

# Collective Actions in the Face of Violence. Disquisitions based on a Case Study: Comuna 13 in Medellín (Colombia)

## Acciones colectivas frente a la violencia. Disquisiciones a partir de un estudio de caso: Comuna 13 de Medellín (Colombia)

Mary Luz Alzate Zuluaga

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Dirección electrónica: mary\_alzate@yahoo.es

### ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the knowledge and visualization of the types and strategies of action that collective subjects produce to cope with violence in a context of internal armed conflict such as the kind that Colombia has experienced for over forty years. It describes them as forms of political action that attempt to reverse, transform or alter the power relations that some attempt to impose through this type of violence. At the same time, it contributes to the emergence of a new public scenario that goes beyond essentialist sovereignties, transcending the interpretations of political action from a purely state-oriented approach and a general will.

*Keywords:* 1. Collective action, 2. politics, 3. violence, 4. Medellín, 5. Colombia.

### RESUMEN

Este trabajo contribuye al conocimiento y visualización de modelos y estrategias de acción que los sujetos colectivos producen para lidiar con la violencia en un contexto de conflicto interno armado como el que Colombia ha experimentado por más de 40 años. Se les describe como formas de acción política que intentan revertir, transformar o alterar las relaciones de poder que algunos tratan de imponer por medio de este tipo de violencia. Al mismo tiempo, contribuye a la aparición de un nuevo escenario público que va más allá de las soberanías esencialistas, trascendiendo las interpretaciones de la acción política desde un enfoque únicamente orientado al Estado y a una voluntad general.

*Palabras clave:* 1. Acción colectiva, 2. política, 3. violencia, 4. Medellín, 5. Colombia.

Fecha de recepción: 22 de mayo de 2009

Fecha de aceptación: 14 de septiembre de 2009

## *INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>*

The aim of this article is to present an analysis of the collective actions implemented between 2002 and 2006 to cope with the various situations of violence derived from Colombia's internal armed conflict. These include collective actions located in an urban territory in which various armed state, parastate and insurgent gangs coexist, in addition to drug traffickers and common criminals. This is the case of Comuna 13 in Medellín, a settlement comprising socially and economically depressed neighborhoods where illegal, authoritarian micro-powers of a local and national order have co-existed as in no other urban community.

At the same time, Comuna 13 constituted an urban laboratory for the implementation of the "Democratic Security Policy," defended by incumbent president Álvaro Uribe Vélez. This involved the expansion of public force on the slopes of this commune in 2002, with the military operations known publicly as Operation Orion and Operation Mariscal, ostensibly to control the armed confrontations between groups of urban militias, paramilitary groups and common criminals.

Paradoxically, this context is inhabited by hundreds of dynamic, creative settlers who are enthusiastic about life and opposed to any authoritarian project that excludes society. The analysis therefore focuses on two scenarios, the first being the identification of social subjects as the protagonists and builders of society's civil, democratic projects. This approach also attempts to prove that these social agents are the masters of their own destinies and life projects, rather than merely being victims of the violence they have experienced. The second scenario is the identification of violence as a context that shapes collective action while producing a dual effect. It separates and threatens activists and protest movements but also speeds up and encourages new forms and repertoires of action that seek to counteract the situations of violence and social and political exclusion that attempt to stymie the social mobilization identified in this study.

<sup>1</sup>This is a summary of the main results and contributions to the doctoral dissertation defended by the author at the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology of the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. The analysis and field research with the interviews quoted were carried out as part of the project on "Non-Armed Civil Resistance to the Armed Conflict, Social Exclusion and Poverty, The Cases of Comunas 8, 9 and 13 of Medellín 2002-2006", directed by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate and Katherine Higueta (joint researchers), with the support of the Committee for the Development of Research (CODI), University of Antioquia, 2007-2008.

The first section contains a brief description of the methodology used, followed by a summary of the discussion on the issues of violence, politics and collective action. The second section contains the main findings and results and a proposal to contribute to the issue of collective action and politics while the last section contains conclusions from the case study of Comuna 13 in Medellín, Colombia.

### *METHODOLOGY USED IN CASE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE ACTIONS FOR COPING WITH VIOLENCE*

The theoretical route that oriented the development of the analysis of the two scenarios mentioned -social actors and violence and its effects, was firstly an examination of the issues of violence, politics and collective action, in light of the transformations derived from capitalist globalization and their consequences in the local sphere. The second aspect was a practical strategy developed as a result of the ethnographic study of cases of collective actions identified in the local sphere of the neighborhood known administratively as Comuna 13 in the city of Medellín. This strategy involved the use of research techniques such as interviews with the activists and persons directly involved in the production of collective action in the face of violent situations. It was complemented by observation tours of neighborhood life and the organization of community workshops focusing on the issues of violence, armed conflict, collective civil resistance action and social and economic exclusion.

#### *The Theoretical Examination of the Issues of Violence, Politics and Collective Action*

- Violence: Between Ambiguity and Depoliticization

Violence is an issue that has been discussed and defined on the basis of dichotomous elements, i.e. its public or private nature and individual (Ignatieff, 2005) or collective responsibility (Tilly, 2004), old and new aspects according to the intensity, speed, specialization and motivation of today's conflicts compared with those of the past (Kaldor, 2005; Münkler, 2004 and 2005; Marchal and Messiant, 2004; Waldmann and Reinares, 1999).

Choosing one element over another in these cases leads to a restrictive, biased vision that prevents one from gauging the ambiguity of the realities involved in vi-

olence (Kalyvas, 2004), and far less, acknowledging the possible links in a word that is increasingly characterized by the combination of local and global circumstances and vice versa (Fazio Vengoa, 2007; Castells, 1995; Sassen, 2007; Mattelart, 2002).

