Reflec tion

Precariousness of the Human Condition in the Context of Violence in Colombia: Letting the Youth Die*

[English version]

Precariedad de la condición humana en el contexto de la violencia en Colombia: un dejar morir a la juventud

Precariedade da condição humana no contexto da violência na Colômbia: deixar morrer a juventude

Marta Cecilia Betancur García**
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7444-3213
CvLAC https://scienti.minciencias.gov.co/cvlac/visualizador/generarCurriculoCv.do?cod_rh=0000426466
Colombia

Abstract

Objective: To deduce and critically examine the moral framework that enables the justification and exercise of violence in Colombia, following the hermeneutic analysis of the network of notions that sustain it: the logic of means and ends, the emphasis on individualism, biopower, state racism, recognition, and disdain. Two questions are addressed: the one posed in the epigraph and its formulation within the Colombian context. **Methodology:** The study employed the epistemological approaches and methodological resources of Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology and Honneth's critical hermeneutic analysis,

---

** PhD in Philosophy. Research professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Caldas. Email: martac.betancur@ucaldas.edu.co

which are complementary and mutually supportive. **Results:** The answers unfold the idea proposed in the title: the climate of violence experienced by Colombian society —one in which broad sectors of youth participate— creates precarious conditions for the conduct of life, as it intensifies relations of contempt experienced as moral offense. **Conclusions:** Ricoeur's hermeneutics and critical theory constitute appropriate mechanisms for revising the anthropological conception and the ethics of violence that underlie the theoretical frameworks allowing its justification, frameworks that have led a portion of the impoverished youth population into exclusion and into the disdain of society and of themselves. Furthermore, these theories offer guidelines for the transformation of thought and action.

Keywords: violence; moral logic of means and ends; individualism; biopower; recognition and disdain (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

Resumen

Objetivo: deducir y someter a crítica el esquema moral que permite justificar y ejercer la violencia en Colombia, siguiendo el análisis hermenéutico de la red de nociones que lo sostienen: la lógica de medios y fines, el énfasis en el individualismo, biopoder, racismo estatal, reconocimiento y menosprecio. Se da respuesta a dos preguntas: al interrogante del epígrafe, y a su formulación en el contexto colombiano. **Metodología:** se hizo uso de los enfoques epistemológicos y recursos metodológicos propios de la fenomenología hermenéutica de Ricoeur y del análisis crítico hermenéutico de Honneth, complementarios y solidarios entre sí. **Resultados:** las respuestas despliegan la idea planteada en el título: el ambiente de violencia que vive la sociedad colombiana y en el que participan amplios sectores de la juventud genera condiciones de precariedad en el desempeño de la vida porque intensifica relaciones de desprecio vivenciadas en términos de agravio moral. **Conclusiones:** la hermenéutica de Ricoeur y la teoría crítica constituyen mecanismos apropiados para la revisión de la concepción antropológica y la ética de la violencia, que subyacen a los marcos teóricos que permiten su justificación y tienen sumergido a un sector de la población juvenil pobre a la exclusión, y al desprecio de la sociedad y de sí mismos. Además, estas teorías ofrecen pautas para la transformación del pensamiento y la acción.

Palabras clave: violencia; lógica moral de medios y fines; individualismo; biopoder; reconocimiento y menosprecio (obtenidos del Tesauro UNESCO).

Resumo

Objetivo: deduzir e submeter à crítica o esquema moral que permite justificar e exercer a violência na Colômbia, seguindo a análise hermenêutica da rede de noções que o sustentam: a lógica de meios e fins, a ênfase no individualismo, o biopoder, o racismo estatal, o reconhecimento e o menosprezo. Respondem-se duas perguntas: a do epígrafe e sua formulação no contexto colombiano. **Metodologia:** utilizaram-se as abordagens epistemológicas e os recursos metodológicos próprios da fenomenologia hermenêutica de Ricoeur e da análise crítica hermenêutica de Honneth, complementares e solidárias entre si. **Resultados:** as respostas desenvolvem a ideia apresentada no título: o ambiente de violência vivido pela sociedade colombiana, no qual participam amplos setores da juventude, gera condições de precariedade no desempenho da vida, pois intensifica relações de desprezo vividas em termos de agravo moral. **Conclusões:** a hermenêutica de Ricoeur e a teoria crítica constituem mecanismos adequados para a revisão da concepção antropológica e da ética da violência que sustentam os marcos teóricos que permitem sua justificação e que mantêm um setor da juventude pobre mergulhado na exclusão e no desprezo da sociedade e de si mesmos. Além disso, essas teorias oferecem diretrizes para a transformação do pensamento e da ação.

Palavras-chave: violência; lógica moral de meios e fins; individualismo; biopoder; reconhecimento e menosprezo (obtidas do Tesauro da UNESCO).

Introduction

This article reformulates and addresses the question posed in the epigraph by Honneth (2011), applied to the Colombian context: *How is moral culture constituted in Colombia, one that proves incapable of granting the affected, the despised, and the excluded the strength to articulate their experiences in the democratic public sphere rather than to live them out in countercultures of violence?*

It examines the prevailing moral thought framework and the subjective representation of violence in our society of contempt, which immerses us in complicity toward a problem that should be approached consciously and responsibly. Thus, the theoretical and ideological frames of reference employed as criteria for its justification and acceptance are exposed and critically examined. The study clarifies the underlying scheme that sustains the belief that the atmosphere of violence is impossible to transform, as it is viewed as a valid mechanism for conflict resolution.

