

Terror in the Antipodes: Sri Lanka and Colombia

María Victoria Uribe

Grupo de Memoria Histórica, Colombia (Historical Memory Group, Colombia)

Beginning with an initial comparison of a few terror techniques characteristic of the conflicts in Sri Lanka and Colombia, I will analyze a few manifestations of the concepts “culture of terror” and “spaces of terror” – coined by the anthropologist Michael Taussig – in the contexts of violence in Colombia and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka and Colombia are antipodes. If one were to pierce a globe with a large needle, entering through Colombia, it's possible that the point would exit through Sri Lanka. Despite the geographic distance and the profound cultural differences between the two nations, there are surprising analogies and similarities in the internal conflict between the two countries. I will outline some of them. First, despite the recent military victory that supposedly defeated the Tamil Tigers [in Sri Lanka], both countries have suffered persistent and prolonged conflicts that have not ended in defeat of the armed insurgencies. The two conflicts share the important emblematic year of 1948. In this year, Sri Lanka gained independence from Great Britain and a violent postcolonial period began that has been characterized by permanent conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. In Colombia in 1948, a fratricidal war known as “*La violencia*” began after the assassination of an important liberal leader. It lasted sixteen years, from 1948 to 1964, and left 200,000 dead.

The events that formed the internal conflicts in Sri Lanka and Colombia are strikingly analogous. The “*Bogotazo*”, which occurred in Bogotá on April 9, 1948, was an explosion of uncontrolled popular violence that destroyed part of the city, which was partially burned by liberals from the assassinated leader's party. The liberals looted stores looking for liquor, destroyed establishments belonging to the political opposition (the Conservatives), and burned buildings and houses downtown. An estimated 2,000 people died in this conflict. In order to control the insurgents who were supported by the police in Bogotá, the Conservative president moved contingents of the police who were loyal to his political party toward the capital. These police troops, known as

“*chulavitas*”, assassinated liberals and carried out numerous massacres in various parts of the country. The *chulavitas* served the Conservative party, which had a reputation for being cruel, extremely sectarian, and ruthless. They carried out numerous massacres, mutilating and killing many liberal peasants.

The killing spree that occurred in Colombo in 1983, known as Black July, is emblematic of the ethnic violence that destroyed Sri Lanka during a 25-year period. The Sinhalese initiated the coup in Colombo in reaction to the assassination of thirteen soldiers at the hands of Tamil rebels in the northern province of Jaffna. Armed with cans of kerosene and weapons, they set fire to the commercial establishments of the Tamil community and gave rise to destruction of an unprecedented scale. The eruption of communal violence left 2,000-3,000 Tamil in its wake, killed in the most brutal ways. Many of them were burned alive. Among the goods destroyed by the Sinhalese were 2 million kilograms of tea for export, entire towns, stores, offices, furniture, valuable documents and entire factories. The army and police force of Colombo did nothing to stop bands of vandals from assassinating the Tamil and setting fire to their property. Members of the governing United National Party (UNP) and hitmen associated with the union Jatika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) joined in these violent outbursts. This national workers’ union played an important role in the institutionalization of violence against the Tamil in Sri Lanka. Prior to the election of Jayawardene as president in the year 1977, the JSS was a small union that later would become the largest in the country. Its president was the Minister of Industry of the government of President Jayawardene and the arch nemesis of the Tamil minority.

These two critical events, the *Bogotazo* and Black July, reveal similar mechanisms of repression on the part of the political establishment in the respective countries where the governments have given power to paramilitary and parapolice forces to repress popular sectors considered adversaries to the political regime.

These two countries share another common social phenomenon, on which I would like to center these reflections. This is the role that terror has played as a pedagogical and

deterrent element. The memory of the dead and disappeared are not easily erased from the collective consciousness, which is weighed down with trauma and pain.

In reference to Sri Lanka, Sasanka Perera offers a provocative analysis of what he calls a “culture of terror”. This is a concept taken from Michael Taussig, who used it to refer specifically to the Colombian case. Taussig says that in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes, “death spaces” proliferate, creating meanings and conscienceness. These spaces aren’t necessarily physical, but, as Taussig says, they are more like thresholds. When they are crossed, they allow for enlightenment as well as confusion, as if they were shamanic transitions with transformative effects. Taussig develops the concept out of the **world of the Casa Arana**¹ or the *cauchería*, places where indigenous communities were enslaved and killed at the hands of Peruvian and English businessmen exploiting rubber in the Amazon forest.

