
Dismembering and Expelling: Semantics of Political Terror in Colombia

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In a series of very suggestive essays, Daniel Pécaut considers how representations of Colombian society as fragmented, heterogeneous, and precarious go hand in hand with the anguish produced by irruptions of an object that hinders socialization.¹ This external something is violence, which Pécaut understands as a circumstantial default or excess of the social that deprives the latter of any type of internal unity. Colombia, a semiperipheral and violent country with one of the most durable democracies in Latin America, has tragically fulfilled Homi Bhabha's definition of the nation: an idea whose potential resides precisely in its impossible unity as a symbolic force.² Some of the most remarkable features of the Colombian case are the paradoxes and dilemmas that in its recent history accompany the relationships between war, nation, democracy, and the peaceful

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1. Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y Violencia: Colombia 1930–1954* (Bogotá: CEREC, 1987).

2. Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

or violent appropriation of national territory.³ Throughout its turbulent history, Colombia has been unable to incorporate its territory within a unitary idea of the nation, and the state has failed to solve profound social inequalities and to gain national legitimacy. As a result, political factions have become violent adversaries seeking territorial control. Tragically, these confrontations have been advanced through the forceful expulsion of local inhabitants. Today, terror in Colombia is a contagious physical reality that has forced more than 2 million citizens to abandon their belongings and flee into urban slums amid terrible hardships.

In Colombia, violence does not follow linguistic, religious, or ethnic lines of difference. It is the slightest disparity between persons that acquires the greatest importance, what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences.”⁴ In this essay, relying on the testimonies of survivors of violence, I would like to examine the figures of “the neighbor” and “the stranger” in two situations of extreme political polarization in Colombia: La Violencia of the 1950s and the generalized war waged today among the military, guerrillas, and paramilitaries.⁵ Both these periods have been characterized by widespread massacres that function as social symptoms of unsocializable violence.⁶ In these massacres, perpetrators carry out a series of semantic operations, permeated with enormous metaphorical force,

3. Gonzalo Sánchez has thoroughly studied the relationship between democracy, nation, and war in Colombia. According to Sánchez, in nineteenth-century Colombia, war was the primary site of power relations: political leadership, presidential candidacies, and territorial controls. Adversaries sought not power or changes in the social system but bureaucratic participation and incorporation into the institutional apparatus. These wars ended in horizontal treaties; only one of them was won by rebels. The end of these civil wars—like the end of La Violencia—was sealed ritually, with amnesties that attempted to define the status of defeated rebels, who were eventually assassinated. See Gonzalo Sánchez, *Ensayos de historia social y política del siglo XX* (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 1985), and Gonzalo Sánchez, *Guerra y política en la sociedad colombiana* (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 1991).

4. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 72.

5. For more than fifteen years, I have been analyzing a recurring phenomenon in Colombia's recent history: the collective assassination of unarmed and defenseless people. I studied 250 massacres carried out by Liberal and Conservative *bandoleros* during La Violencia with the hypothesis that these were sacrificial manifestations. I was able to identify a series of traits related to sacrifice, the specific clothes worn by perpetrators, and certain words and phrases—usually quite crude—used to dehumanize victims. See María Victoria Uribe, *Matar, rematar y contramatar: Las masacres de La Violencia en el Tolima, 1948–1964* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1990).

6. By *symptom*, I mean a nonsymbolized traumatic return that irrupts in the social domain along with the impossibility of its socialization. This definition of symptom owes much to Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 11–13, 21, and his *Mirando al Sesgo: Una introducción a Jacques Lacan a través de la cultura popular* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000), 36, 71.

that dehumanize the victims and their bodies. These technologies of terror seek to expel rural inhabitants from their homes in order to consolidate territorial control. Although massacres are a recurrent cultural practice, the specific alterities they are constructed around have varied from one period to the next.

During La Violencia (1946–64), neighbors used to sharing the same spaces and quotidian practices were transformed into strangers through the intervention of informants. At that time, families in the countryside were politically affiliated with one of the two political parties. This bipartisan polarization coincided with and reinforced the social isolation of rural communities. Internal division was fomented by inflammatory speeches from heads of state, politicians, village priests, electoral bosses, vote buyers, and community leaders belonging to the two parties. Nevertheless, it was an outburst of generalized violence that transformed neighbors into strangers and enemies, precipitating a war of extermination that spread throughout the country. During La Violencia, perpetrators and peasants became involved in a perverse logic. *Bandoleros* adopted the names and behavior of common birds of prey as well as the practices, strategies, and language used for hunting animals. In turn, peasants adopted the attitude of prey: meek, passive, and terrorized.

