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FROM SILENCE TO OUTBURST: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL PROTEST IN COLOMBIA

DEL SILENCIO AL ESTALLIDO: COMUNIDADES INDÍGENAS Y PROTESTA SOCIAL EN COLOMBIA

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Abstract

This article analyzes from a decolonial perspective two events that occurred in the framework of the National Strike of the year 2021 in Colombia: the demolition of the statue of the Founder of the city of Cali, Sebastian de Belalcazar, by members of the Misak indigenous people, and the attack carried out against the indigenous Minga in this same city. Methodologically, twenty documents were analyzed, including press articles, communiqués, reports by non-governmental organizations related to these events and information obtained in autobiographical form by the authors. It is concluded that the events analyzed show situations of stigmatization, discrimination and violence, based on a colonial logic that underpins the power structure of the Colombian State. It recognizes the social impact of the actions analyzed, by questioning the official version of history, proposing alternative ways of organizing and occupying public space and claiming their right to dignity and recognition as a people. It highlights the articulation between the indigenous struggle and popular movements, especially of the impoverished sectors of the big cities that share a colonial history and of armed conflict, traversed by logics of racial, capitalist and patriarchal oppression. For the analysis of the facts mentioned, it is assumed the decolonial perspective derived from the approaches of the so-called Latin American group modernity/coloniality.

Keywords: Coloniality, National Strike, Social Protest, Colombia, Indigenous Communities

1 Introduction

To situate this proposal, we must begin by acknowledging the colonial heritage that the Colombian State shares with other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, inheriting a form of social organization derived from the colonial era, from which land, wealth and political and economic power continue to be concentrated in the hands of a few families. This results in a marked inequality and social stratification that structurally impoverishes, especially, the country's indigenous, black and peasant communities. This inequality is exacerbated when it is linked to a corrupt governmental organization and an internal armed conflict that is now more than half a century old. According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2018), Colombia has about 48 million inhabitants, of which, 1.9 million self-identify as indigenous, corresponding to 4.4% of the population. According to the report of FAO, IFAD, PAHO, WFP and UNICEF (2021), in 2020 there were 3.5 million people in severe food insecurity situation. According to the DANE (2021), income poverty of the population as a whole was 42.5% and extreme income poverty was 15.1%. For indigenous groups, the latter reached 34.7% for women and 32.7% for men, double the national DANE (2022), which indicates the difference in structural inequality which these communities suffer.

In addition to these indicators of poverty in the country, we add the assassination of 145 social leaders and human rights defenders, including indigenous, environmental, civic and community leaders, and an obvious upsurge in crime, drug trafficking and terrorist actions, all of which within a period of global crisis unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the conditions of inequity, inequality, exclusion and poverty in the country. It is in this context of political, economic and social crisis that the Colombian National Strike of 2021 emerged and developed, the object of analysis of this article. The strike began on April 28, 2021 and lasted for more than two months, during which time there were massive protests in different cities and municipalities of the country, and violent clashes between groups of demonstrators and members of the police, particularly the so-called Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD), which was trying to regain control of the cities and disperse the protests. This social event was preceded by the National Strike of 2019, with similar demands: the right to health, education, decent work, upholding of the peace agreements, protection of the lives of leaders and the right to protest, which were interrupted by quarantines and mobility restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

On April 28, 2021, despite the fear generated by the media in the face of the so-called “second peak” of contagion, and against the background of the massive protests in Chile, called to reform its Constitution, thousands of Colombians took to the streets to protest against a tax reform proposed by then-Minister of Finance Alberto Carrasquilla, which affected the country's middle and impoverished classes, unleashing what the media called a “social outburst.” During the months of protest, groups already known, or in the process of being made visible (trade unions, workers, peasants, transport workers, teachers, students, women's movements, LGBT

communities, environmentalists, among others), mobilized in the streets of 75% of the country's municipalities. The indigenous communities organized around the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), an organization founded in 1971, which today brings together 90% of the indigenous communities of this department (CRIC, s. f.).