Following the approach of social philosophy, it is argued that this cultural atmosphere subjects youth to precarious existential conditions, insofar as it denies them recognition —that is, it condemns them to contempt and moral offense—while simultaneously denying them the possibility of realizing the conditions for a life worthy of the respect and esteem owed to every human being.

Colombia is permeated by a moral framework that accepts violence, one that must be unveiled, clarified, and subjected to criticism. This same framework allows violence to be naturalized and legitimized, and has become a driving force behind the death of a broad sector of the country's youth. Such a framework is structured by a network of notions adopted uncritically and unconsciously. Based on these ideas, the article develops: first, the environment of thought that legitimizes violence; second, the moral framework that supports the ethics of violence; and third, the analysis of the types of relations of contempt that arise in this social environment, producing conditions of moral offense and existential precariousness, leading finally to some concluding reflections.

The analysis focuses on the situation of young people who are part of armed groups and live their lives within contexts of violence and disdain, finding therein the most viable way to resolve their existential, economic, and labor conditions.

Vulnerability is made explicit in their inclination to join groups such as guerrillas, state forces, paramilitary organizations, criminal gangs, neighborhood gangs, and *barras bravas* (violent football fan groups), among others.

Youth represents the most exposed generation and the one that pays the highest toll in lives lost, within an environment of passivity and permissiveness. The nation abandons young people from the poorest classes to mutual killing, since there is neither critical awareness nor social sensitivity, nor public policy focused on this issue. Although it seems clear that the main source of violence lies in poverty and lack of opportunities —*structural violence* (Galtung, 1969)— it becomes necessary to clarify and rigorously interpret the subjective representation that manifests itself in the cultural atmosphere.

This article is framed within social philosophy and coherently employs the epistemological approaches and methodological resources of this field, particularly those developed by Ricoeur (2001) and Honneth (2010). The method is analytical/hermeneutical, as it involves a descriptive and hermeneutical analysis of the notions underlying the system of thought, applied to the country's situation, with sociological studies also consulted. The theoretical and ideological frameworks are connected to the characteristics of the moral structure of contempt that lead to moral offense and a precarious existence.

The *Registro Único de Víctimas* (Unidad para las Víctimas, 2024) reports 9,826,986 victims of the armed conflict as of 2024, of which 1,281,097 are Black or Afro-descendant and 657,319 are Indigenous. Among those aged 12 to 28, there are 3,228,222 victims. According to the *Comisión de la Verdad* (2022), 6,402 poor young civilians were killed while in a state of defenselessness. Ángela Muñoz (2024), in *Afectación de los derechos humanos de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el marco del reclutamiento*, reports that since 2013, more than a thousand children and adolescents have been recruited by various armed groups across territorial regions. However, the situation has been critical since 2002. UNICEF and the ICBF (2023) report a 58% increase in recruitment between 2021 and 2023, and in 2024, the *Defensoría del Pueblo* again issued an alert.

"Letting the Colombian Youth Die"

Colombian society neglects the protection of young people's lives, despite this generation representing a crucial sector for the nation's development. The highest percentage of deaths occurs among the poorest populations, many of whom participate in various armed groups. Some reports indicate that approximately

17,600 people belong to illegal groups (comprising 4 major groups and 23 criminal gangs) (*Revista Cambio*, 2023), of which 70% are young men under the age of 30.

The armed forces are also victims of war (Velásquez & Torres, 2023); they comprise about 480,000 members, with a high proportion of youth directly involved. The army reported a total of 18,800 soldiers killed as a result of the war (Infobae, 2021). The proportion of the population exposed to the rigors of violence —and whose life projects are reduced to such practices— is alarmingly high. These statistics must also include young people involved in urban criminal groups. The outlook for this sector is bleak, as they are perceived through a lens of contempt, exclusion, and discrimination.

Violent practices are based on notions deeply rooted in the social imaginary: the various groups deploy arguments derived from instrumental logic, whereby violence is regarded as an appropriate means for achieving multiple objectives, social justice, defense of institutions, the pursuit of wealth, the acquisition of economic means of survival, and entry into the labor market.

Underlying these imaginaries is the belief that violence against members of other groups is legitimate because they are "lives not worth preserving" and "deaths unworthy of mourning," in Butler's (2021) terms. Labels such as *criminal, hitman, guerrilla member,* or *delinquent* negate the value of those lives. This imaginary decisively influences society.

Naturalization consists of the belief that violence is a natural characteristic of human beings and therefore cannot be controlled. According to López (2017), it involves a habituation to acts of aggression in their various forms, which "[…] take root in culture, spread silently […] and end up being justified" (p. 23). "Colombian society has adapted to the violence exercised against it by assimilating it, integrating it into its structures" (López, 2017, p. 118), making it part of the social order; even in popular speech, it is sometimes considered an identifying trait of Colombians.

However, it is necessary to take a critical stance toward these essentialist positions that paralyze alternative ways of thinking and acting. Blair (2009) defines "violence" as the use of force with the intention of harming another, and therefore as a specifically human act: "I understand 'violence' as the set of power relations where power is mediated by weapons and whose ultimate goal is the physical destruction of the adversary" (p. 19). Its use has become generalized through the consolidation of a culture of violence, as Sánchez (1991) pointed out in *Pasado, presente y futuro de la violencia en Colombia*, showing not only the plurality of its forms but also its impact on the development of various types of political violence beyond the maintenance of power by arms or revolutionary struggle for its conquest.

