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## History of the Colombian left-wings between 1958 and 2010<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article looks at the history of left-wings in Colombia, framed within what was happening in the country, Latin America, and the world between 1958 and 2010. After specifying what we mean by “left-wings” and outlining their background in the first half of the 20th century, there is a panorama of five great moments of the period under study to reach the recent situation. The chronology favors the internal aspects of the history of Colombian left-wings, allowing us to appreciate their achievements and limitations framed into such a particular context as the Colombian one.

**Keywords:** Colombia; Left-wings; Guerrillas; Social Movements.

### Mauricio Archila

Ph.D. and Professor in the Graduate program at the Universidad Nacional, in Bogotá, and associate researcher of the CINEP.  
Colombia.  
marchilan@gmail.com

### Jorge Cote

MA student in History at the Universidad Nacional, in Bogotá.  
Colombia.  
koterpy@gmail.com

### Translator

### Evandro Lisboa Freire

Translator and copy editor in English and Spanish. MA in Applied Linguistics (PUC-SP).  
Specialist in Translation (UNIBERO).  
Brazil  
elf\_translation@yahoo.com.br

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<sup>1</sup> The chronological proposal of this article appeared in Archila et al. (2009). For this new publication, form adjustments were made and the background of the Colombian left-wing in the first half of the 20th century was expanded, as well as its early stages and, also, in the end there are some points regarding the current situation. International considerations were substantially reduced, too. Thus, this is a synthesis article that gathers some of our previous works and an updated secondary literature on the theme.

## História das esquerdas colombianas entre 1958 e 2010

### Resumo

Este artigo observa a história das esquerdas na Colômbia, contextualizada dentro daquilo que ocorria no país, na América Latina e no mundo entre 1958 e 2010. Logo após especificar o que se entende por “esquerdas” e traçar seus antecedentes na primeira metade do século XX, faz-se um percurso por cinco grandes momentos do período estudado para chegar até a situação recente. A cronologia privilegia os aspectos internos da história das esquerdas colombianas, o que possibilita estimar seus êxitos e suas limitações de acordo com um contexto particular como é o colombiano.

**Palavras chave:** Colômbia; Esquerdas; Guerrilhas; Movimentos Sociais.

## Historia de las izquierdas colombianas entre 1958 y 2010

### Resumen

Este artículo mira la historia de las izquierdas en Colombia, enmarcada dentro de lo que ocurría en el país, América Latina y el mundo entre 1958 y 2010. Luego de precisar lo que entendemos por “izquierdas” y de trazar los antecedentes de ellas en la primera mitad del siglo XX, se hace un recorrido por cinco grandes momentos del periodo estudiado para llegar a la situación reciente. La cronología privilegia los aspectos internos de la historia de las izquierdas colombianas, lo que permite apreciar los logros y limitaciones de éstas enmarcadas en un contexto particular como es el colombiano.

**Palabras-chave:** Colombia; Izquierdas; Guerrillas; Movimientos Sociales.

This article looks at the whole history of left-wings in Colombia framed within what was happening in the country and the world during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Elsewhere, we have addressed the conceptual issue of what is left-wing, by thinking through its difference from the right-wing (ARCHILA, 2008). For now, it suffices to say they are relational political categories and not ontological realities, which change throughout Western history since the French Revolution until today. The point of the distinction is equality –historical left-wing choice, as recognized by Bobbio (1995)– balanced with liberty. Today, the search for equality may not be understood only

as class-based and even less without the liberty that must accompany it. That is what some French individuals name as *ega-liberté* (CALLINICOS, 2003) –which we translate as “equa-liberty.” In recent times and especially in Latin America, left-wings are also characterized by their respect for difference, either ethnic, gender-based, sexual orientation-based, or generational.

In order to provide a narrative about the history of left-wings in Colombia between 1958 and 2010, we propose a periodization that seeks to combine the evaluation of three factors: the route of Colombian left-wing organizations, the country’s political evolution, and the history of left-wing at the world and Latin American level. For obvious reasons, we have privileged the first criterion, dividing the history of Colombian left-wings into six periods:<sup>2</sup>

- ✓ Background (1919-1958)
- ✓ Emergence of “new left-wings” (1959-1969)
- ✓ Is revolution just around the corner? (1970-1981)
- ✓ A meeting with the country (1982-1990)
- ✓ Crisis of left-wings (1991-1999)
- ✓ Towards reconstruction (2000-2010)

### Background (1919-1958)

As the central theme of this article consists in the Colombian left-wings in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will not address in detail its long gone background.<sup>3</sup> Although there were calls for a vague socialism by liberal radical intellectuals in the current Colombian territory since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it was observed only until the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due, among other factors, to the relative economic backwardness of the country, the conservative political closure since 1886, and the existence of an anti-socialist ideology even before this thought could acquire a political shape (MOLINA, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> In an earlier text we pointed out, between 1958 and 1990, six periods marked by the political history (ARCHILA, 2003: pp. 277-278).

<sup>3</sup> For information about this see Sowell (2006) and Archila (1992).

Indeed, in early 1919, a socialist conference was held in Bogotá, which although adopting a reformist program, had a face different from the traditional bipartisanship.<sup>4</sup> That early socialism gave way to Creole communist and anarchist versions, which would be expressed in workers' congresses in the mid-1920s, where the Confederación Obrera Nacional (CON) was conceived, in 1925, and then the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (PSR), in 1926. This Party rushed to capture the early wage-earner cores, and through novel politicization means, such as tours of the socialist leader María Cano, it managed to make the elites shiver. She, and other leaders of the PSR, directed the great strikes in the oil –October 1927– and banana enclaves –November-December 1928–, which led to bloodshed of proletariat, especially the latter, in the famous “masacre” de Ciénaga. These strikes were a part of the insurrectionary tactic adopted by the Colombian socialists, in accordance with some old liberal military people, to jeopardize the conservative hegemony. However, the country did not opt for the insurgency fueled by right-wing intransigence, but for a civilian way out driven by liberal notables that promoted the institutionalization of labor dispute.

