

Meanings and Practices of Non-violence

Lessons learned in the midst of the urban war in Comuna 13, Medellín

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01. The name Comuna, or 'district' in English, is defined as an administrative unit of a middle or large sized city, in which determined sectors or neighborhoods are grouped.

02. In 2011 and 2012, District 13 appeared in the top 3 districts most affected by these crimes, according to the source Medellín How Are We Doing www.delincomovamos.org/seguridad-yconvivencia (Consulted 27th of June 2014)

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Artist Marlon, "Dj Maya", belonging to the group Kolacho in District 13, Medellín.
Photo:
Silvia Matuk

In Medellín, Colombia, some districts¹ and neighbourhoods have become known throughout the city because of the massive occurrence of violence and its actors who exercise control over the territories. This is the case in Comuna 13, known as San Javier. While almost unknown before 2000, it gained international attention around the year 2002, because of the daily confrontations between illegal armed groups and governmental security forces. Its inhabitants remember this period under the label "the true war". In the years following the war, the homicides, threats, and forced displacement of the territory's population² did not stop.

Today, despite the continued presence of illegal armed groups in the territory violence has not stopped completely. However, at the same time Comuna 13 has also turned into a local and national reference point for active non-violence; multiple memorial initiatives have been realized and the community has likewise achieved a form of resistance against social exclusion and the war. Now, the district's most visible personalities are no longer the ones which cause trouble and not every young person is automatically suspected to belong to one of the gangs who are responsible for the majority of homicides. The population, particularly the direct and indirect victims, has developed alternative concepts of life in the Comuna; they run their own media which publicly exposes alternative values and practices in response to the war and authoritarian ruling.

Even in the most intense moments of confrontation between armed actors (in the period 2000-2002), Comuna 13's population responded peacefully to the conflict's authoritarianism and control over life and death. These actions are little known by the public; they were not in the focus of the reporters' cameras, nor were they covered in the interviews diffused through the media day by day.

This paper exposes a collection of non-violent initiatives and practices, memories of the conflict's suffering and social exclusion, and lessons

learned. These all are related to space and are the basis for the re-appropriation of the meaning of neighbourhood that the war had stolen. Places that had previously carried the image of terror and death are gaining a new meaning through the reflection of the past and the construction of a culture of peace.

Past models

Different interdisciplinary studies³ have been dedicated to the peace initiatives in Medellín's Comuna 13. These initiatives show how the population, in creative and at times dangerous ways, managed to recuperate and intervene in said spaces. The report on forced displacement in Comuna 13, recalls:

*"in the face of violence and the control of social life by the militias, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the public forces, Comuna 13's residents responded both directly and indirectly with actions of creative adaptation, with negotiation, and resistance".*⁴

Through artistic and recreational practice, through sports, and marches, the population declared "no to violence"; they formed social networks, organizations, and initiatives that allowed new forms of relationships, and avoided the involvement of children and young people in the dynamics of gang warfare. Togetherness was an antidote against fear. These initiatives, at times spectacular and dangerous, generated a feeling of "being together." "Togetherness" continues to work in order to facilitate the construction of a future free from fear.⁵ It is based on a shared trajectory of the population, which invaded the high slopes at the beginning of the 1980's, and, in a process that took years, made them habitable. This experience, which enjoyed the support of local and international organizations, played an important role in the containment of the war and taught lessons of non-violence and defence of human rights and freedoms.

"The violence lived by the community for a prolonged time, caused a reconfiguration of identity, favoured by processes of reflection on suffering. Non-violent discourses, practices, and cultural transformation were supported, which indicates [that] 'the population's responses to situations of violence and subjugation [did] not stop at mere survival or in passive acceptance'" (Sánchez, 2011:205).