It is noteworthy that the Department of Cauca, located in the southwest of Colombia, houses the largest percentage of indigenous population in the country, grouping 8 ethnic groups, settled in 26 of the 39 municipalities of this department (CIDH, 2021, p. 18). These communities, including the Misak community, stand out for their autonomy and organizational capacity based on traditional principles such as: the defense of the territory, the preservation of their uses and customs, and the constant denunciation of the structural violence to which they have been subjected as a people since colonial times. (CRIC, sf, 2021b). During the 2021 strike, the indigenous communities of Cauca stood out for their alternative forms of participation, such as the demolition of colonial monuments and the mobilization outside their territories of the so-called “National, Social, Popular and Community Minga, for the defense and care of life” (hereinafter referred to as the Indigenous Minga). It should be noted that the indigenous Minga is a movement that was created by the indigenous communities of southern Colombia at the end of the twentieth century to protest against the violation of their rights as a people. It has been characterized by forceful actions such as the blockade of the Pan-American Highway, or the movement, by caravan, of thousands of its members, who gather from different peoples to go to cities such as Bogotá, where they settle for several days, developing an agenda that includes meetings, marches, spiritual ceremonies, music and dance gatherings and other symbolic activities, which are decided in assembly, as a way of calling the attention of the State and citizens to their historically unmet demands. (CRIC, 2021a, 2021b).

One of the characteristics of this period of mobilization was the high level of violence deployed by the Armed Forces of the State; this attracted the attention of the media and international organizations, culminating in the visit of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) to the country, which was able to verify the systematic violation of rights evidenced in the data recorded by non-governmental organizations such as the NGO Temblores, Indepaz and the Program of Action for Equality and Social Inclusion of the University of the Andes (2021) These organizations documented and systematized 4852 cases of police violence related to excesses by the security forces within the frame of these protests (eye injuries, arbitrary arrests, direct shooting with tear gas, assault with stun bombs, rubber bullets, pellets, reduced lethal grenades and marbles, among others). It should be noted that in the report resulting from its visit, the CIDH (2021) highlights that indigenous communities have been directly attacked and have been victims of different situations of stigmatization, discrimination and racism, which account for particular forms of violence based on the ethnic and racial classification of the population.

Considering this context, this article analyzes two events that occurred during this strike: the demolition of the monument to the founder of the City of Cali, and the attack against the indigenous Minga in this city by armed citizens from privileged sectors, with the support of the security forces. A description and analysis of these events is carried out, supported by an analysis of twenty documents that include press articles published in *El Tiempo*, the best-selling newspaper in the country, reports from the CIDH, the NGO Temblores, and communiqués from the CRIC collected in autobiographical form during the days of protest. This documental analysis was based on the stages proposed by Sandoval (2002): documents that directly related to some of the facts analyzed were tracked and catalogued; they were subsequently selected and classified, considering that they directly alluded to the participation of indigenous communities, and that they had been written during the period of the protests; finally, their contents were read in depth, units of analysis were extracted that were organized into analytical matrices, and a comprehensive synthesis was prepared that guided the description and discussion presented below.

For the analysis of these facts, a decolonial perspective was assumed, used in the sense of the decolonial turn proposed by the so-called Latin American group modernity/coloniality. From this perspective, it is maintained, mainly following the propositions of Quijano (2014), that colonialism as a pattern of power based on the ethnic and racial difference of the population persists despite the fact that colonialism as a historical moment is supposed to be over, and it denounces the economic, epistemic and ontological implications of continuing to place Europe at the center of history and capitalism as the only model of development, thus denying the multiple forms of life that have been subordinated since the colony, being labeled as primitive, barbaric or underdeveloped. (Dusel, 2015). According to Castró-Gómez & Grosfoguel (2007, p. 21, our translation) the decolonial perspective “demands the emergence of new institutional

and non-institutional places from which subordinates can speak and be heard”, and in this sense, the facts analyzed below allow us to recognize the practical power of this perspective.