In this government change the left-wing also changed. In August 1930, the PSR was turned into a Bolshevik-style party, according to the guidelines set by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Partido Comunista de Colombia (PCC) was born, which in its early years took a confrontational tactic, but it changed in the mid-1930s, at the initiative of the Communist International, in a political alliance with the progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie —the Frentes Populares— to halt the advance of fascism. At this time, other expressions of an intellectual left-wing without major political influence also emerged. Parallel for a few years, the liberal left-wing leader, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, fueled a political group –Unión de Izquierda Revolucionaria (UNIR)– very close to the imperialist ideology of the Peruvian Haya de la Torre, a group that fought very firmly against the PCC, but then it came back to the liberal rows.

In Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, at the end of the Second World War a popular radicalization took place, and the response to it was a shift towards the right-wing triggered by the USA within the framework of the Cold War. In the country,

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<sup>4</sup> For information about the route of socialism and communism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Medina (1980).

this shift took the shape of isolation of the communist left-wing and defeat of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's populism, consummated with his assassination on April 9, 1948. This fact led to the popular uprising known as the "bogotazo," which intensified the confrontation between the two traditional parties in the so-called *Violencia*. When the liberal government was replaced by the conservative government, in 1946, communism kept the strategy of Frente Popular, in which many of its leaders adhered to the moderate wing of liberalism. This trend changed when the Cold War dynamics caused the politics of Frente Popular to be abandoned in the communist bloc led by the USSR. As a consequence, the PCC, in its V Congreso, held in July 1947, resumed the Marxist-Leninist principles and abandoned the "Browder's" theses adopted in the early 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

In this context and faced with the increased bipartisan violence and persecution of the PCC members, the Colombian communism also opened the discussion on the relevance of the guerrilla movement as a means of resistance (MEDINA, 1980: p. 598). In the late 1940s, the Partido claimed the need to train peasant self-defense forces against the wave of official violence. In this regard, its work in the armed movement in those years was promoting some kind of coordination and unity of action between guerrillas of liberal or communist influence.

With the rise of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to power, in 1953, official persecution of the PCC was ratified, even making it illegal. This situation continued until 1957, when, after the military dictatorship fell, the Partido supported the plebiscite in December of that year for creating the bipartisan coalition named as Frente Nacional.<sup>6</sup> The following year, the PCC ordered its members to vote for the liberal presidential candidate, Alberto Lleras Camargo. This decision caused unrest in a part of its members, so that internal tensions already expressed about the role of armed struggle during *Violencia* became clearer.

Just as in much of the world, the dominance of the PCC in the scenario of the Colombian left-wing was a feature of this period. As pointed out by Medófilo Medina, the

<sup>5</sup> Browderism is named after Earl Browder, an U.S. communist leader, who in the heat of the alliance between the USSR and the USA during the Second World War spoke of the peaceful competition between socialism and capitalism, the creation of mass communist parties rather than boards, and getting closer to the national bourgeoisie. The PCC adopted these ideas in its II Congreso held in 1944, when it temporarily changed its name to Partido Socialista Democrático (MEDINA, 1980, 529-544).

<sup>6</sup> This was a coalition regime between the two traditional parties on a parity basis to cut off all of the State branches and alternate the presidency during four periods (HARTLYN, 1993).

Partido managed in those years to gather dissident groups, also one which in 1947 was largely driven by much of the labor militancy (MEDINA, 1980, 599). Thus, during these years it was almost the only expression of the Colombian left-wing, as the Partido Socialista Colombiano, founded in 1953 by the intellectuals Antonio García and Luis Emiro Valencia, was not only very small but discredited by adhering to the military dictatorship. Nevertheless, the global and national scene changed due to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, in January 1959, and a new period opens up.

### Emergence of “new left-wings” (1959-1969)<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Castro’s movement triumph generated great expectations in the global left-wing, especially in the Latin American one, since it was an indigenous revolution, alien to the Soviet Union’s influence, committed as it was with “peaceful coexistence.” From then on, and for a long time, Cuba became the revolutionary model for the new Latin American left-wing, especially due to the renewed struggle forms that focalism meant.<sup>8</sup>

During these years, other event changed the face of the world left-wing: the Sino-Soviet split, which became clear in the early 1960s, through criticism by the Chinese CP to the so-called “Soviet revisionism.” This new schism in the communist field meant for the world left-wing greater pluralization, but at the same time new reasons for fragmentation. Along with the two aforementioned events, the history of the world left-wing was also fueled by the Vietnam War, restarted in 1964 because of the U.S. intervention, fueling countless protests around the world. Such events were condensed

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<sup>7</sup> The term “new left-wing” as such emerged in England after the invasion of Hungary in 1956. Incensed by this outrage, some dissidents deviated from the British Communist Party and also increased distance from the labor movement (KAYE, 1989). Meanwhile, in France a dissident group emerges within the left-wing in the context of the liberation war in Algeria, between 1956 and 1962 (TEODORI, 1977, 89-123). The European “new left-wing” was opposed to bureaucratization and reformism of the “old” communist and socialist parties. Eventually, it was influenced by old anarchist and Trotskyist currents, as well as by the new Maoism and certain national liberation movements in Asia and Africa, especially Castrism or Guevarism.