Colombia entered the twenty-first century immersed in an internal conflict whose political issues differ substantially from those of La Violencia but in which the battleground remains fundamentally rural. The countryside has been broken apart again by a generalized terror produced by guerrilla and paramilitary groups. This terror is not reducible to each side's fantasies and has had deadly consequences for a largely nonpartisan civilian population. The obsession with manipulating the Other's body characteristic of La Violencia has now been replaced by a faunalization that mimics the industrial slaughter of cattle, entailing a diminution of the meanings ascribed to the Other's body. Acts of barbarity, shamelessly publicized in television news broadcasts and newspapers, have transformed Colombians into beings filled with fear: fear of war, of violence, of blood, of losing one's own family, even of watching the news on television.

One member of the National Attorney's Office has described a spectacle of mutilated bodies and their scattered remains as "a pile of flesh." My attempt to articulate the metaphorical meaning of these corporeal remains represents an effort to exorcise the terrifying impact of scenes that have become all too familiar to Colombians. But an analysis of these gruesome acts of violence can by no means ignore their devastating effects on the victims, their relatives, and their friends.

Social Antagonism during La Violencia

La Violencia drew on the antagonistic relationship between the Liberal and Conservative parties. These two parties were involved in a war of extermination that left more than two hundred thousand dead and an enormous number of raped women and orphaned children. As a historical event, La Violencia stands out in terms of its magnitude, its fratricidal character, and the impunity that surrounded the atrocious crimes committed during this period. Although the war precipitated changes in landownership, it did not have liberating leaders or emancipatory ideals. The political polarization between Liberals and Conservatives dates from the origins of the republic in the beginning of the nineteenth century and was the focus of both the numerous civil wars that took place through the 1800s and La Violencia of the mid-twentieth century.

By the 1940s, Colombia was still very much a rural and internationally isolated country. Violent political confrontation had been on the rise since the 1930s and peaked in 1948, when the popular Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in the streets of Bogotá, spreading La Violencia throughout the country like gunpowder. Gaitán's speeches, as well as those of Conservative president Laureano Gómez, played a key role in laying the groundwork for violence. Both leaders emphasized the unbridgeable distance between the nation and the state, although from quite different points of view. Both also identified the presence of a radical social antagonism and accepted bipartisan confrontation as an opposition between friend and foe natural to Colombian society. Pécaut has argued that this antagonistic conception of the political created favorable conditions for the extension of the friend-foe dyad to other aspects of social life.⁷

The political polarization characteristic of this period is engraved in the following remarks by Laureano Gómez when he described the much hated Liberal Party as a basilisk:

Upon contemplating the political panorama, the country is absolutely divided in two blocks: on one side is the Conservative party, a singular entity amongst all parties of the continent, because it has completed the lofty task of eliminating caudillismo and egotism as stimuli. The Colombian Conservative party has a program and a doctrine. It defends a set of principles. Under the Conservative doctrine, from one frontier to the other, every Colombian knows why he is a Colombian, shares the same ideas, and serves the same principles. Facing the Conservative party there

7. Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*.

is another block, the Liberal party, an amorphous, unformed, contradictory mass. Our basilisk walks with feet of confusion and insecurity, with legs of abuse and violence, with an immense oligarchic stomach, with a chest of ire, with Masonic arms and with a small, diminutive, communist head that nonetheless is the head. . . . [This image] is not the result of a mental elaboration.⁸

It is not difficult to explain the political polarization that divided the country during the 1940s and 1950s, when Gómez and other politicians filled radio programs with inflammatory political speeches heard by thousands of Colombians. Rural communities were even more attached to the traditional parties, and this generated strong and divisive political identities. To walk through the streets of a Conservative town wearing the red handkerchief that identified Liberals was a dangerous provocation. Likewise, a street cry of “Long live the Conservative Party!” in a Liberal-majority town could result in a lynching. Much like Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Liberals and Conservatives in Colombia waged a war of symbols and signs. During La Violencia, there were almost no social and cultural differences between opposing parties, and the political differences between them were ultimately quite trivial. The polarization that divided Colombians brings to mind Rosemary Harris’s research on rural communities in Northern Ireland, which describes how Protestants and Catholics interact and maintain close relationships with one another but still remain strangers. Harris analyzes the apparent paradox presented by this situation and treats it as a case of social isolation.⁹ For Harris, this means that “it is easy for certain people to live cheek by jowl with members of the ‘other side’ and yet without necessarily intending this, be socially quite isolated from them” through involvement in mutually exclusive patterns of interaction.¹⁰ In fact, Irish Catholics and Protestants share many cultural traits, but it is those they don’t share that are responsible for the divisions in society: schools, neighborhoods, games, certain social spaces, and of course religious beliefs.¹¹ In Colombia, the situation was even more paradoxical, since the thousands killed during La Violencia were mostly poor Catholic peasants who went to the same schools, shared the same social spaces, recog-