2 The knockdown

The inaugural act of the protests, took place in the early morning of April 28, 2021 in the city of Cali and was in charge of members of the indigenous Misak community of the Department of Cauca, who in a surprising but planned way, on the day decreed for the beginning of the mobilizations, carried out the demolition of the statue of Sebastián de Belalcazar, founder of this city. As Carranza (2021) points out, it should be borne in mind that in 2020, this community conducted a “historic trial” against the Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcazar, “accusing him of genocide, dispossession and land grabbing, mass rape of women and physical and cultural disappearance of indigenous peoples” (Carranza, 2021, para. 6, our translation). As stated by the Movement of Indigenous Authorities of the South West (AISO) via Twitter (2021, as quoted in Carranza, 2021, para. 4, our translation): The knockdown of the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar was carried out “in memory of our cacique Petecuy, who fought against the Spanish Crown, so that today his grandsons and granddaughters may continue to fight to change this system of criminal government that does not respect the rights of Mother Earth.” At the same time, as Misak Didier Chirimuskay (2021, as cited in Murillo, 2021, p. 1. 13, our translation), says, it must be taken into account that

This wave of knockdown is part of a symbolic strategy to decolonize the country and shake off a history of violence in which its ancestors put their blood. . . It is a call to the country to reflect on our vital and sacred spaces and to open up to these cultures, if today a certain population has given us a historical script in the country, this is the demand of the indigenous peoples, opening up stages so that they have the space they deserve.

This act of demolition and similar demolitions that followed this event, such as the one that occurred on May 7 in the capital of the country against the Monument to Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, Founder of Bogotá, are presented within the framework of a collective process that has been going on for many years, seeking to recover the memory and dignity of a people and to appeal to the state and its citizens to recognize different versions of history other than the official one; reflections in the face of which a symbolic act like the one performed, evidence to be effective, considering the centuries of silence, impunity, violence and dispossession against the country's indigenous communities. It is evidently a question of settling accounts with history “a wake-up call to a society in arrears to discuss its inequalities” (El destino de las estatuas, 2021, p. 1. 12, our translation). However, this event triggered a great polarization in the media and social networks, one of the consequences of this event being the hate speech promoted by various sectors, who described the indigenous participants as vandals, to which were added adjectives such as ignorant, barbaric and violent. This speech has been promoted for several years by powerful sectors who fear the struggle of the communities to recover their territory and was becoming a major source of unrest that eventually led to the attack against the Indigenous Minga in the city of Cali.

3 The attack to the Minga.

One of the collective actors that achieved high recognition during the protests was the indigenous Minga, a community organization led by CRIC. Faced with the serious human rights violations that were taking place against the demonstrators in the city of Cali, the Minga decided to go to this city with more than 2000 members of its organization, to provide them with support, which generated the support of a wide sector of protesters, but also attacks and expressions of racism, contempt, stigmatization and rejection in the media and social networks, being the most significant event that accounts for these attitudes, the event that happened on May 9, 2021, when, while moving through the south of the city, the Minga is attacked with firearms by some inhabitants of this privileged area of the city, leaving as a result eight indigenous people and two other citizens injured. Two versions of this situation were presented: that of the inhabitants of the area who, as reported in the newspaper El Tiempo, “denounced that their homes had been looted and that at least four people who confronted the horde were attacked with knives and sticks” (Al menos 10. . . 2021, p. 1. 3, our translation) and, on the other hand, that of the indigenous people who, in a CRIC communiqué (2021, as cited in At least 10. . . 2021, p. 1. 3, our translation) stated that “The Mingueros were attacked by a mob together with the force. at the foot of the road”. In response to the events, the CRIC (2021), denounced to the public that:

On the occasion of the national strike, racism has been appealed to disqualify the presence of indigenous people in the city of Cali, and the strategy has been used to generate fear and panic among the population with videos and fake news in which we have been used as the ones who have come to cause harm, when in fact we came 7 days ago to show solidarity with the most impoverished population, who were already being massacred and victimized for participating in the national strike. (CRIC 2021, para. 3, our translation).