<sup>8</sup> Focalism is not far from the Leninist model, because it consists in leaderships that accelerate the revolutionary process. Of course, in a case it is the party and acts in a rather urban context, while in another the political-military apparatus is deployed in the rural world (DEBRAY, 1975). It is needless to point out that some communist parties resorted to armed struggle, such as in Venezuela, Guatemala, and, later, El Salvador (MARTÍ and FIGUEROA, 2006). Then, Colombia maintained the guideline of peasant self-defense, which in the mid-1960s became the “combination of all struggle forms,” a political choice that will hold against all odds until recent times.

in the emblematic French May 68, when the new left-wings acquired a citizenship card (ELEY, 2003). Its effects were felt in all parts of the world, something which really constituted a great global movement, also the countries in Eastern Europe, seeking to provide socialism with a “human face.”<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, Marxism managed to spread to the academic and university environments, contributing to the rise of social sciences in Latin America. Its influence touched even clergy sectors, which, such as Camilo Torres in Colombia, radicalized up to the point of taking weapons. This dialogue between Christianity and Marxism was translated into the Liberation Theology and applied by the increasingly numerous base ecclesial communities. In parallel, there was a reading inherent to the historical development of Latin America, known as the Dependency Theory. In the heat of the political practice of new left-wings there also emerged investigative and pedagogical methods that would bear fruit years later, as those triggered by the Colombian man Orlando Fals Borda and the Brazilian man Paulo Freire. As a whole, it talks about a theoretical renewal in this part of the world, which was fueled by the advances of Western Marxism, but within patterns of its own (HARNECKER, 2000, 26-30).

Colombia was not immune to those continental and global changes. Even after the dictatorship of Rojas Pinilla, and unlike a large part of the Latin American countries, it did not undergo any de facto military regime, the establishment of the Frente Nacional (1958-1974) fueled a high degree of political and social exclusion of forces not committed to bipartisanship (HARTLLYN, 1993, 105). Within this frame of limited democracy and faced with the hesitations of the PCC the early organizations of the new Colombian left-wing were conceived.<sup>10</sup>

Such was the case of the Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Campesino (MOEC), which emerged from the situation of protest against transport price increase in early 1959. The following year, its first congress was held in Cali, the city showing the greatest social unrest at the time. In a hasty attempt to transplant the Cuban revolution, it organized guerrilla groups in peripheral areas, but with recent economic growth, where a

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<sup>9</sup> Such university effervescence was also felt in Latin America. The most notable was the student movement in Mexico whose symbolic date was the Tlatelolco slaughter, in October 1968 (VOLPI, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> We resume herein what is written in Archila (2003, 278-286).



part of its leadership died. Then, it was divided into two wings: a “leftist,” which sought the immediate revolutionary explosion, and a “Marxist,” which intended to organize the people before the insurrection. Such a division became clear when they expelled each other. Then, they were fractionated into multiple cores, which would generate, years later, the *Movimiento Obrero Independiente y Revolucionario* (MOIR), one of the two main Maoist parties in the country.

Indeed, the MOIR was founded in Medellín, in 1969, although at first it was not defined if it was a political organization or a trade union apparatus. For instance, in January 1970 it launched the slogan of national patriotic strike, but it was postponed for no apparent reason. We never knew if it was a workers’ strike, a general strike, or an abstentionist movement. This ambiguity has been a feature of its political behavior. Thus, in 1972, it ran in elections for the first time, although it did not renounce the revolutionary discourse, yet, which is going to be abandoned until it joins the most critical left-wing sector in the armed struggle. Then, it would ally with the PCC in an electoral front, to quickly leave this and go on with its radical rhetoric, but having close ties to elite sectors towards building a national bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, various communist dissident groups generated guerrilla movements marked by focalism, but also showing early Maoist influences, then Trotskyist ones. In 1962, there was a conference of various leftist groups to form the *Frente Unido de Acción Revolucionaria* (FUAR). Gaitanist sectors converged there –among them the caudillo’s daughter–, socialists, former communists, and people from the independent trade unions movement and the student movement. They were united by common contempt for the so-called “electoral farce” and sympathy for the armed struggle, without putting it into practice. Although leftist, the FUAR did not claim to be Marxist. It was subsequently fragmented around the definition of routes to revolution.

The other significant pole of this time was condensed into the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) (MEDINA, 1996). With a self-critical look at the early guerrilla adventures, a group of young liberal radicals who had traveled to Cuba, then it

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<sup>11</sup> Although it has undergone several divisions, today it remains as the most organized core of the electoral left-wing around the charismatic figure of senator Jorge Enrique Robledo.

committed to advance towards the armed revolution.<sup>12</sup> The ELN made public appearance on January 7, 1965, with the capture of the town of Simacota. Then, there came a series of actions that gained prestige among leftist activists, including a train robbery, which was filmed by a Mexican journalist. But the brightest moment in those years took place when the former priest Camilo Torres Restrepo joined the guerrilla group. Camilo underwent a rapid radicalization process from his Christian perspective, almost as quick as his short political campaign just under six months. With the idea of reaching large population segments, Camilo created in 1965 the Frente Unido (FU), which tried to be an opposition alliance against the Frente Nacional, but as it was polarized in relation to abstention, it drove off the leftist groups running in elections to remain on the hands of ELN militants. When Camilo joined the guerrilla late that year, the FU got weaker and soon disappeared. For the ELN itself, the period between 1965 and 1970 showed growth in terms of militancy, despite Camilo's untimely death in his first combat, in February 1966. Then came the official offensive in Anorí (Antioquia), dismantling of the urban networks and, as a consequence, courts-martial, which almost annihilated the organization (MEDINA, 1996, 141). By the mid-1970s, while its main leader was absent from the country, the organization began a process of thinking through the concept of focalism.<sup>13</sup>

During the same years when the ELN was conceived, and almost on the same foundations, the Partido Comunista Marxista Leninista (PC-ML) emerged, the other Maoist stronghold until the late 1970s (VILLARRAGA and PLAZAS, 1995). After the Sino-Soviet split, there was a minority sector within the PCC and a larger figure in the Juventud Comunista that, when expelled, called all Marxist-Leninists to form a new party. In July 1965, they held the “décimo” Congreso, resorting to this ordinal to keep numbering the events organized by the PCC, which they sought to reconstitute. The new party's armed

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<sup>12</sup> Many of these young individuals were members of the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal (MRL), which at first was against the Frente Nacional, but then it rejoined liberalism. Others came from communism and some from the radicalized student movement. It is worth noticing that the ELN was the only group founded abroad and it oddly had a Spanish man as the main leader for several years, the priest Manuel Pérez (BRODERICK, 2001). It is also important to realize that this guerrilla recruited the largest number of Christians, some of them churchmen.

