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Is There a Culture of Violence in Colombia?

Peter Waldmann, University of Augsburg, Germany

During the past decade, economic factors have been given a prominent role in explaining political violence. The example of Colombia shows that economic factors can explain the ubiquitous nature of violence in that country only in the context of a socio-culturally rooted propensity to use violence. The study draws on relevant published research to identify evidence of a culture of violence in Colombia and discusses the structural conditions that allow or cause such a culture to arise. It is shown that violence in Colombia cannot be explained without taking into account cultural factors that are in turn dependent on other explanatory factors, including economic ones.

Introduction

In the discussion on the background causes of political violence, economic approaches currently predominate. Since François Jean and Jean-Christoph Rufin drew attention to “the economy of civil wars” in their anthology around ten years ago, there has been a steady stream of empirical studies and attempts to conceptualize this topic (Jean and Rufin 1999; Eppler 2002; Elwert 1997; Kurtenbach and Lock 2004). People have rediscovered the scheming warlord, who uses violence without hesitation for purposes of enrichment, have talked about the “privatization” of violence and the emergence of “markets of violence,” and have seen “shadow globalization” as a main driving force of armed conflicts. In line with this trend, the World Bank presented an analysis of civil wars that drew much attention, highlighting “greed” as their central cause (Collier and Hoeffler 2001; Collier et al. 2003). My intention is not to dispute the sense of and justification for all these efforts. In an increasingly secularized world, material motives for social acts obviously gain significance, both in general terms and specifically where the use of violence is concerned. Yet I wonder whether the pursuit of economic advantage and power is in itself a sufficient explanation for violent phenomena. Particularly when violent conflicts and crimes of violence become a perma-

nent characteristic of a society, there is much to suggest that they are anchored in that society’s culture (as previously Waldmann 1997). A case study, Colombia, will be used to test this hypothesis. There are at least two reasons to believe that Colombia is a suitable test case for proving the existence of a culture of violence:

- The first is the enduringly high level of violence in that country. Due not least to the vigorous security policy adopted by incumbent President Alvaro Uribe, the annual homicide rate has declined markedly since the early 1990s, when it peaked at more than 70 per 100,000 inhabitants. Nonetheless, it remains alarmingly high by international comparison, at more than 50 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. (See for example *Fundacion Seguridad y Democracia* 2004, 5 ff., 57 ff. For detailed data see Appendix.)
- The second reason for choosing Colombia is that the hypothesis that there is a culture of violence and the existence of other, especially material, motives for the use of coercion and violence are not necessarily mutually exclusive. All experts agree that the most recent upsurge of violence in Colombia, which began in the 1980s, has its origins largely in the narcotics trade (Richani 1997). Thus one could argue that if a culture of violence can be proven as an additional causal factor

even in Colombia – where the relevance of economic motives to the spread of violence is beyond doubt – this would strongly support the idea that such a culture of violence is an important factor in other violent conflicts where material interests are of lesser importance.

How should one approach a difficult subject like this, how to form an empirically substantiated judgment about the Colombian population's proneness to and acceptance of violence? To arrive at reliable results one would have to conduct a comparative analysis of opinion polls and carry out extensive analyses of the coverage of Colombian newspapers and magazines. The author has neither the time nor the resources for this. What he can offer is a few tentative ideas and conclusions that might help to open up this topic, which so far has been little explored. In doing so, in addition to his own observations and experience, he draws on a careful reading of selected works by (mostly Colombian) colleagues who have concerned themselves, in some cases for decades, with violence in Colombia and are therefore far better acquainted with the underlying norms, taboos, and unspoken assumptions than it is possible for an "outsider" to be.

When we speak of a culture of violence in a country, we must first clarify what we mean by the term. This essay therefore starts by considering whether and how the concept of a "culture of violence in society" can be defined and operationalized. There follows a discussion of some empirical findings that suggest that elements of a culture of violence do actually exist in Colombia. Thirdly, it looks in more detail at two extreme forms of violence, the massacre and the sicariato.¹ This is followed by an attempt to identify some structural conditions that are responsible for the emergence of a culture of violence. A brief comment assessing the importance of cultural factors within the context of other factors explaining violence rounds off the article.

It will become clear that while a culture of violence plays an important role as an underlying condition for currently

observable manifestations of violence, it is also a phenomenon that is itself dependent on historical and social factors.

On the Concept of a "Culture of Violence"

To put it simplistically, we can use a relatively broad concept of a culture of violence, or one that is reduced to its core content. In the broader sense, a culture of violence includes all socio-cultural structures and symbols that are connected with, produced by, and perpetuate violence. Obviously, in a country like Colombia with a history of civil wars and violence that goes back roughly 150 years, almost every aspect of life has been shaped and marked by this in one way or another. That is the principal theme of Daniel Pécaut, who asserts that violence has given rise to a peculiarly Colombian system of order (Pécaut 1987, especially part two). In addition to numerous illegal violent actors, counteracted in the sphere of legality by the state security forces and legal private security services, this system includes a highly complex network of coalitions and confrontations between these actors, along with never-ending negotiations of pacts and compromises (often of only limited duration from the outset or later broken). It also features a market order adulterated by pressure and coercion and a legal system devoid of its enforcement component, that is, essentially amputated. Pécaut says that violence and coercion are now fixed components of Colombia's social and political machinery and can no longer be simply removed from it (Pécaut 2001, 91). This means that, along with all social sub-systems, violence too is constantly replicated in that country.

