “difficult to calculate the number of marchers” (“difícil calcular el número de marchantes”). No matter, it continued: “One could say that it was all of Colombia” (“Se puede decir que fue toda Colombia”) (“El grito”, 2008: 1-24). Again, but in a manner even more forceful than before, we have the representation of a nation on the march, all of Colombia moved to action by the country’s real problems, common to all: kidnapping and the FARC.

By the time the July 20 march took place, *El Espectador* had become a daily again. That morning, its headline repeats the attempt to structure what would happen that day, as if reporting the news tomorrow would be too late: “United for the freedom of the all the hostages” (“Unidos por la libertad de todos los secuestrados”, 2008: 1). The sub-headline uses the past tense and reads: “El Día de la Independencia se convirtió este año en una nueva jornada contra los violentos” (2008: 1), and on the second page we find a few, finely chosen words: “The end of kidnapping: national cause” (“Fin del secuestro: causa nacional”, 2008: 2). The following day, against the background of an out-of-focus crowd the words “Libertad, Freedom, Freiheit, Libertà, Liberté, Vrijheid” (2008: 1) are superimposed. Inside, the paper recognizes that the FARC were the central objective of the march (“Medellín gritó contra el secuestro”, 2008: 6). While *El Espectador* afforded the march less physical coverage, the emotional and ideological encoding of the event was essentially identical to that of its ideological competitor, *El Tiempo*: the nation was united, as never before, against a common enemy.

The other march

The singularity of the marches' focus was politically expedient—but only if one's politics coincided with that of the marches. There were those who argued that the marches placed an all too selective emphasis on one actor, one responsible party, among many. I, though not (yet) Colombian, am among this group. The focus on the admittedly damnable FARC left Colombia's paramilitary forces—forces whose genesis owes something to the armed forces' incapacity to make headway against Colombia's various guerrilla factions—in the clear, even though their favored method of violating human rights and the norms of decency was not to kidnap but murder anyone they believed to be a guerrilla sympathizer. The singular focus of the marches also excused the Colombian state, leaving it with no apportionment of blame and culpability in making Colombia literally unlivable for so many. And yet the state and its official armed forces have been found to be responsible by international courts—and by the trail of evidence in cases that have not reached the courts—for the murder of Colombians opposed to Colombia's long-standing injustices and inequalities. In response to the singular focus of February 4 a march was called for March 6. I now analyze how this march, convened against all agents of violence in Colombia, not only the guerrilla but also the paramilitaries and the state itself, was represented.

For the March 6 march there were no attempts by *El Tiempo* to make the march materialize by announcing its success before it had even happened. The day after, it gave it space in the top right quadrant of its front page. The rest of story, which followed on pages two and three, made no allusions to masses nor to the entire country nor to a newly invigorated citizenry nor to a human sea nor even to Colombia as some sort of unified body. As it turns out the marchers weren't even principally Colombian; they were "women" and "victims" ("Mujeres", 2008: 1-1; "Víctimas", 2008: 1-2). The small image in the restricted space on the front page is not taken from the on-high vantage point that was used a month earlier to represent the mass nation on the march. It is a close up of a crowd—a crowd in Barranquilla, not even Bogotá. In the foreground of the image there are some details worth noting. We see some faces clearly, which seems to personalize the march rather than universalize it. We do see—it is true—some other faces clearly too. These are the faces—photographs of the faces—of victims of state violence. However, one has to know this. The information is not given in the image's caption. Additionally in the foreground, we see a red banner. The slogan painted on the banner is not totally visible, but it clearly says something about the unemployed. This allows the viewer to read the march as the expression of particular interests, that is, sectoral and not national interests, as a march that is, in the end, not national at all. In sum, scarcely two pages were dedicated to this event, inhibiting the possibility that it would constitute itself as a significant part of national reality. From the reportage we learn, yes, that the march was in protest against violence perpetrated by *all* of Colombia's actors in arms, but then the point is well-made that this march was "not as multitudinaria as the one against the FARC" ("no fue tan multitudinaria como la que se hizo contra las Farc") ("Víctimas se hicieron sentir", 2008: 1-1). *El Tiempo* gives no clue as to why this might be. There was no editorial reflection on its significance or insignificance. Having participated in the

marches as something like a participant observer, I can attest that the paper was not lying. But we must remember that what the media does is less report than make intelligible. In its reporting, it lets us know not only that less people participated in this march than that of February, but that it was clearly a less important—an unimportant—march. It was made intelligible in the following terms: though there were, as reported, thousands of marchers, it was clearly not a march performed by all of Colombia. Neither a nation nor a country was manifesting itself. Rather, mere victims of violence were the ones protesting, some women, some unemployed people. Given this lackluster coverage, a sympathetic observer would have to conclude that their cause would seem to be a lost one.