Reflec tion

Naturalization is tied to the generalization of a culture of violence, often based on confusion between the concepts of *aggressiveness, conflict,* and *violence.* "Aggressiveness" (Ricoeur, 1990) is an innate human inclination; "conflict" is a characteristic of intersubjective relations among beings with diverse interests and claims; and "violence" designates a specific type of relationship characterized by the power to harm another. Not every conflict manifests through violence, nor does aggressiveness necessarily materialize in it.

Naturalization leads to the normalization of violence, both based on the instrumentalist ethic of means and ends, already criticized by Benjamin (2012) in his essay *Para la crítica de la violencia*, where he posed the problem in radical terms: "Is violence moral in principle, even when it is a means to just ends?" (p. 70). The philosopher questioned the acceptance of the premise that "[…] violence can only be sought in the realm of means and not in that of ends" (p. 169), which confined the discussion to whether the means serve "[…] just or unjust ends" (p. 169).

An affirmative answer always proves tolerant of violence and has made it a normal tool for achieving goals, as Butler (2021) explains:

> What seems most important, however, is that the tool is already part of the practice, which presupposes a world conducive to its use; the use of the tool constructs or reconstructs a particular kind of world and activates a sedimented legacy of use. (p. 34)

In other words, naturalization and normalization are connected with the individualistic ethic of preserving one's own life at all costs, of acquiring resources, accumulating wealth, and defending power, all of which permeate the social environment. This phenomenon has been legitimized through laws and institutions, turning it into a legal and official praxis encouraged by the State, which validates certain forms of violence, especially those exercised by its own forces. Ricoeur (1990) asserts: "What a topology of violence cannot forget is that the State is the focal point of a concentration and transmutation of violence" (p. 210).

The State concentrates violence through the military system and control over weapons. In Colombia, however, the situation is more critical because the State has relinquished total control of violence, leaving it in the hands of private groups that kill one another. It shows permissiveness toward forms of violence that lead to the deaths of poor young people, particularly Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural populations. The State has not only fostered violence through its official armed forces but has also allowed death to operate through dark, extralegal forces.

Nevertheless, legitimization does not appear solely through state mechanisms; its acceptance sometimes permeates academic sectors, as evidenced in acts of violence occurring during youth-led social mobilizations.

Thus, the question remains pressing: *What is the framework of thought within which violence in Colombia is understood, such that society remains insensitive to the death of its own youth?* Paraphrasing some of the questions posed in the *Final Report of the Truth Commission*, whose purpose was to clarify the crimes committed during the war, one might ask: Why did the country not stop to demand that the State end the war and negotiate peace? Where were Congress, the political parties, the ministers, and the educators? Why did we allow all this to happen? Where were we when it did? What role did the media play?

De Roux (2022) calls upon us to assume our share of responsibility, and the task for academics lies in their capacity to elucidate the frameworks of thought that underlie and coexist with such practices. In the same address delivered during the presentation of the report, De Roux (2022) highlighted the impact of the armed conflict on youth:

> "[…] the lines of boys and girls taken to war […] the search for disappeared children, the mass graves, the Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, the thousands of women […] humiliated and massacred." (Canal Capital, 2022, 19'26") [own translation]

Ethics of Violence

The ethic of accepting violence is supported by the following interrelated ideas: a utilitarian conception of life and society; biopower; the distinction between lives that are valuable and lives that are not worthy of mourning; state racism; contempt for others and for oneself; and self-subjection.

Utilitarian Logic of Means and Ends

In *La crítica a la razón instrumental*, Horkheimer (1965) denounced the instrumentalist logic of means and ends as a form of thought characteristic of the modern capitalist mentality. Enlightenment rationalism had defined it as an essential feature of how people relate to one another and treat things. Within this logic, nature, things, and living beings are turned into useful means for attaining ends.

Horkheimer (1965) denounced the instrumentalization of nature, of things, and of the human being himself, who becomes a means to egoistic ends.

In the context of the capitalist economy, the individual becomes a means for the acquisition of wealth and the attainment and preservation of power (Horkheimer, 1965). This relational logic is interwoven with a self-understanding of the person as eminently individualistic and selfish: an individual capable only of thinking and fighting for his or her own interests, fulfilled insofar as he or she is an individual, autonomous, and independent being. This conception became a widely accepted and enduring self-understanding, an apparent self-evident truth that is scarcely subjected to critique. Yet such an anthropological view ignores and forgets another aspect bound up with our way of being in the world: our relational character and interdependence. The person is a being whose autonomy both requires and is traversed by the autonomy of others, someone in need of others and who cannot be reduced to instrumental logic.

According to Ricoeur's anthropology (Ricoeur, 2006), the human being is relational and interdependent, able to realize existence only amid social bonds and the company of others, and who recognizes this interdependence in everyday life, where relations of companionship, struggle, solidarity, and competition are established, among others. In daily living we practice capacities for empathy and solidarity, we go beyond purely instrumental relations, and we can apprehend others as ends in themselves and as persons worthy of empathy, respect, and solidarity. Despite critiques of the instrumentalist system, it has not yet been forcefully challenged; an individualistic and egocentric self-understanding persists. There is an insufficient search for new ways to understand what we are as a species. Precisely Butler, Honneth, and Ricoeur contest the individualist and instrumentalist outlook as the only viable model for understanding social conflicts. They develop new ways of conceiving human relations through the concepts of recognition and the peaceful struggle for reciprocal recognition.