This broad concept of a culture of violence is not very helpful because basically it amounts to the trivial assertion that violence and coercion, as constantly employed means of enforcement, have created their own social and institutional environment that supports them and keeps them alive. It appears more interesting and less tautological to ask whether specific factors in the collective consciousness, such as certain ideas of values and norms, contribute to-

¹ A sicario is a [hired] assassin. For a more detailed explanation of the term, see the section entitled "Extreme Forms of Violence: Massacres and Sicarios" below.

wards the persistence of violence; that is, whether cultural makeup in the narrower sense – understood as the general view of what is desirable, worthwhile, and normatively acceptable – is responsible for the difficulties of putting a stop to escalating violence.² If we focus on the problem in this way, we immediately have to add two brief explanations that will help us to come to a realistic conclusion.

First, “subcultures of violence” must be differentiated from a generally prevalent culture of violence in society. Violent subcultures that depart from the prevailing consensus on norms and values in society exist all over the world. However, they have come to attention especially in modern industrial societies such as the United States.³ These subcultures are usually confined to particular parts of the cities and are found among adolescents from the poorer classes with limited opportunities for social advancement and success. This leads them to adopt an attitude of resistance and protest against society in general, and especially against the middle and upper classes. The swift, spontaneous recourse to violence as a means of enforcement that is widespread in these subcultural formations is not least an expression of this protest and of distance from established society. The idea presupposes the existence of largely non-violent spaces, whence the description “subcultures” of violence that are by no means representative of the society as a whole.

However, it is a fundamentally different matter to put forward the hypothesis that a widespread acceptance of violent methods of conflict resolution exists in society as a whole. Unlike violence-oriented subcultures in which reference to coercion and violence often creates a sense of identity, modern societies as entities virtually never subscribe to a basic attitude that is pro-violence or promotes violence. There are two reasons for this. First, in modern nations it is assumed that the state has a monopoly on the exercise of violence. If in fact the state has failed to

monopolize violence, this circumstance is played down and presented as a temporary state of affairs that can be resolved. In this there are undertones of the not unjustified idea that for modern societies based on a division of functions, arbitrary exercise of violence by individuals or organized groups, unless a marginal phenomenon, might represent a stress factor with which society would be unable to cope for long. If the “war of every man against every man” in the Hobbesian sense were an obstacle to the functioning of even primitive societies, that war, if it persisted, would lead developed societies to the brink of collapse.

The second reason why the political and social representatives of modern societies will be reluctant to admit that unchecked exercise of violence by citizens is the order of the day in their countries has to do with the current international rules of political correctness. NGOs that specialize in monitoring human rights violations have now assumed a kind of international watchdog and control function. In these circumstances, if the representatives or the media of a country spoke too often about violence as a customary means of enforcement there, this would amount to voluntary character assassination of that nation. Their frankness would be punished, and the country in question and its representatives would be stigmatized and relegated to the margins of the international community.

My line of argument boils down to the conclusion that – unlike in the case of violent subcultures – where violent practices are accepted by society as a whole, we should not expect any open avowal or forthright justification of such practices. Instead, to track down such patterns of acceptance or a normatively approved disposition toward the use of violence we will have to look for indirect or covert indications. Often, the facts of violence speak eloquently for themselves. To find out something about how they are supported by and embedded in a culture, we are well ad-

² Culture in a comprehensive, general sense is to be understood as the “complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and practice and all other activities and habits that the individual has acquired as a member of the society” (see Nohlen 2005, p. 503). In this article,

a narrower concept of culture is preferred. This takes into consideration the prevailing ideas as to values and norms on the one hand and the generally accepted habitual modes of behavior that these give rise to on the other.

³ On the following see for example Albrecht 2003 and Kühnel 2003. The classical work on this topic is Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1969.

vised to pay less attention to statements that refer directly to coercion and violence, and more to exploring the conceptual and ideological settings in which they are made. There is in fact a general sociological argument supporting this more indirect approach. Sociological system theorists realized quite early that a society's central value premises and norm orientations are by no means continuously emphasized. Rather, they tend to be mentioned in passing precisely because they are unquestioned matters of course. Not by accident did Talcott Parsons, the best-known system theoretician of the 1950s and 1960s, describe the strategy for maintaining the social value base as "*latent pattern maintenance*" (Parsons 1951, 26 ff.; 1967, esp. 165). What he meant was that values have the greatest impact if they remain latent and are accepted unquestioningly and unspokenly. If they come under discussion or are explicitly asserted and avowed in a society, as a rule this is not proof of a society that is keenly aware of its values, but rather betrays insecurity and a crisis of values.

As regards the problem of a culture of violence in Colombian society in general, it would therefore probably be futile to seek clear, positive evidence of an affirmation of recourse to violence for whatsoever purpose. At best, one might expect tacit tolerance of coercive methods. To reiterate, indirect indicators around the topic of violence should be no less helpful than indicators referring directly to violence in providing evidence of this.

Indicators of a Culture of Violence

We can identify three types of indicators that point to a culture of violence. These are structural indicators that arise from the nature of violence in Colombia (frequency, intensity, etc.); mental indicators that suggest that there is a widespread propensity to violence; and a lack of taboos and prohibitive rules that would limit the use of violence.

