

A Multitude in Precarious Conditions - On the Colombian Strikes

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The collective decision to stage a strike during the Covid-19 pandemic has a unique feature that cannot go unnoticed.

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Tragic Action

The call for Colombians to go out and protest in the streets came on April 28th, 2021. [1] After a year of strict confinement, isolation from family, the virtualization of all communication, extreme sanitation measures, administered fear, contradictory and erratic public health policies, and the rise in unemployment and social inequality, the fact that people went out despite the lack of any real safety measures meant that the people found the protest to be the lesser of two evils.

The proposed tax reform, like Llorente's flower vase, [2] offered the opportunity for multiple social uprisings to converge, explosions that had neither a unitary nor a central orientation. A multitude, made up of individuals who had been forced to scrounge enough resources for their nuclear families' subsistence, saw through the cynicism of the government, which wanted to increase its tax revenue by sacrificing workers' salaries to benefit big capital. Cynicism, in this context, means "the shameless practice and defense of reprehensible actions and practices." To have named the tax reform "The Law of Sustainable Solidarity" (Ley de la solidaridad sostenible), was an obscene way of mocking people who depended either on their own efforts or on the real solidarity of their closest friends and family members, and in many cases, on public and private charity, to survive. Thus, the decision to strike was first motivated by a rather broad and complex assemblage of affects and feelings, primarily those of anger and indignation.

Those who have actively led the strike and joined the mobilization in the streets have suffered and endured the effects of the pandemic. Under a stratified and hierarchized health system, most people do not have proper access to health care, nor do they have the slightest chance of flying to Florida to be vaccinated in the U.S. Most have been waiting for weeks to even be tested for Covid-19 if they were so lucky. Everyone has a mother, or an uncle, or a sister, or a comrade, who has been sent back home from the hospital, only to end up days later in overcrowded intensive care units. Everyone has friends who got infected and then died because they were forced to go to the streets to have something to eat, or grandparents who are still waiting for the first dose of the vaccine, even though they were scheduled to have been fully vaccinated already. The "demonstrators"

("manifestantes"), as they have been called by mainstream social media, clearly and rationally understand the dangers to which they are exposed under a general strike that requires their collective presence in the streets. And they continue to participate in public and collective actions that are repressed by the state, both legally and illegally. Doing so, they expose themselves to the dangers of Covid-19 and to the bullets fired by the agents of an order they wish to endure no more.

The so-called "great thinkers" ("mentes lúcidas") and "talking heads" ("voces limpias") who criticize the protesters from intellectual positions they regard as "unpolluted" are wrong to characterize them as irrational and irresponsible, as their protests have a rather clear rationale behind them. The protesters are choosing the dangers of the pandemic because they do not want to be subjected any longer to a social order that condemns them to poverty and misery, the same order that transforms them into cheap labor while making them complicit in their own exploitation—as in the case of "self-entrepreneurs on bicycles" (empreendedores en bicicleta). [3]

The 2021 strike has all the characteristics of a tragic action, as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to save the Achaean warriors who were fighting alongside him against Troy; he did so, even as he knew of his dreadful destiny of suffering at the hands of Clytemnestra on his way back to Mycenae. Colombian protesters face the same tragic fate in the streets, as they are forced to choose, during the worst peak of the pandemic, what they consider to be the lesser of two evils. Knowing full well that they might be putting their lives at risk, they nevertheless consider the strengthening of the economic, political, and social order that has governed Colombia since the end of the twentieth century to be the greater evil.