Lives Worth Preserving and Deaths Unworthy of Mourning. Biopower and State Racism

In *La fuerza de la no violencia* (2021), Butler argues that the acceptance of violence is grounded in a demographic differentiation between lives that deserve to be preserved and deaths that are not worthy of mourning. Society is stratified into populations that do not deserve to live —because they do not play a prominent role or belong to groups perceived as obstructing social ties and degrading the social environment— and populations that must be protected, those who inhabit the world as *mournable lives*: "[…] indeed, to be in the world as a mournable

life is to know that one's death would be mourned. But it is also to recognize that one's life would be protected because of its value" (Butler, 2021, p. 130). Underlying these imaginaries is an inequality between lives that are valuable and lives that are expendable, between lives worthy of esteem and lives deserving of contempt. A society that establishes such structural differences moves against the cultural process toward intersubjective recognition; recognition that enables the flourishing of individuals and the development of communities. As Honneth (1997) noted:

> To achieve successful self-realization, the human being is destined for the intersubjective recognition of his capacities and operations. If at any stage of development such a form of social assent is excluded, this opens a psychic void in the personality, into which negative reactions of feelings of shame or anger penetrate. For this reason, the experience of contempt is always accompanied by affective sensations that can indicate to the individual that he is being deprived of certain forms of social recognition. (p. 220) [own translation].

It can therefore be stated that, amid war among various groups —with high youth participation— a society of contempt is promoted, leading to the tearing apart and progressive deterioration of social life, which hinders both the flourishing of personal life and the development of communities.

This ideological framework rests on political and demographic foundations of inequality. Society constructs a structure of thought that provides criteria for distinguishing between a population worthy of protection and one that is not. In *Defender la sociedad*, Foucault (2000) develops the concepts of biopolitics and state racism to interpret these phenomena. There, he describes the "biopolitical" as a regulatory power aimed at "producing life" or "letting die" different populations selected by sovereign power. These are agencies and forms of power that do not operate directly from the center but within a

> [...] post-sovereign context to control populations as living beings, to direct their lives, to make them live, to make them die. This form of biopower regulates, among other things, the so-called livability of life and determines the relative life potentials of populations. This kind of power is documented in mortality and birth rates that reveal forms of racism that belong to the biopolitical. (Foucault, 2000, p. 132) [own translation].

Reflec
tion

"Biopower" thus becomes a mode of power regulation that provides criteria for selecting and segregating population groups, appearing less openly and explicitly while exerting subterranean forces of power within social imaginaries and thought. Foucault addressed the problem through "state racism", understood as the sedimentation of censorship and the exclusion of groups: "This is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create censures in the biological continuum taken up by biopower" (Butler, 2021, p. 244). Exclusion through the representation of a group authorizes other sectors to act against that group and to "let it die", given that it is considered a source of threat to the rest of society. These are lives that do not deserve protection.

The notion of "state racism" (Foucault, 2000) is applicable to how youth are viewed. There exists a kind of racism that leads to perceiving the poor population under 30 as a social threat and danger. This is the population that lacks opportunities, faces unemployment, protests, becomes more vulnerable to participating in various forms of armed forces, and is immersed in conditions of suffering, violence, and contempt, for themselves and for others. In Foucault's (2000) terms, this discourse

> [...] is linked to a perception and a binary partition of society and of men: on one side some, and on the other, others; or the unjust and the just, masters and those subjected to them, the rich and the poor. (p. 74) [own translation].

The "letting die" of this population at the hands of an internal war of all against all is an implicit strategy—perhaps even an unconscious one—for exercising control over the mortality and survival of that group. Expressions defending violence, rejecting peaceful solutions, showing complacency toward conditions of precariousness, and accepting a wartime environment all bear witness to this. "Letting die" functions as a mechanism used to resolve a social problem for which no other solutions based on solidarity, respect, and recognition are sought.

For Foucault (2000), state racism is a discourse that emerges with the development of racist thought at the hands of the State and succeeds the idea of race wars, tied to evolutionary theories of the struggle for life, where the strongest prevails. From the nineteenth century onward, racist thought and state racism are formulated and transcribed through a biological discourse that becomes "biological social racism":

> [...] the other race, ultimately, is not the one that came from elsewhere, that triumphed and dominated for a time, but the part that infiltrates permanently and

relentlessly into the social body or, more precisely, is constantly recreated within the social fabric and from it. (p. 65) [own translation].

Since then, a binary social structure has taken shape, shifting the conflict between external and internal races toward "[…] the splitting of a single race into a super-race and a sub-race" (Foucault, 2000, p. 65), a structure organized through the centralization of power in the race of the "good," the "pure," the "decent," the "upright," etc., as is expressed today in Colombia (Velásquez, 2021). A form of state racism is configured that functions surreptitiously as a regulatory principle of society and as a mechanism of discrimination.

The country has not been immune to this transition from race wars to biological and state racism. From the race wars characteristic of our history, it has moved to a state racism exercised by an elite that arrogates to itself the right to protect the integrity, superiority, and strength of its own group, at the expense of excluding other sectors composed of the poor, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, peasants, and workers. This problem is expressed as follows in Foucault's work (2000):

> Lastly, it will be said that there are two races when there are two groups that, despite cohabiting, are not mixed because of their differences—perverse asymmetries due to privileges, customs and rights, the distribution of fortunes, and the mode of exercising power. (p. 77) [own translation].

