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Observatory of Symbolic Violence
Exploratory Mission Colombia

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Aims of the Exploratory Mission

We are currently setting up the first observatory of symbolic violence. This action research project aims to research a thorough understanding of the mechanisms of symbolic violence, its impacts and ways for the population to adapt to it and to reduce it. The first pilot project has been running in Palestine since 2011, identifying various spatial and cultural aspects of this form of violence. We are opening a second pilot project, this time in Central Colombia.

In extreme environments such as Palestine and Colombia, symbolic violence has become a way to (insidiously) impose a forced domination though means such as obstruction to freedom of movement, destruction of heritage or lifestyle or forced reorganization of social spaces.

In Colombia, the observatory is focussing on different groups: direct and indirect victims of violence such as displaced populations, farmers in the coffee growing areas and indigenous people. Symbolic violence for these populations is expressed in the dispossession of their land and the destruction of their associated lifestyle. It impacts social links and family relationships.

The Santander Research Grant has allowed an exploratory mission to take place in order to meet up with potential partners such as Fecoop in Cali and IOM in Bogota as well as two universities: the University of Manizales and the University of Tolima. The University of Tolima has given us the opportunity to present the observatory to staff and students and to launch our project in Colombia. The current peace process and the associated Law on Victims and Land Redistribution are major sources of hope after decades of violence. The observatory of symbolic violence can be a significant contributor to the elaboration of community-based peace-building initiatives.

Executive Summary

Symbolic Violence is at the same time a root cause of conflict and an impact of it. It can lead to discrimination and exclusion and to the use of physical violence. Understanding, monitoring, reducing and preventing symbolic violence is therefore a key issue for sustainable peace building. PROTECTION, ADVOCACY and CAPACITY BUILDING are our main aims.

In Colombia, all spaces have been affected by different forms of violence during decades of conflict. Our observatory will be targeting in particular rural areas, affected by displacement of population, presence of fighting groups, forced changes of lifestyles and an overall stigmatisation of different populations.
Symbolic Violence and Resilience

Symbolic violence is described as a ‘soft violence somehow invisible even to its own victims.’ When Pierre Bourdieu coined this concept he sought to demonstrate impacts of all types of domination. By negatively impacting upon spaces and resources, symbolic violence has consequences for cultures, identities and socio-political functioning of communities. This can cause extreme reactions of both dominant and dominated, and become the foundation of the use of physical violence.

The link between symbolic violence and resilience is critical. If symbolic violence is a tool for normalising domination and subsequent discrimination, this normalisation can also be seen as a form of adaptability that can withstand the small but ceaseless daily harassment. The border between resilience and normalisation tends to be constantly blurred. Work on symbolic violence is essential to avoid a full normalisation, which is becoming inevitable especially for younger generations who have never lived outside the situation of conflict and violence.

The determination to preserve cultural roots, land or house attachments or to keep hope, to adapt as best as possible while refusing to give up dignity and rights, are essential as much for enhancing resilience as for reducing the impacts of this form of violence.

Symbolic Violence in Colombia

Colombia has known decades of conflicts. Guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and state security forces have been fighting to control lands, populations and resources. This has led to the worst forms of physical, psychological and symbolic violence and to massive forced displacements and land abandonment or grabbing. The number of IDPs is estimated at more than 5 million. Despite peace efforts, due to the multiplicity of actors involved, internal conflicts keep intensifying and increasing in complexity. Long lasting impacts of symbolic violence on vulnerable populations living in affected areas or forcedly displaced are widespread. This can be seen in the stigmatisation of rural populations aligned with warring parties or their supporters or in the normalisation of violence or of the presence of armed groups. All reorganisation of social spaces and of invisible boundaries, creation of virtual spaces of fears and threats are leading to changes of lifestyles but also to a wealth of adaptation strategies.

Victims and Land Restitution Law 1448

In June 2011, the Colombian government adopted an ambitious law on victims and land restitution. This Law constitutes a positive step forwards to transitional justice, truth and reconciliation as it recognizes existence of armed conflicts in Colombia (denied previously by the State), and calls for protection rights and restitution of land to forcibly displaced persons. It also addresses in its articles 141, 142 and 145 symbolic reparation mainly through the creation of a national day of memory and the collection of oral testimonies of direct victims. This Law is unique as it proposes before the end of violence to put in place processes usually reserved for post-conflict situations. This may lead to implementation difficulties to guarantee safety of victims, sustainable returns and independence of courts.
Florida, Territorio de Paz

Florida, Valle de Cauca, is a municipality known for a legacy of 20 years of violence resulting from clashes between guerrilla groups, armed forces and the civilian community. A dangerous process of normalization of this violence is noticeable among the youngest generations who have never known another life scenario than war, attacks, fear and death. It is concerning that every day, rural school children during their recreation time play roles of guerrilla fighters or policemen using lemons to simulate attacks of explosive bombs.

