



IN FOCUS

DEPARTURES FROM CONFLICT

The period after violent conflict is deeply challenging for individuals and communities struggling to come to terms with how war has impacted their lives. As they resume everyday civilian life, ex-combatants, veterans, civilian victims, their families, and government institutions seek to move beyond the physical, psychological and social ramifications of war. This series examines these struggles with post-conflict rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration, and the ways in which those involved in violent conflict—in any capacity—remain connected with it.

Pasts Imperfect

Reintegrating Former Combatants in Colombia

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In the end, we don't know why we have [this war]. Before we had it clear—people fought for a town, for a party, for poverty...for thousands of things. But right now we don't have it clear why there's this war. And the war now just goes from revenge to revenge—that's how this war goes.

— Juan, former FARC combatant, December 2006

A key component of peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction is the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants. DDR programs imply multiple transitions: combatants lay down their weapons, governments seek an end to armed conflict, communities receive or reject demobilized fighters. These transitions involve a complex and dynamic equation between demands of peace and justice. However, traditional approaches to DDR have focused on military and security objectives, which has resulted in these programs being developed in relative isolation from the field of transitional justice and its concerns with historical clarification, reparations and reconciliation. By reducing DDR to “dismantling the machinery of war,” these programs have failed to adequately consider how to move beyond demobilizing combatants to facilitating social reconstruction and coexistence.

Since January 2005 I have conducted research on demobilization programs, interviewing (with my research assistant) nearly 200 Colombian ex-combatants from the AUC, FARC and ELN, as well as working with state entities, NGOs, military and intelligence representatives, Catholic and Evangelical churches, and

host communities. I argue for considering how demobilized ex-combatants might contribute to transitioning from violence to sustainable peace. A key challenge following mass violence is what to do with the thousands of low-level perpetrators whose numbers may overwhelm the legal system and whose return to civilian life may generate tremendous fear and resentment. I discuss how the former combatants with whom I work conceptualize justice, forgiveness and reconciliation, which are central concerns to the field of transitional justice.

In addition to helping policymakers design more relevant and effective interventions, ethnographic studies of reconciliation emphasize that transitions in the political realm must be accompanied by transformations at the subjective and interpersonal levels. Among these transformations are the relationships former combatants have to their violent pasts and their imagined futures. How do these men and women talk about killing, the possibility of justice, living again as and among civilians? Most truth-telling endeavors have focused on victims, in part to write new national narratives that are inclusive of groups that have been historically marginalized. Without denying the importance of listening empathetically to victims, I insist on the need to hear the accounts of low-level perpetrators as well. Listening to both victims and perpetrators—and to those who blur the categories—is crucial to constructing “departures from violence” (Borneman 2002).

Speaking of Justice

There are approximately 48,300 demobilized combatants in Colombia, but only 5% will be tried and sentenced under the govern-

ment's Justice and Peace Law. The vast majority of former combatants will receive de facto amnesty unless new forms of accountability are developed. What forms of accountability—and transformation—might be possible? Perhaps understanding how the demobilized talk about killing and justice provides a place to start.

During my conversations with ex-combatants, I have lost count of how many times someone has insisted, “I never killed anyone—I only killed enemies in combat.”

conversations are replete with spatial metaphors: “*en el monte*” (in the mountains or the jungle); “*allá*” (over there); “*en el otro lado*” (on the other side); and the contrast made between *el monte* and *el pueblo* (town). These spatial terms locate violent actions elsewhere, and that distance in turn marks differences in time, self and conciencia. In other words, many attempt to “cordon off” certain actions and facets of their violent pasts by locating them in another space, time and self. Certain

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At this point I strive to open a space for empathy. I assure them I admire the efforts they are making to change their lives, and know how difficult it is to do so. I then ask them for help with something that is difficult for me: “I remember a woman I met in Medellín who has lost five sons to this violence. When I sit with women like her and talk about the time I spend with all of you, I am usually asked how I can stand it. What would you say to her?” My aim is to create room to acknowledge that even if they justify killing as part of combat, those they killed were people with grieving families. Recognition and reckoning can begin with putting a human face to those who died.

In former combatants' reactions to my question, I witness a change in *conciencia* associated with leaving the war behind and building “civilian” or “legal” lives. *Conciencia* (conscience or consciousness) figures prominently in our conversations, and it has various significations. It can refer to being *concientizado* (indoctrinated) by the armed group to which one belonged or to the degree to which one was aware of one's actions. It informs assessments of how responsible the individual is for what they have done and creates room for accountability.

Discussions of *conciencia* form part of a broader process of compartmentalization. Our

moral codes pertain to certain spaces, and compartmentalization is a powerful way of managing one's past. Unfortunately, the same terms that allow them to construct a new sense of self may also allow them to deny the harm they have inflicted.

Command Responsibility

For many ex-combatants from the FARC or ELN, justice is associated with rules imposed within armed groups and “war councils.” JM described: “If you screw up, you'll get a sentence, a reprimand—that is, if it's your first time. That's how the war council works. If it's your second time, you'll be killed.” After eight years in the FARC, LR explained to us: “justice is that everyone has to pay for what he does.” Importantly, the people sent to carry out the “death penalty” are members of the condemned individual's squadron, and foot soldiers come to resent their commanders as they force them to carry out orders at odds with their beliefs.