The racial schema we inhabit creates phantoms to safeguard the structure that sustains it. The figure of the young person as a strong and daring subject — who functions as a victimizer but never as a victim— persists; this representation is internalized as a self-understanding among young people, who come to see themselves as a source of external threat and fear, while ostensibly invulnerable within. The reciprocal representation each has of the other and of self is that of a strong subject, capable of evil and killing, where the weapon is the instrument of aggression and death that confers power. Each denies both his own fear and fragility and those of others. Their self-understanding is fractured and false.

But if the understanding promoted by state racism is distorted, so too is the submission of broad social sectors. There is a certain complicity arising from the absence of clarity and critique of these discourses. Voices can be heard promoting violence: the most conservative political sectors champion a fight to the death against drugs, criminal gangs, the FARC dissidents, and the ELN. For them, problems are solved by means of weapons, because those who die are social

205

Universidad Autónoma de Manizales. L-ISSN 0121-6538. E-ISSN 2248-6941. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Reflec
tion

groups whose lives neither deserve safeguarding nor merit mourning, they are deemed worthy of contempt. They know well that the dead are drawn from poor populations, since Colombia's upper classes do not take part in that war. There exists a class-based form of state racism.

It is worth recalling the words of a scion of this political caste, E. Gómez Hurtado, at a *Centro Democrático* assembly: "I am tired of hearing about peace." Likewise, consider María Fernanda Cabal's remarks about the young people who took part —some violently— in the civil mobilization of May: "They are not young people, they are terrorists"; "Mr. Minister, the ESMAD police officer is a human being who deserves dignified and superior treatment because he risks his life, but we already know that you prefer vandals and misfits. What a disgrace for Colombia, this government!" (Infobae, 2018, p. 1).

There are further responsibilities. The academic community must exercise society's critical conscience, questioning the structures of thought that underlie this social atmosphere. The younger generation has grown up in an environment that naturalizes violence and has learned to legitimize it. Hence the need for critical and hermeneutic engagement. Honneth and Ricoeur, moreover, open avenues for understanding conflict, social violence, social pathologies, and peaceful struggles for recognition, perspectives whose meanings help unveil the rending suffered by Colombian society and youth.

Recognition and Disdain

Inter-subjective disdain and the self's subjection are two salient features of the internal relations within violent groups. They suffer from an exaltation of asymmetrical relations that contradict symmetrical relations of reciprocity, if one adopts the philosophical configuration of these concepts developed by Honneth and Ricoeur. The key point is this: the forms of violence in which young people from various armed groups are involved do not constitute a genuine struggle for recognition; rather, they are a violent struggle that exacerbates relations of disdain and subjects youth to extreme conditions of precariousness and a tearing of their human condition. It also obstructs the possibility of setting ideals of self-realization and community development—two interwoven factors—which authorizes us to speak of a deepening of social pathology (Honneth, 2011).

This philosopher focused his recent decades of research on the figures of disdain that coexist, in tension, with the figures of recognition and that, through struggle, drive progress toward achieving better living conditions. The process of recognition is the path traversed in the search for horizontal relations of reciprocal

understanding, amid respect for dignity and the appreciation of intersubjective values. It is a trajectory of efforts aimed at building relationships of interpersonal recognition, as beings worthy both of rights and duties and of esteem. The movement of recognition is grounded in the moral motive of the human need to be recognized, one that accompanies the selfish struggle of competition for survival. Moreover, it unfolds in the two figures of recognition and disdain, where intuitive experiences of injustice and contempt due to violations of empathy and respect become motives that drive the struggle to overcome disparagement.

The typified forms of recognition are as follows. First, recognition in primary relations of love and friendship, which leads to trust; its corresponding form of disdain takes the shape of mistreatment and the violation of physical integrity, as well as disapproval or rejection. Second, recognition within legal and institutional relations, where disdain appears as dispossession of rights, exclusion, and violation of integrity. Third, recognition of each person as a member of a community of shared values, in which case disdain appears as an insult and a violation of dignity and honor (Honneth, 1997). In the tension between recognition and disdain, the former constitutes a precious good and a *telos* to be achieved, while disdain is the negative experience to be overcome, since it is a basic source of suffering, deterioration of the human condition, and social pathologies. As the philosopher asserts:

> [...] we have understood that the recognition of the dignity of individuals or groups constitutes the essential element of our concept of justice [...] I will attempt to outline the normative content of recognition in such a way that, through a differentiation of the forms of moral harm, various forms of recognition emerge. These conceptual clarifications will allow me, in the final stage, to present a proposal that enables us to understand distributional conflicts more reasonably and more appropriately as struggles for recognition. (Honneth, 2010, p. 12) [Own translation].

According to these authors, persons and social groups need to be made visible, attended to, and approved by others, in line with the three levels of recognition, each manifesting a distinct normative content because each has different moral implications according to the expectations of what is considered desirable and preferable in intersubjective relations (Honneth, 2010). Each dimension is expressed in practical life amid social conflicts, where persons and groups make

demands with a view to developing the link between self-consciousness and intersubjective recognition. There is a form of:

> [...] moral progress that unfolds along a gradation of three patterns of recognition of increasing complexity, between which an intersubjective struggle arises each time among individuals to assert the claims of their identity. (Honneth, 2010, p. 20) [own translation].