The use of violence as a means or resource of action has served both society's loftiest ideals and the crudest, most predatory interests. Likewise, moving away from any immediacy in the specific temporal and spatial characteristics of violence, today's forms of violence speaks of recent dynamics that may be reshaping and reorganizing unresolved structural conflicts in the various societies involved. Researchers therefore attempt to acknowledge it from its ambiguity, duality and amalgamation in the processes of social and political disintegration and reintegration. In other words, they attempt to recognize it as an inherent feature of the experiences of human relations (Subirats, 2002) in whatever location or state of civilization we may be.

Bearing in mind the spatial transformation experienced in recent decades, nowadays the violence produced in a particular locality cannot be exclusively understood on the basis of the social, political, cultural and legal conditions of the context of national states. The idea of state apparatuses with a monopoly over violence has been increasingly called into question due to the vast number of material, ideological, social and political transactions, including illegal transactions such as illegal arms dealing, that are increasingly difficult to control within national territories, particularly because these are activities that are not located (Giddens, 1993; Bauman, 2005), since they form part of the transactions that have entered the fluid place of international networks whose decisions do not depend on a single actor. In this respect, in today's states, "there is very little that can be realistically monopolized, except the idea of territory as a diacritical point of sovereignty" (Appadurai, 1999).

However, the current lack of definition and classification of violence between the limits of public and private issues (Münkler, 2005), the national domestic and the world sphere, between its state and non-state nature (Gledhill, 2000), which also encourages the same perspective of lack of determination and ambiguity regarding the distinction between individual and collective violence, also leads to a depoliticized approach to violence with entails serious risks because of the argument of absence of responsibility on the part of those that produce it and the consequences it creates. In other words, understanding violence from the point of view of its ambiguity and inability to be classified tends to reduce the responsibility of its perpetrators, plunging it into an empty space or "no man's land" (Agamben, 2005:24). Thus, questioning the effective monopoly of the exercise of violence by the state in the global era does not mean accepting the declaration of the privatiza-

tion and commercialization of war (Münkler, 2004:6) or consequently, the destitution of violence or the disappearance of state responsibility in conflicts.

What is confirmed is the recognition of the multiplicity of local armed groups, groups of organized crime and international terrorism networks, as well as of authoritarian and military governments using violence in this restructuring of power relations in the local, regional and global sphere, which includes the concentration of natural resources and territories under the control of elite power groups. According to Lemke (2006:16), “Foucault’s analysis of neoliberal governance shows that the so called ‘withdrawal of the state’ is in fact a prolongation of government. Neoliberalism is not the end of politics but rather a transformation of it that restructures power relations in society”. Thus,

The market therefore promises an extensive reproduction of the state’s violent resources while the clandestine, outside interference of supposedly “responsible, democratic governments” have played a key role when it comes to encouraging violence as a means of achieving political objectives all over the world. If the world created by empires now causes them alarm due to a degree of disorder they are no longer able to control, this disorder is, in the last analysis, of their own making (Gledhill, 2000:254).

In this wish to depoliticize and remove the state’s responsibility, Foucault’s (2000:81) thought was much more visionary in that it stated: “if the discourse of races, of races in conflict, was undoubtedly the weapon used against the historical political discourse of Roman sovereignty, the discourse of race (singular) was a way of turning this weapon around, of using its blade to preserve the state’s sovereignty”. Thus, the meaning acquired by the production of a certain type of violence must be understood according to its use in specific power relations. Thus, information technologies in the geopolitical sphere of war and peace are used to monopolize markets in a unipolar world, which leads to the argument of a global security strategy, characterized by military intervention circumscribed by the “surgical” or “clean” expansion of the global free market model of democracy.

The historical and cultural transformations of violence produce different aspects of policy, within which collective subjects begin new strategies for action and social mobilization. At the same time, within unequal power relations, violence has been used as an action strategy. In other words, both violence and politics—and collective action within the latter—beyond fixed, different, essential structural realities, form part of the processes of constructing life in common. The way social relations are constructed within the framework of processes of violence and politics, determines the consequences for the various possibilities of experience

in common. Below is a discussion of the subject of politics and collective action, together with a reflection of the effects on public issues of the transformations of the state and the positioning of the market in the era of globalization, which has expanded the possibilities of political action outside the state framework and the global market hegemony.

- Politics from Plural Orders of Existence

This is a perspective on politics that attempts to go beyond its definition and structuring merely from the point of view of central, fixed relations, located in the state's administrative activities (Foucault, 2000), the main setting in which the representation of the people's sovereignty had been determined and handled. A new political setting is prefigured in the acknowledgement of the citizen's capacity to represent himself and create the conditions for the common good, based on the criterion of changing power relations that oscillate permanently between dissolution, fragmentation and the inclusion in a community of citizens. This is the declaration of a policy of differences that established weak limits in social relations, limits that recreate material struggles and struggles involving meaning that lead permanently to new configurations of power.

This policy defined in the limits is a recognition of singularities, understood not from an essential unity but rather as an expression of plurality but also of ambivalence, in other words, the multiplicity of interrelated differences, confirmed as different forces in interaction inhabiting a diverse space (Virno, 2003 and 2004). What should one do in these settings that bind people beyond state sovereignty? What arguments should one use to open up new horizons of possibility beyond the current market-state model? How is politics constructed in the new global and local settings?

The gradual state deregulation of issues concerning citizens and the strengthening of the free market economic model, in keeping with the global processes of technical, social, political, economic and cultural transformation, leads to the emergence of political definitions from the point of view of social subjects' constructions and discourse on the subject. The answers to some of the concerns raised are dealt with on the basis of the unusual experiences of collective action. These concerns contain various initiatives to deal with the threats posed by both the violence and the lack of labor flexibility and the deregulation of the public/private relations of life in contemporary society. These are counter hegemonic experiences that practice new ways of being in the world.

