

On paradoxes in the colombian countryside Algunas paradojas en el campo colombiano

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All countries house a multitude of paradoxes, but perhaps Colombia more so than others. During the six months that I was lucky to live there to conduct research for my PhD, I discovered a country in which countless people dream of and work towards peace, in the hope of ending the longest armed conflict in the Americas, but also a country where the peace deal to end this conflict was rejected in the 2016 referendum. I learnt that Colombia is the second most biodiverse country in the world [1], and simultaneously the most dangerous country in the world for environmental defenders [2], and a country where successive governments have continued to hungrily grant environmentally ruinous contracts to extractives companies [3]. In just a few hours of driving, one can go from waterfall pictures and artisanal bakeries of the popular tourist town of “Minca”, to La Guajira, where the rate of poverty is a devastating

67.4% and more than 370 children died of hunger between 2017 and 2022 [4, 5].

While all of these paradoxes are striking, the singularly most striking paradox for me was the Colombian countryside. Driving through the countryside in the provinces of Meta, Guaviare, Caquetá, and Tolima, I marvelled at the most beautiful rural landscapes I have ever seen; landscapes that have also been the principal backdrop to the very worst violence of the armed conflict, and which continue to be the sites of state abandonment and neglect. Despite significant socioeconomic inequality and decades of conflict, it is in this countryside that I experienced innumerable acts of kindness: cup after cup of “tinto”, invitations to “almorzar”, the compresses carefully applied to my friend’s ankle after it was burned by the engine of a “mototaxi” (motorcycle serving as a taxi).

One of the places that I spent time in, and where my friend's ankle was looked after with such care, was the "Antiguo Espacio Territorial de Capacitación y Reincorporación" (ETCR), Héctor Ramírez in Agua Bonita, Caquetá, where an estimated 150 signatories¹ are undertaking their process of reincorporación [6]. Nestled in the verdant landscapes of Caquetá, the Centro Poblado is a rainbow of colours due to the murals painted on its buildings during the annual arts festival Agua Bonita se pinta de colores [7].

In Agua Bonita, I witnessed the emergence of more paradoxes. Those previously part of a violent insurrection against the state now dedicate their lives to building peace. Agua Bonita houses one of the offices of "Corporación Reencuentros", where a team of signatories search for information on those who were forcibly disappeared during the conflict, and of "Humanicemos", which is conducting humanitarian demining work in the zone. On lands where significant blood was shed during the conflict, numerous crops including thousands of pineapples now flourish. After the FARC long-term prohibition on having children was lifted, dozens of toddlers and children now play and run around the Centro Poblado.

That the FARC perpetrated atrocities during the conflict is undeniable; nor was this denied by the signatories who I spoke to.

However, I cannot help thinking that those who continue to oppose the peace deal and to stigmatize signatories are perpetuating a vicious circle – and one which continues to add more and more victims to an already devastating toll [8]. In July, two signatories who were residents of Agua Bonita were killed in Caquetá within a week [9].

While peace is often thought of as an official affair conducted by high-ranking officials and commanders around a negotiating table, it is also something constructed by individuals in quotidian spaces and in and through everyday acts. Everyone has a part to play. It is built every time a signatory removes a mine or plants a pineapple. And it can be built by visiting an ECTR, (many of which provide visitor accommodation), or one of the community spaces constructed by signatories, to realize that the othering discourses on signatories are constructions. These community spaces can be found in Bogota in Casa de la Paz [10], in Medellin in the Mercado de las mujeres [11], and in Popayan in La Casa de las Manuelitas [12].

I left Colombia several weeks after the election of Gustavo Petro. In addition to the profound gratitude, I feel towards Colombia for being such a wonderful home for me, I also hope that the country's abundant biodiversity will be nurtured and allowed to thrive by the halting of extractives, and that the

¹ The most common way that FARC ex-combatants refer to themselves is as signatories, in reference to their having signed the 2016 peace deal with the Colombian government.

status of signatory will no longer constitute a lifetime sentence of insecurity and stigmatization.

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