<sup>13</sup> The ELN is perhaps the most radical guerrilla and it never signed a truce with the Colombian State, indeed, still today –April 2015– it did not finish negotiations on a peace agreement.

wing was consolidated in 1967, the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), which aimed at opening multiple foci in several peripheral areas of the country, but only that in Costa Atlántica survived. However, even this focus faced a hard siege by the police in the late 1960s. In the process of creating and consolidating the armed wing not only most of its founders were killed, but the organization got isolated from the social whole, by moving its address to the countryside. The PC-ML, characterized by its orthodox defense of Maoism until 1980, was expelling several nuclei that diverged in issues of revolutionary tactic or organization, and this has led to many organizations named as “campo M-L.”<sup>14</sup> But the strongest mark of Maoism was rivalry, sometimes armed, with the PCC and its armed wing.

To complete the frame of those years, we must mention the very emergence of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). After the hesitant statements by the PCC regarding armed struggle, there came the State’s offensive against the so-called “repúblicas independientes.” The operation against some zones of “colonización armada,” such as Marquetalia, pressed the call for the first communist guerrilla conference, in late 1964. In May 1966, the self-defense forces definitely turned into the FARC. They followed a model of military self-defense and support to the activity of the Partido until the 1980s, then varied to a more aggressive tactic to seek power. The history of the FARC was less spectacular than that of other guerrilla groups in those years and the organization was even about to succumb, because of some military failures. Unlike the other Colombian guerrillas, it was always based on peasants, something which was reflected on its early political platform (PIZARRO, 1995). In this regard, it was far from the focalism prevailing in the other armed groups and, in practice, it came closer to the “prolonged popular war” characterizing the Chinese experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Some of them would become years later the political-military organization Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT), which took a seat on the north coast and it was demobilized in 1991, after trying to merge with the ELN. In fact, there was another Maoist fraction that joined this guerrilla for some years, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), but many of its members were demobilized in the mid-1990s, as we will see below.

## Is revolution just around the corner? (1970-1981)

The international arena in this period was marked by the end of economic growth in the core countries, which is, in turn, a result from the increase in oil prices in 1973. Under these conditions, the European Welfare States went into crisis and “the strong truths from the Fordist era began to crumble” (ELEY, 2003, 402). This undoubtedly affected the Western left-wing, especially socialist and communist parties in their attempts to reform capitalism. The revolutionary spirit of May 68 seemed to be confirmed not only by the negative social effects of the capitalist economic recession, but by the democratic advances in Europe and the anticolonial triumph in some peripheral countries. However, the legacy of the 1960s faded due to the struggles between the various models of socialism and the theoretical crisis of Marxism, triggering uncertainty among the global left-wing (ANDERSON, 1986).

In Latin America, political action will be marked by the crisis of democracy, which, in turn, is related to the global economic recession and the strengthening of extreme right-wing dictatorships. Indeed, the electoral victory of Salvador Allende in Chile, in 1970, proposed to the entire Latin American left-wing another pathway instead of armed struggle to achieve social transformation. But this proposal was violently suppressed by the military Coup d’État led by Augusto Pinochet and the onset of a “dirty war” against the left-wing, which will be replicated by other dictatorships in the Southern Cone. Meanwhile, there is a geopolitical shift in the armed left-wings, from the Southern Cone to Central America, which will underpin what for many is the second largest guerrilla wave in Latin America (MARTI and FIGUEROA, 2006; WICKMAN-CROWLEY, 1992).

In Colombia, the period concerned is framed by the crisis of the Frente Nacional and its slow dismantling since 1974. The 1970 elections, accused of “fraudulent” by the opposition, served to stir the debate on the revolutionary pathway at the heart of the left-wing. While general Rojas, then seeking his populist phase, showed the potential of mass mobilization, the “fraud” with which he took the virtual triumph showed the limitations of the electoral process (AYALA, 2006). Nevertheless, the rural guerrillas created in the previous decade were not those that picked this lesson, but the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) –named this way just to celebrate that electoral bid. It was

a group with features similar to that of Montoneros and Tupamaros, which had a remarkable urban presence and expressed a nationalist ideology that drew public attention, among other reasons, because of the innovations in propaganda and media it represented. We refer not only to everyday actions, such as seizing food to give it to the poor, but especially to stealing more than 1,500 weapons from a heavily guarded military garrison, in January 1979. The military men, wounded in their pride, engaged in brutal persecution, arresting nearly 300 militants of the M-19, besides many social activists who sympathized with this movement. When the court-martial was about to take place against it, the guerrilla organization engaged in hostage taking of diplomats –among them one from the USA and the Vatican nuncio–, in February 1980, and this lasted for several months. Although they did not achieve the goal of freeing their militants, dollars were made and, above all, they spread widely the message of a “national dialogue” to overcome armed struggle (ARCHILA, 2003, 292).