For its part, *El Espectador*, still being a weekly at this point, did try to talk up the march to come in its March 2-8 edition: "Now for the victims" ("Ahora por las víctimas" 2008: 1A). In its editorial the point is made that "the historic march of a month ago would not be worth much if we are not ready to reject with the same enthusiasm atrocities of all type and origin" ("Y ahora, por las otras víctimas", 2008: 16A). But it does not suggest that Colombia is rising up, as it did a month ago. And it did not have anything to say in its edition that followed the march. Later in July, as we have seen, it will declare the end of kidnapping a national cause. But in March it does not think to speak of the end of state violence in anything like the same terms. Beyond the coverage and the editorials, certain voices were given space in *El Tiempo* to opine about this march. The president's chief adviser affirmed that March 6 "was a march totally called/convoled by the FARC" (as quoted in "José Obdulio Gaviria insiste", 2008). General Álvaro Valencia Tovar was also given space to delegitimize it before the fact, pointing to "the suspicious motives of the ideologues of the effort" ("los móviles sospechosos de los ideólogos de ese intento"). He predicted that it would be "a pitiful mobilization" ("una movilización raquítica") and thus "preferable not to even try it" ("preferible ni intentarla") (Valencia Tovar, 2008: 1-23).

The coercers

In the same space the General argued that one of the factors that contributed to the success of the first march in February was that it had a clear objective. In his words, its objective was: "Singular. Precise. Without need of any supporting arguments" (Valencia Tovar, 2008: 1-23). On the other hand, to discredit March 6 the General affirmed that its objective was not very clear. This is perhaps due to the fact that March 6 pointed its finger at all the perpetrators of violence, among them—uncomfortably—the state itself, and not just at the FARC. And herein lies a big problem, for as it turns out, the FARC are not even the principal perpetrators of violence in Colombia. Yes, the most forceful slogan of February 4 and July 20 was the unarguable demand "No more FARC". But we cannot overlook the fact that the Colombian Attorney General's office has affirmed that "in almost all of the crimes against organized labor, journalists and human rights activists that have been investigated those responsible have been paramilitaries," and that, both the People's Ombudsman (*Defensor del Pueblo*) as well as the Human Rights Observatory have found that paramilitaries are responsible for the majority of massacres in Colombia, "as well as uncountable [other] crimes" ("3.650 días de horror", 2004: 1-10) during recent years. In terms

hard to apprehend because of the cognitive dissonance that they produce, the paramilitaries are more awful than the FARC.

Perhaps more disturbing is the phenomenon of *falsos positivos* and extrajudicial killings. False positives are innocent civilians gunned down and counted as terrorist kills, either by military or para-military agents. We will return to them below. Extrajudicial killings are just what they sound like. And according to the *Observatorio de derechos humanos y derecho humanitario* (2008), between July 2002 and December 2007 there were 13,634 cases, of which evidence points to culpability in 8,049. In 75.4% of those 8,049 (6,068 casos), *the state was either directly or indirectly culpable*. In 17.53% of the 8,049 (1,411 cases) directly so; in 57.87% (4,658 cases) indirectly so.

In terms of the relation between the state and paramilitary forces—or what might be called indirect culpability—we should take into consideration that quite recently, on September 26, 2010, the Colombia state, to comply with a sentence passed down by the Interamerican Court on Human Rights, had to pay to “publish in the Paper of Record or in another paper of wide national circulation, once” various paragraphs from the case proceedings which explained why the court had found the state partially culpable in the extrajudicial killing of a human rights worker, Jesús María Valle Jaramillo (see “Cumplimiento de Sentencia”, 2010: punto 15).¹ In one of the paragraphs that the state was compelled to publish, we learn that the “state helped bring about the creation of self-defense [paramilitary] groups with specific ends, but that these groups broke away [from state oversight] and began to act outside the law” (“Cumplimiento de Sentencia”, 2010: paragraph 76). As we have seen, such groups have been responsible for most of the country’s massacres—though not its kidnappings, because they do not engage in that crime.