Comuna 13: emblematic case of urban war

In Colombia, the name "Comuna 13 of Medellín" was and still is almost synonymous with urban warfare. It stands for a territory where bandits held hegemonic power for over a decade, the most representative being the People's Armed Commandos (CAP). Later it became the battlefield in a dispute between CAP and the guerrilla, and their joint confrontation with the paramilitary incursion (1998-2002).

Subsequently, Comuna 13 was the epicentre of large-scale armed interventions by the paramilitaries, who worked hand in hand with the police and the army to gain control over this Comuna. In 2002, eleven military

03.

See: Angarita Canas (2008), Nieto (2009) 38-59. Sánchez et al 2011, Luz Amparo, Villa, Marta, Inés, Riaño, Pilar (reporters). 2011.

04.

The report on forced displacement in District 13, was published by the National Centre of Historic Memory (Sánchez, 2011:205)

05.

Throughout the work "The Fear in the West", Jean De-lumeau, presents the fears and the social responses that range from spontaneous defensive riots to organized workers' movements.

operations were carried out. The biggest offensive action against the insurgency was the “Operation Orion”, which became famous for having been the biggest military action ever in an urban territory in Colombia. It involved 1,500 soldiers; more than 150 raids were carried out; 355 people were captured, of which 82 were charged. The use of large range weapons, tanks, and fight helicopters created a climate of terror and distress amongst the population, which lost all their personal belongings once they fled and their homes were destroyed.

“The militias and guerrillas maintained positions in trenches constructed around 20 residences, abandoned by the civilian population... In the midst of the confrontations one civilian was killed; 38 more were injured and 8 ‘disappeared’ after being caught by the National Army, paramilitaries, and members of the Technical Investigative Body (CTI)” (Sánchez, 2011 80-81).

The period following Operation Orion (2004-2008), was one of silent action. The paramilitaries repositioned themselves without the need to use firearms, resorting to new and more discrete techniques of victimization such as forced displacement.



Administratively, Comuna 13 is conformed of 19 neighbourhoods. It shelters older poor neighbourhoods on squatted land next to private residences. Since the 1990s, the Comuna was flooded by displaced people fleeing the armed conflict in rural areas. At the same time, Comuna 13 was the destination with the highest rate of intra-urban displacement of residents forced to flee other parts of the city.



Left:
Bases occupied
by police guards
and improvised
military barracks
in the early 2000s

Right:
Places known for
frequent killings,
torture and the
disappearance of
people

Maps by Andrés
Medina

"The successive disputes for territories and sovereignties are also extending over the civil population, which, along with territory, has become the main and central object of the war. This develops accordingly, as a situation from which the alternating actors impose conflicting orders on the city (either against the state or as a 'para-state')... In this way, the imposition of said orders permits the demarcation of micro-territories and the imposition of an authoritarian (and in many cases totalitarian) control over all facets of the population's everyday life. [This is achieved] through a confuse system of codes and penalizations in which personal and collective freedoms are suspended and replaces by the unpredictable mood ... and the requirements of the group controlling the respective zone." (Nieto, 2009: 44-45).

It is not difficult to imagine the risks that the population underwent while living in the territory under the control of various armed actors at the same time. Even just giving in would not deliver safety in return. In a situation where one does not have anything left to loose, the population created multiple forms of resistance in defence of their rights, the recovery of public spaces, and the conservation of social fabric. In addition, especially since 2003, the uselessness of war, and permanent threat to life and belongings, had become evident to everyone. Angarita's study, previously referenced, reflects:

"Those who decide to sign on to the immediate benefits of the conflict are faced with an ethical ambiguity that consists in tolerating or supporting acts such as the 'social cleansing', or ridicule through the beating of abusive men, unfaithful women, or youth gone astray, carried out by the delinquents that made up the Comuna's first gangs" (Angarita, P., 2007: 266).