Among the structural factors concerning violence itself we must mention first its ubiquity in this country. There

is hardly a single social sphere, geographical location, or group that has been spared it for any longer period. Be it in the cities or remote rural areas, the social microsphere of the family or the macrosphere of politics, the lower, middle, or upper class, the judiciary or any business sector, violence is everywhere. Certainly, it occurs in different escalatory sequences and forms. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that different forms of violence were based on different causal origins. On the contrary, if people resort to physical coercion in all conceivable situations for all possible ends, the obvious conclusion is that they must share an underlying disposition that gives rise to this standard approach. And how would such a pervasive underlying disposition come into being if not by way of attitudinal patterns that are ultimately culturally determined?⁴

Another circumstance suggests that there is a propensity to violence that is socioculturally anchored in the widest sense. This is the multiplicity of collective violent actors and their routinized modus operandi. Certainly, one encounters groups that take the law into their own hands and kill people at will in other Latin American countries, too. The striking thing about Colombia is that a host of organizations and groupings operate outside the law and employ coercion and violence in pursuit of their aims.⁵ In doing so, they generally operate in a way that is both cold-blooded and professional. This professionalism is partly the result of mutual imitation and learning processes. For example, it is obvious that the paramilitary forces learned mainly from the guerrilla organizations, which already had years of previous involvement in partisan struggle and dubious sources of funding before the paramilitaries came into existence. In any case, the development of a wide range of techniques of violence, whether based on personal experience or adopted from others, presupposes a sociocultural ambience that does not stigmatize the unauthorized use of violence but accepts it as one of several ways of attaining esteem and success.

4 The only alternative would be the anthropological hypothesis that "the Colombian" has an innate propensity to violence, which I consider to be nonsense. On this complex see Waldmann 1997, 143 f., 155 ff.

5 Ibid., 144 ff. See also Sánchez 2001, 10: "... what is remarkable in Colombia is the extraordinary diversity of violence."

As the final structural indicator for the probable existence of a culture of violence, the frequency and ease with which a transition from “simple,” rationally comprehensible acts of violence to violent excesses takes place in this country should be mentioned. Extreme forms of violence and their sociocultural significance are dealt with in a separate section below. Here it will suffice to note that a glaring discrepancy between the brutality of means and the modesty of the ends pursued, along with torture, the mutilation of corpses, and the like, are by no means exceptional in this country, but an everyday occurrence. Such excesses, which in individual cases can escalate into orgies of violence, are only possible in the context of a society in which the taboo limiting the unauthorized use of violence has not only been broken but, in some social groups and sectors, has been practically removed and replaced by a cult of annihilation of enemies.

The annihilation of enemies is the cue for moving on to the second complex of indicators, the way in which violence-promoting patterns of thinking and emotive concepts are anchored in the collective consciousness: first and foremost the friend-foe dichotomy that enjoys a central place in the Colombian realm of imagination, in all social classes. (On the emergence of the friend-foe culture in the nineteenth century see Krumwiede 1980, 87 ff.; Uribe 2004, 43 ff., 62 ff., 124 f. etc.). Originally associated with the rivalry between the two traditional political parties, conservatives and liberals, thinking in terms of friend and foe has now become a matter of course and permeates social discourse on all social planes, from micro to macro. There is no urban district, region, or village without a sworn enmity between two or three main actors, be they individuals, family clans, or organized groups, that shapes the life of society and compels the remaining actors to take sides and fall into line. Even in new settlements founded by war refugees far away from the central civil war action, the well-known pattern of division is reproduced almost automatically, resulting before long in

confrontations and moves by mutually hostile groups to disassociate themselves from one another.⁶

According to Gonzalo Sánchez, in Colombia, the historical continuity with which enmities are cultivated and war is repeatedly waged is on its own sufficient to identify the existence of a culture of violence. Massacres, abductions, the circulation of lists of victims before the actual act of violence is committed, and the key role played by informers are not new phenomena spawned by the most recent wave of violence but patterns of behavior and role models that can be traced back far into the past (Sánchez 2003, 36, 83ff.). What is remarkable, he says, is that these have survived almost unchanged through the transition from a primarily rural to a highly urbanized social structure and the associated radical transformation in values from a highly religious to a largely secularized society. This, he says, can only be explained by their being firmly anchored in Colombians’ cultural memory.

The friend-foe model as a pattern of perception is frequently overlaid by a quasi-moral discourse about honor and the need to retaliate, along the lines of “tit for tat.” Many young men are unable to forget that they lost their fathers in an arbitrary act of violence. Even if they do not know the killers, the recollection of this crime is stored in their memory and fills them with a dull, aimless hatred that can discharge at random. Killing someone because of an insult to one’s honor is not only considered legitimate but is essential in some groups and circles if one wishes to avoid jeopardizing one’s reputation (Uribe 1992, 54 ff.).

A further consequence of dividing the social environment into friends and enemies is the tendency to be intolerant and Manichean, to think in categories of black and white and to disdain nuances and compromises. On the one hand, this leads people to seek the solution to problems in direct confrontation with the opponent (or, if an impasse is reached, in direct negotiations with him), that is, to

⁶ For example Maria V. Uribe and Teófilo Vásquez give an impressive description of how fighting flared up between the supporters of different party factions and other groups in the Departamento Meta resettlement zone (Uribe and Vásquez 1995,

49 ff). The author knows from his own experience, too, that the various districts on the outskirts of Bogotá constitute a microcosm that faithfully reflects the conflict situation characteristic of the entire country.

reject outside mediation, whether by an arbitrator or in court. On the other, it casts a dubious light on all those who fail to clearly take the side of one party or the other. As a bandit interviewed by Victoria Uribe once said: “I’d like to have two hearts, one for the good people and one for the bad.” Asked who the “bad” were, he said, “Those who don’t attack their enemies. They are dangerous traitors.” (Ibid., 25) The traitor, the alleged or actual informer (“sapo”), and the collaborator are established figures in the realm of collective imagination, and they are directly connected with the rigid friend-foe pattern. The sinister aspect of the social labeling processes that these figures give rise to is that they proceed in a largely uncontrolled and arbitrary fashion, so that any outsider runs the risk of being given one of these labels that can then cost his or her life.