- Collective Actions as Alternative Political Experiences

From the perspective defended here, collective actions are defined as a political and social exercise —with higher or lower levels of organization, that seek to achieve common demands. However, it has a deeper meaning that a purely instrumental view of action, which is why, according to Alberto Melucci (1996), collective actions build emerging systems of political culture that are intertwined with everyday life. They provide new expressions of identity and directly oppose the dominant order.

Bearing in mind the most inclusive and heterogeneous aspects of these experiences, collective actions are the visible expression of a political orientation, whether to defend the reigning political and economic establishment or to protest, resist or oppose this established social order. These collective expressions may be interpreted through the acknowledgement of the multi-dimensional nature of collective action and the complementary nature of aspects of analysis for their knowledge, such as the origin of collective actions and social mobilizations, the logic of action that has oriented them, the organizational form acquired and the impact obtained through the action and self-definition of social actors, the way they have managed to act jointly and remain opposite their adversaries or in a social mobilization project implemented in contrast to hegemonic society.

Social leaders and activists have been approached by acknowledging them as the key players in their horizons of possibility, by choosing non-violence from an active attitude, conscientious objection, non-collaboration with armed groups, the autonomy of community actions undertaken, the denunciation of excesses and the violations of human rights by violent persons, the creation of alternative cultural, social and political projects to the current project for society, despite the risks and costs that other leaders and activists have already paid with their own lives. The aim of this is to question the excessive importance given to the repressive power and all kinds of violence in the limitation, disarticulation and elimination of alternative socio-political and cultural powers and projects.

### *FINDINGS AND RESULTS*

For the period from 2002 to 2006, nine social actors (Juegos Cooperativos para la No-Violencia –Jughandi–, Corpades, Caravana por la Vida, Realizadores de Sue-

ños, Corporación Sal y Luz, Red Cultural Expresarte, Asociación de Mujeres Las Independencias –AMI–, La Elite Hip Hop, Son Batá) were identified as the promoters and protagonists of various collective action to combat the violence and armed conflict produced in the outlying districts of Comuna 13 neighborhoods located on the west side of the city of Medellín, as a means of resisting, denouncing, confronting and creating new social alternatives, different from the violence of all the armed actors that came together there.

These experiences of action were extremely varied, with different features that were gradually revealed, forcing them to move slightly away from a pre-established analytical framework on collective action, by revealing a variety of lightly defined actions and organizational processes with an astonishing degree of simplicity, subtlety, creativity and above all, firmness in relation to armed actors and the shortage of economic and social opportunities experienced by most of their actors. Nevertheless, the main role was played by collective actions, interpreted on the basis of the creation of the components of social mobilization, such as the political context, the perception of justice, the effectiveness of action, the construction of collective identities and the creation of a local cultural policy.

It emerged that the collective actions produced at Comuna 13 are conditioned, recreated, and triggered by elements such as the context of socio-economic exclusion and violent conflict that frames them. There are also other aspects of the national and world political context that interfere in the production of each of the collective actions identified, such as the current national government's Democratic Security Policy and the threat of world terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. And in the local sphere, one has the confrontation between armed actors in the neighborhoods of Comuna 13, the threats to life and the permanent risk to social leaders and the civil population, the departure in 2002 of most of the non-governmental organizations that used to be present in Comuna 13 and the disarticulation of pre-existing collective actions. Conversely, this political context also comprises new social actors directly mobilized to deal with violence, the persistence of certain social actors in the zone and local (Red Juvenil) and national (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres/Mujeres de Negro) social movements that accompany the various collective actions undertaken to deal with violence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>In Colombia, despite the frailty of many of the processes of social organization and their ineffectiveness against armed actors, it is now possible to talk of social and political progress in the face of violent persons. The 1980s were particularly active for indigenous organizations, Afro-Colombian peasants and women's organizations. And since the mid-1980s, a sector of the population

Among the aspects related to the perception of injustice as an element on the basis of which the configuration of collective action was analyzed, social actors mention direct violence by armed actors against social leaders and the civil population, the undertaking of military operations by public forces and fights in the midst of the civil population, the intimidation of social leaders, threats and the prohibition of social, political and cultural activities. Other aspects that form part of the perception of injustice by social actors were the restrictions experienced by settlers on their free movement among the Comuna 13 neighborhoods, permanent military control, the stigmatization of young people due to the fact that they came from poor neighborhoods with a traditional insurgent presence, and the images of war and war-related games that children in this context have acquired.

The effectiveness of collective action has been interpreted on the basis of the tradition of neighborhood self-management, creativity and cultural imagination interpreted as a form of civil resistance, the capacity to reveal the situation of violence and the violation of the population's human rights. Other factors include relationships of trust, solidarity and work combined in networks of local social organizations, the emergence of new organized social actors that demand freedom of expression, neighborhood autonomy and the withdrawal of armed actors from the territory.

The other element that shapes the collective action analyzed has been the construction of identities. The case study identified gender, youth, artistic and musical identities, which has permitted the creation of a process of cultural policy developed through community organizational strategies to enable civilians to deal with all kinds of armed actors (guerrilla, paramilitary, drug traffickers, criminal and state) and the war dynamics within Comuna 13 territory. Through this identity construction, young people and women in particular have been positioned as the director negotiators of social organizations, no longer as victims or persons recruited to swell the ranks of an armed actor but as the architects of their own destiny.

Dissident young people with political aims regarding armed actors and human rights violations have realized that they have a great deal to contribute to the

---

have demonstrated in favor of life and human rights as a response to the violence from various armed groups. The 1990s saw various social mobilizations and mass actions that have sought respect for life, human rights and humanitarian international law among the civil population by the groups involved in the armed conflict.

construction of the commune and the city. This in turn has led to the organization of young social actors around the planning of a future outside armed conflict, together with the formation of female leadership and the confirmation of civic autonomy, with the creation of mechanisms for reflection on the experiences and everyday lives of armed actors.