Community responses to the war in the barrios

The testimonies of collective response to violence in Comuna 13, presented below, stretch across different periods; some have been realized only once and others are repeated regularly, as is the case with the

memorial weeks or festivals that are convened annually. Some of the initiatives are ongoing while others are a new cooperation between institution and recently created networks. However, the unifying element is the focus and principle of non-violence in Comuna 13, like the one expressed in the following quotation:

“Create a local political culture tied to the protection of life, that confronts those who are violent and the armed conflict and that will democratize public spaces (the streets, parks, alleys, stairways), recovering them for public use and the free movement of all of the population. One adopts the principle of non-violence through a supporting attitude, conscientious objection, and avoidance of collaboration with those who are armed. It implies the autonomy of community action, the promotion of the ethic values of co-existence and respect for differences” (Alzate, 2012:438).

Over several decades, a shift in focus can be observed: in the beginning, physical accommodation and the ability to make the zone more habitable was the dominating common interest. Most of the Comuna was officially classified as inhabitable high risk and zone and not for residential use (in the 1980s and 1990s). After that, especially in the new millennium, the emphasis shifted to social values, like inclusion and democratization of the territory.

Immediate responses: collective action against violence in the midst of the war

In the most intense moments of the war, community responses were directed to negotiating a ceasefire between the armed groups in order to save lives. The best-known case was the “White Handkerchief March” which arose spontaneously during the military’s Operation Mariscal, on the 21st of May, 2002.

“On this occasion a multitude of people waved white handkerchiefs from their windows or went out to the street waving them to demand a ceasefire. The response was triggered by the impossibility to help relatives or neighbours, wounded in the fights, because of ongoing crossfire. When two civilians were hurt and no one was able to help them, a girl stopped in the street waving a white sheet and asking that the gunfire stopped... Many of the inhabitants’ stories coincide in reporting that right after that incident a mass movement of people started waving white sheets from their windows or out in the street” (Sánchez, 2011:209-210).

The collective street presence was the only way to impress and confuse the armed groups that were fighting. “Togetherness”, a human response to fear—guided the community’s heroic action in favour of life and solidarity. In Comuna 13, diverse manifestations of that kind occurred, to protest against confinement, death, the denial of collective life (resulting from the armed actors’ control), and, as in the case described above, actions to save the lives of wounded neighbours.

The occupation and collective use of public spaces at night was another strategy to keep the gangs away, at least temporarily. Some of these

actions were associated with sports like football matches, which proved to be effective in keeping the control over public space in the hands of residents. Furthermore, such activities served as a pretext for nocturnal movement, meetings, and medical assistance to wounded community members.

“In the 13, violence will not destroy us”

In the face of large scale military operations, a coordinated collective action developed under the slogan “In the 13, violence will not destroy us.” This action was started by a hip hop group, and can be described as non-violence activism and was a spontaneous and communicative counter action to confront the Comuna 13’s military operations. ‘Operation Elite Hip Hop’ was carried out 4 months after the Operation Mariscal and 24 days before Operation Orion. Subsequently, after 2004, the festival took the name Revolution without Deaths, and continues to be celebrated regularly today.

This action and other similar actions call for active nonviolence, denouncing crime and the reclamation of justice through marches, sit-ins, performances, festivals, and a range of other symbolic acts.

Long term responses: Nonviolent meanings and practices for cultural transformation.

Since 2003, barrio leaders and organizations have joined forces in promotion of community initiatives for local development. Since 2010, nine organizations have been known for their more or less continuous activities over those years.

“They prepare peace initiatives with the objective of reconstructing social relationships in the neighbourhood and the quality of everyday life. Most of them display a cultural and artistic orientation (‘the clean façade’) and the promoters tend to be young people from the neighbourhood” (Sánchez, 2011:217).

These initiatives are started by women or by men, whereby the women-led movements more specifically tend to address topics of resistance and the memory around injustice and suffering. In 2010, the following collective initiatives emerged in Comuna 13: “Cooperative Games for Non-Violence;” Jughandi, Corpades, “Caravan for Life”, “Making dreams come true”, “Salt and Light Corporation”, “Express Art Cultural Network”, “Association of Women of Independence –AMI”, “Elite Hip Hop” and “We are Batá”. Further groups have evolved since then. Examples include the following:

The 13 Talks (Cuenta la 13)⁶: Initiated in 2009 and led by Comuna 13’s young people, this was a self-administered website, social network, and radio program where children, young people, and women could take ownership of digital narratives to tell⁷ stories using photos, audio, text, and videos, about the “day to day life” of the conflict. The reporting community – accompanied by journalists- documented their frequently difficult reality, culture, acts of resistance, and bravery, as

06. www.cuentala13.org

07. In order to recover memory and denounce the conflict, different forms of media have been used including the website www.cuentala13.org, the live radio program on www.morada.co, and social networks such as Twitter (@cuentala13) Flickr, YouTube and Facebook (which use the same name).



well as the daily violence which they were subjected to by the drug tracking gangs, paramilitaries, and the security forces. In the interviews done over the years, Comuna 13's direct and indirect victims repeatedly identified stigmatization as a collective harm caused in part by the media's portrayal. After some years, they founded and consolidated collectives such as "The 13 Talks", dedicated to telling their own versions of what has happened: essentially, an insider's narrative.

*Left:
Casa Kolacho
Group. Photo:
Kosta Mathéy*

*Right:
We are Bata
Corporation /
Corporación Son
Bata.*

For a long time this group is committed to prevent the forced recruitment of children or young people by gangs and do so through providing alternative perspectives through schools for artistic training. Similar groups include, among others, the collectives: Kolacho House, We are Bata Corporation, and the Culture is Art Corporation.

Kolacho House (Casa Kolacho) is a Comuna 13 youth collective. It was initiated in 2013 as a way of keeping the memory of Héctor Enrique Pacheco Marmolejo -KOLACHO- alive. Kolacho was a member of the hip hop group C15 and was assassinated in 2009 near his residence. It is for this reason that these young people come together around art as a strategy for memory, using music and graffiti as tools to claim their rights, denounce violence, and the generate spaces for the training of young women and men. In Comuna 13, the school, Hip Hop Kolacho, and the graffiti-tour, (a series of graffiti on the Comuna's walls that

*Posters of the
group Cuenta la 13*



demonstrate the feelings of young people) serve to express their commitment to non-violence and their fight for social and cultural rights, as well as for the memory of the conflict's victims.

We are Bata Corporation, (Corporación Son Bata): Operating for more than ten years now, the corporation became particularly known in 2010, because of the assassination of one of its members. The group engages in community art and culture programs; works against the recruitment of children and young people by armed groups; and against social or racial exclusion – which is especially experienced by the Afro-Colombian community, which has mostly been displaced from the coastal region in result of the armed conflict there.

Culture is Art Corporation (Corporación Culturizzate) was initiated in 2009 by a group of art professionals. The offer artistic education aimed at the creation of a new mentality and respect for human beings. The group also aims towards the construction of a historic memory and artistic training from a non-violence focus.

The political dimension of suffering- memory and resistance

State led security efforts tend to mostly be concerned with detecting and catching the perpetrator of a criminal or violent act, and maybe deliver him or her to the system of justice. They do not perceive it their mandate to take care of the victim, who is often left on his/her own, with bodily or psychological injuries, many times for years. In Comuna 13, several victims' support organizations, sometimes self-help initiatives, fill that gap as much as possible. They directly offer counselling to victims, share their pain and loss and help individuals to reconfigure their identities.

The following initiatives are mostly led by women and young people who collectively have reflected on their suffering, passing from memory to reflection and eventually claiming their rights. They have generated physical and mental spaces for reflection, for mourning, and for the construction of victims' own testimonies about what happened and for the denouncement of social exclusion.

08.

"The Dump" is an open deposit for waste and rubbish, located in one of the high parts of District 13's hills. According to witnesses, the bodies of approximately 150 "disappeared" individuals can be found there, people that it is assumed were killed or that have been moved from other places in the city to be buried there. Currently, local authorities are exhuming the premises.

"Memory Room" - Women walking for the truth, (Salón de la Memoria - Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad). The organization was founded in 2010 by women from Comuna 13 who witnessed the forced "disappearance" of relatives. Their work centred on the search for their missing family member as well as a battle for turning the "The Dump"⁸ into a memorial monument for being a place where bodies of family members could possibly be found.

I am Comuna 13, (Soy Comuna 13). This group was founded in 2012, with the slogan "Where Memory and Life Unite." They fight the concealment of human rights violations in Comuna 13, especially since Operation Orion (2002). They further stand for the demilitarization of their residential territories, call for justice for the disappeared, and petition for providing of adequate conditions allowing the displaced population to return home. They denounce human rights violations

at the local, national, and international levels. At the same time, they extend their solidarity to the various community organizations in Comuna 13.

Convergence: Comuna 13's Committee Actions of Memory (Convergencia: Comité de Acciones de Memoria de la Comuna 13). This is a joint initiative uniting several organizations in Comuna 13 and other parts of the city with the objective to promote the construction of memory. Examples of their work include memory murals in several of the Comuna's open spaces or the organization of the yearly conference on "Peace, Memory, and Non-violence in Comuna 13" to commemorate victims from the military operations Mariscal and Orion.

Women for Independence Association (AMI), (Asociación Mujeres de las Independencias). This organization, founded at the end of the 1990s, witnessed the persecution, detention, and the forced displacement of some of its leaders. Since 2003, AMI broadened its objectives by including the defence and promotion of human rights, education with a gender based focus, and the narration and production of historical memories (community memories) of victims of the armed conflict and civil resistance.

Revolution without Deaths Festival, (Festival Revolución sin Muertos). This yearly festival is an initiative of the *Hip Hop Elite Network* that was initiated in 2004 as an expression of resistance to the armed conflict. Furthermore, in recent years the festival has also led an initiative for the construction of memory and non-violence, which made the festival one of the most important music events at the local and national levels. The festival takes place in Comuna 13 as part of the "Peace, Memory and Non-violence Conferences".

Repossession of public space by the community

Movements for the recovery of public space aim to establish the safe, public, and free use of territory, which have been, or continue to be, controlled by armed actors.

"Because limits are not borders", ("Porque los límites no son fronteras"). As part of the conference "Peace, Memory and Non-Violence" in October 2008, a march was organized bearing the slogan "Because limits are not borders."

"[The march] began in the sector Cuatro Esquinas and went towards the football field in the El Salado neighbourhood. The route was chosen in order to "unmark" the stamp of violence on the territory, which at that time was clearly controlled by opposite armed groups. This [was] a direct action of reclaiming the right to life and territory that [could] only be carried out collectively because crossing a border from one neighbourhood to another [represented] a risk to someone's life (suspicion of passing on information ABOUT the rival gangs operations)" (Sánchez, 2011: 217-218)

“Corners We are Bata”, (“Esquinas Son Batá”). A member of the initiative We Are Bata recounts how the initiative was born:

“We got a map of Comuna 13, we identified the points that were most violence took place due to the lack of institutional presence, and we strategically occupied these place with group manifestations – like the result was a flash gathering with a percussion performance in front of the San Javier metro station and various similar ones in representative points for the neighbourhood which we named We Are Bata Corners”⁹

09.
Ortiz, 2013.
http://www.elcolombiano.com/Banco/nocimiento/C/13/comuna_13_territorio_de_artistas
Photo:
Kosta Mathéy

Giving new meaning to the territory necessarily implies localizing our action. Street corners are intersections of pedestrian movement where gatherings for solidarity or for the control of armed actors are most effective.