And yet the huge marches were convened against the FARC and not against anyone else, while the march called to protest against all perpetrators of violence was rather less than huge. March 6 was effectively belittled by the media if not totally ignored. February 4 and July 20 were encoded as nothing less than manifestations of the nation and its will: no more FARC. This was done on the basis of a *synecdoche*, in so far as the part was used for the whole. But if it is well and good to use *mouth* for *person*, as in, there were three mouths to feed when we mean that there were three people to feed, it is simply wrong to say that a certain number of people is the nation. This last has no substantial existence. We have seen here some examples of a journalistic discourse in which a large but limited number of Colombians is taken for the nation, for the totality—filtering out all alternative or contrary representations. It is worth reviewing the most notorious examples, from editorials in *El Tiempo*: it is “difficult to calculate the number of marchers”, but “It could be said that it was all of Colombia” (“El grito”, 2008: 1-24); and, “Yesterday, an entire country condemned you in the streets ...” (“Tomen nota”, 2008: 1-16). But this *synecdochic* move is also seen in the discourse of letter writers, as we see in this sample from letters to the editor printed on February 5: “It is the country that rejects them”; “Colombian society is waking up to

the narcoterrorists”; “the country showed its anger”; “Yesterday all of Colombia ... , without distinction of race or social class” (“Foro del lector”, 2008: 1-16). Where there was a crowd, even if it was big one, a nation in so many words is said to be manifest. Why? What is it about a nation?

About a nation

A nation isn’t something, or at least it is not what we think it is. Among recent authors on the subject Brubaker has perhaps been most insistent on desubstantializing it. He argues that the question, what is a nation? “is not as theoretically innocent as it seems: the very terms in which it is framed presuppose the existence of the entity that is to be defined. The question itself reflects the kind of realist, substantialist belief that a ‘nation’ is a real entity of some kind” (1996: 14). But, instead of falling into the trap set by the question and attempting to describe naively some sort of real community with these or those characteristics, we should respond that the nation is a discourse. It is a discourse that constantly reworks a fundamental idea in an attempt to order reality, to make it make sense. It is a way of making the real intelligible to people. To understand the essence of that idea we need to turn to an earlier commentator on the nation, the Abbé Sièyès, writing in 1789 in the fervor of the French Revolution:

The Nation exists before all things and is the origin of all. Its will is always legal, it is the law itself ... Nations on earth must be conceived as individuals outside the social bond, or as is said, in the state of nature. The exercise of their will is free and independent of all civil forms. Existing only in the natural order, their will, to have its full effect, only needs to possess the natural characteristics of a will. In whatever manner a nation wills, it suffices that it does will; all forms are valid and its will is always the supreme law. (as cited in Smith, 2001: 43)

These words demand close study. Sièyès remarks that the nation is “outside the social bond”, “in a state of nature”; that it exists as part of the “natural order”. He goes on to say that the “exercise of [its] will is free and independent of all civil forms”. I want to suggest that this is not nationalism, which is always a specific movement in relation to a specific “nation”, but nationism, the discourse of the nation as such. Here, the nation is in some sense another version—though certainly not a secular version—of God. But as Smith comments in his use of the words of Sièyès, in the same pamphlet that these words appear, Sièyès identifies the social and historical Third Estate with the nation (Smith, 2001: 43). What we see here is rhetorical sleight of hand: while Sièyès insists that the nation is beyond all civil forms, he nonetheless points to it being embodied by a civil agency. Despite its claims to be above or beyond any particular group or group interest, it is appropriated in practice by a very specific sociohistorical collectivity or group, the Third Estate in the case of the French Revolution. But it is not fair to say, on the one hand, that the nation exists in a state of nature, and on the other identify the Third Estate as the nation. This leaves out of consideration other actors and groups. In identifying this one segment of the population as the nation, Sièyès is saying that its will—the will of the Third Estate—conditioned to the core by social and civil processes, is nonetheless free and independent of all civil forms. The will of the nation, the will that must be done, is in fact the will of some only—but it claims to be the will of all.

¹ I can’t help but comment on the fact that the state chose to publish the announcement in the paper that is already known for being critical of it. In such a newspaper the admission hardly counts as news. It would have made more sense, from the point of view of the court, to insist that it be published in *El Tiempo*.

This is, I argue, the point. The nation manifests itself or is manifested in representation as a real thing, as a universal collective subject, whose will must be realized. No one speaks of the nation without believing that its will must be done. But this thing, this community only exists in discourse, as a result of mediation, or, as we have seen above, as a result of the media—which amounts to more or less the same thing. As Hall puts it, in general, the media, in so far as they do ideological work, produce the “mystical unity of ‘consensus’, into which free and sovereign individuals and their wills ‘spontaneously’ flow” (1977: 339). The media, though, disavow their participation in the process of “structuring ... what individuals in a society think, believe and want”, which, to the contrary, “is represented, in appearance, as a freely given and ‘natural’ coming-together into a *consensus* which legitimates the exercise of power” (Hall, 1977: 339). Our analysis has shown us how in this particular instance, with respect to violence in Colombia, the media has participated in producing a degree of consensus against only one violent agent, the FARC—the only armed actor with a discourse that challenges the structure of domination in Colombia—by representing such opposition as national, while ignoring other actors interested in and responsible for the country’s structure of domination and acts of coercion designed to maintain it.