‘In the 80ies, you could easily and quietly come to our village but today it is impossible to cross certain neighbourhoods’ (quotation of an interviewed resident of Florida). Invisible and impenetrable borders create inaccessible areas even for police forces. This is one of the reasons why people were forced to change their lifestyles and limit their agricultural production. It reduced also their mobility especially at night. Those situations have led to a stigmatisation of young people who are looking for jobs. As Florida is located in a red zone, young people feel rejected from certain enterprises and are therefore obliged to change their CVs, lying about their origin in order to be accepted.

Natagaima : Trusting Return

Natagaima is a city known for its strong cultural legacy based on the heritage of a majority of indigenous population. The city has known one of the saddest chapters in its history in the late 90s, with the occupation of the area by anti-guerrilla group AUC (Defence of Colombia) who attacked the civilian population, conducting all kinds of crimes of extreme cruelty and dispossessed farmers from their land forcing displacement of urban and rural population toward the main populated urban areas of the region. However some return has started taking place approximately four years ago. The roots and attachment to the land as well as traditions and family ties have pushed families to return to Natagaima where security conditions are beginning to improve.

A touristic project which brings into play all the culture and folklore of this municipality represented in the popular figure of Matachin, well-known emblem of indigenous folk culture present in all annual festivals, has been created by the community to publicize an alternative image to the violence.

Ortega : Roots and Traditions

Ortega district is located in the southern part of the department of Tolima. It has been the target of outlawed groups and has witnessed a massive displacement of peasants in the past years. During our stay in the village, we had the opportunity to hear the life stories of four city councilors who together with their families were direct victims of all kinds of physical, psychological and symbolic violence. Between tears and laughter, they counted in a dignified manner how after having been dispossessed of their land, they decided to return to fight for what they consider their property. “The Earth is all what they are” they acknowledged. A strong agricultural vocation that they refuse to abandon.
The phenomenon of displacement and the consequent fluctuation of students’ attendance in schools and colleges, as well as the lack of confidence and expectations, can explain partly the phenomenon of uprooting and of indifference on the part of adolescents for their place of origin. There is a widespread negative stigma on the rural population. In an area where the entire economy was formerly based on the production of coffee, the grower today is seen as someone ignorant.

In Ansermanuevo Valley, endemic social problems are impacting particularly young people and adolescents who at very early ages are sinking into alcoholism and drug addiction, both as consumer and vendor or distributor. In urban and rural areas, this situation has caused the increase of the micro-trafficking, theft and crimes. This situation tends to "be normalised" by those inhabitants of the village who define it as "a fashion of young people of Ansermanuevo".

To cope with this situation FECOOP (Foundation for Cooperative Education) has launched innovative pedagogical models that attempt to make agricultural and livestock production attractive, thus participating in the social and economic reintegration of displaced persons in the rural sector.

Among all victimized populations, some have been more vulnerable to violence and displacement than others. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities as well as impoverished farmers are among those. Within these populations, some groups have been deeply impacted by symbolic violence: such as the youth who has never lived outside violent context and those depending on livelihoods linked to space and places.

In order to carry out the identification phase of our project in conditions guaranteeing safety and accessibility to targeted populations, we have decided to concentrate our investigation on the monitoring of the conditions of indigenous communities, displaced populations and dispossessed farmers. The results of this identification phase will allow us to target more specifically subgroups and to expand the research to more critical areas of the country.

**Direct or Indirect Victims: the Cafeteros of the Valle de Cauca**

A conference on Symbolic violence has been successfully carried out in one of the auditoriums of the University of Tolima, in the city of Ibague. This presentation of the project of the Observatory of symbolic violence was an initiative of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Husbandry, thereby fulfilling one of the objectives of this mission, consisting of the dissemination of the concept of symbolic violence. This open event was attended by teachers, students and administrative staff.

Further than presenting theoretical concepts of symbolic violence and resilience, the conference aimed to introduce the similar work and progress made in Hebron, Palestine. We had at the same time the opportunity to present the objectives of the project and the first results of the identification phase conducted in Colombia since last year and thus to alleviate potential doubts and concerns, which were resolved completely.

**Conference on Symbolic Violence. University of Tolima**

**Targeting Specific Populations**

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Targeting Specific Issues

All preliminary research done in Palestine on symbolic violence has proven that spaces, culture and identity are the three dimensions most impacted on by this form of violence. Our exploratory mission in Colombia has confirmed the same trends.

The identification phase of our project will be therefore targeting in particular: home, space and place attachment key specifically for displaced and dispossessed persons. The notion of reality and the stigma left due to the succession of waves of violence and conflict as well as the ongoing process of rurbanisation (urbanization of rural areas) due to displacement, will need to be addressed as a priority. Invisible and virtual spaces, dismantlement and reorganisation of social spaces, place making and identification mechanisms will be particularly monitored.

Protracted conflicts spread over more than a generation are characterised by embedded and normalised adaptations of behaviours and lifestyles, positive and negative coping strategies and forms of resilience which need to be carefully monitored in order to identify impacts of symbolic violence and ways to challenge them.

Finally, initiatives that may reduce impacts of symbolic violence and particularly its normalisation, prevent its future expansion and help for symbolic reparation; will need to be identified and when possible tested and promoted.

Creating a participative Project through Partnership

The observatory of Symbolic Violence is a project owned jointly by Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom and the CERAR (Centre d’études et de recherches-actions sur la résilience) based in Paris, France. Since 2011, initiatives have been conducted in Europe in order to develop the conceptual and methodological frameworks. Seminars, internships, field trips as well as workshops have taken place in Palestine to develop a first pilot study. This is conducted through the Building Sumud Project (http://www.buildingsumud.org/).

One of the assets of the project is to link local academic institutions as well as local NGOs in order to bring in a joint initiative, reflection, action and knowledge sharing. In Colombia, where the first contacts were initiated in 2013, a partnership agreement is under development between the two European institutions and the Universities of Tolima and Manizales, IOM (International Office of Migrations) and Fecoop. The project is locally designed in order to respond to the specific needs and expectations of all potential local partners.

An Action-Research Project

The observatory is an action research project. Our goals are on one hand a thorough understanding of the mechanisms of symbolic violence and of its impacts and on the other hand to find ways that support the positive coping strategies and forms of resilience of populations at risk, in order to avoid a complete normalisation of symbolic violence and an escalation of its effects. It aims also to halt the dismantling of the social, physical and cultural environment. To achieve that, the project is based on an innovative research protocol including participatory research methods involving the very population in a team of self-observers as well as on testing restorative symbolic actions such as the creation of moments of exception.
Our very special thanks to the Santander Research Grant for its funding which allowed us to conduct this first exploratory mission in Colombia.

Our sincere thanks extended to all the Colombian entities which made this work a complete success. To Fecoop for its active and fruitful collaboration and for providing logistical means for all activities carried out in the Valle del Cauca and in the area of coffee production. This support has been crucial in our work and has allowed us to achieve our goals and to obtain first field results.

Our gratitude also to the University of Tolima for the excellent organization and planning of different academic activities as well as for the administrative and efficient coordination with local field agencies. Both the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine as the office of Social Projection were key to achieving these results that are vital for the development of this project in which you are already taking part.

We are also looking forward to the participation of entities such as IOM (International Organisation for Migration) and the University of Manizales which has manifested their interest to join and support the project and has allowed us to present the observatory to the representatives of their different services.

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Moving Forward

The project is broken down into 3 phases as follows:

**Innovation phase** (6 months). This involves conducting local diagnosis in order to study the key aspects of symbolic violence as well as to confirm specific issues and finalize agreement with potential partners. It also involves creating a methodology which is in direct response to the research that allows symbolic violence to be observed, documented and responded to. During this phase, some awareness raising and dissemination of the concept of symbolic violence is being done via meetings, workshops, internet and social networking.

**Consolidation phase** (2 years) A call for evidence (collecting further data but also to identify new cases of symbolic violence in extreme situations) will be conducted via an interactive open source. We also aim to create a ‘visual database’ on which images, surveys and audio-visual data will be collected and catalogued. Teams of observers will be created and trained through observer organizations, universities and the very population. Creating educational tools, methodological surveys and observation techniques will be refined.

**Development phase** (ongoing – minimum 5 years) This phase is based on ongoing monitoring of key case studies, opening new observatories; conducting advocacy campaigns for the recognition of symbolic violence as a full form of violence; establishing methods for reducing symbolic violence and strengthening people’s resilience. Finally work on the physical, cultural and spatial environment to reduce environmental and social impacts of symbolic violence (for symbolic reparation) will be conducted.