In the case of Comuna 13, collective actions create a local cultural policy linked to the defense of life, that deals with violent persons and armed conflict and democratizes public places (such as streets, parks, alleys and slopes), recovering them for the common use and free circulation of all settlers. Non-violence is adopted from the position of an active attitude, conscientious objection and non-collaboration with armed persons, the autonomy of community actions undertaken and the promotion of civil values of coexistence and respect for differences. They have learnt to recognize the fact that artistic and cultural expressions can be used to break down barriers and the limits of war by proposing a new setting for local politics that acknowledges citizens' capacity to represent themselves and create the conditions for shared well-being.

The action repertoires<sup>3</sup> identified in Comuna 13 were firstly, those of complaint and denunciation; by using strategies such as marches, symbolic protests by waving handkerchiefs and white sheets in streets and terraces.<sup>4</sup> They also included sit-ins at public institutions and the production of documentary video testimonials of the situation of violence and the violation of fundamental rights, in which the participants ironically and critically acted out the violence and stigmatization experienced by the settlers of Comuna 13. In addition to the March of Solidarity for Life and the Caravan for life,<sup>5</sup> collective actions were undertaken to counteract

<sup>3</sup>Following Sydney Tarrow (2004:59), "A repertoire is both a structural and a cultural concept that includes not only what the contenders do, when they are immersed in a conflict against others, but what they can do and what others expect them to do. Just as in 18th Century France, malcontents would have resorted to sit-ins, and their opponents would not have known how to respond to them, so the victim of a charivari in one of today's university campuses would be at a loss as to how to respond. As Arthur Stinchcombe writes, "The elements of the repertoire are [...] both the skills of members of the population and the cultural forms of the population (1987)".

<sup>4</sup>The White Sheets Protest, a collective action that the entire community joined by hanging sheets and white cloths in their windows and on the tiles as a form of protest and to defend their lives, in response to the deployment and air and land attacks by the public forces on the roofs and streets of Comuna 13 in Medellín on 2002.

<sup>5</sup>This involves a colorful procession of jugglers, dance troupes, music, dance and disguises carried out in the neighborhoods regarded as the epicenter of the armed conflict in 2002. At the end of this artistic and musical procession, a Musical Demonstration was staged at the center of these neighborhoods (the courtyard of the 20 de Julio Church) with a public reading of slogans and reflections against war.

the violence, denounce the situation of war, confront the armed actors, create external solidarity and defend life from violent persons.

During the March of Solidarity for Life, we walked through all the hills. The initiative came from the women, because we didn't want so much violence and we made some beautiful murals. The point was to say that women were present and that we expressed our solidarity with what had happened. The women expressed their support of Comuna 13, with all its human rights violations (Leader 1, interview, 2007).

Secondly, the identification of repertoires of civil resistance, through the use of various strategies such as artistic and musical tours of territories in which armed groups have prevented the free circulation of settlers, the annual concerts of the Revolution without Deaths, the activities of *Escucha Comunitaria*,<sup>6</sup> the annual fiesta known as *alborada de la chirimia*, the creation of social networks and the coordination of community work, night walks through the various neighborhoods of Comuna 13, actions through which people attempt to resist violence and armed control in a peaceful, subtle yet incisive and constant way.

The year 2002 saw the first Elite Hip Hop Operation Western Center, with the slogan, "In (Comuna) 13, we won't let violence overcome us." It kept this name for two years before being renamed Revolution without Deaths and this year marks its fourth version (2007).

After the Mariscal (a military operation) the first large-scale festival against stigmatization was successfully organized. In "In Comuna 13, we won't let violence overcome us," they used military language, and since the Elite Commando had engaged in the military intervention, the fact that the musical group called itself The Elite was also a sort of protest. Twenty-six groups sang and acknowledge each other and the commune. Symbolically, the event was full of discourse. Messages: active civil resistance from a position of non-violence. It was a concert in the midst of the September conflicts and at the end of the concert, the sound of grenades exploding in the surrounding neighborhoods could be heard (Leader 2, interview, 2007).

And thirdly, the participants identified the repertoires of actions involved in the construction of peace and the democratization of local life, through the organization of community bazaars involving the supportive exchange of products, cooperative games of non-violence with boys and girls in town squares and public

<sup>6</sup>Space for the women in these neighborhoods to express their sadness and anguish caused by the violence and death threats against their loved ones on the AMI premises. Activity scheduled once a week.

meeting places with a philosophy of non-violence, the organization of artistic and literary workshops, the recovery of cultural memory, collective savings, the construction of collective, self-sustainable spaces, fiestas for life, sports championships in values and planning and local development projects.

Other action strategies including showing films in open-air cinemas, the production of community media involving written and audiovisual community, commissioned by other social organizations in Comuna 13, to achieve the involvement, participation and recognition of young people and settlers in general, to inhabit the streets, public squares and places locally identified as territories of war and armed confrontation between opposing gangs. This led to the inhabitation of war spheres with actions that express life and freedom. All these action strategies have attempted to transform situations of violence and create an alternative perspective to war.

Below is a brief description of the characteristics of the experiences of collective action identified to date.

