

Hegemonic Vehicles, Capitalism and Conflict: A Critique of the System of Social Relations in Urabá, