

# Alternative Methods of Political Participation in Colombia, South America

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## Abstract (131)

Via interviews this project sheds light on the incredibly creative methods of political participation the interviewees have used to bring an unresponsive political system to change. The actions include everything from dressing up as lemons in order to protest the destruction of citrus agriculture, to organising dance marathons at university strikes. In the face of a toxic mix of violence and corruption, which are often themselves a product of a perceived lack of viable means for effecting political change, combined with an unusually rich democratic tradition, activists and academics have been not only brave and determined but capable of creating symbolic significance that carries a political message not easily distorted and oversimplified by mainstream media. These interviews seek to bring to the fore their own grass-roots initiatives and forms of understanding.

## Introduction (217)

The research problem was born out of a side question to my dissertation where I researched Colombia's history of political dissidence and wanted to focus on single locality in depth. No work currently exists in English that had this focus and brings together the work of academics in the field. At the same time, Warwick student protests in December and the increased sense of lack of viable forms to protest government austerity fuelled a desire to research alternative forms of political engagement. Originally the project was intended to be academically focused, filming academic discussions, and background reading was performed accordingly, focusing on the works of local academics and academics who wrote specifically on the area and the theme of political engagement. Upon arrival in the region, it became clear that local activists and even academics made little reference to academic discourse in their activism. Theirs was home grown and grass-roots, born out of a real need for change, rather than a political ideal. Therefore the project shifted in focus. The decision was made to document their experiences and draw on their creative methods of political engagement, in order to foment more effective engagement in the UK, where mass protests are the orthodox means of expressing discontent and tend to be grossly misrepresented in the media.

## Methodology (234)

Academics and activists whose work on civil disobedience I had read in March about were contacted in May. These in turn recommended interviewees further afield and initial filming sessions were planned. An acquaintance helping to film (July) became interested contacted people from different political circles and these recommended more people in turn.

The project centres on filming group discussions and more intimate interviews with activists and academics in July. Filming was chosen because it allows interviewees to express themselves more naturally, limiting the researcher's ability to force conclusions. The interviewees described their motivations for becoming politically engaged, the different methodologies used to engage with the political system, what obstacles they encountered

and how they overcame these. The aim being to discover creative forms of grass-roots political engagement that address problems Colombians themselves deem important as opposed to themes outsiders wish to focus on.

The first and third groups were provided via email with a translated project outline to guide the discussion prior to filming, with little intervention in the whole session, the latter two were given a verbal explanation and asked prompting questions throughout. Interviews 1, 2 and 4 are referred to in this report. Interviewees were encouraged to interact with each other's ideas. Only segments of the interviews' findings are discussed below.

2-3 cameras were used and a voice recorder. The footage was compiled, transcribed and translated, with English sub-titles inserted into the footage.

## Results

01/07/2015, Los Labriegos, Armenia, Quindío, Colombia (869)

**Oliverio Gómez:** Argues his political activism was driven by observing need, needs such as paved streets in his locality. He describes his initial involvement in local politics, radicalisation and pursuit of an ideological utopia, and his later shift to what he describes as a greater consciousness and rationalist approach.

**Nestor Ocampo:** Saw the need to defend the environment from degradation and decided to leave his company to his father and children and dedicate himself to what he felt was more important (1983). It is not just about politics, but also changing social consciousness.

**Ruben Santamaría:** Thanks to his degree in social work he went to Caqueta, in the south of Colombia to work with farmers and the indigenous communities there. He stayed 8 years, submerged in the dynamics of the armed conflict. He set up an organisation that provides political support to the peace communities.

### **Creative forms or participation:**

- ✓ Nestor arranges strategic walks in the wild countryside every month, to re-create a connection with the environment, an awareness of the threats it faces, and attach nature to our social consciousness. The walks are part of a political discourse over nature, they inform people of the conflicts that are associated with each territory and the historical memory of the area. This discourse offers alternative ways of thinking about the environment.
- ✓ A few years ago the city Armenia saw a project-protest called Artes Vivas Por la Tierra. Participants placed 64 "stations" along the main road, each addressing a different issue, grievance, proposal or reaction to current affairs. The stations had signs, drama, circus arts, and other cultural expressions.
- ✓ The traditionally powerful tend to use force and violence when their mechanisms of control fail. In Colombia they kill anyone they are unable to prevent from pursuing an alternative lifestyle. But current protest movements are using symbolic statements as a way of communicating aims and grievances, an alternative to violent reaction. This increased emphasis on the symbolic has changed the dynamics of

discourse on protest. A great example is Tambogrande in Peru. There were plans to construct a gold mine in an area of citrus cultivation. Opponents to the project dressed up as mangos and lemons, with signs that read, "Without lemons there is no ceviche". Ceviche is a favourite dish in the country. With that symbolism, the farmers made a political point, engaging a wide audience in non-violent ways and succeeded in their aims.

- ✓ A mayor mobilisation took place to protest a proposed educational reform two years ago and university student nationwide were mobilised, organising abrazatones ("hug marathons", where protestors hug the police rather than throw stones at them). It was the first time popular opinion got behind students' demands. Recent farmers' protests have seen farmers giving hot chocolate and bread to the special riot teams sent to disperse them from blocking main roads. These have also secured popular support due to their peaceful image.
- ✓ By organising the fourth "Foro Internacional de no Violencia y Naturaleza" on 10-12 August, attended by academics from Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Belgium, Canada, the US, Colombia, Mexico, etc.... they aim is to discuss threats posed to their territories and to increase the visibility of resistance in all its creative forms. Many of the communities that organise themselves are home-grown, mobilising themselves without an awareness of foreign currents of thought or academic grounding and this interaction between them enriches their political participation.