- The various repertoires of action that have been collectively produced have directly and indirectly experienced control by and threats from armed actors in the territory, through the existence of work in a network in which each collective action has been requested by a community organization, which in turn has been followed, accompanied and strengthened by the other social actors in Comuna 13. These actions have also received the support of non-governmental organizations of a national and international order, thereby reducing the social power of armed groups over a territory which they have kept in a permanent state of anxiety.
- Generally speaking, in the various collectives mentioned, the process of creating collective action has usually been characterized by the strong conviction of dealing with the violence, with each of the collective subjects using different strategies, management and initiatives. Some of these initiatives are peaceful and non-violent, others are critical, confrontational and resistant to armed actors while still others consist of civic political opinions involving autonomy and social democratization.
- However, there are problems when it comes to creating alternative political proposals and reproducing the information and self-recognition of each collective actor, due to the fact that the issues and proposals continue to be handled individually by each social organization and in a highly localized way

in the neighborhood or sector of origin. This situation is characteristic of the heterogeneous dynamics that focuses politically on everyday life, which produces a fragmentation of the social mobilization used to combat violence and armed conflict in Comuna 13. This in turn prevents the continuity and external recognition of broader social and political processes that tend to improve the impact on the violent situation that people are trying to transform. The origin of these problems is linked to the overall social mobilization of Comuna 13, due to the lack of an inclusive plan to create and position a common political and social project for all the social organizations

- Despite this, there has been a convergence between the organizational work of community organizations linked to organization through networks, whereby all the youth groups in the zone gathered together under the *Uniendo Sueños* network or the *Expresarte Cultural Network*, in addition to strengthening the links between the organizations in Comuna 13, create other links with other institutions in the city, and each collective action has revealed possible shared allies and exercises of knowledge and resources among the various existing collective actors in order to begin to improve communication and the impact of social mobilization on the rest of society.
- Musical concerts and marches to denounce the violation of human rights are the activities that have recorded the mobilizing message most forcefully and directly, revealing the situation of violence and armed subjection in which settlers have lived, with greater dissemination and support from other collective subjects and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, it triggered the participation of citizens living in other neighborhoods and parts of the city of Medellín and Colombia.
- One of the most common internal difficulties for the construction of each of the collective actions identified in Comuna 13 has been obtaining funds to be able to undertake various initiatives, maintain them over time and have a greater ability to attract attendance in all the Comuna 13 neighborhoods and even the city of Medellín. Although some collective experiences have involved effective self-management strategies, focusing almost solely on obtaining public resources forces some of these initiatives into a sort of moral limbo, by placing activists in a situation in which they depend on the same institutional policies that have often led to the social and political malaise that prompted collective action to combat violence. However, this is a situation in which the leaders themselves must acknowledge the fact that no organizational process

is totally autonomous or independent, and that the administration of public resources for collective actions to protest and produce civic alternatives constitute, in the words of Zibechi (2007), “mechanisms to compensate inequalities;” and not, as one might think, from an essential perspective of social and political organization, forms of dependence and accumulation.

- Linked to the above, the encouragement and activation of mobilization has taken place in an excessively localized sphere, among other aspects, due to the approach and use of channels of dissemination aimed virtually exclusively at a population group in the commune. Most of these efforts have focused on young people (with the exception of certain experiences that have focused on groups of women, and children in the commune). Their main aim has been to extend the message to mobilize in response to the violence of other persons not only in the commune but also in the city, the country and the international sphere—without the need for additional resources, for example, through a medium such as the Internet, following other successful mobilization campaigns, thereby seeking to expand the links between and participation of the entire population in the process of collective action.
- Another internal difficulty is the lack of educational training of the leaders and members of social organizations to strengthen the internal collective process and renew their organization. This aspect has to do, among other things with the minimal individual opportunities for human development available to date, together with the minimal institutional mechanisms that exist to promote civic participation in the development of educational, economic and social projects.
- In addition to the direct threat to the social collectives of Comuna 13 from the murder, threats to and forced displacement of leaders and persons comprising social organizations, processes of social and political organization are also threatened by the intimidation and replacement of social organizations by armed actors interested in politically and socially controlling the civil population. This leads to the emergence of fuzzy borders between the space used by collective actors, whether they are coping with violence from opposition and civil resistance or the civic construction of political and social alternatives and armed actors in their attempts to co-opt and replace political and social leaders in a territory that is being violently controlled.
- These armed groups have sought to legitimize their presence by offering perks such as the payment of transport and free tickets for children in working-class

neighborhoods to visit the city's amusement parks. Moreover, armed actors have also attempted to legitimize community leaders to socially legitimize the presence and control of the territory, making civic and community leaders work with them in inviting the population to take part in recreational activities such as the Beer Festivals or trips to the city's amusement parks. Armed actors have also taken over organizations that were previously organized by civic and community leaders, which has led to the "readjustment" of community leadership, which has now been taken over by armed actors.

- One internal opportunity for collective action has been provided by the inauguration and recreation of spheres of action adopted from artistic activities and cultural practices, which permit the playful and festive, as well as encoded and disperse dissemination of messages that transmit and share ideological representations involving opposition and response, as well as the autonomy of their civil actions. These artistic and cultural activities have established links of trust, empathy and solidarity between the members of collective groups, somewhat altering existing local power relations through the creation of collective identities.
- Another internal opportunity has been the identification and recognition of the fighting tactics implemented in the heat of the armed conflict, due to the fact that this knowledge has made it possible to overcome the permanent threat of war by drawing lessons from situations that may pose the greatest risks to the collective and to the physical safety of each person belonging to the community process. It is within this collective social dynamic, on the basis of each member's perception, that the actors have been able to understand the situation of armed conflict in which they are immersed and thereby identify allies and adversaries in the development of civil collective action.

#### *MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SUBJECT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION*

Not everything in the organizational process describe involves alternative solutions to cope with the armed domination. Polarization of the population is one of the characteristics of any society that has experienced such a prolonged internal struggle as Colombian society. Moreover, many other collective actions are shaped by the inclusion and participation in the hegemonic model of political and cultural domination. A propos of this, Gledhill's reflection, when he makes the following criticism, is relevant:

the authors related to “subordinate studies” assumed that there was a sort of pure and authentic “subordinate awareness” that was not affected by either discourse or colonial practices. As authors such as Keesing have shown, these completely “autonomous” subjects do not exist and the idea that there are spheres of subordinate social life that are not at all colonized by power relations constitute a disastrous weak point in James Scott’s theories (Gledhill, 2000:115).

Collective action in the context and results described have signified a “performance” of diverse aspects. It involves popular force based on different forms of rationality to resist the violence and latent, direct threat of collective and individual life, creating a type of representation that overcomes the fight for “survival” and dares to engage in the fight for new political possibilities of relative autonomy, recognition of rights and individual and collective responsibilities, with the aim of altering the conflictive political reality.