It is noteworthy that the situations of stigmatization and racism evidenced after this event, were motivated by hate speech promoted from the beginning of the protests by different sectors of economic and political power in the country on their social networks; an example of this were the statements of the then Vice President Martha Lucía Ramírez (quoted by Vladdo, 2021, s. p, our translation) who wrote on her Twitter account: “They tell me that it costs approximately \$1 billion a day to hold the minga that arrived in Cali. Who is behind their financing? What profitable activity allows for such liberal spending?” Evidently, the tone of this type of comment promotes a negative perception towards the Minga in particular and towards indigenous communities in general, which seeks to generate fear and encourages violent reactions based on fear. As Jorge Iván Ospina, Mayor of Cali, mentioned at the time (2021, cited in Cuatro Preguntas. . . 2021, p. 1. 5, our translation), “people imprisoned by insulting comments on social networks, where they pointed out that the minga had been committing acts of vandalism, had an absolutely criminal reaction. . . and this has broken a relationship that must be healed.” One of the most worrying aspects of this fact is that the Minga was attacked by armed civilians from privileged sectors. As noted in Miranda (2021, para. 3, our translation), there is evidence that this attack was premeditated.

With white shirts and vans, groups presented themselves that called on the neighbors of different neighborhoods of southern Cali on Sunday to defend their properties against the advance of an indigenous caravan known as the Minga. . . the mayor of Cali, Jorge Iván Ospina, said that he does not know who the people who shot. . . 'We know that they were armed men, with high-value vans and dressed in white.'

The seriousness of this fact led the Minga to leave the city of Cali a few days later; however, as stated by Aida Quilcué, (2021, as cited in Indígenas abandonan Cali. . . 2021, p. 1. 5, our translation), then national coordinator of the CRIC, leaving the city did not mean the withdrawal of the indigenous people from the strike but rather their repositioning “In a territory that allows us to stay longer”, situation that reveals the difficulties faced by indigenous communities to have their needs recognized by a State that shows clear manifestations of ethnic and racial violence, violence that, considering what was stated in the report submitted by the CIDH (2021) to the Colombian State, refers to “any action or behavior based on ethnic and racial origin that causes stigmatization, exclusion, or any type of violence, directly or indirectly” (CIDH, 2021, p. 17, our translation). In this regard, within the framework of the protests, the CIDH:

received with concern testimonies from members of indigenous peoples in the department of Valle del Cauca about the serious effects on their communities, both by the death of their traditional authorities or leaders, and by the attacks against them. . . it also received information about attacks, acts of intimidation, harassment and stigmatization committed by civilians, linking these peoples to the demonstrations recorded in Cali. (CIDH, 2021, p. 18, our translation).

According to information provided to this commission by various ethnic organizations, during the protests there were 50 cases of attacks against members of the Minga, two deaths, three physical attacks, 159 harassments and 21 alleged victims of attacks against members of their communities. For this reason, in its report, “The Commission reiterates its concern at public expressions stigmatizing ethnic demonstrators and recalls the duty of the State to prevent and combat practices of direct and indirect racial discrimination, as well as to make comprehensive reparation. to victims” (CIDH, 2021, p. 18, our translation).

4 Discussion

The recognition of the indigenous Minga and its impact during the days of protest by proposing alternative forms of organization, dialogue and authority, by questioning and reversing, even temporarily, the symbols of power, by renouncing the silencing and segregation to which the indigenous communities in the country have been relegated, and by putting themselves at the center and

playing a leading role, showing other forms of mobilization, protest, occupation of public space and the construction of collective memory and identity, make possible multiple sides of the discussion. decolonial theory to the understanding of these events.