8. *El Siglo* (Bogotá), 27 June 1949, 4.

9. Rosemary Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbors and “Strangers” in a Border Community* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1972).

10. Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance*, ix.

11. Anthony D. Buckley and Mary Catherine Kenney offer an interesting anthropological study of social isolation in Northern Ireland in *Negotiating Identity: Rhetoric, Metaphor, and Social Drama in Northern Ireland* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

nized common national symbols, and, more importantly, belonged to the same social class. So what separated them and made them strangers?

The political culture of rural inhabitants was determined by the two-party system, illiteracy, and social isolation shot through with violence. One was born either Liberal or Conservative, and membership in a given party was passed on from parents to children. A Conservative woman describes how this bipartisan division and enmity was experienced on the ground:

Our town was divided into ten *veredas*, five of them were Liberal and five of them Conservative.¹² We were Conservative and the Liberals were strangers who lived on the other side of town. They were the people one feared; they were *those* people. It wasn't that they were strangers, because one knew who they were. If you went to the other side's *veredas* they said the same thing about us. For them, we were also strangers; we were thugs. The *veredas* separated us; the Liberals did not mix with the Conservatives, and that was what divided us. One lives in peace where there are no mixtures. Killings occur in mixed towns. There is a lot of uncertainty when one is mixed up.¹³

This narrative eloquently shows how the enemy was at the same time a stranger and a known person—an equal or near-equal from whom one was separated by a street, ravine, or river. The town's division by *veredas* kept neighbors at a prudent distance. Personal identity was thus based not so much on belief systems as on a set of spatial and genealogical relations. Neighbors could maintain close and amicable relationships while being essentially separate—a situation that changed radically when violence erupted and forced neighbors to become foes. Social isolation played a definitive role in grounding the stereotypes that precipitated La Violencia.¹⁴ Another key role in the violence between Liberals and Conservatives was played by informers, known variously as “toads” (*sapos*), “turncoats” (*vol-*

12. In Colombia, municipalities are divided into *veredas*. Each *vereda* is made up of a number of isolated peasant smallholders located on the outskirts of small towns and villages.

13. This narrative clearly shows how the differences that existed between Liberals and Conservatives were of proximity imbued with strangeness; see also in Uribe, *Matar, Rematar y Contramatar*. All narratives excerpted in this essay belong to Colombians who were forced to witness the deaths of their neighbors and relatives. These testimonies, given to attorneys, judges, and members of human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), were collected by a human rights organization in Bogotá. Most of these testimonies come from women survivors, as women have often been exempt from the “machismo” economy of violence in Colombia.

14. The Liberal peasants, who considered themselves representatives of the only legitimate political party, used to call themselves “cleans” and referred to Communist peasants as “commons”—evidence of a broader Liberal ideology of contamination and purity.

teados), “stool pigeons” (*soplones*), or “pointers” (*señaladores*). *Sapos* identified the political affiliations of potential victims to armed bands of *bandoleros*—outlawed peasants loyal to the two parties who were mobile and frequently unfamiliar with local populations.

In this context, *sapos* served an ambiguous role, taking advantage of certain situations in order to gain favors from one or another group by informing on neighbors and kin. *Sapos* were social agents who came from deep within the community but turned against it by pointing out some of its members for extermination. These actions determined those they identified as strangers. The figure of the *sapo* thus condenses all of the ambiguity inherent in the neighbor-stranger dyad. All throughout La Violencia, *sapos* played a deadly role by mediating between friends and enemies, and they themselves were often murdered. Although *sapos* never publicly identified themselves, a sudden change in party loyalties immediately transformed a person into a *sapo*, making that person suspect to old party fellows who avoided him or her and doubted his or her intentions. In the marginal areas of Colombia, the term is used more generally to designate those who play up to the authorities, who tell on those who don't play by the rules.¹⁵ As such, the *sapo* is an ambiguous, liminal figure who points out kin and circulates among both friends and enemies. The *sapo* is slippery and sticky, what Mary Douglas has called “slimy,” inspiring rejection and hate from kith and kin.¹⁶ *Sapos* have had great symbolic importance in Colombia and, as will be shown, they continue to play a key role in the contemporary paramilitary violence.