However, the results of collective action are partial. In the last analysis, it has proved impossible to eliminate the various orders of violence against which they have protested, but this is an incomplete, collective process whose scope is both uneven and ambiguous. It is shaped and recreated as the conflicts and alterations of collectively shared meanings arise. That is why Escobar’s criticism is relevant, “Civil society has often been characterized as being within a positive framework, such as the sphere of the good and the enlightened [...] forgetting that they also constitute ‘a social sphere full of ambiguity, irony and conflict’” (Escobar, 1999:163).

Nevertheless, every collective experience has had successes related to its capacity for organization and social and political leadership. These include political and social training, the acknowledgement of individual and collective potential for coping with the risks of community work and armed actors themselves and the capacity to verbalize and transmit what they have experienced and felt in extreme situations of economic and social precariousness, but also of indignation and physical and moral pain in the face of violence.

Some of the collectives used the lyrics of their songs to metaphorically and directly narrate the situation they were experiencing, while placing themselves in a new social and political position, against stigmatization and reaffirming their civil position outside war.

Just as they made a noise with their bullets (*in the neighborhoods at the epicenter of the conflict*) which constituted their instruments, we want to make our own sound heard, that of young people with other instruments we were working on for many things

and hip hop was the means. We had other visions of life and sought other options; saying we did not want another war was what we wanted (Leader 3, interview, 2007).

Other collectives were given the possibility of speaking and sharing common projects. These were spheres of solidarity and companionship that gave them the strength not to engage in war.

War is a double-edged sword, since it entailed problems but helped us with other things. It gave us the strength to go on working. Not everyone in the Comuna is a guerrilla and we were able to prove that other things were being done and that we don't all carry guns. We certainly do not fit the description of the Interior Secretary, who said that those in Comuna 13 did not deserve what we were going through, because we collaborated with armed groups.

During the conflict, the young people who have been involved in artistic and musical groups have not taken part in the war and have not touched a single weapon. They have hit us hard (by killing relatives and friends) but we have not given up because we have our art, which has enabled us to stand firm. Our motto is "Music for the Soul," which is the expression I use to feel and therefore create (Leader 4, interview, 2007).

The organization of the various experiences of collective action around hip-hop and cooperative, non-violent play, the production of handicrafts and hand-made objects, collective savings and rescuing folklore, memory and Afro-descendent identity have been produced from the perspective of youth, gender and a cultural policy that revolves around neighborhood integration. The training and projections for local development are collective experiences that have given rise to various spheres of solidarity and promotion of music, dance and creation, but also to the alteration of power relations among the population.

This alteration in power relations has slowly occurred in recent years, albeit with setbacks. It has, however, been significant for each of the social collectives analyzed, through specific proposals such as overcoming the stigma left by military operations on the population of Comuna 13 and the creation of an alternative space to enable youth and children to move away from proposals for life around weapons. It also involved the construction of self-sustaining artistic and musical offers, the search and spread of the work of the Comuna's community organizations and the search for and dialogue with other organizations to administer zonal development, through leadership and processes of organization and participation for social development that attempts to integrate the entire population of Comuna 13.

The entire process of experiences presented has been a persistent collective creation and conversing with other actors in the city helped them to classify their identity discourse *vis-à-vis* violence, to become internally strengthened and to create new forms of learning regarding project planning and management. Thus, the various cultural expressions have become a life choice that involves collective action in response to conflict and positions young people and women in particular as the direct negotiators of social organizations, no longer as victims or persons recruited to swell the ranks of an armed actor but as the architects of their own destinies.

After the conflict, the Commune underwent a major change in its form of participation. It emerged as the need for coordination, spaces where forces are combined and one begins to plan. This is how they began to think about the Comuna 13 development plan. They began with meetings with organizations; Corapaz, Realizadores and Sal y Luz led the process. In 2003, the three organizations were established and plans were made for the process of community coordination and in 2004, the Development Plan began.

The conflict has continued, the problems have not been solved and the war continues but in any case, this period made it possible to react and bring about changes.

The work carried out by the organizations in Comuna 13 forms part of this resistance, and although it is not directly linked to the conflict, we are performing actions to make the city realize that Comuna 13 is different from its reputation (Leader 5, interview, 2007).

This shows, on the basis of the cases analyzed, the existence of a sort of scattered wills (Virno, 2003 and 2004) for the production of new community narratives of collective autonomy and new community development projects that involve the diversity of social forces and effective solidarity. Dissident young people with political aims regarding armed actors and human rights violations have realized that they have a great deal to contribute to the construction of the commune and the city. This in turn has led to the organization of young social actors around the planning of a future outside armed conflict, together with the creation of female leadership and the confirmation of civic autonomy, with the creation of mechanisms for reflection on the experiences and everyday lives of armed actors.

One of the contributions to the interpretation of collective action is that the impact achieved from such vital collective experiences in such specific political, economic and social conditions of war and exclusion is that despite the apparent secretiveness of armed power, these collective actions with their silent steps softly

reveal what is impenetrable. The intimidating, proscribed power of the armies cannot control everything, there are cracks through which small rays of light can become powerful balls of fire. This power circulating throughout the social body Foucault mentioned is constructing one of those processes here and representing itself. Social organizations have learnt, for example, to move cautiously in territories involved in armed conflict and in the dynamics of illegal and legal groups for social and political as well as military control.

Another contribution to the interpretation of collective actions is their identification as a post-state political expression that is sending messages about the possibility of constructing a common project for society that is neither authoritarian nor exclusive, and relaunches politics not only in the local sphere, through a process of social participation that incorporates the changes and challenges of politics in the global sphere as the means towards democratization and the promotion of civic rights. Within this perspective, the power of the weak and subjugated becomes a constructive, imaginative, creative exercise, in an interaction of forces. This is one of the many existing possibilities of making power circulate. Faced with *de facto* power, faced with the power exercised by violent means, there will always be a possibility of slipping away. Other technologies and spheres of action will be inaugurated, renovated and refurbished, like other tactics involving the ingenuity and possibility of the so-called “weak”.

