

A Trouble in the Heavens: Human (In)security, Identity and Fragmentation in Cali, Colombia.

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Abstract

The paper discusses the issue of identities and fragmentation in the context of Cali, the third largest metropolitan area of Colombia. The author uses the framework of human security to examine the distinctive patterns of the continuing crisis in the city, in order to demonstrate the importance of fostering a community of solidarity through mutual support and recognition for city's recovery. Referring to the experience of Bogota's "miraculous" transformation from one of the most appalling South American capitals to one of the most dynamically developing cities in the sub-continent, it is argued that a key to Cali's revival is to understand that urban space is socially and culturally constructed.

In Colombia, people often use beautiful metaphors with regard to their cities: "the city of eternal spring" for Medellin, "the white city" for Popayan, "a miraculous city" for Buga, and, finally, Bogotá, located "2600 meters more closely to the stars". Indisputably, Cali is known throughout the entire country as a "branch of the heavens".

Founded in 1536 by the Spanish conquistador Sebastian Belalacazar, since the beginning of the 20th century the city had been flourishing as the center of one of the world's major sugar-producing region, Valle del Cauca. The establishment of an important university in the 1940s and the Pan-American Games in the 1970s led to the further growth of the city, which earned the reputation of the festive capital of the Western part of Colombia inhabited by joyful people, a true branch of the heavens.

These days, however, a few people would run into risk by referring to Cali as a "branch of the heavens". Recently, having being told the Cali's famous metaphor, a first-time visitor to the city has ironically noted that, if it is true, then there is a serious

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trouble in the heavens.

A City in Crisis

The changes that have been taking place in Cali since the second part of the 1980s are the consequences of impressive transformations in the Western part of Colombia in the last two decades of the 20th century. There are several origins of these transformations. Firstly, it is the process of the industrial development and the further expansion of the long-lasting Colombian internal conflict into economic, political and cultural domains of the city of Cali. Second, it is the growth of the impact of the illegal drug industry on almost all of the vital aspects of living in the city. Third, it is a steady empowerment of a number of political, social and ethnic actors representing diverse sectors of the city, which previously lacked visibility or which had been perceived of almost no importance for the power arrangements in the city. In particular, in the political context, it is worth mentioning the high degree of influence that the popular strata, student movements, trade unions, indigenous and afro-Colombian movements and organizations have been increasingly gaining from the end of the 1980s.

As a result of the frequent clash of the interests of various actors and the lack of the will -from all the sides involved- to reach a negotiable solution, at the turn of the centuries, Cali inhabitants had to face a severe administrative and financial crisis that came along with a significant deterioration of the quality of living in the city.

One can identify several crucial “wrongs” in this Andean “branch of the heavens”. One of the key factors is an impressive institutional fiasco. A striking level of corruption, which was caused, to a great extent, by the activities linked to the illegal drug trafficking, led to the wide-spread generalized mistrust to the city authorities, including towards those city leaders who showed their sincere interest to improve the state of affairs. The institutions which in the past gained the confidence of caleños had been dramatically and rapidly losing it¹.

The worst economic crisis in the city’s history is another crucial factor. The city’s share of GDP had been declining as much as 2 per cent annually whereas the

¹ This includes not only political institutions, but also the institutions like EMCALI, a consolidated municipal enterprise in charge of delivering public services to the city, which used to be the reason of constant pride of caleños.

unemployment had doubled in the 1990s and reached the appalling figure of 21 per cent in 2000². Moreover, teenagers of 12 to 16 years old represented a significant part of Cali's labor force³. In 1999, the city's debt was estimated by almost US \$200 million and the deficit of the city's budget reached 57 million, whereas the biggest single type of spending was the payments to the city's employees⁴.

Last, but certainly not least, it is the altering of the social profile of Cali. During the city's former days of glory, Cali served as a model of civic progress in Colombia. Nowadays, however, the perception within as well as outside of the city is an opposite one. It is due, in part, to the fact that less than in five years, from 1994 to 1998, the number of people living in misery in Cali's municipal area reached 10 per cent of the population and, with those living below the poverty line, accounted for almost half of the entire population of the city⁵. In the beginning of 2000, the Gini coefficient (0,542) was one of the worst in the country placing Cali second to none amongst the biggest Colombian cities⁶.