First Sidenote

Last week (May 17-23, 2021) I gave a lecture on violence and social movements at an event organized by a collective from the Department of Law and Political Science at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. In that lecture I argued that violence has a structuring dimension that precludes reducing it to pure instrumentality. Violence structures subjectivities, social relations, territories, forms of life and collective actions. Consequently, violence can distort the meaning of a protest, especially when agents who are external to the protest take advantage of it. Two days ago (May 25th) I was contacted by three young activists from Cali's "points of resistance" (puntos de resistencia); one of them studied at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and is currently finishing his degree at the Universidad del Valle, the other two, a woman and a man, survive through taking on odd jobs (rebusque). They told me: "although we did not understand everything that you said, we think that we are partially in agreement, but we would like to clarify one thing. We are the children of violence. We have grown up amid violence. We are not only talking about the violence of hunger, which is also violence, but the violence of the gangs, the paramilitaries, the guerrilla, the police, the military, the robbers, the thieves, the violence that you all call micro-traffic, and the violence that our mothers and sisters face in our houses. We are neither 'good law-abiding' citizens (personas 'de bien'), nor 'respectful' persons (gente 'sana') wearing white shirts. [4] We know that violence has 'marked' us, we are migrants from the countryside, forcefully displaced; but we are not 'cats' who have suddenly discovered violence. [5] There is desperate 'strife' ('cólicos') in our communities. Because of that, we do not want to return to the violence into which the government and the ruling class of this country want to confine us. The points of resistance are the safest places in our cities. We try to control the violence during the strike, but when they shoot at us, torture, and rape us too, violence sprouts from even the most peaceful bodies. We are trying to justify nothing. We are only trying to tell you that we are made of violence and yet, that we continue to resist and want to overcome that violence, but it is very hard to do so in this shitty society."

The New Proletariat, or the Multitude in Precarious Conditions

The 2021 protests share a common element that distinguish them from other prior protests, except perhaps the ones that took place in 2019. Groups participate in these protests that are so heterogeneous that they have defied sociologists' ability to characterize them by some shared element, for example as salaried workers, or by a social or cultural *habitus*. The general strike has brought together social and political actors as different and as heterogeneous as unemployed young people, students, wage-workers, neighbors, women who take active part in all aspects of the protest (not just in tasks related to care), professors, teachers, artists of all kinds, peasants, indigenous peoples, informal workers, political activists, NGO officials, doctors, nurses, and so on. Amidst such heterogeneity, what brings them together is a negation.

Such a negation refers to the social damage or pathology that condemns most Colombians to a condition of mere survival so that a small minority can build their well-being on the discontent and labor of the majority. The perception of those who protest in the street is clear: they are not protesting against a single reform or policy; they are protesting because for decades they have been enduring unbearable conditions; because the horizons of livability for the youth continue to shrink; because unremunerated labor will force them to work into old age, or depend on their families for survival; because a mother whose child is on the *front line* (*primera línea*) of the protest must pick up odd jobs in order to survive; [6] because poorly paid domestic labor is not even enough for these workers to feed their families, thus forcing them to go into informal work as well; because in the face of an already inadequate wage that barely covers the costs of living, workers wince at how the tax reform will increase their grocery bill; because the new generation of workers see that they must save more and more money to pay taxes to a state plagued by corruption and impunity.

As Andrés Felipe Parra says in his analysis of Karl Marx's "Contributions to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction" (1843) and *The German Ideology* (1846), from the limited perspective of productive relations of material life, this rather diverse set of human beings condemned to mere survival would be the proletariat. [7] That is to say, "a class that is not a class," a social group that is only defined by a negation, as it represents a form of life based on survival, upon which the rest of society organizes itself. Looking beyond productive relations, today we could also think of this group as a multitude living under precarious conditions. Current social relations and the corresponding forms of political organization lead many to confront—intellectually and affectively—imminent death as an everyday reality. Life itself is permanently exposed, vulnerable to loss, and today many consider the pandemic a lesser risk compared to the social pathology that throws them into a struggle for mere survival.

Second Sidenote

An activist in one of the points of resistance says the following: "before, we were nobodies; now, for the first time we are somebodies beside each other in the streets, where we even sleep undisturbed—except for when we are attacked by the police or by armed 'good law-abiding citizens.' Behind the barricades, you'll find the popular assemblies and the communal potlucks, thanks to which some have access to three meals a day (*los tres golpes*) for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic." [8] Another shares the following reflection with students from my Theories of Power undergraduate course: "the country exploded in their faces. They have not yet realized that we have no hope and that because of that, we will continue to take to the streets."

A Counter-Insurgent Apparatus

Feeling and thinking about the limits of survival, as is happening today in Colombia, generates the singular and collective desire for a life worth living. The heterogeneous struggles for other forms of life, from such a diversity of actors, have also broken the accepted logics of action within the existing social order in the country. In reaction, the state has adopted a new approach to counter-insurgency, based in the thought of Chilean entomologist and publicist Alexis López. López was plucked from obscurity when the ex-president, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, mentioned him approvingly, after he was invited to the Universidad Militar of Colombia (Military University). [9] The contradictory and theoretically inconsistent doctrine referred to as “molecular dissipated revolution” (“*revolución molecular disipada*”), would have been irrelevant, a mere curious object of Latin American neo-Nazi thought, had it not been used as the springboard for the counter-insurgency apparatus employed against the general strike. It has already accumulated a staggering number of human rights violations. According to INDEPAZ (Institute for the Study of Development and Peace) and the NGO *Temblores (Earthquakes)*, by May 7th more than 50 extra-judicial killings, 12 rapes, and 548 enforced disappearances had already been reported.