According to Paolo Virno (2004:21), while the post-Fordian multitude continues to mouth its support for the people, until it invents political forms that match its way of being (producing, communicating and inhabiting the word) authoritarian political experiments will continue to multiply”. The cultural policy that has been constructed in Comuna 13 through the various processes of collective action for dealing with violence, is a production of spaces for discussion, on a par with construction, shared common features and a genuine, valuable way of dealing with authoritarian political and military projects in their spheres of life.

Heterogeneity is the characteristic of strategies deployed by social, political and cultural actors regarding what should be done in response to the situation of violence. Each collective has its own perspectives of action, even though the objective is the same: coping with violence. For example, in this democratization of public places, one of the strategies has been to eliminate the imaginary frontiers of war that prevent all the residents from circulating between the sectors of the neighborhoods, which means new horizons of possibility distinct from armed conflict for everyone. In keeping with this proposal, Escobar declares,

perhaps the cultural aspect is most obvious when movements make demands based on cultural aspects [...] or those in which they use culture as a means of capturing or mobilizing activists [...] However, we wish to stress the fact that cultural policy is also implemented when movements intervene in debates on policies, attempt to resignify the dominant interpretations of political issues or challenge established political practices (Escobar, 1999:142)

The vehement attitude of the various collective actors regarding the power wielded by armed groups has been a political posture of belief in the “effectiveness of collective action.” This belief has involved the possibility of altering existing power relations and the positive impact of an alternative civil message through the various strategies and repertoires used in response to the control and domination of armed groups over residents’ lives. None of the collective actions could have been carried out without the confluence of the motivations and orientations of action of the members and activists who have shared the values, interests and definitions of reality and been identified and been actively supportive in response to the arbitrary, authoritarian exercise of armed power in their territories.

## *CONCLUSIONS*

The questions that guided this case study were dealt with on the basis of an open interpretation of the narrations of the collective leaders and actors interviewed. The analytical bias involved focusing on the collective actions that sought to deal with the violence created by the armed conflict experienced by their actors. But beyond this, it involved an internal process of constructing a dignifying study of the settlers which, in turn, would visualize the genuine nature of the encounter between the researcher and the organizational process and also the encounter between the various social organizations and their experiences. That is why the author sought and largely managed to keep away from any preconceived idea of the logic and political orientation that encouraged the various settlers to act in response to violence, such as discussing collective action merely from the perspective of civil resistance, opposition or any other logic of action in particular.

Although the achievements of each of the collective actions in Comuna 13 are distinct, localized and ambiguous about what they seek, they have the significant force of having been pronounced and of managing to make apparently impenetrable relations of domination porous. Although the social mobilization produced in Comuna 13 has failed to transform the violence, it has created processes

of openness involving messages and action strategies different from war. In other words, it has produced messages that serve to create a political opportunity for the recognition and defense of the civil and political rights that have not yet been partially, let alone fully guaranteed in these communities.

Despite the existing internal and external limitations, according to the local specificities described, the range of social, political and cultural actors have, on the one hand, managed to acknowledge their possibilities and potential for action and on the other regarded many real threats as political opportunities, with each acting from their own perspectives and conditions of possibility. Within these perspectives, they have realized the diversity of collective actions that have been implemented to cope with the violence in Comuna 13 in Medellín. But beyond this, they have realized the existence of the various forms of expressing themselves in relation to violence, thereby signifying a symbolic conflict, according to Alberto Melucci, who proposes alterations in the hegemonic relations of domination, even though they do not undermine power structures themselves or constitute the motivation that mobilizes collective action.

However, in the contexts of violent conflict, as shown by the case study of Comuna 13 in Medellín, the collective actions that pre-existed at the time of the violence do not necessarily eliminate or disarticulate the collective actions that existed at the time of the violence. On the contrary, it is on the basis of the new situation of threat and restriction, within the framework of violence, that various social, political and cultural collectives use and renew the repertoires of action. They do this by inventing, reshaping and recreating them to cope with the violence, positioning themselves as collective groups that have increased their power in relation to state power and alternative warlike micro-powers of many orders, by managing to construct political, social and cultural alternatives in their spheres of action. Thus, as in another of the conclusions to this study, despite the systematic repression to which the various collective expressions and actions and Colombia have been subjected, and despite the discourse expressed by a society united against the hegemonic political and economic class, various forms of collective action emerge that propose the existence of orientations and forms of action that oppose armed domination and illustrate the plurality of cultural, political and social alternatives, which in turn alter the relations of subordination.

Each of the collectives mentioned in Medellín's Comuna 13 has had the need to overcome many internal as well as organizational situations, to increase the participation of other social groups in Comuna 13, which once again recalls Charles Tilly (2000:234) when he proposes the following, "Generally speaking, the or-

ganizers must work hard to encourage the shared awareness of oppression and the will to resist and even with intense efforts at organization, they fail, except in special structural circumstances”.