The city has also experienced the changing perception with regard to the violence. Whereas it is true that Cali had been never considered a particularly safe place to live in and the local universities is the place where violontology was born⁷, it was Bogotá and Medellín that had being perceived the most violent cities of Colombia. This perception has changed in the end of the 1990s. Illustratively, one day in 2001, the local newspaper *El Pais* headlined "A miracle! No one was killed today in Cali!". However, the major cause behind the changing perception of Cali was not the homicides, but the mass kidnappings.

The kidnappings in Colombia are a well-known modus operandi of the illegal armed groups, including leftist guerilla and ultra-right paramilitaries, the drug traffickers and common delinquency. Since the end of 1980s, this type of a criminal activity has being rapidly spreading all over the country⁸. However, in the beginning of 1990s, the city of

² It is estimated that Cali employs up to a quarter of all working force of entire Colombia (World Bank 2002)

³ 15 per cent of all youngsters from 12 to 16 year old had to work in 1998. (Ibid.)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In part, it is the phenomenon of forced displacement from Colombia's rural areas into the cities that has contributed in the tremendous growth of the number of poor in Cali (see Rouvinski and Vasquez 2005)

⁶ World Bank 2002

⁷ see Guzman and others (1993)

⁸ In the 1990s, the major guerilla groups in the country have changed their tactics: avoiding the

Cali raised to the top of the headlines with regard to the kidnapping-related violence: along with the growth of the influence of the Cali cartel and the other illegal groups involved in the drug trafficking, the problem from a serious one converted to a severe. Next, in the middle of the decade, the extortions of various Cali-based transporting companies and the kidnappings of relatives of those who were in charge of the transportation businesses put the authorities on even a higher alert, since up to this moment, the kidnapping had been considered a problem caused by the drug trafficking only.

The worst was yet to come, however. On 30 of May of 1999, the first of what was to become a series of massive kidnappings in Cali ruined –in a radical way- all the previous efforts to provide caleños with a better security in the city. With an exception of the massive inflow of internally displaced persons to the Cali metropolitan area in the second part of 1990s, before the La Maria kidnapping, the majority of the city dwellers perceived the armed conflict as unrelated to their daily life. But in May 1999, the rebels of the National Liberation Army (ELN) were able to freely enter the city, interrupt a service at La Maria church, put some 160 people, including small children, women and elderly persons, who attended the service, into two trucks and take them towards the mountains of the Farallones National Park in the proximity of Cali⁹.

During the months that followed the kidnapping of La Maria, the city was united to demand the release of the hostages, but the event of the mass kidnapping was considered by those living in the city as rather a single occurrence. However, a year and a half later, in September 2000, ELN undertakes another mass kidnapping, this time during the celebration of the Day of Love and Friendship¹⁰. Several dozens of people had been forced to walk long hours in the mountain jungles, among them many senior citizens. For some of them, this walk became the last one in their lives.

The kidnappings by ELN targeted primarily the Cali's middle-class and the rebel group had demanded above all the political gestures from the government. Whereas the city *per se* was unlikely the major objective of the rebels, the consequences of the mass

direct confrontation with the government forces, they now stick to random but efficient attacks in economically most vulnerable areas and kidnappings for political purposes.

⁹ Amongst the kidnapped children were two of the students of the author of this paper. They were released several days after the day of the kidnapping, but many other hostages remained in the tropical jungles for as long as six months.

¹⁰Traditionally, this is a day of big festivities in Cali.

kidnappings turned out to be the fatal ones for the entire city: the fall of the real estate prices, the closing down of middle-size and small enterprises, mass out migration, galloping unemployment and the shortage of investments occurred with no delay.

Finally, in the environment of the already growing fear and insecurity, the major rebel group of Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), conducted yet another mass kidnapping in Cali. On 11 of April of 2002, the rebels entered the building of the Departmental Assembly located in the city's downtown and took twelve democratically elected deputies to an undisclosed location.¹¹

On the other hand, besides the mass kidnappings, the other patterns of the crisis in Cali in the second part of the 1990s had been similar to the other Colombian megacities. In fact, back then, the entire country had been living through the worst recession in its modern history. When a nation-wide recession ended in the mid-2000s and the new policy of democratic security started to show some positive results in many parts of Colombia, strong hopes had risen amongst caleños as well. The fear of mass kidnappings started to disappear. Yet, contrary to other "cities of reference", like Bogota and Medellin, Cali has never managed to truly overcome the crisis of the second part of the 1990s.

