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BOOK REVIEW

LAS IDEAS EN LA GUERRA. JUSTIFI- CACIÓN Y CRÍTICA EN LA COLOMBIA CONTEMPORÁNEA

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Jorge Giraldo Ramírez

Las ideas en la guerra

Justificación y crítica en la
Colombia contemporánea

Prólogo de Daniel Pécaut

DEBATE

In his book, Jorge Giraldo Ramírez's reflections on the Colombian conflict are based on a close and in-depth understanding of the subject, given that he is not only professor and Dean of the School of Humanities at EAFIT University (Bogota); he has also been actively involved in the *Historical Commission on the Conflict and Its Victims* (CHCV), which was set up as part of a general agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC to end the conflict. He therefore has a very real and comprehensive overview of the subject. In addition, the academic works he has published in recent years have focused on themes related to contemporary political philosophy, civil wars and criminal economies in South America, where he has provided an enriching view and approach to the process.

The author raises two key questions in an attempt to understand one of the longest conflicts in South American history: How to explain the longevity of the FARC and why large sectors of Colombian society believed that the country's social and political system would inevitably lead to an armed conflict and even justify it. The answers to these and other questions are explained in-depth in this book, which is much more than a mere retrospective look at the past. The book's originality lies in the angle from which the author assesses the problem, given that he not only provides a description of the conflict, but he also provides new insights into the ideas that have fuelled a war that has lasted more than fifty years and resulted in almost two hundred thousand victims, a war that society and the State have to resolve.

It is interesting and surprising to note that, at the peak of the Cold War, while the FARC was still in its infancy and having difficulty surviving, Colombia's Communist Party had been legal since 1958, was publishing a newspaper and reproducing official documents from the communist guerrilla forces, all with the approval of the Ministry of Justice, thus suggesting that during this period Colombia enjoyed more civil liberties than the rest of South America. Any exercise in comparative politics will reveal that there was no characteristic or event either in Colombia or elsewhere that could be described as structural or objective in determining the start of the war. In general, wars are caused by the decisions of political units, and this one was instigated by revolutionary groups who challenged the government and society using arms, something that drug traffickers would mimic years later. The author uses different testimonies to demonstrate how the men and women who took up arms against the State did so even though they had other alternatives, and with little support from the left wing militants who were as radical and convinced as they were, but who believed there were other ways to change Colombia's political institutions and society.

However, let us not forget that guerrilla warfare did not spread to the rest of South America until the Cuban revolutionary model triumphed in 1959, and the possibilities of imitating that model were high because it united several very different ideological movements and a strong continental tradition under a single historical event.

The war in Colombia has been long, complex, discontinuous and, in short, political. Above all, however, it has been complex, given that from the outset it has involved several independent and somewhat unconnected guerrilla groups. And this situation

was further complicated when new guerrilla forces emerged on the scene in the 1970s, followed by self-defence paramilitary groups and armed drug gangs in the 1980s.

Professor Giraldo Ramírez's book is relevant and necessary because of the approaches it provides. One of Giraldo Ramírez's chief concerns since he was asked by the government to sit on the Historical Commission on the Conflict and Its Victims, agreed with the FARC at the 'Conversation Table in Havana', is to demonstrate how guerrilla groups emerged in Colombia without considering country-specific conditions, to describe the various stages the groups have gone through over the years and the different and sometimes erroneous messages they have been sending to the people to justify their actions while remaining untouched by the reforms that were being implemented by the different governments.

One of the book's greatest achievements is its ability to analyse in-depth the testimonies of a number of guerrillas who initially saw violence as a means of changing the situation in Colombia, but who, after abandoning it, were capable of having their own ideas and denouncing the war. The Constitution of 1991 provided an explicit response to some of the demands made by guerrilla organisations and ushered in a period of reform in all areas of the political and socio-economic system. It also brought important advances in the fields of justice, health, housing and education and increased citizen participation in public institutions; in short, in modernising the country.

In 1965 the National Liberation Army (ELN) emerged. In 1966 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were officially set up, and in 1967 the People's Liberation Army (EPL) arose. The emergence of these guerrilla groups can be attributed to the global conflict that arose between the liberal West and the communist East following World War II. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, there were five attempts to wage guerrilla warfare in Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Paraguay. Therefore, the phenomenon was not confined to Colombia, given that in the ten years following the Cuban Revolution, similar groups emerged in all South American countries, with the exception of Costa Rica. And while the Cuban Revolution initially filled radical, nationalist and socialist sectors with enthusiasm, their actions ultimately proved to be far removed from the initial ideas that gave rise to it.