As we have pointed out in other writings, the 1970s showed the main indicators of social struggles show in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Colombian history (ARCHILA et al., 2002). In them, there was an unusual and impressive agitation among peasants, workers, and students (MÚNERA, 1998). In turn, the peak of social mobilization fueled the left-wings, although with mixed results. While the bulk of the new Colombian left-wing was still submerged in the weakened armed choice, from the pro-Soviet, Maoist, and Trotskyist viewpoint the possibility to participate in elections as a political action to reach the masses was increasingly considered. There were even surprising attempts at unity, like that led by the PCC and MOIR towards the Unión Nacional de Oposición (UNO) for the 1974 elections.

The convergence of these groups took place despite the enmity, but it was unstable. In fact, mutual sectarian attempts broke this unity and by 1978 the Colombian electoral left-wing was grouped into three blocs with a certain ideological identity, a result, again, from international alignment: the UNO, controlled by the PCC, since the MOIR quit the alliance; the latter, in turn, formed the Frente Unido del Pueblo (FUP), where Maoist forces into the electoral arena converged; and it also created the Unión de Izquierda Obrera y Socialista (UNIOS), an alliance of socialist and Trotskyist groups that

quickly exploded into fractions.<sup>15</sup> Given such a pathetic division, a sector of intellectuals grouped in the *Alternative* magazine –whose participants included Gabriel García Márquez, Orlando Fals Borda, and Enrique Santos Calderón, among others– launched a signature campaign to unify the left-wing. Although failing in the short term, it managed to form a short-lived democratic expression known as “Firmes” that connected the portion of the leftist intelligentsia not affiliated with party expressions.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the end of the Frente Nacional and its slow dismantling aroused expectations for democratic opening among the Colombians, especially because in 1974 Alfonso López Michelsen came to power, a character with a rather progressive image due to his alleged rebel history in the MRL and because he was son of the most reformist president in the Colombian history, Alfonso López Pumarejo. However, his real political mood quickly became clear when he angrily rejected popular demands and repressed social protests. The popular mood was also exacerbated by increased cost of living and led to the massive Paro Cívico Nacional on September 14, 1977. Despite its undoubted magnitude, this event was disproportionately interpreted, both by the left-wing and the right-wing. Some people thought that the mass insurrection was just around the corner and the others did their utmost to suffocate it (MEDINA, 2014: p. 89). So, the next president, Julio César Turbay (1978-1982), within the first month of his administration, issued the Estatuto de Seguridad –son of the militarist doctrine of the same name– that significantly restricted democratic freedoms.<sup>17</sup> For much of the Colombian left-wing – which echoed what happened in Latin America–, the new signs were an expression of right-wing repression, and they deserved a response through a new guerrilla war. Again, expectations for democratic opening were stifled by the noise of weapons.

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<sup>15</sup> Trotskyism, with great intellectual leadership, came to influence the university and trade union world and also the peasant movement in the early 1970s (GARCÍA, 2009). However, just like Maoism, it was characterized by great internal pugnacity and successive divisions, generating a stream of acronyms in the tutelary shadow of Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>16</sup> Firmes was dissolved in an alliance with the PCC in the early 1980s. Just like the *Alternative* magazine, it was influenced by the M-19.

<sup>17</sup> Although Turbay had already proclaimed the Estatuto de Seguridad few days before the first anniversary of the Paro Cívico in 1977, the gruesome assassination of former minister of government, Rafael Pardo Buelvas, by an urban commando named Autodefensa Obrera (ADO), was used by the president to justify repression. This small group was decimated after this horrible crime and the remainder was demobilized in 1985.

## A meeting with the country (1982-1990)

In 1981, Ronald Reagan became the U.S. President, and he, in addition to reaffirming the neoliberal model implemented by Thatcher in England, leads the Cold War to its utmost expression by promoting an arms race with the Soviet Union. The latter was forced to spend huge sums on defense and neglect the population's welfare. The "real socialism" was running into its own limitations, so urgent reforms were needed to survive (HOBBSAWM, 1994). In this context, Mikhail Gorbachev took office in the USSR in 1985 and focuses his reform program on "perestroika" –economic and political restructuring– and "glasnost" –information transparency. Thus, the discontent that had been maturing for years behind the "iron curtain" comes out and, fortunately, it did not face the old Soviet repressive response. As a new domino –now under another sign–, one after another, the satellite countries move away from the Soviet control and depose their communist governments. In late 1989, the symbolic fall of the Berlin wall, which halved Germany and Europe as a whole. Two years after the Soviet Union itself would disappear, torn apart by nationalist appetites in a number of countries that could not even federate (ELEY, 2003: cap. 25). Meanwhile, in faraway China, under the leadership of Deng Xiao Ping, the pragmatic turn to the capitalist economy was consolidated, without producing any liberalization at the political level (HOBBSAWM, 1994, 486-487).

The Latin American left-wings did not stop at just watching the collapse of "real socialism." They got increasingly involved in the fight against dictatorships and sought to resume democracy. Although they did not translate into immediate electoral success, they got increasingly committed to extend citizenship to the inhabitants of the region. The democratic winds also hit the guerrilla left-wing, which in many parts resumed criticism of weapons. After the 1979 Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, the privileged scene of struggle was Central America, especially El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala. The electoral defeat of Sandinismo and the setbacks of insurgent forces in other countries led them to negotiation processes to disarm (MARTI and FIGUEROA, 2006; WICKMAN-CROWLEY, 1992).

In Colombia, the left-wing also took the democratic challenge of promoting peace talks with the administration of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), which were implemented

in 1984, with an unstable truce, first with the FARC and then with the M-19 and EPL. This administration underwent the main impact of the Latin American debt crisis, and it adopted a protectionist economic policy, which did not survive two years, then it entered the restructuring current driven by multilateral banks. In parallel, Betancur urged political reform, especially the budget decentralization and the popular election of mayors. Meanwhile, some leftist groups took surprising steps, moving away from old dogmas and international alignments to get closer to people made of flesh and blood. It was a creative way to respond to the growing crisis of global left-wings.