Recognition is realized in progressively more complex dimensions as the fruit of conflict. In his more mature theory, Honneth starts from the negative side of "disdain," which consists in starting from a phenomenological analysis of moral harms where the idea plays a central role that circumstances experienced as unjust offer an appropriate key to explain at least the internal connection between morality and recognition (Honneth, 2010, p. 23), contexts in which those affected establish the evaluative criteria for experiences of disdain.

The recognition/disdain process is framed within the aspiration of persons to self-realization under favorable life conditions. For the theories of Honneth and Ricoeur imply abandoning the supposed irresolvable contradiction between the individual and society. While they acknowledge this opposition as an inescapable source of conflict, they maintain that the human being is, above all, a person who inhabits spaces of multiple subjectivities in relation, all of them bearing claims to recognition, justice, and freedom, a setting in which human life and aspirations for self-realization unfold, where each one needs others for his or her own development.

Precariousness of the Human Condition in the Pathologies of Disdain

Any social development that contradicts the conditions for unhindered self-realization is considered a social pathology.
(Honneth, 2011, p. 102).

Settings of participation in armed groups reduce young people to the precarization of the conditions for developing the human condition. In the social space inhabited by individuals in violent groups, there is an exacerbation of relations of disdain at all three levels: each person is identified by an alias, is perceived through bonds of enmity, and assumes they may be eliminated; they are identified by boots, uniform, and weapon, symbols of strength and power. Each is, for the other, a faceless, nameless anyone who hides and evades individuality. The social and intersubjective space becomes a setting of enmity, hatred, and resentment,

leading to distrust and the denial of social capacities and rights, as well as to the profound deterioration of security, solidarity, and social esteem.

The first level of disparagement in close relations appears in the form of humiliation and lack of empathy; recognition is expressed as sheer violation and disdain. Within groups, each person leaves their personal history behind to become an "alias," adapting their life to the military style, characterized by verticality and domination through force, where only obedience and distrust are permitted, and where dreams and relations of empathy disappear. In affective disdain, self-confidence is precarious, for "the most basic layer of emotional and physical security, in the externalization of one's own needs and feelings, which constitutes the psychic premise for the development of all other forms of self-esteem," is obstructed (Honneth, 2010, p. 25) [own translation]. The basis of personal fulfillment is thus frustrated.

The second form of disdain is the deprivation of rights and social exclusion, since in such cases the person is humiliated because "within a community, he is not granted the moral imputability of a fully valued legal person" (Honneth, 2010, p. 26) [own translation]. This figure shapes how people interact and learn to regard one another reciprocally as subjects of rights and duties. This violent environment and its interactional mechanisms draw individuals into mutual denial.

Whereas in this sphere individuals ought to recognize one another as agents —capable of accomplishments and socially responsible— the actors of violence become visible as subjects of death and barbarity, deserving of social rejection and exclusion. The recognition environment into which they are tied is one of absolute disdain toward themselves and toward others. A deepening of the precariousness of the human condition appears as they project onto themselves the resentment and hatred that surround them.

The denial of rights and the reduction of capacities lead to further deterioration of the reciprocal affective environment, reduced to fear, hatred, and resentment. The capacity for affirmation becomes killing, while awareness of social responsibility is exceedingly poor. Typically, precarious conditions and past suffering shape how they think and feel, while the possibility of constructing a hopeful life project is stolen from them. Thus, the subjects of war —without ceasing to be victimizers— also become victims, fragile individuals exposed to death, degradation, and the loss of humanity; that is, to a pathological situation.

In legal disdain, the individual experiences exclusion before the law and vis-à-vis others, which leads to the decline of respect. The armed actor does not regard himself as morally responsible toward others and renounces the shared value system. His stance is one of violating the norms, rights, and duties adopted by the broader social group —the nation and civil community. He imposes his own

rules by force through the threat of weapons— armed shutdowns, confinement of the civilian population, kidnapping, and killing. Everything that makes us human and capable of living intersubjectively deteriorates progressively. Decline replaces the material and social expansion of rights. People place themselves at the margins of society and develop feelings of disdain toward it. This form of disdain —which should trigger indignation and a struggle in defense of dignity— exacerbates conflicts.

Likewise, the demand to be recognized —which leads to reciprocal recognition and originates in the moral need to be recognized as human in a back-and-forth exchange of reciprocity— deteriorates. One could say that individuals renounce that demand because they limit lived experience to the struggle for physical survival, where valuable ideals such as health, education, leisure, and participation in cultural goods disappear.

Life is almost reduced to natural and physical existence; the defense of one's own life at the cost of the other's is exalted, and the most radical act of disdain is carried out: crime. The combatant loses the conditions for demanding and granting recognition; this asymmetry obstructs solidarity and reciprocity. The situation is precarious even within the groups themselves, built around vertical and hierarchical bonds of domination and tyranny.

The third figure of disdain "consists in the degradation of the social value of forms of self-realization" (Honneth, 2011, p. 29) [own translation]; the capacities an individual develops cannot be positively valued by society because they cannot form part of the shared value system that would otherwise contribute to personal and communal fulfillment. They do not enable intersubjective recognition or the enrichment of personal and social life, precisely because they participate in a way of life that undermines respect for life and human dignity:

> These evaluative patterns of certain actions or forms of life have, for the affected individuals, the consequence that they cannot refer, through the positive phenomenon of social appreciation, to the capacities acquired throughout their lives. (Honneth, 2010, p. 28) [own translation].