While this was taking place in Colombia, significant events were also unfolding in Europe and Asia, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and, with it, the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, followed by German reunification in 1990 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. While Cuba was in the throes of the so-called «Special Period», the South American Left was exploring new democratic scenarios. However, by contrast, the FARC, ELN and Sendero Luminoso ('Shining Path') remained rooted in the past and alone in their demands, a situation which former Uruguayan president José Mujica has described as a «permanent chronic war».

Jorge Giraldo Ramírez's goal throughout the book is to show how the violence in Colombia was not criticised; to the contrary, it became a hallmark of the country's political culture, and justification for the war was shared by the guerrilla groups and

the various intellectual circles and institutional forces alike, thus giving the guerrillas reason to believe that they could continue to harbour the illusion that they would one day win or at least make significant progress for their cause.

One of the greatest virtues of the book is that it sets out the opinions and arguments of those who justified the war, but also those who did not bury their heads in the sand and who openly criticised it. Focus is given to the opinions of a number of Colombians such as Cayetano Betancur, Jorge Orlando Melo, Francisco Mosquera, Carlos Jiménez Gómez and so on. Moreover, where intellectuals, politicians and ideological enterprises are concerned, the author highlights four stances: those who implicitly or explicitly justified the war, those who showed restraint in doing so, those who were neutral and those who took a critical stance.

There was also a group of intellectuals who defended their ideas and signed what became known as the «Letter of the Intellectuals», which was published in the newspaper *Tiempo* on November 20, 1992. These included Gabriel García Márquez, Nicolás Buenaventura, Cayetano Betancur and Jorge Orlando Melo, among others, who questioned the legitimacy of the war that was being waged in Colombia in terms of human rights, terrorism and corruption. Criticism of the war came from different ideological and political circles but, for many years, their ideas represented a minority, and many of the intellectuals who signed the letter were cornered and vilified. The author has very little interest in the views of those outside Columbia, and it soon becomes apparent to the reader that this is an internal assessment and critique of the discourse and narrative of guerrilla and intellectual groups, as well as an analysis of Columbia's recent history based on the author's research into the theory of civil war, all conducted from a well defined ethical and political perspective.

Professor Giraldo Ramírez points out that while it may appear that the war in Colombia has always existed, it has actually undergone a lengthy process of conceptualisation: initially, the Colombian armed-left wing inserted itself into the three waves of guerrilla warfare in South America. He describes the models it followed in order to promote different means of organisation and warfare and compares it to communist ideology. However, as the years passed, the guerrillas increasingly distanced themselves from these ideas until the FARC split from the Communist Party in the 1980s, and the leaders for the former took command of the organisation under the slogan «the war against the State». The guerrillas have not only clashed with the State, but also with numerous paramilitary networks that were set up with the aid of drug traffickers, local politicians and, on more than one occasion, with the support of the security forces.

The author also helps us to contextualise the many reasons for sympathising with and joining the armed struggle: rejection of a political system that was based on a pact between the elites, a pact that was tainted from the outset by the imposition of silence in relation to the violence, the social lethargy of the National Front, the resistance of some institutions to the very idea of modernity and the latent displacement of the system. It is backed by rebellious generations from rural areas who can find nothing in the system to give them hope for the future and meaning to their lives.

This author concludes this interesting work by placing all of his hopes in the 'Conversation Table in Havana'. It has been demonstrated that if lasting and stable peace is to be achieved, the process has to engage all sectors of society and, above all, a strong state has to be built; this is a theoretical prerequisite for any form of fair and stable peace.

The government's biggest challenge at this time is to make peace a state policy. However, neither the government nor the guerrillas can be held accountable for this process; at most, they can join forces and pave the way for this to happen. It is the intellectuals, representatives of academia, entrepreneurs, the media, actors, athletes and a vibrant civil society that must take responsibility for and come up with new ways of assessing and acting before we can be confident that neither the war nor its atrocities will ever be repeated. Peace, as the author points out, is not the absence of conflict, it is the condition whereby conflict is integrated into the democratic debate.

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