Our conversations are filled with references to injustices ex-combatants experienced or witnessed at the hands of their commanders. Although specific examples of double standards in rules and punishment vary across armed groups, resentment of former commanders is shared and acute: commanders' female

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times, our critiques are powerful enough to win sympathetic listeners from the policy domain. The case of mental health, trauma healing and psychiatric treatment in Liberia's post-conflict recovery suggests that, at some level, the anthropological critique has "won" a policy debate. But what does winning mean?

It is important to remember that anthropological critiques exist in a dialogic relationship—or what Giddens called a "double hermeneutic"—with international multilateral and bilateral donors, and with NGO program directors, consultants and staffers. Internationally mobile humanitarian agencies, however, tend to engage in this double hermeneutic by making statements through practice rather than dialogue. They can eliminate criticized activities altogether, defer significant program reforms for the next short-term crisis intervention (perhaps in a new locale), or dismiss critiques as being "impractical." In the


case of mental health and trauma healing for ex-combatants, it appears as though humanitarian agencies have chosen the first and second options. They have taken the anthropological critique seriously enough to disable intervention, but in the process they have abandoned the opportunity to provide important structures of care to veteran populations.

Our critical analyses, if made without an appreciation for the structural limitations of the institutions under critique, can result in the dangerous immobilization of resources, labor and perceptions of need. Increasingly, it is apparent that institutions that fail to stake out a physical and moral presence in the post-conflict environment are most likely to be neglected or abandoned in the reconstruction efforts of post-conflict states. For Liberia, this means that more than five years after the conclusion of its civil war, there continues to be no state entity responsible for mental health, psychiatric and trauma healing services, and

veteran populations are stigmatized and abandoned, rather than integrated into functional paradigms of care and support. The emerging result of this paralysis is the total desiccation of paradigms of care and support for mentally ill persons throughout Liberia, and for veteran populations in particular.

Unfortunately, many moderate voices from within our field have fallen by the wayside on this issue. Through our powerful critiques, the discipline of anthropology has broadly labeled previously lauded types of care and treatment of mentally ill persons as culturally inappropriate, and therefore invalid services to offer in the context of post-conflict recovery. Although anthropologists have taken active roles in the development of the 2007 IASC *Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*, have conducted key research into measurement and program development in this area, and have offered guidance to important organizations providing

trauma healing and mental health services, the visibility of these efforts pales in comparison to the harsh criticisms we, as a discipline, have offered. On issues of mental health and psychiatric care in post-conflict environments, we need to resituate mental health as a human right, and the right to post-trauma healthcare as a basic foundation of both anthropological and humanitarian engagement and debate.

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partners are allowed to carry pregnancies to term while low-level female combatants are routinely subjected to forced abortions; commanders eat well while the rank and file eat whatever is on hand; commanders pocket illegally earned money while the foot soldiers "put their chest to the war."

Even those who state that justice should be administered "by God" qualify their statements by adding that "helping him out" is not a bad thing. As JC told us after spending 13 years in the AUC: "Justice? Well, supposedly God takes care of it, but, really, God is a very busy man." I underscore the complete absence of the state in these responses concerning justice. One factor that contributes to the desire for revenge that so many former combatants express is a lack of legal alternatives for dispute resolution. If one component of justice is staying the hand of vengeance, then the Colombian state is guilty of failing to adjudicate conflicts and punish the perpetrators.

Living with Oneself, Living with Others

Reconciliation is multidimensional: within the individual, among members of a community, between communities or states, between individuals and their gods, and between civil society sectors and the state. However, not one demobilized combatant with whom I have spoken is aware that their demobilization is allegedly part of "national reconciliation" efforts—the overlooked "R" in DDR. How do these men imagine life will be when they live once again among those they may have harmed?

Interviewing a young man named Barney in Bogotá about his years in the AUC, I asked him if he thought forgiveness would be possible: "No. Forgiveness is just a word, but in the heart the resentment remains... Here, people... they're afraid, they resent you." He told me that when he went into the nearby town, a storeowner said he had "the face of a demobilized combatant" and told him to leave. There was no consultation with the host community and people wanted nothing to do with the "killers who appeared overnight" in their town. I had another conversation with Wilton, who

had been in the AUC for over four years. He told me, "I committed a serious error. A person... isn't going to forgive me. The only one who can is God... [The family] may accept my words, but they will never forgive me." I asked, "Even if they don't forgive you, could you live ... in their town?" He replied, "No, I couldn't. If you live there, you just don't know what might happen."

This was the first time in our conversations about the DDR process that reintegration was discussed as more than passing by the office for regular monitoring and picking up one's stipend. Both these former combatants and surrounding communities would benefit from imagining ways to reconstruct social life and making concrete plans for implementing those ideas. What might reintegration entail? We must ask what sort of violence was suffered and practiced in various regions and by whom. Who benefited, who stood by, and who gave away a neighbor or loved one in hopes of improving their own lot? Who is guilty? The complexity of guilt can rarely be reduced to a binary variable, and the gray zone will be vast in practice if not in narration.

When considering what is involved in repairing the damage done to people, relationships and societies following violence, clearly the moral issues of guilt, remorse, accountability and reconciliation cannot be adequately addressed within a strictly legal or security framework. These questions radiate across disciplinary and practitioner fiefdoms. My conversations with former combatants convince me that they have much to contribute to social reconstruction. Combining these conversations with place-based analyses of locally and regionally salient practices of justice, punishment and reparation could assist third parties in more effectively contributing to the rebuilding of social life and institutions in the aftermath of war.

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