A second pattern of behavior that promotes the arbitrary use of violence is the macho cult that is widespread in Colombia and, closely linked to it, the tolerance of a ruthless individualism that shirks no means of enforcement. Uribe observed the version of this reverence for imperious, brutal individuals that is customary in rural regions when she visited a cemetery in southern Colombia. She found that special deference was paid to people who had gained reputations as cruel butchers and inhuman monsters during their lifetime (Uribe 2004, 16). Studies on the *Violencia* period, too, describe how gang and guerrilla leaders who committed repeated massacres not only inspired fear and terror among the peasants, but were also admired by them (Sánchez and Meertens 1983, 53).

The modern version of the self-confident macho who shows no scruples as he works his way up is the shrewd businessmen, or someone like Pablo Escobar who came from humble beginnings and succeeded in rising to become head of a famous and notorious drug cartel and became popular with the general public not least on account of his generous donations. In the end, it was not so much the use of violence balking at no human sacrifice that

sealed his fate, as the fact that he developed further-reaching ambitions and planned to culminate an essentially criminal career legally by standing for parliament.⁷

Generally, on perusing the literature in search of motives and attitudes that stimulate violence, one gains the impression that broad strata of Colombia society have little regard for either life or death (Uribe 1992, 94: «... lo que menos cuesta, desde luego, es la vida...»). Evidence is plentiful that people are very generous with the lives of others (and sometimes also with their own). Take, for example, the small sums for which sicarios are prepared to kill any stranger, the frequent massacres, the kidnappings that not infrequently end in the death of the kidnapped person, the fact that homicide is the most common cause of death among young men between the ages of 15 and 35, and much more besides. Yet this disregard for life somehow extends to death as well. Only that explains why in the *Violencia* period, the mutilation and desecration of corpses was nothing unusual, or why after massacres the dead were (and still are) often left lying on the ground or buried hastily in a pit, that is, without any kind of funeral rite. Now, when sicarios ordain that when they die there should be no lamentation and no funeral service, but that their friends and relations should mark the occasion by holding a party with music, dancing, and alcohol, this, too, reflects a banalization of their demise (Osorno 1993, 126f.). It is as if they were saying, “Don’t worry about my and your future, all that counts is the moment, the present, which should be made as eventful and pleasurable as possible.”

A third set of factors encouraging the spread of a culture of violence is the lack of restrictive taboos and informal sanctions against the unauthorized use of violence. This shortcoming is apparent in Colombia in the way the subject of violence is treated, both generally in public discussion and in relation to specific individuals.⁸ First, as far as general discussion, in public and especially in the mass

7 On the cult of the macho see Borda 1999, 20: „In Kolumbien blüht ein hemmungsloser Kult des starken Mannes...“ See also Restrepo 2001, 98: “There predominates in Colombia an extreme individualism. ... Each individual confronts society as if it were a menacing jungle.”

8 Restrepo 2001, 98: “... I do not believe that ... there exists a spontaneous and permanent inclination toward the exercise of force ... Instead, I believe that we share a ‘culture of social indifference toward violence.’”

media, is concerned, the absence of systematic efforts to criticize and delegitimize the illegal use of violence is striking. It may be possible to explain this as a reaction of fatigue to the never-ending series of hold-ups, kidnappings, and murders, and it may reflect a certain resignation and submission to the inevitable. Anyhow, the fact is that the media only adopt a critical tone in exceptional cases of particularly brutal or spectacular acts of violence. They are more preoccupied with and pay more attention to the conflict narrative than to the use of violence. They warn against possible further escalation and polarization, speak about an increased willingness to negotiate and compromise on all sides, and give expression to the general longing for peace by calling for an end to the hostilities. However, they hardly question the use of violence as such, which is the mode in which the conflict is played out.

This has two consequences. Since acts of violence are reported only in a routine tone, no public discussion takes place about the extent to which they can be described as fair or unfair, courageous or cowardly, legitimate or illegitimate. Whether certain minimum rules of engagement were adhered to, whether the violence is directed at innocents or combatants, whether people are attacked frontally or shot dead from behind, is all seemingly uninteresting (Sánchez 2003, 121). The only thing that matters is the outcome of the fighting. Who won, who is the victor in a zone, who must vacate it? The second consequence is that fixing attention on negotiations and a possible peace deal leads to past injustice being largely blanked out and played down (Ibid., 61). Somehow, the inflation of illegal acts of violence and the swift forgetting of them are two sides of the same coin. Where all hope is directed toward an early end to a violent conflict, little space is left for reviewing, analyzing, and expiating past crimes. Naturally, dispensing with punitive justice involves the risk that some time later the violent monster, which has been lulled by a peace deal but by no means stripped of its lethal claws, will reawaken and strike.

These general comments also apply to a large extent to the way the careers of individual violent actors are seen from the point of view of the general public. In this case, too, it is primarily the outcome that counts, the demonstrable success, and not the path, the dubious means, that led to

it. That someone ordered or committed a murder does not necessarily turn out to be a hindrance to a career in politics or elsewhere. True, criminal law says that murder must be punished, but the judiciary is corruptible. Even in the unlikely case that sentence were to be passed, the possibility of a pardon would still beckon (Rubio 1999, 33 ff., 199 ff.).