Sustainable life gardens. The collective *“Agro-Art – Seeds of the Future”* is a youth organization. Since 2010, they promote the defence of human rights under the name “gardens of resistance and memory”. During their activities violent acts are denounced and victims of the conflict were defended. From its beginning, this organization attracted young people from the Comuna’s different neighbourhoods through music, graffiti, agro-ecology, and art and communicating the meaning of a culture of peace and non-violence.

The Memory Room. This initiative, previously outlined as a political movement against forced disappearance, also is a physical space for mourning, collective memory, and actions oriented to the search for truth and justice. It constitutes one more point in the geography of memory and resistance to the war and violence.

The Graffiti-tour is defined as a walk that allows young people to express their vision of how they want things to be and to promote changes in society through the graffiti on the Comuna’s walls. This youth initiative has aesthetic, historic, and political interests and contributes to the creation of a new geography in the Comuna through

Left:
Beautification
of Comuna 13
initiated by the
municipality
of Medellín to
impress visitors of
the World Urban
Forum in 2014.

Right:
Memory walk
organized by
an initiative of
Comuna 13



day-to-day interventions in its spaces. One of the graffiti reads “Orion Never Again”.

“The walls, the microphone, represent different ways of telling stories that transmit a political message, which at times is of anger, but also one of hope. They tell all the sad stories, which are the most publicized, but also others which are less known; stories of joy and love, of which they have created quite a few.” (Viajer0el. 2013)

Precedents to non-violent discourses and actions

Young people and women, through their organizations and community expressions, generate of their own new culture. The effectiveness of collective action is based on the tradition of neighbourhood self-management as well as creativity and cultural imagination; it can be interpreted as the key to civil resistance. A relationship of trust and solidarity was generated through the networking of locally based social organizations, as well as through the emergence of new social actors defending freedom of expression, neighbourhood autonomy, and the withdrawal of armed actors from the territory.

Lessons learned

While the results of each of Comuna 13’s collective actions are singular, locally focused, and at times ambiguous, they share a significant potential of weakening, and even overcoming, what were once considered impenetrable patterns of domination. Although the social mobilization has not succeeded in transforming the violent situation in Comuna 13 altogether, it has opened spaces for communication and concrete strategies to peacefully confront the warlike activities that are still going on. These initiatives have resulted in the formalization of unplanned settlements initially born by the needs of displaced persons. They managed to mobilize political support for the recognition and defence of the residents’ civil and political rights up to a point where the municipality began to build public housing schemes, improved access and even public transport (through escalators and cable cars) to the remote neighbourhoods in the hills and engaged young artists from the Comuna 13 community in the beautification of their formerly illegal settlement on the occasion of the World Urban Forum in 2014.

Artistic interventions and cultural protests have proven to be a peaceful approach to manage daily life in a warlike environment, maintain citywide public attention and overcoming social stigmatization. Furthermore, joining forces in community work and co-operation in social networks are effective means to create collective memory, expose truth, and demand justice. A local leader expressed it like this:

“After the conflict, an important change took place in the Comuna in terms of participation. It was born through the need to come together, form spaces where strengths can unite, and to begin to plan concrete action, like the Comuna 13 development plan. The cultural youth organizations ‘Corapaz’, ‘Realizadores’ and ‘Salt and Light’ led the process. In

2003, the three organizations sat down and thought about the process of uniting the community. In 2004, the development plan was initiated, but the conflict continued. Nevertheless, the process allowed people to react and generate changes. The work that Comuna 13's organizations carried out formed part of the resistance. Being a peaceful movement cannot mean direct confrontation in the conflict, but we are showing to the city that Comuna 13 is not how they are used to perceive it" (Líder 5, 2007. Cited by Alzate, 2012:445).

The disillusionment created by the government made the people question the way they have acted in the past, evaluate their role in the conflict, and adopt a position of confronting the difficulties without violence" (Angarita, P. Jiménez, B. and others, 2007: 266).

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