Whereas the rate of unemployment has declined, it remains high and, since 2006, there is a new tendency to grow of the number of unemployed¹². Homicides are still the major cause of the deaths in the city: Cali is one the most violent cities in Latin America, next only to Caracas and San Salvador¹³. The city and the department of Valle del Cauca continue to be one of the most indebted territories of Colombia: the combined debt is equal to more than a fifth part of the total debt among the administrative entities of the country¹⁴. The city's infrastructure is a total disaster: only 2 per cent of roads are in good shape and the average time necessary to reach one's destination within the city's limits is 151 minutes¹⁵.

¹¹Later, eleven deputies had been killed in unclear circumstances. The murder of the deputies led to mass protests, which, however, also contributed in the strengthening of the image of Cali as the capital of violence in Colombia.

¹²From approximately 10 per cent in 2005 to about 12 percent in 2007 (Sanabria 2008) .

¹³74 per 100.000 inhabitants; compare to 18,8 in Bogotá and 33,5 in Medellin (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2007)

¹⁴Sanabria 2008

¹⁵Cali has a population of 2.075.380 people. Compare to Medellin (population of 3.831.000): 53 per cent of roads are in good shape and 30 minutes is the average time of displacement, Bogotá (population of 8.244.980): 32 per cent of roads are in good shape and the same average time of

The complexity of the current situation in Cali deadlocks the bravest minds in Colombia. Many believe that Cali is truly “a volcano waiting to erupt”. Yet, in the end of 2007, despite of all the predictions by mass media and political analysts that had been giving the victory to the candidate who represented traditional regional elites, another candidate became the new city mayor. Many experts habitually ascribed the victory of Jorge Ivan Ospina to the corrupted political process and populism of the new city leader. However, these observers had neglected one important element of Ospina’s election campaign, namely, a call for unification.

The fact is that Cali is a highly fragmented city. But in contrast to some other cities in the region, like, say, Caracas, which has certain tangible features that are deliberately designed in such a way that to differentiate one part of the city from another¹⁶, the fragmentation of Cali manifests itself not as much by some physical dimensions as by the sharply marked and diligently maintained distinctive identities of the people who inhabit the city. It is through these identities how the fragmentation is reinforced and the intangible boundaries within the city stay intact. Hence, identities play an important role in the city’s daily life, and one can argue that it is the identity-based fragmentation which frustrates attempts to construct a policy that addresses the entire city.

Urban Identities and Human Security

The topic of identities can be closely linked to the issue of human security. The notion of human security is rarely applied to an urban context: by many, the concept is still considered a new and thus immature framework of analysis, which is characterized by ambiguity and the lack of common ground. However, despite of all its ambiguity, the concept has certain value for an analysis of the situation in Cali. That is because human security takes into consideration the individual situated in broader identity-based social structures that are evident in any megacity like Cali.

The United Nations define human development as a “process of widening the range of people’s choices” and human security means “that people can exercise these choices safely and freely – and that they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today are not totally lost tomorrow”¹⁷ The latter is “a crucial ingredient of

displacement as in Medellin (Sanabria 2008)

¹⁶Like, for example, different police uniform for distinctive city districts

¹⁷UNDP (1994)

participatory development”. In other words, if given the opportunities to meet their most essential needs and earn their own living, people will set themselves free and ensure that they can make a full contribution to the development of themselves and of their local communities. It is in this way that the concept of human security advanced the notion of development and emphasized the following four characteristics: universal concern, interdependent, early prevention and the focus on “common people”.

Whereas the framework of human security is usually applied to the entire countries or regions, it is more than appropriate to apply the notion in an urban context, in particular, when one examines the sources of urban *in*security. In the case of Cali, it is possible to identify three major sources of human insecurity: individual, institutional, and structural/cultural¹⁸

As the individual sources of human insecurity are concerned, there are plenty of harmful actions directed against people or property with visible and immediate consequences, including banditry, lootings and inter-communal strife. Reflecting the city’s fragmentation, the poorest strata are the most affected ones; and women, children and the elderly are amongst the easy victims.¹⁹

The harmful actions and neglect of institutions can be considered the institutional sources of insecurity. In the case of Cali, it is a clear failure of the welfare system to provide the access to basic services in poor strata; the corrupted and unprofessional police force; medical facilities with no drugs or qualified personnel; miserable quality of education; and wide-spread corruption amongst the city’s civil servants. Altogether, these are the key contributors in the continuing growth of mistrust towards the city institutions.