My deliberations so far can be summarized as follows: The unauthorized use of violence in Colombia is neither an emphasized right nor a generally decried outrage. Basically, there is no public discourse on violence. People are generally aware of it primarily because it is constantly, and not infrequently excessively, perpetrated. This in turn is only possible because of a widespread tacit tolerance and acceptance of the use of physical force to solve private and social problems, an attitude that one can certainly describe as a culture of violence. This is based on mental stereotypes and models that stimulate aggression and independent, unauthorized enforcement on the one hand and on the absence of taboos and informal norms that inhibit or limit violence on the other.

Extreme Forms of Violence: Massacres and Sicarios

The two forms of violence referred to in the heading differ from one another in their processes and the aims they serve. Massacres spread terror and are a form of show of strength, while the sicario, or contract killer, offers violence as a service for sale. However, as we will see, they have a number of features in common, the most important of which is that they constitute extreme forms and each carry a specific motive for violence to its extreme. They are included here on the assumption that extremes and excesses are neither alien to nor untypical of the societies involved, but definitely say something about their normal constitution and the attitudes of the average citizen.⁹ Here a brief outline of each of these two forms of violence, is followed by an exploration of the structural features they have in common and their significance in a wider social context.

Acts of violence in which more than four people die are termed massacres. (On the following see especially Uribe and Vásquez 1995; Uribe 1992; 2004.) The dead may be a family, a youth group, or an entire village. Sometimes the number of victims can run into hundreds. Back in the

days of La Violencia, Colombia was already the scene of numerous massacres committed by a wide range of groups. This horrendous practice was revived during the course of the most recent wave of violence. The death squads and paramilitaries in particular have a reputation for spreading fear and terror by means of selective massacres. Victoria Uribe counted a total of 1,230 massacres during the period from 1980 to 1998. She differentiates between massacres with economic, social, and political aims, but regardless of the specific aim the fact remains that massacres are first and foremost an extreme demonstration of strength by means of violence.

Massacres often follow a specific sequence of events (Uribe 2004, 88 ff.). They do not befall the unsuspecting victims out of the blue but announce themselves, or are announced, through vague rumors, threats, and forewarnings. The collective act of violence often takes place in the evening, when the inhabitants of a farm, several houses, or a village are surprised over supper or when engaging in some other communal activity. Not infrequently, the attackers wear uniform, and they are always heavily armed. In the countryside, the targeted group of houses is often surrounded so that no-one can escape. All the occupants are then herded into the central square and a list of names provided by informers is read out. The accused, usually men, are singled out and taken elsewhere. Shots and cries of pain signal to the remaining villagers that these men have been butchered. When the attackers have made off and the survivors make their way to the scene of the murderous events, what awaits them is a heap of lifeless, often badly disfigured, corpses. In an isolated settlement it can be days before neighbors notice that a massacre has taken place.

In addition to this “normal” pattern there are versions involving even greater cruelty. Sometimes, the butchers take their time and torture victims before killing them. While women and children are generally spared, there are instances of women being raped and children being killed

to prevent the possibility of revenge (when they grow up). During La Violencia it was customary to cut the dead into pieces like slaughtered animals or to mutilate and disfigure them in quasi-ceremonial fashion (Ibid., 72 ff.).

The violence of the sicarios, on the other hand, usually takes the form of assassinations of individuals rather than large-scale carnage. In cities, victims are generally attacked with firearms from the back of a motorcycle. (On this and the following see Osorno 1993; Salazar 1990; Sánchez 2001, 7 ff. On the phenomenon of criminal juvenile gangs in Central America see Peetz 2004.) The killer, riding behind the driver, aims for the victim’s head because he can only be sure of receiving his money if the victim dies an instant death. Sicarios are young men between the ages of 15 and 25 – working in groups – who specialize in earning their money from contract killings. The institution of contract killing originated in Medellín but has now spread to most Colombian cities. Yet the gangs of young men who actually perform the violent business are only the tools of people behind the scenes who organize and coordinate the entire action. These may be individuals, but often an agency is behind the attacks. These agencies – which are disguised to a greater or lesser degree depending on their geographical location and social affiliation – act as mediators between the “customers” and the sicarios who perform their murderous wishes. They arrange the assassination contract, fix the fee (usually payable in advance) in line with the anticipated difficulties (for instance, if someone is heavily guarded), and identify among the gangs of young killers which is best suited to undertake the violent transaction in question.

Every sicario’s dream is to be hired for a “mega attack” that would allow him and his family to live without worries about the future. Yet his wages are only a fraction of the sum paid for the contract killing. The lion’s share goes to middlemen and people behind the scenes who prepare the assassination and ensure its smooth execution. Al-

⁹ Three arguments support this hypothesis. First, those who commit the excesses are not social deviants but represent an average type, at least in certain social groups and classes. Second, they do not act in isolation but, as will be seen, are embed-

ded in a wider context of social planning and organization. Third and last, the wider public’s calm reaction to the crimes enables them to be, if not approved, at least ultimately accepted.

though sicarios are prepared to commit any violent act for money, one cannot describe them and the subculture they form as materialistic in the narrow sense. This subculture includes its own language, a love of certain types of film and rock music, dance, narcotics consumption, black humor, and a fundamentally macho attitude featuring a cult of weapons and motorcycles. Sicarios do not reject loyalties and ties out of hand. They venerate the Virgin Mary and often idolize their own mothers. They also make firm friends. Their philosophy of life combines an antibourgeois hedonism with an absolute fearlessness of death in any form.