This recognition figure leads to solidarity with one another. It accounts for a movement of social maturation in which the importance of qualities is assessed and valuation systems are configured (Honneth, 1997, p. 139) [own translation], allowing people to refer positively or negatively to concrete faculties and capacities on the basis of horizons of values shared intersubjectively.

It implies valuation within a social framework where ethical values and goals are formulated and function as guidelines for action. The person is valued in terms of "social honor." Participation in these value systems leads to ethical

self-confirmation, where self and other are related by a value horizon that generally acts as a regulator of the system of burdens and responsibilities. This ethical commitment assumes feelings of empathy and leads to solidarity practices.

Honneth (2011) contends that visible deficiencies of social life exist "that are related to the structural conditions of mutual recognition" (p. 140) [own translation] and that such conditions are found in the social forms in which the individual develops and learns to conceive of himself as a member of society with the same rights and "at the same time unique." Moreover, the movement of the three moments constitutes the conditions of a "successful formation of identity:

> [...] successful identity formation: emotional affection in intimate conditions such as love and friendship, legal recognition as a member responsible for his acts in society, and finally, the social appreciation of individual performance and capacities. (Honneth, 2011, p. 141) [own translation].

In the case of young people in armed groups, beyond losing the capacity to assume responsibility for their actions and to be accountable for others' lives, they develop an alienated view of themselves regarding their contributions to society in the sphere of work, while they instill feelings of disdain. The pathology and disdain in this field of recognition are radical, if we accept the value of participation in the world of work —"labor"— for social appreciation.

As Honneth (2011) states:

> Now not only can it be supposed but affirmed with considerable certainty, taking into account analogous research, that the social appreciation of a person is measured in the form of formally organized work. The relations of recognition concerning social appreciation are highly intertwined with the distribution and organization of social labor. (p. 141) [own translation].

It follows that the structural conditions for the development of poor youth in Colombia promote disdain and are pathological. Hence, responsibility must be assumed to achieve transformation.

The moral theory of Honneth and Ricoeur, based on the principle of recognition, leads to an expansion of civic morality because it sets out the guidelines required for an appropriate unfolding of social life that fosters the development of persons and community. Additionally, it has the advantage of establishing relations of complementarity between personal and collective life because it constructs models of social interaction between the formal and the historical spheres, between universal and historical characteristics.

Recognition models harbor the power to spur evolution toward new normative ideals and open the capacity to promote equality and justice: "A formal scheme of morality encompasses the qualitative conditions of self-realization that can be distinguished from the diversity of all particular forms of life, insofar as they constitute general premises of the individual's self-realization" (Honneth, 2010, p. 33) [own translation] which, however, are filled with content and historically transformed within social contexts.

The relations of disdain among young people under arms contradict the requirements of the struggle for recognition and dehumanize. Genuine struggles aim at equitable distribution, material redistribution, justice, and equal treatment (Honneth, 2010). Likewise, the granting of rights "fulfills the normative function of granting each citizen the real opportunity to participate in the democratic process of public construction of the community of law" (Honneth, 2010, p. 41) [own translation]. For Honneth (2010) and Ricoeur (2004), the struggle for recognition incorporates and integrates conflicts over fair distribution, freedom, and justice, as can be seen in the achievements of social movements in Colombia.

Finally, another feature of this phenomenon of disdain must be mentioned: the loss of freedom, the renunciation of emancipation, or the state of domination within the groups to which young people are subjected. If emancipation is understood as coming of age —the capacity to think for oneself, to act according to one's own judgment, and to prevent submission to another's will (Adorno, 1970)—then it is clear that young people participate in relations of dominant, vertical, and hierarchical power, where critical thinking, deliberation, participation in decision-making, and the possibility of acting responsibly disappear.

At no point can they construct reasonable judgments about their own life project or that of the community. Their judgments are determined by social suffering, hatred, resentment, and disdain toward others, society, and the institutions that have failed them.

Conclusion: Alienation in Self-Representation and Paths of Hope

There exists a kind of alienation in the way we represent ourselves as human beings, following Marx's most general definition of the concept as a deformation of self-consciousness. This alienation is both anthropological and ethical because it concerns the conception of "ourselves," the humans we have come to believe

we are an idea we repeat without critical reflection and use as the basis for social relationships. The alienation that afflicts us consists, above all, in the adoption of the modern philosophical postulate that reduces human beings to individualistic, selfish entities driven only by natural passions and adjusted to instrumental logic. This conception has become the dominant ideology, devoid of conscious, critical, or deliberative debate. By organizing society according to this assumption, we generate a limited and impoverished understanding of ourselves that paralyzes those capacities —also inherent to human beings— that allow us to cultivate feelings fostering a good life in common.

However, these reflections and ideas suggest alternative paths forward. First, it is necessary to take seriously the proposals of critical theory and hermeneutic phenomenology, both of which call for a critical evaluation of the theoretical and ideological frameworks used as references for understanding humankind, society, and social bonds. Ricoeur's dual hermeneutics of suspicion and listening may serve as an appropriate mechanism. What is required is a radical revision of the anthropological conception and the ethics of violence that underlie the theoretical frameworks legitimizing its naturalization, normalization, and justification—frameworks that have submerged a sector of the poor youth population into exclusion, contempt, and death. It is equally important to reclaim the contributions of critical theory, which teaches the possibility of a form of thinking capable of questioning the structural conditions that promote relations of disdain and generate pathological social dynamics.