The messages produced by activists to encourage the participation of the inhabitants of Comuna 13 in each of the collective actions have incorporated the urgent need to create new social values around coexistence, respect for life and the social, cultural and political differences of their inhabitants in response to dominant values such as competition and the annihilation of one's adversary. In this respect, the mobilizing messages for collective action in Comuna 13 are not always direct nor do they confront the armed groups that exert control over the territory. The forcefulness of the voices that dissent from this violence should be evaluated from the perspective of their autonomous yet incisive nature in response to exclusive, totalitarian projects of domination, which in turn create new practices of cultural and political relations.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio, 2005, *Estado de excepción. Homo Sacer II*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo Editora.
- Appadurai, Arjun, 1999, “Soberanía sin territorialidad. Notas para una geografía posnacional”, *Nueva Sociedad*, núm. 163, Buenos Aires, pp. 109-124.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, 1999, *La globalización. Consecuencias humanas*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, 2005, “Los residuos del progreso económico”, *Claves de Razón Práctica*, núm.149, Madrid, pp. 14-20.
- Castells, Manuel, 1995, *La ciudad informacional. Tecnologías de la información, reestructuración económica y el proceso urbano-regional*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial.
- Escobar, Arturo, 1999, *El final del salvaje. Naturaleza, cultura y política en la antropología contemporánea*, Santafé de Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia/CEREC.
- Escobar, Arturo, 2005, *Más allá del tercer mundo. Globalización y diferencia*, Santafé de Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia/Universidad del Cauca.
- Fazio Vengoa, Hugo, 2007, “De la globalización a la historia global: hacia otra representación del mundo contemporáneo”, *Análisis Político*, núm. 61, Bogotá, pp. 28-44.

- Foucault, Michel, 2000, *Defender la sociedad. Curso en el Collage de France (1975-1976)*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Giddens, Anthony, 1993, *Consecuencias de la modernidad*, Madrid, Alianza Universidad.
- Gledhill, John, 2000, *El poder y sus disfraces. Perspectivas antropológicas de la política*, Barcelona, Ediciones Bellaterra.
- Ignatieff, Michael, 2005, “Democracia y terrorismo”, *Claves de Razón Práctica*, núm. 150, Madrid, pp. 4-13.
- Kaldor, Mary, 2005, “Cinco acepciones de la sociedad civil global”, *Claves de Razón Práctica*, núm. 149, Madrid, pp. 30-35.
- Kalyvas, Stathis, 2004, “La ontología de la ‘violencia política’: acción e identidad en las guerras civiles”, *Análisis Político*, núm. 52, Bogotá, pp. 51-76.
- Lemke, Thomas *et al.*, 2006, *Marx y Foucault*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión.
- Marchal, Roland y Christine Messiant, 2004, “Las guerras civiles en la era de la globalización: nuevos conflictos y nuevos paradigmas”, *Análisis Político*, núm. 50, Bogotá, pp. 20-34.
- Mattelart, Armand, 2002, *Historia de la sociedad de la información*, Barcelona, Paidós.
- Melucci, Alberto, 1996, *Challenging Codes. Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Melucci, Alberto, 1999, *Acción colectiva, vida cotidiana y democracia*, México, El Colegio de México.
- Münkler, Herfried, 2004, “Las guerras del siglo xxi”, *Análisis Político*, núm. 51, Bogotá, pp. 3-11.
- Münkler, Herfried, 2005, *Viejas y nuevas guerras. Asimetría y privatización de la violencia*, Madrid, Siglo XXI Editores.
- Sassen, Saskia, 2007, “Una sociología de la globalización”, *Análisis Político*, núm. 61, Bogotá, pp. 3-27.
- Scott, James C., 2000, *Los dominados y el arte de la resistencia. Discursos ocultos*, México, Ediciones Era.
- Subirats, Eduardo, 2002, “Violencia y civilización”, *El Viejo Topo*, núm. 165, Barcelona, pp. 45-55.
- Tarrow, Sydney, 2004, *El poder en movimiento. Los movimientos sociales, la acción colectiva y la política*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial.
- Tilly, Charles, 2000, *La desigualdad persistente*, Buenos Aires, Manantial.
- Tilly, Charles, 2004, *Social movements 1768-2004*, Boulder Colorado, Paradigm Publishers.
- Virno, Paolo, 2003, *Virtuosismo y revolución, la acción política en la era del desencanto*, Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños.

- Virno, Paolo, 2004, *Cuando el verbo se hace carne. Lenguaje y naturaleza humana*, Buenos Aires, Cactus/Tinta Limón Ediciones.
- Waldmann, Peter y Fernando Reinares, eds., 1999, *Sociedades en guerra civil. Conflictos violentos de Europa y América Latina*, Barcelona, Paidós.
- Zibechi, Raúl, 2007, *Dispersar el poder. Los movimientos sociales como poderes antiestatales*, Bogotá, Ediciones Desde Abajo.

## Interviews

- Leader 1, [from the Asociación de Mujeres Las Independencias], 2007, by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate y Katherine Higuita (joint researchers), [field work], *Resistencia civil no armada al conflicto armado, la exclusión social y la pobreza. Casos Comunas 8, 9 y 13 de Medellín. 2002-2006*, Medellín, Colombia.
- Leader 2, [from Hip hop group organizer], 2007, by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate y Katherine Higuita (joint researchers), [field work], *Resistencia civil no armada al conflicto armado, la exclusión social y la pobreza. Casos Comunas 8, 9 y 13 de Medellín. 2002-2006*, Medellín, Colombia.
- Leader 3, [from Elite Hip Hop Group], 2007, by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate y Katherine Higuita (joint researchers), [field work], *Resistencia civil no armada al conflicto armado, la exclusión social y la pobreza. Casos Comunas 8, 9 y 13 de Medellín. 2002-2006*, Medellín, Colombia.
- Leader 4, [from Son Batá Group], 2007, by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate y Katherine Higuita (joint researchers), [field work], *Resistencia civil no armada al conflicto armado, la exclusión social y la pobreza. Casos Comunas 8, 9 y 13 de Medellín. 2002-2006*, Medellín, Colombia.
- Leader 5, [from Agrupación Sal y Luz], 2007, by Jaime Rafael Nieto López (head researcher), Mary Luz Alzate y Katherine Higuita (joint researchers), [field work], *Resistencia civil no armada al conflicto armado, la exclusión social y la pobreza. Casos Comunas 8, 9 y 13 de Medellín. 2002-2006*, Medellín, Colombia.