Though they differ widely in conduct and aims, massacres and sicario killings share several defining characteristics:

- Both are organized undertakings that presuppose a high degree of planning, preparation, and coordinated action. The initiative of an individual or a handful of people does not usually suffice. Rather, the cooperation of a larger group, a team, is required to carry out operations of this kind.
- This is also reflected in the cold-bloodedness and professionalism with which victims are executed. Pleas for quarter or mercy fall on deaf ears. At most they trigger scornful incomprehension. This indicates that the actual act of killing is preceded by a mental dehumanization of the victims, who before they are killed are no longer counted as human. (Uribe (2004, 75) particularly emphasizes this aspect.)
- Thus the perpetrators and the people behind them scorn all the Western world's humanitarian criteria. They apparently live in an enclave that has abandoned the shared values of the civilized world, one where the fundamental values of respect for physical integrity of others, compassion, and elementary social solidarity have been suspended.

Disregard for the life of others is also reflected in the structure of the acts of violence as experienced by the victims. Two features are particularly striking:

- The first is the unpredictable and arbitrary way in which the calamity befalls the victims. They are left no

time to prepare themselves either inwardly or outwardly for their imminent fate. There is no question of a humane death. What is more, their corpses are often subjected to additional maltreatment.

- Second, the means are often glaringly disproportionate to the ends.¹⁰ This is especially evident in the case of massacres, where the mere suspicion that a social group or village has cooperated with the opposing side suffices to gun down indiscriminately all inhabitants of a particular settlement. In the case of the sicariato, the disproportion is based on the fact that human life has become a mere marketable commodity. Everyone has his or her price. The possibility of buying the death of any chosen person has considerably expanded the circle of potential initiators of violence. If someone is out to kill another person, he or she no longer has to overcome the inhibitions that prevent most people from committing acts of violence themselves. He or she just has to engage a routine killer who does not even require an explanation of the motive for the murderous plan.

Both the massacre and the setting up of assassination agencies are extreme cases of the use of violence for specific purposes, in the former case to demonstrate and assert power, in the latter to secure material gain. At the same time, however, they transcend these ends, undermining them in the process. What lesson is the general population of a province or region meant to learn when entire villages are extinguished on the pretext of complicity with one of the warring camps? And what is the appropriate price for an act of violence aimed at gunning down an unsuspecting person from behind on the street? In many cases, violence has obviously become detached from its purpose and has become an end in itself. Massacres are for the most part bloody ritual sacrifices without any further-reaching symbolic value, in which the butchers celebrate themselves and their gruesome deeds.¹¹ The same goes for the parties that a gang of sicarios holds to mark the completion of a "successful," well paid contract killing. Here, too, only superficial homage is paid to life and its pleasures, while the underlying tone is of a death cult and a vague awareness of their own mortality.

¹⁰ Sánchez (2003, 55) talks in this connection about the triumph of means over ends («... los métodos se imponen sobre los objetivos»).

The final shared feature of massacres and paid contract killings is the perpetrator structure. In both cases, the killers are mainly young men from the lower class aged between fifteen and thirty who have trouble finding a regular job or simply prefer to earn a relatively easy living from the business of violence. However, this common feature should not be overestimated. After all, the young men in each case are only the last link in a chain of middlemen and sponsors, some of whom are from completely different social strata. The organized nature of both extreme forms of violence means that each is integrated into extensive social networks. Therefore it is not enough to hold the “militia soldiers” and paid “killers” who actually carry out the violent work primarily responsible for inhuman acts of violence. They are only the most visible representatives of a multitude of different groups and organizations that support, provide cover for, and in some cases also finance these practices because they profit from them in one way or another.

A much more difficult question is whether and to what extent the wider public – the man on the street and the media – approves of these excessive forms of violence. Why is there no public denunciation of assassination agencies, when the location of their headquarters is common knowledge? Why do attempts by the paramilitaries, who are widely known to be responsible for most massacres, to become reputable and gain recognition as a political force, not encounter more protest?¹² These questions are difficult to answer. On the one hand, popular sayings such as «por algo sera» (“it will be for something,” in other words, “he won’t have been killed for nothing”) and «el que la debe la paga» (“he who has a debt pays it”) point to a very wide general tolerance of even gruesome and apparently unjust acts of violence. On the other hand, Colombia has always had groups of people who insist on compliance with international humanitarian law, and victims’ associations have repeatedly called for the guilty to be punished. However, in a general atmosphere of mistrust and intimidation, expectations as regards the population’s willingness to mobi-

lize and protest should not be set too high. To some extent, public opinion probably fluctuates depending on the events and the political constellation. Spectacular murders or a rash of cynical massacres provoke outrage and focus people’s wrath on the perpetrators. However, if the latter signal willingness to compromise and signs emerge of a possible end to the conflict, the majority of people are prepared to brush aside past crimes against humanity in order to reach an amicable, peaceful solution.

Looking for an Explanation

Much consideration has been given to the causes of violence and an eventual culture of violence in Colombia, and much has been written. I will therefore confine myself here to giving a brief account of the most important explanatory factors, disregarding cultural variables in order to avoid the trap of a tautological circular argument.