Second, we must contribute to the construction of an ethics of non-violence that comprehensively and holistically understands the human being and recognizes the positive capacities that enable new mechanisms for conflict resolution. If conflict is essential to social life, its violent resolution is not. It is possible to find ways of struggle grounded in the positive capacities for empathy, reparation, forgiveness, and reconciliation, capacities that also define us. Likewise, it is possible to work toward the peaceful pursuit of recognition at various levels that drive social development and aim at building a good life in common. Ricoeur's notion of mutual recognition, focused on the capacities of gift-giving, gratitude, and forgiveness, and applicable across diverse phases, is an important feature contributing to the unfolding of these struggles.

Third, the social theory of these authors, together with the struggles for overcoming disdain and for achieving social justice, can serve as a guide for new research aimed at discovering and exalting civic values that can most effectively foster the construction of a society that enables its members' self-realization under adequate conditions of intersubjectivity. Among such values, empathy, respect, and solidarity must not be absent.

Reflec tion

References

Adorno, T. (1970). *Educación para la emancipación.* Ediciones Morata.

Benjamin, W. (2012). *Para la crítica de la violencia, Ensayos escogidos.* Coyoacán.

Blair, E. (2009). *Aproximaciones teóricas al concepto de violencia: avatares de una definición.* Universidad de Antioquia.

Butler, J. (2021). *La fuerza de la no violencia.* Paidós.

Comisión de la Verdad. (2022). *Los falsos positivos.* https://www.comisiondelaverdad. co/los-falsos-positivos

De Roux, F. [Canal Capital]. (June 28, 2022). *Discurso de entrega del informe de la Comisión de la verdad.* [video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=ZkZ5QOugnJw

Defensoría del Pueblo. (July 12, 2024). *51% de casos de reclutamiento conocidos por la Defensoría corresponde a niñas, niños y adolescentes de pueblos indígenas.* https:// www.defensoria.gov.co/-/51-de-casos-de-reclutamiento-conocidos-por-la-defensoría-corresponde-a-niñas-niños-y-adolescentes-de-pueblos-indígenas

Foucault, M. (2000). *Defender la sociedad.* FCE.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research, 6*(3), 167-191. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301

Horkheimer, M. (1965). *Crítica de la razón instrumental.* Trotta

Honneth, A. (1997). *La lucha por el reconocimiento.* Crítica

Honneth, A. (2011). *La sociedad del desprecio.* Trotta.

Honneth, A. (2010). *Reconocimiento y menosprecio.* Katz

ICBF. (May 11, 2023). ICBF Y UNICEF lanzan estudio sobre reclutamiento de niñas, niños y adolescentes en Colombia: se requieren acciones urgentes para su prevención y protección. https://www.icbf.gov.co/noticias/

icbf-y-unicef-lanzan-estudio-sobre-reclutamiento-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-en-colombia

Infobae. (July 4, 2018). *Palabras de las víctimas del conflicto armado.* https://www.infobae.com/colombia/

Infobae. (November 14, 2018). *En total fueron 18.800 militares muertos en conflicto con la guerrilla, asegura el Ejercito.* https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2021/11/14/en-total-fueron-18800-militares-muertos-en-conflicto-con-la-guerrilla-asegura-el-ejercito/

López, D. (2017). *De la naturalización de la violencia a la banalidad del mal. Ratio Juris, 12*(24), 111-125. https://doi.org/10.24142/raju.v12n24a5

Muñoz, A. (2024). *Afectación de los derechos humanos de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el marco del reclutamiento reporta más de mil niñ@s* [Undergraduate thesis]. Universidad La Gran de Colombia, Bogotá, Colombia. https://repository.ugc.edu.co/items/dc62e5d3-2fce-4d95-9e3e-516bffecff86

Revista Cambio. (April 13, 2023). *¿Cuántos integrantes tienen los grupos armados ilegales en Colombia?* https://cambiocolombia.com/conflicto-armado-en-colombia/cuantos-integrantes-tienen-los-grupos-armados-ilegales-en-colombia#

Ricoeur, P. (1990). *Amor y justicia.* Carrápos.

Ricoeur, P. (2001). *Del texto a la acción.* F.C.E.

Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Caminos del reconocimiento.* Trotta.

Ricoeur, P. (2006). *Sí mismo como otro.* Siglo XXI.

Sánchez, G. (1991). *Pasado, presente y futuro de la violencia en Colombia. Análisis político* (30), 3-36. https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/anpol/article/view/76353

Unidad para las Víctimas. (2024). *Registro único de víctimas.* https://datospaz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas/

Velásquez, R. (2021). *La gente de bien.* El Colombiano. https://www.elcolombiano.com/opinion/columnistas/la-gente-de-bien-GB15058619

Reflec
tion

Velásquez, P. & Torres, M. (2023). Militares víctimas en los conflictos armados. Normativa internacional e interna. In C. López, S. Chavarro & M. Lozano (Eds.), *Soldados aviadores constructores de paz* (pp. 13-39). Sello Editorial ESDEG. https://doi.org/10.25062/9786287602427.01