### Concerns:

- ✓ Legislative oppression of political dissidence. Prior to 1991 it was a criminal offence to organise students politically. One of Oliverio's friends was arrested for doing so, and in his frustration towards a system that oppressed political engagement became radicalised, joining the armed conflict. This legislation changed with the new constitution of 1991 and with it the forms of political engagement also changed, seeing a shift away from violent alternatives.
- ✓ Mass movements which rely on social media face the challenge that by encouraging this type of technology they can end up engrossed in their private affairs and not take on public responsibilities and citizens' responsibilities, thus avoiding present struggles by hiding in their online affairs.
- ✓ Thus we are seeing a contestation over the use of symbols and a fight to dominate how we construct our perceived reality with them between more clandestine information networks and official sources.
- ✓ A lot of the problems in both developed and developing countries are a consequence of lack of civic action, a civic body that does not get off its backside, is too comfortable, does not mobilise itself in favour of defending rights and in doing so renounces the power it possess, and chooses to upkeep politicians who see their position as a means for private profit rather than public service. Need develop solidarity movements and resistance movements in the form of a worldwide network, to counter the oppressive networks which have already globalised.
- ✓ Citizens in developed countries have greater power to pressure their governments to end the degradation of natural resources and are failing to do so.

- ✓ There are forms of power structuring aside from 'political power' which create consensus and dynamics that dispute orthodox forms of power, these need to be recognised to manage the sphere of symbolism.

[03/07/20215, Barragan, Valle del Cauca, President of the miners' union of Barragan \(271\)](#)

The miners' union of Barragan was an informal union that only recently got a mining title and environmental licence (2007), despite being founded in 1960. The members quarry the sands from the river bed with spades and no machinery. The government passed legislation that caters to big mining corporations and places heavy requirements for the granting of a license, such as the presence of a cartographer, topographer, etc... The small union of the village of Barragan is unable to meet said requirements, despite their footprint on the environment being significantly smaller than that of large multinationals. Thus the miners were suspended for 8 weeks. They co-ordinated with the truck drivers who were also being threatened by the larger trucks multinationals were bringing in, and organised a protest where 500 people on foot and 250 trucks blocked the roads of the city. The local government immediately reacted and according to the union president now takes the miners into account when making decisions. So much so, that before the suspension was fully lifted the governor brought the mining families food to see them through the process. The miners further created an agreement with the processing plant to which they sold their sands, whereby the plant would meet the legal requirements of a license, that the miners could not afford to meet, and the miners would agree to sell exclusively to that plant.

The co-operation between truckers and miners (the interested parties) enabled them to have a greater reach. In addition, engaging with the local processing plant enabled a mutually beneficial agreement. Thus establishing networks based on trust and mutual benefit enabled a resolution.

[06/07/2015, Medellín, Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria, Founder Teresa Gaviria \(207\)](#)

The organisation is a group mainly of women who are searching for the truth of what happened to their loved ones who have gone missing, many thought to have been murdered. Teresa's son went missing and she refused to accept no-one knew what had happened to him. In her quest to find him she engaged with the government, paramilitary groups, the FARC, assassins hired by drug lords, and petty criminals. Her definition of the justice she seeks, is truth, she wants those involved to come forward and help the heartbroken families by giving them a sense of closure. Women in her organisation will follow leads and travel to remote areas where imprisoned paramilitaries have confessed to killings, or army officials have uncovered remains or confessed to have forcefully recruited young men. They offer them forgiveness and ask for an honest account of their loved ones last moments.

Three things stand out in this political engagement: bravery in the face of death threats, willingness to engage with anyone regardless of their role in the conflict, and that the women do not have a single line of bitterness on their faces, only huge hearts that seek to console others who have suffered a similar fate and to bring reconciliation.

## Conclusions (111)

There are vibrant alternative forms of political engagement aside from conventional marches. These involve creatively communicating a message via shared symbols, creating trust between parties, and co-operating with interested parties where possible. Most older interviewees who were politically dissident in the 60s and 70s, fighting for what are now constitutional rights in Colombia, such as the right to form political organisations or the right of indigenous peoples to have a clear title to lands, did recur to violence for the purpose of forcing the political system to respond. With legislative changes they now propose peaceful forms of dissidence, but warn that oppressive legislation is good fuel for violent manifestations of frustration.

## References

Interviews with:

01/07/2015:

Rubén Santamaría, activist for the peace communities of San Jose de Apartado, lecturer of Social Work at the University of Quindío.

Néstor Ocampo, Environmental activist.

Oliverio Gómez, Historian at University of Quindío, ex-activist.

03/07/2015:

Liliana Sanchez, local councillor candidate.

President of the miners' union of Barragan.

Luz Estella Ramirez Guevarra, president of the miners' association of Colombia.

David Cortez, working for the Polo Democratico of Quindio.

Claribel Arango Ramirez, student activist.

Antonio Gutierrez, president of the Polo Democratico.

Joanna Salcedo, student activist, director of the student union of the University of Quindío.

06/07/2015:

Teressita Gaviria, Founder and Director of Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria.

Anita, Secretary of the Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria.