For Aníbal Quijano (2014), a referent of the so-called decolonial turn, the patterns of colonial domination are based on an ethnic and racial classification of the world population, a classification that continues to operate in many areas of the material and subjective existence of peoples both in social and daily life, despite the fact that the stage of colonialism is supposed to end after the end of colonial administrations and the creation of nation states. According to the author, “in America, the idea of race was a way of granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by conquest” (Quijano, 2000, p. 123, our translation). The imposition of this idea as an instrument of domination led to the fact that the conquered peoples were placed in an inferior position, not only with regard to their phenotypic features, but also mental and cultural, which includes their knowledge and ways of life (Quijano, 2000, p. 123, our translation). This situation persists to the present day and can be seen in situations of violence, discrimination and stigmatization, such as those referred to above, including the differential indicators of poverty and inequality of the country’s indigenous communities, as an expression of structural violence dating back more than five centuries. Coloniality is based on the mythical metarelative of modernity, a Eurocentric construction that “thinks and organizes the totality of time and space, the whole of humanity, based on its own experience, placing its historical/cultural specificity as a superior and universal reference pattern” (Lander, 2000, p. 23, our translation). From this point of view

The other forms of being, the other forms of organization of society, the other forms of knowledge, are transformed not only into different, but into deficient, archaic, primitive, traditional, pre-modern. They are located at an earlier moment in the historical development of humanity, which within the imaginary of progress emphasizes its inferiority. (Lander, 2000, p. 10, our translation).

In this regard, it is possible to understand the origin of the attitudes of violence and intolerance on the part of certain citizens of privileged sectors against members of indigenous groups who claim to exercise some kind of authority in a territory other than their own, who dare to remove their icons, or who question the official history which portrays as heroes and saviors those peoples recognized as genocides and executioners, which clearly shows that history is different if it is told by the victors, or if it is told by the vanquished (Santos, 2019), and that therefore, there is a hegemony of history and memory that can be disputed from acts like those analyzed, which respond to long processes of reflection and popular and community organization.

4.1 Demonumentization

The knockdown of statues during the strike prompts us to reflect on the place occupied in Colombian public spaces by figures considered heroic, directly linked to colonialism and independence, and particularly reflects the social prestige enjoyed by male, military and warrior figures in our society. Torsos and busts of conquerors, founders and heroes of independence, generally recognized as the “fathers of the homeland”, abound in the public squares of the country, accompanied by their swords and horses. The strength of these references lies precisely in the fact that they go unnoticed by a large part of the population. In this sense, symbolic acts such as their overthrow are very significant, since they make them visible and open up processes of collective reflection on our past and our present.

However, this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the protests in Colombia, but a political trend that has been unleashed at a global level in recent years. As Badawi (2022, p. 12, our translation) points out, statues are mobile organisms, in the sense that “they are placed in a place in accordance with the dominant ideology. For the author, being mobile, the statues are usually moved, stored and even removed by government order without this generating the indignation unleashed at the knockdowns to which reference has been made. According to the author, this happens because in the first case “the same power that erected, the executive, is the same power that removed. The real problem seems to be when the erective power does not coincide with the removing power. ” (Badawi, 2022, p. 11, our translation) that is, when these same acts are carried out by a social movement and not by the state, it is when violent repression is unleashed.

The fact that the demolitions of monuments during the protest later spread to other cities and included figures such as Antonio Nariño, Francisco de Paula Santander or Simón Bolívar of republican and libertarian spirit, indicates “the boredom in the face of monumentalization itself, that which places on a pedestal as a milestone or urban reference – which is also moral in the end – to any person above others” (Badawi, 2022. p. 15, our translation). From this perspective, we are witnessing a historical moment of demonumentization that demands new referents, that intervenes and appropriates public space in different, diverse, ephemeral ways, where manifestations such as graffiti, performance, dance, music, noise and even silence show other ways of recognizing ourselves as political subjects and protagonists of our own history.

4.2 Colonialism and Patriarchy

The attacks against the indigenous Minga, which are mainly carried out by white men from privileged backgrounds, with a conservative tradition, with broad economic power, who claim to be defenders of their territories, mobilize the military forces of the State at their convenience and resort to actions that can be described as paramilitary in defense of their economic interests allow to show, as Constain states (2021, para. 2, our translation), that since independence, Colombian society has been struggling between “its republican and liberal institutions, based on the ideal of equality, and political, economic and cultural structures inherited from the Colony and marked by exclusion, privileges and the Creole myth of blood cleansing”. In this regard, as Silva states, (2021, para. 3, our translation):

[...] since before Independence there was a violent insistence on a “stain of the earth” worn by all who were born in this plot. It has been worthy of study and unbelievable that, once the empire was banished, these armed elites were given up and installed with their airs of masters, colonialists, Aryans, predestined, escorted. They are macro-Colombians, yes, they have lived and resurrected with a sixth sense to shred all the urgent reforms that have been made in search of the political recognition of Colombians, who they have looked at with fear, with disgust, with sneer, and with disdain, and have prevented it from being clear that Colombia is not a practical problem, but a historical one.