Consenting to coercion: you’re not Colombia

My purpose here is not, of course, to free the FARC from collective condemnation. While I recognize that their discourse is directed against Colombia’s structure of domination, I harbor no illusions about their actions—nor, incidentally, about their proposed solutions—and I do not believe them to be in any way justified. Nonetheless, it is important to condemn not only them but the other purveyors of violence in Colombia as well, if we are to move towards a more humane and dignified shared existence. This wider more inclusive condemnation was effectively prohibited by arguments like those of Mauricio García Villegas, to wit: “The fact that public opinion is partial in its condemnation does not mean that it is mistaken in what it condemns” (2008: 1-17). But I would argue that it is indeed mistaken, because by not including the crimes of the state within its condemnation, it

is effectively expressing approval, that is, consent to the criminal actions of the state and its various agents. The marches—“national”—against the FARC did not permit a condemnation of the government, nor of the Armed Forces. As a consequence, the exclusion of the significant part of the population that had been killed, disappeared and displaced was effected. They were not the nation, not important: legitimate targets of the exercise of power. Though I doubt the connection was consciously made, it is as if by wearing t-shirts and carrying banners saying *no más*, the marchers in February and July were saying no to *los demás*: no more = no one more/no one else. This seems plausible when we learn that another slogan of these marches was “I am Colombia” (“Colombia soy yo”). Instead of synecdoche, metonymy: Colombia I am. The many is reduced to one, a perhaps puzzling rhetorical move—unless one recalls the words of Sièyès, which affirmed that the will of the nation is a natural force, irresistible. If I am Colombia, the nation, then my will is the nation’s will, which must be done, in whichever way. *Colombia soy yo* said the t-shirt, the banner, the placard, even the billboard overlooking the main thoroughfare in the city’s northern—wealthier—sector. The others are not.

The plausibility of the argument I am making increases when one learns that in the autumn of 2008 and during the first months of 2009 what are known as false positives once again became headlines in Colombia. False positives are the bodies of poor but otherwise innocent Colombians who have been killed by the Armed Forces (the state), their corpses listed as enemy—legitimate—kills. In the face of this news, in the face of these proofs of death at the hands of the state, the result of a state policy which rewarded terrorist kills with weekend passes for the killers—agents of the state/nation—there were no multitudinous marches demanding “no more killings”. There was but one small protest, to which no one thought to apply synecdoche. The paper of record published a mere three sentences about it on its web site (“Marcha de víctimas de ‘falso positivos’”, 2009) fulfilling, one could argue, its journalistic duty but also confirming the analysis here. The ‘nation’ was not appalled, not moved. The tiny march did not express any nation’s will. To the many millions of Colombians who not so long ago were said to have constituted a newly invigorated citizenry, interested and participatory, the