“Molecular dissipated revolution,” presumably inspired in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, assumes the existence of a great insurgent movement against the normality of Colombian institutions. According to this doctrine, a vanguard has organized this movement from the shadows, successfully giving it an anarchic façade when it is, in reality, a horizontal, molecular and dissipated civil war whose main objective is to overthrow the legitimately elected government in order to replace it with a socialist or communist dictatorship. This interpretative apparatus is not only inconsistent but also contradictory. López and his Colombian followers are unable to understand the ways in which the vertical organization they envision in response to the strike, entirely contradicts the kind of molecular revolution theorized by Deleuze and Guattari who, they otherwise claim, inspired the doctrine. By reducing the molecular to the micro-political, the doctrine erases Deleuze and Guattari’s materialist understanding of desire as a productive drive, which is the *conatus*, the immanent force of a subversive power that articulates itself around diversity and multiplicity, rather than in an organization established on a prior and shared identity.

However, the internal coherence of this approach has little significance when compared to the 2021 strike. What matters is the new counter-insurgency apparatus articulated by means of this doctrine into a new war machine. Through this ideological device, constitutionally protected public protests are transformed into bellicose acts, protesters into enemies who must be eliminated either physically or symbolically, and repression into an instrument that allows the state to perform lethal micro-surgeries in the streets of Colombia. The ideological blindness caused by this machine does not allow it to understand that the more the people are reduced to a condition of mere survival, the more decided, prolonged, and perhaps even violent the resistance will be. But it is also possible that this ideology works as a pair of blinders, making the state see the state of exception as the sole political solution to the crisis of legitimacy that grows ever-more acute.

Third Sidenote

When she heard me talk about this doctrine, an environmental militant wrote back to me: “the tragedy is worse than what you describe, because state-sanctioned violence feeds on the violence of those who are desperate.” In fact, physical violences are getting mixed in conflicting ways, and that mixture is used, by the state and mainstream social media alike, to construct the narrative that we are under a generalized state of war, which then creates the conditions to adopt more authoritarian and dictatorial measures.

Interregnum and Anti-Interregnum

During fascism and while imprisoned, Antonio Gramsci wrote about the “crisis in authority” and of the interregnum that such crisis opened. Amidst a harrowing situation, while incarcerated, he scribbled on a notebook: “if the hegemonic class loses its consensus, that is to say, when it no longer ‘governs’ but only ‘dominates,’ as it relies exclusively on its pure coercive force, this means that the masses have separated themselves from the traditional ideologies, that they no longer believe in what they used to, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old dies but the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, the most varied morbid phenomena are verified.” [10] If we are optimistic, in Colombia we are witnessing an interregnum in which the new must be born, and we must aid with the delivery. But we could also be experiencing an anti-interregnum, one in which, as I argued in the preface to the publication in Colombia of Boaventura de Souza Santos’ *Izquierdas del mundo ¡uníos!* (2019), “this is a regressive mutation, in which rather than a crisis in authority we have its metamorphosis, one that can strengthen itself under new ideological bases, capable of giving new form to such morbid manifestations such as today’s neo-authoritarianisms and neo-fascisms.” [11] Up until now, the strike has been focused on what Guattari would call the de-instituting moment. This is a moment capable of making visible the cracks in the current social order. But it is not yet a constituent moment. The strike has not yet found a way to enable a different kind of articulation from below—one able to assemble other alternatives so that Colombian society can transition from a micro to a macro-politics of desire. The uncertainty to which we have been subjected makes it difficult to anticipate what path we are going to follow.

Authoritarian rule threatens to truncate once again the invention of forms of life that go beyond mere survival. As does, too, the rush of some to try and organize the multiple explosions of protests from the top, by means of the guiding voice of the leader, or the intellectual light of the Universities, when faced with dispersed social conflicts of all kinds. If the protests are forced under a single political and programmatic logic, all of this could result in a new collective frustration.