Massacres during La Violencia

A great many massacres were perpetrated in relatively isolated rural areas of Colombia. The victims of these massacres were mainly smallholder peasants immersed in subsistence farming, isolated in *veredas*, and whose personal identities were subordinated to the two traditional political parties. The setting of these massacres was almost always the same: a remote peasant farmhouse at night, when everyone was having dinner, getting ready for bed, or already asleep. The *bandoleros* would knock on the door and cry out, “Open up, it's the law!” Gener-

15. The *sapo* is a multilayered and contradictory concept that defies simple and rational definitions. In Colombia, people commonly resist impositions by the state and public authorities, which is why those who play up to them are considered to be *sapos*.

16. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

ally, they summoned the owner of the house by name, and the owner would open the door thinking it was the police or soldiers searching the area. Peasants were thus placed in a paradoxical situation, for regardless of who was knocking on their door, there was always a very slim possibility that it was indeed the army. In the end, the identity of the nighttime visitor did not matter, for it was the irruption of a group of armed men moving under the cover of night that created an atmosphere of terror. For peasants and inhabitants of rural areas, the law was (and is) represented not by codes or the judicial system but by the uniforms of soldiers and policemen; thus, a direct association was established between power, legality, assault rifles, and uniforms.

During La Violencia, the massacres fit a pattern of polarization in which Liberals assassinated Conservatives and vice versa. Nevertheless, there were numerous cases where enmity did not reflect the preexisting political polarization but emerged in the massacre itself. The following narrative, by a woman who survived a massacre committed by Liberals, is not atypical:

It was eight thirty at night, when we were about to pray the Holy Rosary in the company of my husband, my father, my mother, a twelve-year-old girl, and my small daughter, fourteen months old. I was sitting on the bed, cradling the girl, my husband at my side, pampering her, when father called my husband telling him he was needed outside. He jumped up immediately and [the *bandoleros*] asked him: "Who lives here?" And he answered: "Antonio Rodríguez"; then they asked: "Who owns the farm?" And father replied: "Jesús Rodríguez." We then heard a noise as of long-range guns, like rifles or shotguns being loaded. At that same moment, several men walked into the corridor in green uniforms, green metal helmets, and with guns that I could not see if they were rifles or shotguns; they had belts with black cartridge pockets on their hips and others had bandoliers with bullets. When they entered the corridor, one of them said they were going to search the house. One of them insisted on asking my husband in a loud voice for his revolver, and he said he didn't have any on the farm. The same one that was asking for the revolver asked everyone in the house, that is, my husband, my father, and a worker, what their names were. Then, one of them made my father move from the place where he was sitting to a corner of the corridor, just in front of the patio door; in the meantime he came in, tore off the antenna from the radio, and when he heard a voice in the corridor say "Ready," he went and tied up father with the antenna, his hands behind his back. At that moment we were pushed into a room and from there I saw when a man shot father in the back of his head; I was on the floor when I saw that he shot him again and I felt when my husband was shot and he cried out. After that, the ones

guarding us in the room took our earrings from my mother and me, and told us to give them money and to make no noise or else they would kill us. Then one of these men grabbed the child to take her to another room; they took her to that room and I knew nothing more about her until after a while they led her back. Later, after the men had left, the girl told us that these men had ruined her. They made me give my baby daughter to my mother and took me to another room, where two men abused my body. Then, one of them asked if the dead were Liberal or Conservative. I answered back: I don't know, and he told me: go and see your children.¹⁷

Manipulating the Body of the Other

The treatment of the body during massacres centered around the reconfiguration of its organs and members. An inventory of practices and techniques of bodily manipulation drew from everyday peasant life (butchery practices and the culinary preparation of wild and domestic animals) and from the ways that peasants conceived of their own bodies. For them, the human body combined the physical attributes of pigs, cows, and chickens. That manipulation techniques came from hunting is evident in the proliferation of terms used to refer both to human beings and to game animals. Domestic butchering also familiarized peasants with the cuts, vulnerable parts, entrails, blood, and smells of animals.

In accordance with the peasants' system of classification, human and domestic mammal heads were designated by the same term (*el tuste*).¹⁸ Peasants living at the time of La Violencia believed that an opening in the upper part of the head permits the entrance and exit of air, so that a single blow to this opening with a machete can kill because "air [goes] into the brains." The pupil of the eyes was called "the girl" (*la niña*), probably the only specifically human term in this folk anatomy. The distinctly human qualities of eyes were so strong that corpses whose eyes were left open were "killed" a second time; otherwise "the dead person wasn't truly dead."¹⁹ The neck was called by the two terms used to refer to the craw and gullet (*guargüero* and *guacharaco*) in birds, especially chickens. The aorta, which passes through the left side of the throat, was the only object a modern anatomist would recognize in this system of classification. According to peasants, this artery linked the brain to the heart; blood, in turn, came from the heart.

17. Taken from File No. 7078, folio 55, Juzgado 2° Superior de Armenia, Colombia.

18. All of the terms mentioned here (*tuste*, *buche*, *guargüero*, *guacharaco*, and *cuajo*) are non-standard Spanish.

19. It is this second killing that inspired the title of my book, *Matar, Rematar y Contramatar*.

All of the terms used for the entrails also came from the animal world. The abdomen had the same name as the stomach in quadrupeds (*el buche*) and contained the bowels, bladder, and liver—organs thought to be similar to those of a pig. All these organs were housed within a bone structure called the *cuadril*, which is the term for the homologous bone structure in quadrupeds. In general, peasants established associations between an essential organ for balance called the *cuajo* (the abomasum in ruminants), the bladder, and the testicles. Finally, the human knee was called by the same term that butchers used for bovine knees (which are much appreciated for their flavor). Thus, it seems that this is a synthetic classification system, blending together elements from animal orders on the basis of their distinctive qualities.²⁰ Although in many languages the same anatomical terms are used to designate body parts common to both animals and humans, in the Colombian case the analogies are taken one step further.

Cutting and Mutilating: A Real and Symbolic Rupture of the Body

La Violencia wasn't simply about killing Others; their bodies had to be dismembered and transformed into something else. What were the killers looking for when they cut up the lifeless bodies of their enemies? What alterities did they constitute, these *bandoleros* armed with machetes, operating under cover and at night? In most cases they killed their enemies by shooting them in the back of the head, after which they manipulated the corpse by making a series of cuts with a machete. The objective behind these cuts was to disorganize the body, depriving it of its human nature and turning it into a macabre allegory. What belonged inside the body was placed outside it—the fetus in a pregnant woman was extracted and placed on her midriff; men's tongues were exhibited like neckties by pulling them out through a hole cut in the trachea—and insides were replaced with what belonged outside—the fetus was replaced by a rooster, and men's testicles were stuffed in their mouths. They also placed on top what belonged on the bottom—dead men's penises were cut off and placed inside their mouths—and, conversely, displaced what belonged on top to the bottom—a head would be removed and placed on the corpse's arms. In the “flower vase” cut, which produced an absolute inversion of the folk anatomy, the corpse's head, arms, and legs were cut off, the thorax was emptied of its contents, and the limbs were then stuffed inside the thorax like flowers in a vase. Two other cuts drew on food prepa-

20. See Roy Ellen, “Anatomical Classification and the Semiotics of the Body,” in *The Anthropology of the Body*, ed. John Blacking (London: Academic, 1977).

ration techniques and are especially worth noting. The first of these was called *bocachiquear*, a verb normally used to designate the oblique cutting of a species of fish (*bocachico*) for easier cooking. The second, *picar para tamal*, describes the action of dicing the meat that fills corn tamales.²¹

So transformed, the corpses were displayed in highly visible places, so that neighbors and the authorities could find them easily. The bodies of murdered persons became terrifying alterities, pedagogical and exemplifying texts that always achieved their objective: to frighten the local inhabitants away from the area, their houses, and their livestock. Upon coming back, if they ever did, they would find that others had usurped their property. As in other parts of the world, terror in Colombia was used to frighten people away from their land. This use of terror achieved a perverse inflation of local identities to the detriment of any coherent national identity. In this way, a reterritorialization was posited, one that sought to create new institutions based on the extermination and expulsion of Others.

The agents of these massacres were not just Liberal or Conservative peasants involved in a fratricidal war. They were at the same time practicing Catholics who, while killing, did not distinguish between humans and animals. The terms used to talk about butchering—both of humans and of animals—come up frequently in *bandolero* narratives. Also, certain verbs taken from hunter's jargon are often used in relation to the actions of spying on, stalking, and killing victims. These semantic procedures turned the victims into animals totally vulnerable to the actions of the hunter. The bird species whose names were used as aliases by the *bandoleros* were either wild or semiwild and rarely belonged to the class of edible, domestic birds. By contrast, the latter were often used to describe persons who were about to be murdered. During La Violencia, both the social distance between Liberals and Conservatives and the faunalization of the Other's body legitimated dehumanization.

Reflections on the Contemporary Context of Violence

The political polarization of late-twentieth-century Colombia is embedded in the atmosphere of suspicion, uncertainty, and paranoia that Arjun Appadurai and Liisa Malkki take to be characteristic of the age of globalization.²² In contrast to

21. For a complete inventory of the types of cuts and techniques of manipulation perpetrated on bodies during La Violencia, see Uribe, *Matar, Rematar y Contramatar*.

22. Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization," *Public Culture* 10 (1998): 225–47; Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

what has happened among Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia and between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Hindus and Muslims in India, and Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, the brutal violence that now permeates Colombia is not exercised by civilians against other civilians but by armed organizations (composed mainly of rural inhabitants). Although paramilitaries and guerrillas differ radically in their political and military objectives, both make use of opaque social figures as intermediaries who facilitate the identification and killing of persons suspected of collaborating with the enemy.

During the 1990s, Colombia underwent rapid urbanization. By the end of the decade, 70 percent of the population was concentrated in cities; during the first half of the twentieth century, 70 percent of the population was rural. The impact of globalization was felt in cities and towns, in political, economic, cultural, and social circles, and helped dilute the significance party affiliation has held over the last two centuries. During the 1980s and 1990s, with the expansion of coca bush and opium poppy cultivation, Colombian society saw a rapid and illegal accumulation of wealth. The paramilitary and guerrilla groups, as well as some inhabitants of Colombia's marginal regions, have exploited these conditions.²³

Contemporary massacres are perpetrated in small rural towns and isolated peasant homes. In these places, strangers dressed in camouflage uniforms suddenly appear and execute unarmed persons who, caught by surprise, are unable to defend themselves. The sites where these strangers appear—by land, water, or air—are not empty spaces. On the contrary, they are social spaces, spaces of intimacy and closeness imbued with cultural meaning, daily practices, and shared memories. These spaces are dislocated and blown to pieces as soon as the strangers in camouflage uniform appear.

That each of the armed groups wears the same camouflage uniform only contributes to the terror. "All uniforms are the same," said a frightened peasant incapable of differentiating the armed men that cross his *vereda* sowing death and terror. "Today there is confusion in this country. Today it's not only the army that uses that type of garment. Years before, it was only the army that one saw use camouflage uniforms. Not today. All dress the same and that's where one gets confused and doesn't know what to do. To a peasant, all uniforms are the same." Peasants have been forced to adopt as common sense the proposition that if all of

23. Guerrillas and paramilitaries use proceeds from the sale of narcotics to pay their foot soldiers; to buy arms, explosives, ammunition, satellite phones, and radios; and to bribe local politicians and informants.

the groups that have vowed to kill one another—the army, paramilitaries, and guerrillas—use the same uniform, then they are all the same.

Peasants and rural inhabitants have been deliberately terrorized by these uniformed, armed groups of men. The substance of this terror is its indistinctiveness, ambiguity, and confusion. It is a sticky, slippery substance made up of interwoven rumors that circulate before and after the event, that are construed from what is heard, seen, or imagined by those who live in these rural spaces of terror. The unwary peasants who inhabit these spaces attribute a spectral character to the authors of these massacres. This spectrality is reinforced by a mass media that refers to guerrilla and paramilitary groups as “the dark forces of society,” thereby diluting their identities and distorting the intentions and rationality of their actions.²⁴

The construction of enmity between the guerrilla and paramilitary groups is nowadays a pragmatic issue. The transmission of party membership from parents to their children belongs to another era. Now, rural inhabitants are murdered because they are perceived as direct or indirect support for the opposition. To do business with, chat with, show hospitality to, or sell any goods or services to the other group is reason enough to be considered an enemy collaborator (*auxiliador*). In some cases, paramilitaries and military intelligence agents seek to convert, by force if necessary, local peasants into a pointer (a traitor to one’s own group) or a collaborator (an ally of the opposition)—contradictory roles known by the same term, *sapo*.

Those who live in enemy-controlled territories and maintain even sporadic contact with the opposition are also considered collaborators: “These people come about every year. Here we are three hundred peasants and they say it is three hundred guerrillas. They say a two-month-old child is a guerrilla.” Likewise, individuals bearing any physical resemblance to those in the dog-eared photographs carried by the camouflaged men are also assumed to be collaborators. To resemble anyone who has been pointed out and marked is to become contaminated, like the young peasant woman in this story, recounted by a witness:

A crowd [of paramilitaries] came in, and because she was a nice looking young woman they started to chat with her. All said she was very pretty. And then came a young man who embraced her. She carried a photo in her pocket, a photo of herself, and that young man came and took the photo, taken when she was twelve years old. That man showed the photo

24. Due to violence against journalists, the Colombian media frequently avoid naming the perpetrators of violent acts.

to another one and that other man in uniform took out another photo and presented them both to her. As her conscience was clean, she told them, why do you compare my photo with that one? So they said, "You look like this other one." The other photo they carried was of a woman in uniform. She said, "No, it's not me; I have witnesses; it's not me because I became a woman over here [in this town]." So then, another woman came and they asked her, "What are you up to with the girl? Is she your daughter?" "No, she's not my daughter, she works at my place but she is no child of mine." So then they told her, "Look, this young woman looks like this other one." She said, "Yes, one devil looks like another." So then they said, "She's very pretty and we have a lot to chat about" and took her away. "We want her for us because she's very pretty." So then they took her away and between seven and nine o'clock we heard three shots. The young woman disappeared and I looked and looked for her the next day, and nothing. And the old man looked for her that day and couldn't find her. And then the next day he found her. He saw the grave; they'd left a sandal outside it. That was all.

Mimetic Procedures

On a nice, sunny morning in 1997, more than one hundred men dressed in camouflage uniforms and bearing assault rifles appeared, without warning, on the main street of a small town in Colombia. Their entrance was marked by shouts and orders given to the townspeople moving about in the street at the time. The newcomers were understood to be strangers who talked too much and had a foreign accent. They placed sentinels throughout the town, cut off radio communication, and damaged the electric power station. Once everyone was gathered in the town square, the people in camouflage started shouting off names from a list one of them carried. The list had been assembled with the help of a silent individual wearing a ski mask who limited himself to pointing out some of the persons. The *sapo* reappears, once again directing the massacre since the people in camouflage come from far away and do not know whom they are supposed to execute. With the advent of globalization and the generalization of war, the Colombian *sapo* becomes a professional, an agent who will serve any of the armed groups. For a few pesos, the *sapo* takes advantage of the mask and points out members of the community who have had relationships, sporadic contact, kinship ties, or have otherwise crossed paths with the guerrillas.

Identification by the *sapo* contaminates the chosen person with an alterity that anticipates death. This pointing out is reinforced by the fact of being on the list,

both events being induced by the *sapo* as a contaminating agent. This is a type of contamination transmitted by contagion, in the manner conceived of by Mary Douglas; not only are those identified murdered, but the *sapo* is eventually killed. A surprised survivor asked one of the paramilitaries, “Sir, what did you find on him? Did you find weapons? Did you find uniforms? Did you find flyers? What did you find on him? No, he’s on the list. So they died because they were on the list, because a *sapo* pointed them out for money, because all their *sapos* are paid off. The same goes for those in the army and the police; that is, it’s money. Any ignoramus can have a person killed because he didn’t like him or because he didn’t do him a favor or for any reason.”

Those persons signaled by the public reading of names on the list were then taken to the town slaughterhouse, a pigsty, or other unspecified places. The killings would start only at night, as one witness testified: “During the day, they killed no one, but that night they started killing people.” The specific choice of the slaughterhouse or pigsty materialized the symbolic operation by which the men in camouflage related the domestic slaughter of animals to the persons about to be murdered. As in La Violencia, these operations reinforced the transformation of victims into animals. In the words of one survivor: “They took him and tied him up and took him to the slaughterhouse where they kill cattle and killed him there.” Some of the persons were tied up and interrogated; others were eventually set free. Various narratives describe how the victims were butchered and left to bleed to death—much as butchers sometimes slaughter cattle and pigs. A terrified woman’s account:

I live a block away from the municipal slaughterhouse, the official slaughterhouse of the town. And every night my sons and I would watch, I saw it, people passing with their hands tied behind their backs and their mouths gagged. When they gave the order to shut down the lights and turn off the power station, they would start to kill, torture them first, and then kill them. They shouted for help. But as you will understand, in this country the one who commands is the one with weapons or he who has the power to send the armed killers. So we were impotent, and all the good people of the town were impotent before these criminals. And we were at their mercy for five days, without anyone’s help.

The killing went on for several days, and the town’s inhabitants were silent witnesses of this horror. One woman said: “We locked ourselves in early in order to know nothing. One would look at them go by with people, but we would act as if we knew nothing.” A young woman who survived the massacre asked one of

the youthful executioners what he felt when his victims begged him not to be killed. He answered: “No, nothing happens, it’s like . . . with hens. . . . An animal is a living being, it has life. . . . So then when one kills them, when one is going to eat [*comérselas*] them, well you take their life away. So then, a human being is the same; it has a life just like an animal. So killing a human being, a person, is like killing a hen. So it’s just like killing an animal.” The young paramilitary’s phrasing, “when one is going to eat them [the hens], well you take their life away,” can be understood in a double sense, since *comer* is used by Colombians to designate both the actions of eating and sexual intercourse. Paramilitaries call those who have been contaminated by informers and are about to be murdered “my little hens.” Feminized and faunalized, victims are assimilated to the domestic sphere; they become susceptible to being penetrated, eaten, and tamed. In this way they are dehumanized, and the slaughter, dismemberment, and vivisection of their bodies becomes a licit act.

The *sapo* is someone who has no specific location within the social system. *Sapos* are intruders operating from a place to which they no longer belong. Their power comes from their ubiquity, their ability to move and flow between persons and Others. Conversely, the identity of the camouflaged men is elusive, producing phantasmagoric effects that disconcert those under interrogation. In one survivor’s words, “One does not see them. The moment one hears that a group of paramilitaries is coming, or that the army is coming, or anyone, one doesn’t wait to see. You don’t really know whether they are coming to chat with you or to kill you.”

All sorts of persons are dehumanized by the killers and transformed into a terrorized, displaced mass on the basis of public identification by the *sapo*. The fear of contagion in these spaces of terror is so extreme that any type of exchange with the opposition is dangerous. The figure of the collaborator is a fundamental part of this phenomenology of terror, and to be considered one is to become part of a world that is not human. Those whose names or nicknames appear on the paramilitaries’ lists are considered collaborators, and it is already too late for them: “I tried to save his and other people’s lives . . . from being one of those beings; but he was already on the list and there was nothing to do because supposedly they had come to make a cleansing.”

Final Comments

Alterity is not established by mass killings or body mutilations, as some authors have claimed. As I have been trying to demonstrate with the Colombian case, it is

the application of technologies of terror and the use of semantic procedures that convert persons into destructible and consumable bodies. In the context of generalized barbarity that currently dominates Colombia's rural areas and that of La Violencia, there can be no exploration of the Other when his or her body is manipulated and cut into pieces; there are only dead certainties. Through a semantic operation fed by political hatred, human beings are transformed into inhuman creatures, Others to be killed and butchered. At the same time, the dismembered bodies are the ultimate generators of terror. If the Other can be thought of as a hen or a chicken, it is quite easy to cut into pieces. Thus, for the perpetrators there are no moral dilemmas, because in their terms nothing human is hurt; the dead do not have human qualities. Consequently, there is no systematic degradation or dehumanization in the executioner's mind because only the animality of the Other is present. Those who carry out the massacres have before them strangers who do not belong to their world, archetypes of the unspeakable: physically close but spiritually distant. As such, what we have in Colombia is a deadly game of representations and self-representations trapped within a perverse and inhuman logic.

When trying to understand collective killings, it is necessary to attend to the persons who are killed and the representations of them that make them Other. If these persons reduced to formless bodies are ignored, it is easy to reduce social contexts and bodies to doubt and uncertainty. Massive human annihilation dilutes alterities and deforms culture. Identities, traditions, beliefs, and a sense of belonging disappear from view, leaving only the bodies of abominable strangers. In these contexts, it doesn't matter whether war is between true alterities or between equals, because the question of Otherness or selfness has lost most of its meaning.

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