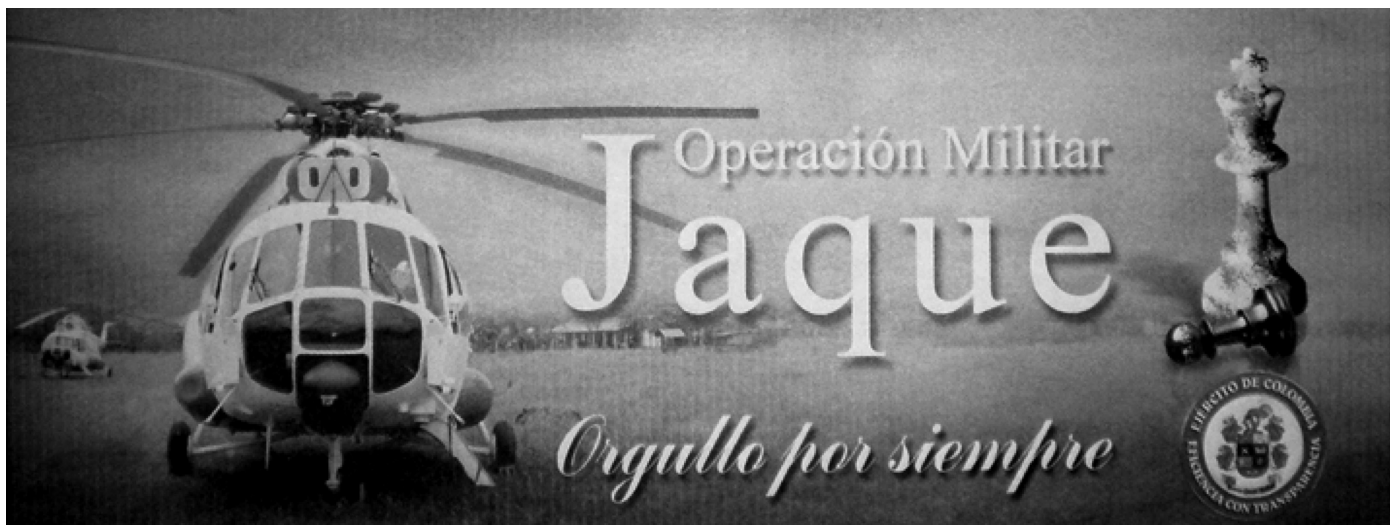


Illustration 1: Flyer distributed by Colombian armed forces to celebrate the anniversary of Operation Check

matter was of no import. Instead of marches what we saw was a publicity campaign by the state, with the collusion of *El Tiempo*: the Armed Forces responded to the revelations by publishing, and having soldiers distribute at toll booths on Bogota's outskirts, these flyers (see Illustration 1). They celebrate the anniversary of *Operación Jaque*. The image is of two helicopters—one in the foreground, one in the distant background (neither displaying the symbol of the Red Cross)—and two chess pieces: a camouflaged king standing over a fallen pawn (a legitimate kill?). The text anchoring the image's meaning is "Military Operation Check", with a subtext "Pride forever" and the symbol of the Army and its slogan: "Army of Colombia, Efficiency with Transparency".

The image of the chess pieces is most curious, in so far as in chess the expression "check"—the name of the military operation—is used when the king is in danger, though not yet killed. Here it is the pawn that has been, as it were, checked, and thus the message would seem to be that the sovereign power of the nation, as exercised by the state and its forces, is being successfully applied against the pawns. What are called pawns in English are *peones* in Spanish, a word that is not limited to the chessboard, whose most telling definition is a person who is subordinated to the interests and projects of others. If there were any confusion regarding the meaning of all this, the posture of the state, the army and the preferred position of those who consider themselves the nation in the face of the fact of the false positives, the subtitle anchors the phrase thus: *Orgullo por siempre*. (And as I said, *El Tiempo* colluded in this campaign, including a special magazine in its Sunday edition that was entirely devoted to celebrating the operation of a year ago.) As Barthes has argued, one of the functions of the linguistic message that accompanies an image is that of providing "anchorage" (1980: 274). The linguistic message is, Barthes argues, one of the "techniques" societies have invented in order to "fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (1980: 274); "the caption ... helps me to choose the correct level of perception, permits me to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding" (1980: 275). The anchoring text, Barthes continues, is "ideological" in so far as it "directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to

avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (1980: 275). Here, one is thus directed away from reading the image in terms of an out of control military unmoved by the innocence of its victims or the inviolability of the certain symbols like that of the Red Cross, and towards a celebratory apprehension of Colombia's military exploits, a source of eternal pride rather than embarrassment or shame: I am Colombia. Those others? I'm not so sure.

Conclusion

I conclude this analysis by observing that while the press, for its part, did not represent the March 6 march as a march of the nation, or the country or the masses, the marchers themselves did, providing an interesting riposte to the slogan of the February march. The slogan *Colombia soy yo* was replaced by *Colombia somos todos*. The intention of this slogan is to point out that all Colombians, in all their differences, constitute the nation; that the nation is not just one person, but all persons. Still, in actual practice the claim is not less problematic. It does not suffer from the egoism of the prior claim, but the invocation of universality, as if there were a universal subject, a moment of connection, a commons, remains a strategy for advancing what continue to be particular interests. For unfortunately, it is quite obviously in the interests of many people to maintain Colombia's structure of domination, even if that means that some—other—people have to die.

We see this evidenced by the actual number of marchers in February and July and the coverage of the marches, and by the lack of both in March: the fact of the false positives (and more generally of the extrajudicial killings mentioned above), provoked no grand march, no spectacular coverage. But my purpose here is not to impugn anybody's essential humanity. It is rather to shed light on the role of the media, acting freely, in producing specific points of view, in winning consent to structures of domination by (mis)representing them, by encoding them in a certain way, by choosing to focus on certain things and not on others.

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