Generally, the lack of a state monopoly of violence in Colombia counts as one of the main reasons for violence running out of hand.¹³ Some say that the state relinquished this monopoly only in recent times. However, this overlooks the fact that ever since the state of Colombia was founded, the country’s political elites have not only been unable to secure for it the sole power of disposal over physical means of force, but have not even tried in earnest to enforce this monopoly. The scope of the central state enforcement and security apparatus has remained decidedly modest. Evidently, the state’s leaders shunned the cost of maintaining stronger armed forces, preferring instead to wage conflicts using ad hoc militias recruited on a voluntary basis (Krumwiede 1980, 79 ff). Looking at earlier European history, we see that elimination contests between regional princes generally led to an increasing concentration of military and political power, until all dominion was concentrated in a single institution, the state. In contrast, regional conflicts in Colombia, of which there were a good number, always ended in an arrangement, a compromise, that left existing decentralized structures in-

¹¹ Uribe (2004 21), too, denies that massacres have any symbolic significance.

¹² The paramilitaries, for their part, complain that the state that created and supported them suddenly wants nothing more to do with them.

«Y ahora dirán que el papá no va a responder por el muchachito – les va a tocar ver que hacen con el hijo de Herman Moster que crearon.» *El Tiempo*, May 16, 2004, 6. On the “reintegration” of the paramilitaries see Catedra Konrad Adenauer de Comunicación y Democracia 2004.

¹³ Kurtenbach (1999, esp. 396 f.) states that the Colombian state has secured a monopoly neither on violence nor on taxes. See also Waldmann 1997, 145 f., 149 f.

tact. It is also noticeable that – unlike the sixteenth-century religious wars in Europe – the nineteenth-century civil wars in Colombia, which at least in terms of their rhetoric were certainly comparable with the former, produced no impartial force obligated only to the good of the state and the common good.¹⁴ Instead, they led to a perpetuation and consolidation of the friend-foe dichotomy until it finally became the shared mental property of all social classes. To summarize, the Colombian state is certainly present in public consciousness as an intellectual and physical entity, but it has remained a weak state incapable of enforcing the laws it passes and incapable of disciplining its own officials and citizens. Though it may be able to establish a certain degree of public order, its power is insufficient to guarantee public security, which as Hobbes said is the most important good for everyone.

The main initiative within Colombia's political system still lies with the two traditional political parties, Conservatives and Liberals. Generally speaking, the dominant axis of conflict in this country is "horizontal" (conflict between political parties, between armed actors such as guerrilla organizations and paramilitary associations, etc.) as opposed to the "vertical" relations of power between the state and its citizens. Some interesting analyses of the different implications of horizontal, "symmetrical" violent conflicts and vertical, "asymmetrical" conflict constellations have been published recently. Iván Orozco in particular has given much consideration to this topic (Sánchez 2003, 58 ff; Orozco Abad 2005¹⁵). He writes that the circumstances are significantly clearer in the case of vertical abuse of power, vertical "barbarisms" as he puts it, of the kind customarily perpetrated by authoritarian or totalitarian states, than in the case of "barbarisms" committed in the context of horizontal conflicts, for instance during civil wars. This applies first to the extent of the groups involved in the misuse of violence, which in the case of violent excesses committed by the state tends to be limited, secondly to role differentiation between perpetrator and victim, which

in this case are clearly separated, and thirdly to the duration of violent processes of this kind, which are temporally limited. In the case of horizontal, "symmetrical" violent conflicts, everything is much more complicated. First, they engender greater mobilization, i. e. broader sections of the population become involved in them in one way or another. Where armed confrontations are of longer duration, this in turn makes it difficult to draw a clear separating line between "perpetrators" and "victims," because an individual can alternate between the two roles depending on the conflict constellation and power relations. Finally, it is difficult to bring civil-war-like conflicts to a definitive conclusion. If those who have committed serious human rights violations during the fighting face the threat of criminal proceedings after its cessation, in case of doubt they will prefer to carry on fighting. Yet if they are granted an amnesty the misuse of violence goes apparently unpunished and there is the risk of violence flaring up again at the first opportunity. Orozco summarizes the dilemma facing responsible statesmen and peacemakers in civil wars or civil-war-like situations in terms of the need to make a twofold transition (Ibid., 27).¹⁶ The dilemma is how to achieve peace on the one hand while on the other effecting the transition from a state of lawlessness and authoritarianism to a democracy under the rule of law. In any case, Orozco's studies show that the dynamics of violence emanating from the horizontal conflict constellations characteristic of Colombia are much harder to check and "rein in" than asymmetrical, vertical "barbarisms."

A third complex of causes that has recently escalated the violence and fostered a generalization of the culture of violence is the narcotics trade. Most experts agree that the production of and trade in narcotics has broken the long-standing tie between violence and party politics, leading to a situation where violence has penetrated all areas of life as a means of power and enforcement (Pécaut 2001, 103 ff.; Kurtenbach 1999, 387 ff. with reasons). In other words, the drugs trade has turned violence into something banal

¹⁴ The state, and the state security forces, were always involved, and were often especially brutal. On the role of the police and the army during La Violencia see Sánchez and Meertens 1983, 75. For the development of the army in general see Gilhodes 1986.

¹⁵ The subsequent comments refer primarily to the first chapter of the book, "La Barbarie Horizontal," which the author saw first as a manuscript in English.

¹⁶ Orozco's line of thought is only very roughly outlined here. The author does not claim to have done justice to the complexity of his arguments.

and commonplace. This happened for a variety of reasons, among others because a rare, coveted commodity like cocaine inevitably incites competition for its possession and because the profit that this lucrative trade yields makes it easy to recruit young men who definitely prefer easy work with a weapon to a monotonous, badly paid job in some other business. Probably the most important structural reason is that there are no binding informal rules governing dealings between leading figures in the drugs trade, so there is no basis for mutual trust. This forces each to acquire a private army as a potential threat in order to ensure that agreements are observed.