At the same time, social unrest in Colombia resumed with a new series of the so-called civic and regional movements, in great days that paralyzed, not just neighborhoods or intermediate cities, but large regions, as observed in the second half of the 1980s. It is also a time of longing for unity, which is embodied in the creation of the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC), in 1982, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), in 1986, and the reunification of peasant organizations, a year later (MÚNERA, 1998, 458-469).

Nevertheless, achieving peace was not possible, because both the State and the guerrillas kept hidden agendas that bet on war. Besides, the feeble agreements were torpedoed from different sides. Without having completed a year, the truce with armed organizations was broken, a fact which was confirmed through the bloody takeover of the Palacio de Justicia by a commando of the M-19 and the brutal official recovery on 5 and 6 November 1985. A few days later, the spokesman of the EPL, Oscar William Calvo, fell assassinated in the streets of Bogota. In its turn, the FARC kept the peace agreements for two more years. The political grouping triggered by the guerrilla to enter the public sphere, the Unión Patriótica (UP), was quickly decimated, something which has been labeled as a “political genocide.”<sup>18</sup> Something similar happens with political fronts of other guerrillas, such as A Luchar, promoted by the ELN and trade union sectors, and the

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<sup>18</sup> There are no exact figures of dead members of the UP, except the generalized expression that they are more than 3,500 (ARCHILA, 2003, 122). In a thesis to obtain the title of Historian, the student Johana Trujillo (2005) managed to document 1,095 cases between 1986 and 1990. Most of the victims correspond to areas where there was a historical presence of the FARC and increased figures of dead members of the UP were observed within electoral periods.



Frente Popular, created by the EPL.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for 1987 the armed organizations that had agreed a truce with the State were back in the war, with a significant organizational novelty –learnt from Central American struggle: a *coordinadora guerrillera* grouping all armed organizations, except the FARC, initially. They finally entered in 1987, once broken their truce, and added to the acronym of the *coordinadora* the name of the Liberator: Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB).<sup>20</sup>

By then, the Colombian conflict had broken into multiple players. Besides the historical confrontation between State and insurgency, paramilitary sectors emerged, increasingly linked to the drug trafficking activity. In 1982, following the kidnapping by the M-19 of a member of a clan of Antioquia drug traffickers, the latter created the group Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS), which not only managed to free the kidnapped person, but also opened a new counterinsurgency action way. Indeed, in former areas of armed struggle there were “autodefensas,” which claimed to oppose excesses and extortion practices of the insurgency. Such groupings relied on permissiveness, if not on open support, by the elites and civil and military authorities in these regions (ROMERO, 2003). With greater frequency and intensity, they resorted to drug trafficking as a funding source. This is the background of the “dirty war” that the civil, military, and paramilitary right-wing launched against the UP and generally against the social and leftist activists, which did not exempt progressive presidential candidates, such as Jaime Pardo Leal, in 1987, Luis Carlos Galán, in 1989, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa and Carlos Pizarro, both in early 1990.

Yet, the seed of peace, or rather the search for a political solution to the armed struggle, bore fruit at the end of the decade, when the M-19 expressed its willingness to demobilize and act as a legal political group and pressed for holding a Constituent Assembly to draft a new social and political pact in Colombia. The initiative was supported by sectors of the legal left-wing and some social movements, through which the Alianza

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<sup>19</sup> Actually what is observed since the mid-1980s is widespread violence against leftists and social leaders of peasants, indigenous people, women, and trade unions as a way to prevent the undoubted rise of social mobilization and an expression of the tragic anticommunism of our elites (ARCHILA et al., 2011).

<sup>20</sup> However, unlike the Central American experience, in Colombia the CGSB was short-lived, because some guerrillas negotiated peace and others, such as the ELN and the FARC, after an attempted joint negotiation between 1991 and 1992, resumed war, but each by its own and sometimes opposing each other.

Democrática (AD-M19) was formed. It was also emulated by other rebel forces of the extinct Maoist movement, such as the PRT and EPL, out of which the bulk of their membership demobilized to form a new group, Esperanza, Paz y Libertad –the “esperanzados”–,<sup>21</sup> as well as by the Indian guerrilla, the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (MAQL). The other armed organizations were not involved in the Constituent, but left the door open for future negotiations with the State, despite the FARC attack on its headquarters the same day that the creation of this Assembly was voted. Again, war and peace were simultaneously at stake, posing serious questions about the future of the country and its democracy.

### Crisis of left-wings (1991-1999)

The fall of “real socialism” was ratified with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War. Capitalism in its late phase, clearly neoliberal, is imposed by almost all the world, with a particular orthodoxy in the former socialist countries, so that some of its advocates rush to celebrate the “end of History.” However, the triumph of economic liberalism did not mean the strengthening of its political counterpart, liberal democracy. The USA clearly emerged as the great power to be faced, no longer a similar opponent, but multiple resistance foci with various identities ranging from fight against neo-liberalism to opposition to the West and its Judeo-Christian tradition (HOBSEBAWM, 1994).