Applying the concept introduced by Taussig, Perera characterizes a “culture of terror” as violence unleashed by the Sinhalese of the extreme left, from a group known as Janata Vimukti Peramuna, or JVP, between 1988 and 1991 in the South of Sri Lanka. During this period, the JVP strongly criticized the prevailing political regime in Sri Lanka and had several confrontations with the armed forces of the State. This antigovernment position was accompanied by opposition that established provincial councils, by which the island’s Tamil minority has governed. Some of the members of the JVP look to Peru’s Shining Path for the way in which it created awareness of a silent class struggle, persecuting public officers in the State system and supporting raids against criminals like rapists and robbers. Using this example, Perera defines a “culture of terror” as both a physical space harvested with cadavers and a semantic space where existing words are given new meaning in contexts of violence and terror. It is a space that has a structure and its own vocabulary.

Continuing with this analysis, Perera joins another concept from Taussig, the “death space”, with that which he calls the “shadow of death”. He argues that the transformation

¹ Phrase often used to refer to nobility/class hierarchies

that Taussig uses to discuss the “death spaces” can only occur through the application of terror. He argues that these death spaces completely alter norms and cultural paradigms that constrain ideas on a good or natural death, affirming that in these contexts terror and death become surreal. It is on this point that Perera weakens the discussion by referring to a scenario that he considers surreal and was deliberately construed by JVP members as part of their terror techniques. He defines it as a scheme that joins together certain elements in a way in which Buddhists would disagree, such as placing 18 decapitated heads next to a pond near the University of Peradeniya in the center of the island. Both the University and the pond are located very close to the temple of Kandy, where one can find the Tooth of Buddha, a particularly sacred site for the Sinhalese. To use surrealism to explain correlations as Perera does is like calling real events “magical realism” because they are exotic to inhabitants of the First World, when they are everyday common events for those who inhabit these spaces of terror.

The scenario that Perera mentions is familiar to me because in Colombia the spaces of terror are associated with massacres and places where bloody battles have taken place. Some of these spaces, like in Sri Lanka, are deliberately construed with the aim of terrorizing the population. To illustrate this concept, I will discuss a practice that was very common during *La Violencia* of the 1950s, in which people were shot, their bodies later mutilated to the extent that they were profoundly altered physically. Finally, the different parts would be put back in different places to produce a real “corporal disorder.” As much during the decade of *La Violencia* of the 1950s as in the 1990s, this “corporal disorder” resulted from the practice of dismemberment. However, there are differences between both periods. During *La Violencia*, the methods for killings were linked to peasant practices of hunting and butchering, but for the paramilitaries everything was reduced to “killing for the sake of killing”. In both cases, terror is incorporated in the population by introducing an absolute disorder in bodily classification.

The inhumanity of the physical and symbolic butchery that has taken place in Colombia does not have precedent on the American continent. The violence has been cyclical and nonsensical. The atrocities range from dismemberment to decapitations, covering a

whole slew of practices that reduce the human body to a pile of meat. These actions impact at least two spheres of social life. One of them is the local social environment, and the other is the subjective environment. In the local social environment, they are devastating events that profoundly affect as much the people directly involved as well as entire communities. The atrocities have a devastating effect in the subjective environment, according to testimonies of survivors who narrate the facts, predominant among them women and children.

Finally, I would like to discuss the way in which the cleansing of spaces polluted with terror have come about in both contexts. In Sri Lanka, the spirits of Buddhism and Hinduism are those that intervene in the cleaning of people and contaminated spaces. However, among both the Sinhalese and the Tamil as among the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in Colombia there is the belief that the spirits of people who have been assassinated do not rest in peace due to the nature of their violent death and the way in which assassinated bodies they are treated once they are buried in common graves. The survivors, although they are able to orally articulate their stories, cannot make sense of what has happened to them.

In the midst of profoundly dehumanizing war, many communities perform rituals with the aim of cleansing spaces and recovering the dignity of the people that have been assassinated. Collective reparation necessarily happens through the social reincorporation of the dead who have been condemned to the sphere of the forgotten and to restore the dignity of those who have been assassinated for their presumed links with armed groups. It has to do with the creation of rituals that construe new meanings that transform the horrors of war.