The male protagonist related to the use of violence during protests points to the close relationship between colonialism and patriarchy. For Segato (2018, p. 19, our translation) it is fundamental to recognize that “the history of the State is the history of patriarchy,” as the author puts it. The heroic position of the Creole founder of the republican states, recognized as a subject of the homeland, “does not allow us to see that this is an insecure subject and therefore perfidious, cruel, violent and domineering [...] In his whitewashed role of patriarch, the criollo will punish everything that he perceives in contempt of his patriarchal law” (Segato, 2018, p. 42, our translation). In this line of thought, those who create disorder, disobey, who do not stand in their place, who speak, who denounce, who shout, who burst into complaints and renounce silence, produce great fear in those who benefit from the established order, and as a result, a disproportionate reaction of repression and violence is unleashed against them, all the more so when they are stigmatized as vandals, lazy, barbarian, backward, a mob, when they are not even recognized as fully human. In this regard, it is worth highlighting what Fanon (2015), for whom the experience of the Colony allowed us to establish what metaphorically calls a line of the human. On this line would be placed the white, Christian, heterosexual man and the other men and women who are meeting these conditions, especially whiteness. Below it, would be the black men, Native Americans, black, and the rest of the women.

People who are above the human line are socially recognized in their humanity as human beings with the right and access to subjectivity, human/citizen/civil/labour rights. People below the human line are considered subhuman or nonhuman, that is, their humanity is questioned and therefore denied. (Fanon, 2010, as cited in Grosfoguel, 2018, p. 98, our translation).

It is therefore essential to consider that colonialism is, to the same extent as patriarchy, “one of the two modern Eurocentric modes of domination based on ontological deprivation, that is, on the refusal to recognize the integral humanity of the other” (Santos, 2019, p. 162, our translation). And in this sense, as proposed by Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007), it is necessary to recognize, as proposed by the decolonial perspective, that the structures formed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries based on epistemic, racial and gender hierarchies, deployed by modernity as devices of domination, continue to play an important role in the present. The idea of inferiority based on race or ethnicity that assimilates the white with civilization and the non-white with underdevelopment and barbarism (Dusel, 2015), continues to justify the use of violence against those peoples who do not assimilate to the idea of

development based on the accumulation of capital, being that it is these same people who, from their multiple forms of resistance, offer alternatives to the dominant model of social organization, based on war, expropriation, dispossession and death.

5 Concluding remarks: by way of closure

The violent, clearly discriminatory and racist reactions by some sectors against members of indigenous communities in response to their participation in the National Strike are closely linked to the hate speech promoted by the ruling classes. This is not new, however, and it highlights the strong colonial imprint that sustains the Colombian social order, organized around the myth of racial superiority, from which indigenous peoples and their ways of living and perceiving the territory continue to be considered a threat to these power structures.

By proposing alternative forms of organization, authority, mobilization and memory, indigenous communities have managed to occupy a leading place in this “social outburst” resulting from the abandonment and silencing to which they have been subjected for centuries. With visible and forceful actions, the product of the collective reflection and action of several centuries of resistance, these communities compete for public space and question the hegemonic colonial structures, becoming political subjects with a high social impact, whose example, read from a decolonial perspective, invites the rest of the citizens, mainly from impoverished and subaltern sectors, to raise their voice and claim their dignity as subjects and as people, denouncing and making visible the conditions of oppression, discrimination, inferiorization, exclusion and violence to which they have been victims since the beginning of the Second World War. to this day.

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