Given these events, the world communist and socialist left-wing failed to act with the same speed and strength of the past. Abandoning the revolutionary tradition and internationalism seemed to be the response to the fall of real socialism. In such a collapse of the global partisan left-wing, social movements re-emerge, now to embody the revolutionary idea. But they do so radically moving away from the Marxist-Leninist tradition. Indeed, vanguard parties with boards are harshly criticized and they only accept electoral mass formations that seem to play a subordinate role to the social protests. The

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<sup>21</sup> The EPL, and behind the PC-ML, had a surprising turn in the early 1980s, when it not only abandoned Maoism, something which was regarded as a new ideological deviation, but broke with the isolationism that had been practiced to get closer to the social bases. That political shift provided it with revenues in areas where it was present, but led it to face other leftist organizations, especially the FARC, with which it had an old rivalry (ARCHILA et al., 2011, 152-198).

centrality and universalism of proletariat are relegated to the past and break multiple identities that deviate from the paradigm of classes (ELEY, 2003: caps. 26-27). So, there will be a new cycle of global struggles in the turn of the century, although this opens with the Zapatista uprising in 1994, against the force of the U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) (SEOANE and TADDEI, 2001. 105-129; RODRÍGUEZ, 2002).

In Latin America, the implementation of neoliberalism is also a surprise to partisan left-wings, which are relegated by the emergence of other social movements. Here, mutation in the revolutionary traditions is also observed in a “new” non-Marxist left-wing, which is not even socialist, strongly related to social movements and prone to revolutionary reforms. Although during this decade the leaders are predominantly center-right oriented, the left-wing faces power in successful practices of local government, where it highlights the momentum of participatory democracy in dimensions such as the preparation of local and regional budgets (HARNECKER, 2000). Armed struggle disappears as a means of struggle of the Latin American left-wing, which is increasingly committed to build the utopia of a radical democracy.

In this period, Colombia adopted a new Constitution –promulgated in 1991–, not free from contradictions, because while it formally established the social rule of law and cultural and ethnic pluralism, it opened the doors to neoliberalism and eventually did not slow down a war that escalated in intensity and also degraded, up to the point of causing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis on the continent. Therefore, the hopes of a political solution to the armed struggle wrecked, reflected on the demobilization of guerrilla contingents already mentioned above, which was joined by a dissident group of the ELN with Maoist roots in 1994, known as the *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* (CRS),<sup>22</sup> and the great mobilization for peace that is observed in the second half of the decade. After the breakdown of talks with the CGSB, in 1992, there were successive declarations of war by both sides, punctuated by ephemeral attempts at negotiation that seemed to bear fruit in 1999 with the FARC, after clearance of five municipalities in the southern region of the country, the Caguán, almost as big as Switzerland. The same did not happen with the ELN, more ready to dialogue with civil society than with any administration. Successive military mistakes made by this last guerrilla prevented a

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<sup>22</sup> This dissent group mainly comes from the MIR that had merged in the late 1980s with the ELN, as already pointed out in another note.

Convención Nacional to be held, and when that was concluded in the turn of the century, communities in southern Bolívar, fueled by paramilitaries, were strongly opposed.

However, talks with the FARC were doomed to failure, not only because they were developed in the midst of war, where each side had a hidden agenda to get militarily stronger, but because paramilitaries got much bigger, fueled now by legalized self-defense entities such as the cooperatives “Convivir,” due to ties with sectors of the armed forces and regional elites, and especially funded by drug trade, which also increasingly scattered insurgency. Deterioration regarding human rights, despite the brand new Constitution, and increased forced displacement from areas of armed conflict, which in the turn of the century came from two million Colombians to nearly six million in 2014,<sup>23</sup> illustrate the humanitarian crisis that engulfed the country.

Under these conditions, the chaos of partisan left-wing became more apparent, and the recent political formations resulting from the demobilization of guerrilla forces did not escape it. Thus, the UP and the AD-M19 virtually disappeared from the political map in the 1990s, to say nothing about the leftist parties, which subsisted only as acronyms of a past that seemed remote. In 1998, the partisan left-wing did not obtain any parliamentary man, if we except a militant trade union leader from the MOIR, who managed to get a seat due to his social figuration. The fall of real socialism and the global crisis of Marxism were added by persistent violence in Colombia, and this frightened off any legal expression of the left-wing, leaving room for armed groups, which increasingly denied in practice the libertarian ideals they claimed to be inspired by.

This became dramatically evident in the armed confrontation between demobilized members of the EPL and a stronghold of this guerrilla that remained using weapons. The latter allied with the FARC, which sought to control trade union sectors and above all territories with a clear presence of “esperanzados,” especially in the region of Urabá. Thus, it revived the old enmity between the guerrillas with a Soviet and Maoist inspiration, although those origins now seem to be things of the past. “Esperanzados,” in turn, formed “comandos populares” for defense and sought support by the police and even paramilitary sectors. As a consequence, there was a fratricidal violence punctuated by chilling massacres on both sides, which ended up with the expulsion of the FARC from

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<sup>23</sup> Figures from the NGOs conducting this survey (available from: <[www.codhes.org](http://www.codhes.org)>. Retrieved on April 1, 2015).

Urabá and the disappearance of the UP in the region later this decade (ARCHILA et al., 2011, 175-185).

Nevertheless, social resistance in Colombia took over political and military action. Social unrest in the years after the end of the century increasingly entered into direct political grounds (ARCHILA et al., 2002). Mobilization was not only for material needs, but also for the dispute regarding development plans and State policies, as well as the enforceability of State's rights. This encourages broad social and political convergences that will result in new organizational processes of the left-wings, as discussed below.

### Towards reconstruction (2000-2010)

The beginning of the new century accentuated the trends observed in the previous decade. Unipolarity and the U.S. hegemony suffered a devastating terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. It is clear that, just as the empire does not have a single center, its enemies are not located in a defined space, too (HARDT and NEGRI, 2002). Meanwhile, the neoliberal model shows clear signs of exhaustion in the midst of the global recession of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is also faced by social movements on a global basis, as already mentioned (SEOANE and TADDEI, 2001, 105-12).