I will tentatively mention a fourth possible complex of reasons for violence and a culture of violence in Colombia. This is the continuing marked tension between the upper and the lower class, combined with an inadequately developed middle class and urban middle-class culture.¹⁷ In doing so, my starting assumption is that in general – and especially in rural areas where the state is hardly present – both the big landowning class and the class of small farmers and agricultural laborers share a predominantly instrumental, pragmatic understanding of violence. Colombia's agrarian history has seen numerous violent confrontations between, and within, these classes in which legal considerations certainly carried weight but the availability of means of coercion determined the ultimate outcome (Le Grand 1986). In Latin America in general, consistent condemnation of violence and its banishment from public life did not come about until urbanization processes established the urban lifestyle, and in many cases this applied only in the cities for a long time.¹⁸ Within the cities, in turn, it was primarily the middle classes who, due to their specific resources (they had educational goods and professional knowledge at their disposal, but little expertise in the use of physical force), their socialization and their general orientation, had the greatest interest in the emergence of non-violent spaces governed by the rule of law.

The author suspects that in Colombia this kind of genuinely urban ambience that rolls back violence to the margins emerged only at a relatively late stage, and never to its full extent. There is no lack of testimony to art and culture in the country's major cities, from impressive works of architecture to a flourishing publishing industry and numerous universities, of which not a few are of an excellent standard. However, one cannot avoid the impression that many lower class migrants from the countryside have only completed the urbanization process half-heartedly and that their mentality, and this also applies to other classes, has remained rural and parochial in some important respects. Class struggles in the city are still fought in a rough, physical manner and there is hardly any question of their being switched to a more symbolic plane. As yet, no typically urban middle-class political party exists. Populist revolutions, a typically urban phenomenon throughout Latin America, have never taken place. The traditional parties – born in a predominantly rural context – along with their clientelist appendages still have the say.

The urbanization process the country has undergone in recent decades has not actually suppressed violence as a means of conflict resolution, but has only changed its appearance. It is no longer openly on show and no longer employed visibly as a means of domination and strength. Nobody in the central districts of the big cities disputes the right of the state and local authorities to keep the public peace and general order. Yet violent plots are still hatched covertly in back rooms. In the cities people are killed or kidnapped on a daily basis, while in areas on the urban periphery the law of the jungle prevails in any case. Violence has become more anonymous and selective, but whether it has declined during the course of the urbanization and modernization process is an open question that should probably be answered in the negative.

This article has shown that the incidence of violence in Colombia cannot be comprehended without understanding the existence of a culture of violence as expressed in high

¹⁷ It should be noted that although there is a large degree of social inequality as measured by the Gini index, for example, it does not exceed the customary dimensions in other Latin American countries (Bulmer-Thomas 2003, 11).

¹⁸ The author is thinking primarily of the Cono Sur, of Chile and Argentina for instance.

homicide rates, the existence of institutionalized violent actors, the prevalence of certain norms such as those of the macho and of revenge, and the absence of other norms, taboos, and prohibitive rules. The ubiquity of violence is not plausible unless a propensity to violence is socioculturally anchored. In this respect, the hypothesis that a culture of violence exists is helpful in explaining conditions in Colombia, and the culture of violence can be seen as a causal factor. Nonetheless, this is not to assert that when seeking explanations one can stop at culture. For culture itself is determined by historical and contemporary factors: by the lack of a state monopoly of violence, by the dominance of horizontal axes of conflict, by the rules of the narcotics trade (which creates strong economic incentives for excessive use of violence), and by the class structure of Colombian society, which is characterized by class tensions combined with a weakly developed urban middle class. In this respect, the culture of violence in turn is only a dependent variable that requires explanation. Cause and effect interact and interweave. Since the real practice of violence as perceived by social actors shapes social expectations of behavior, influences definitions of cost and risk, etc., it sets cultural parameters. And in this cultural environment violence is more likely to be used.

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Appendix: Homicide Statistics in Colombia and South America

Colombia: Murders and homicides (1997–2002)

Year	Total number	Number per 100,000 inhabitants	Of these, absolute numbers attributable to political conflict	Political murders as a proportion of the total number (%)
1997	25,379	63	3,730	14.7
1998	23,096	56	3,633	15.7
1999	24,358	59	4,003	16.4
2000	26,540	63	6,987	26.3
2001	27,841	65	7,637	27.4
2002	28,780	66	4,625	21.4

Source: Pizarro Leon Gómez 2004

Crude rates of homicide in the Americas (per 100,000)

Country	Last available year between 1988 and 1995	Last available year between 1994 and 1997
Argentina	4.2	4.1
Brazil*	17.8	23.5
Canada	2.1	1.6
Colombia*†	76.3	73.3
Chile	3.0	3.1
Costa Rica	3.7	5.3
Cuba	7.3	6.6
Ecuador*	12.6	12.3
El Salvador*	39.9	40.9
United States*	10.1	8.2
Honduras	not available	not available
Guatemala*	25.3	2.2
Guyana	not available	11.0
Jamaica	1.8	1.3
Mexico*	17.6	15.1
Nicaragua	6.1	6.4
Panama	9.7	12.7
Paraguay	9.3	11.6
Peru	2.9	not available
Puerto Rico*	23.2	22.4
Dominican Republic	not available	12.2
Uruguay	4.3	4.4
Trinidad and Tobago*	8.0	11.1
Venezuela*	11.2	13.5
Average*	14.7	14.7

* Rates higher than 10 per 100,000 people are considered high and are printed in bold.

† Country with the highest rates in the Americas.

Source: Bergquist et al. 2001, 276.

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