Finally, the structural and cultural sources of human insecurity originate in those processes that have been already mentioned above, like the impact of the activities related to the illegal drug industry and mass kidnappings. These are also the processes of urban impoverishment, neglect of avoidable inequalities, unemployment and the dominance of the culture of permissibility and disrespect of law and regulations.

¹⁸I follow here the approach proposed by Earl Conteh-Morgan (2004)

¹⁹In Cali, the high rate of homicides is a distinctive feature of the poorest neighborhoods: in 2005, more than 70 per cent of all homicides occurred in estratos 1, 2, and 3 (Cali en cifras, 2006)

It is worth of mentioning here, that in Colombia, after the city's "miraculous" transformation from one of the most appalling South American capitals to one of the most dynamically developing and secure metropolis of the world, it is today's Bogotá that is a reference for many other cities in the country. Nevertheless, the regional political leaders are rather slow in learning the lessons from the rebirth of the nation's capital.

What happened in Bogotá, some call "a revolution from above". Following the 1998 elections, Enrique Peñalosa declared that his primary goal as the city's mayor is to "create equality". The new mayor started with some simple but unexpected measures: in the city of eight million people, where every fifth bogotano has a vehicle, he ordered to increase the height of the street curbs so that no parking would be possible in unauthorized spaces. Next, he had chosen to build cycle ways and not the new roads. An ample program to provide public illumination and green spaces in Bogotá's numerous poor neighborhoods was successfully implemented. New secure routes for children to come to and from schools had been designed. Previously with almost no public parks, today's Bogotá possesses a dozen of perfectly maintained and highly appreciated beautiful parks. Indicatively, in the end of Peñalosa's term as a mayor, one could see such graffiti like "Peñalosa, do less and promise more!" and "We are different, but all of us are Bogotá!"

At the same time, the measures taken by Peñalosa followed the policies of the previous city's administrations. For example, another mayor of Bogotá, a descent of Lithuanian immigrants to Colombia and formerly a rector of the Colombian National University, Antanas Mockus is known for his extravagancy and the advancing of a new system of mass transportation in the city, despite of the enormous resistance by the owners of the private bus and taxi companies. However, Mockus had also invested heavily in the development of the poorest neighborhoods by the introduction of new kindergartens, schools and medical facilities to these areas.

The decentralization was also a key of the started process of the lessening of the degree of city's fragmentation. In addition to the decentralization of the management of the city's budget, one of the most impressive transformations was the changing perception of the police force in the city, previously considered the most inefficient and corrupted in the country. Nowadays, the policemen form a part of the city's positive image and work hand by hand with the civil support groups in poor neighborhoods.

Formerly, many members of these civil support groups belonged to the city's notorious gangs. Today, for a modest fee from the city, these bogotanos are collaborating with the city in providing security and assistance in their neighborhoods.

Would a positive transformation, similar to the one that happened in Bogotá, possible in Cali? In order to answer this question, one has to examine the Bogota's success story from a human security perspective.

A crucial feature of the crisis in Cali is the already mentioned clash of interests of various actors representing distinctive sectors of the city. However, since human security is a tri-level phenomenon (individual, institutional, and structural/cultural), what is needed is not only to account in the urban policy for the concerns about the reactivation of the city's economy and the improvement of the city's infrastructure, but also to provide an answer to the needs of Cali's "common people" without suppressing their individual and group identities.

In both Bogotá and Cali it is possible to identify a number of distinctive, although often overlapping, individual and group identities of the urban population. These may include racial identity, identity based on one's political preferences, "institutionalized" identity linked to the city's stratification or self-identification as a supporter of a particular football club to mention a few. Unlike Cali, however, Bogotá has achieved a better human security because the city has managed to assure that different political, racial or cultural identities of people who live in the city foster a community of solidarity through mutual support and recognition. Today's Bogotá is a megacity, in which the views, activities and experiences of a wide spectrum of the city's population are made an integral part of political and public realms of the city.

Hence, in Cali, which in the past had witnessed such extreme forms of the rejection of other's identity as "human cleansing"²⁰ and which continues to be sharply divided along identity lines, human security would be possible only if a "we-feeling" is re-activated. There is no a ready recipe for how this can be achieved. However, there must be a clear understating that an urban environment is also socially and culturally constructed. This is a process in which the collective meaning of the city's progress is

²⁰In the 1980s and 1990s, several clandestine groups proclaimed the need for "human cleansing" in the city and started to murder beggars, homeless people and homosexuals. These groups are believed to be formed by retired policeman and paramilitary.

based on shared goals and the acceptance of common destiny.

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