In Latin America, the crisis of neoliberalism is more pronounced, especially due to its bad social results (OCAMPO, 2004, 781-782). Everywhere in the region the masses of unemployed, workers, peasants, Indians, students, housewives, and urban settlers, among others, are mobilizing against economic globalization and pushing for political change, thereby causing a shift towards the left-wing.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On a balance book regarding recent Latin American left-wings, they are descriptively named as “nueva izquierda” and characterized through five traits: plurality of organizational forms and objectives, expanded social bases and political agendas, putting civil society as the main space of political action, seeking revolutionary reforms, and assigning a leading role to democracy. These traits are summarized in two highly topical: search for alternatives to neo-liberalism and democratization of society (RODRÍGUEZ et al., 2005, 31-37). Years before, Jorge Castañeda (1994, 25-26) contrasted it with the right-wing by advocating for change instead of continuity, democracy and human rights instead of national security, identity and national sovereignty instead of economic integration, social justice instead of economic performance, income distribution instead of market operation, reduced inequalities instead of competitiveness, social expenditure instead of inflation control, and need for expenditure instead of consolidation of government finances. In 2006, Carlos Gaviria Díaz, then leftist Colombian presidential candidate, intervened in the debate and said: “Between the old and the current left-wing there is a clear difference, and it is a change in utopia: while the classic left-wing was looking for a classless society (...) the modern one is looking for a possible democratic society” (*El Espectador*, 23-29 de abril de 2006, 14-

These electoral advances in the continent were a result not only of new leftist political strategies, but especially new ways of social mobilization that go beyond party structures (RODRÍGUEZ et al., 2005, and MARTÍ and FIGUEROA, 2006). In addition to particular demands, many social players raise the flags of resistance to economic globalization and push for greater national autonomy in the management of natural resources, as they resume the demands of greater democracy. Also, there are transnational convergences, such as that embodied by the World Social Forums inaugurated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 (SEOANE and TADDEI, 2001).

Amid this continental scene, Colombia is an exception not only because of the right-wing authoritarianism, embodied in the long regime of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), but also due to the increasing alignment that this president had with the administration of George W. Bush, which caused marked tensions with neighboring countries. The failure of peace negotiations with the FARC in early 2002 bent public opinion, for the first time in twenty years, towards the warrior choice. The policy of “Seguridad Democrática” adopted by Uribe Vélez had a strong hand for insurgency and at the same time a gloved hand for paramilitaries. The later, in a process of partial dismantling of their military structures, preserve their economic and political ones while concealing the truth about their atrocities. Drug trafficking, despite the ostentatious official campaigns to defeat it by using costly aerial spraying, still remains as a highly profitable business that feeds all armed players, without ignoring the irrigation it provides to the whole society. The FARC, in their turn, made a tactical withdrawal without any signs of defeat, despite having suffered heavy blows in their military structures. The ELN, in its turn, had lukewarm talks with the government asking for greater involvement of civil society, while it eagerly sought more profitable funding sources, thus sometimes it collided with the FARC.

This political conjuncture, although favoring Uribe’s bloc, was also an opportunity for growth and unity for the democratic left-wing. The dispersion and invisibility that characterized it within the previous period began to be overcome in 1999, after the creation of the Frente Social y Político, an initiative by the CUT. A result of increasing

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A). Herein we ignore the distinction, which has a media taste, between moderate and radical Latin American left-wings, because it is difficult to make a sharp distinction, since they share ideologies and practices, e.g. extractivism, despite the alleged discursive differences.

polarization and frustrated political reforms, various forces of the social and political left-wing converged on the Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), which enabled some significant electoral gains, such as the conquest in 2003 of the mayoralty of Bogotá, an event which was repeated in 2007 and 2011. These trends were ratified through a parliamentary vote in the left-wing achieved in 2006, close to 12%, and especially that which supported the presidential candidate Carlos Gaviria, who won honorable 22% and achieved the second national amount of votes after the re-elected president.<sup>25</sup> Of course, we should not name it as triumphalism, since a part of this amount of votes was not in favor of the left-wing, but against Uribe Vélez.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the desired unity within the plurality of the left-wing seems to crack for reasons ranging from old ideological contradictions to disguised personal appetites for power, going through internal survival of undemocratic practices and even the emergence of open corruption phenomena.<sup>27</sup> So, the PDA has been divided, giving rise to new electoral groups that fight against each other for the small proportion of the population, especially urban, voting for the left-wing.

Given this critical panorama, in Colombia, as elsewhere in Latin America, sociopolitical movements arise,<sup>28</sup> renewing from below the agenda of a left-wing fighting for freedom and equality, upholding the respect for difference. A part of its agenda is triggering the political negotiation of the armed struggle that seems to make its way to the recent talks between the FARC and the administration of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) in Havana and those potential talks with the ELN.<sup>29</sup> Although the future is not guaranteed, there are hopeful signs that Colombia also goes, on its way, towards a possible utopia.

<sup>25</sup> Historically, it is the second electoral result of the Colombian left-wing. The first was the vote for the AD-M19 for the 1991 constituent, which reached 27% (ARCHILA, 2003, 296).

<sup>26</sup> In fact, in 2010 and 2014 the amount of votes for a leftist presidential candidate was again close to 10%.

<sup>27</sup> Just as in Bogotá in the last administration of mayor Samuel Moreno Díaz (2007-2010), grandson of general Rojas Pinilla.

<sup>28</sup> We refer to groups like the Marcha Patriótica and the Congreso de los Pueblos, which gather several social and political movements, in an action that goes beyond the electoral process, without undervaluing it.

<sup>29</sup> Santos, born from the bowels of Uribe's administration, differed from it only on the issue of peace, because regarding the other ones he follows the neoliberal agenda of his predecessor. Nevertheless, this break is enough so that hardcore Uribe followers declare an opposition that, as it often happens in Colombia, also combines all struggle forms.

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