Last Sidenote

When I asked another activist from the points of resistance what alternative they proposed when faced with the impossibility of sustaining the strike indefinitely, they answered me: “During the organization of popular assemblies we have gained a knowledge that we are never going to lose. Right now, we are neither negotiating nor recognizing any actor as negotiating on our behalf, but if something good happens we are willing to retreat and come back only if they breach the agreements or want to insist on the normality that we no longer accept.” Will a new reality be born, or will we sink in the old one that is willing to drag us all into its authoritarian abyss?

Leopoldo Múnera Ruiz

P.S.

- Spectre Journal. June 28, 2021:
<https://spectrejournal.com/on-the-colombian-strikes>

- Leopoldo Múnera Ruiz is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His research rethinks the relationship between politics and aesthetics in relation to gender-differentiated colonial logics of capitalist accumulation. He is the author of

Antigone in the Americas: Democracy, Sexuality and Death in the Settler Colonial Present (New York: SUNY Press 2021), and of various articles published in Settler Colonial Studies, Theoria, Theory & Event, Representation, Theatre Survey, Contemporary Political Theory, and Hypatia, among others.

- Translated by Andrés Fabián Henao Castro.

Footnotes

[1] This text was initially prepared by Leopoldo Múnera Ruiz on May 27, 2021, and translation by Andrés Fabián Henao Castro was prepared on June 24, 2021. From April 28 to June 16 of 2021, the Ministry of Defense registered 13,544 activities of protest related to the strike, across 864 of Colombia's 1103 municipalities. Only 10% of those activities were recorded as disturbances, and those mostly because of the participation of the police's ESMAD (Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squad). [Trans.]

[2] Llorente's flower vase ("el florero de Llorente") is how Colombians refer to the symbolic event that triggered the Colombian Declaration of Independence on July 20th, 1810. Colombian President Iván Duque Márquez's tax reform, in this case, is compared with Joaquín González Llorente's flower vase. The latter refused to lend one of his flower vases to known pro-Independence leaders at the time, who wanted to honor Antonio Villavicencio, a well-known sympathizer of the Independence cause. Llorente's refusal was considered the tipping point for the Independence movement calling for the people to go into the streets and declare independence from Spain. [Trans.]

[3] "Emprendedores en Bicicleta" is a way of discursively qualifying people's survival strategies, to hide the rising rates of poverty and unemployment, conditions coercing people to take on odd jobs and engage in informal economies to cope with their structurally imposed precarity. [Trans.]

[4] In the city of Cali, a sector of the upper class that rejects the strike and self-identifies as "good law-abiding citizens" (personas de bien), wears white shirts. Some of them are armed and have joined the police in repressing the protests in the streets, none have yet been brought to justice. [Trans.]

[5] "Cats" (gatos) is a pejorative way of referring to working-class young people as immature and powerless. [Trans.]

[6] Primeras líneas, literally "first lines," is a tactic being used in the current protest, in which the youth form a line of defense around the protest to defend it from the seemingly inevitable violence at the hands of the police. This tactic thus protects the democratic right to protest in the streets, which though constitutionally protected, is constantly under threat. [Trans.]

[7] Andrés Felipe Parra, *La clase que no es una clase: Acción política y emancipación*. PhD Thesis (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2016).

[8] "Golpes," literally "hits," is a popular way of referring to meals that denotes the inseparability of sustenance from struggles. [Trans.]

[9] The controversy over Alexis López's role in the Colombian military increased when his active role in neo-Nazi organizations in Chile was made public. [Trans.]

[10] “L’aspetto della crisi moderna che viene lamentato come «ondata di materialismo» è collegato con ciò che si chiama «crisi di autorità». Se la classe dominante ha perduto il consenso, cioè non è più «dirigente», ma unicamente «dominante», detentrica della pura forza coercitiva, ciò appunto significa che le grandi masse si sono staccate dalle ideologie tradizionali, non credono più a ciò in cui prima credevano ecc. La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati.” Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere I* (Torino, Einaudi, 1930), §34, 311.

[11] Leopoldo Múnera Ruiz, “Prefacio,” in *Izquierda del mundo, ¡uníos!*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Bogotá, Siglo XXI Editores, 2019), 13-23.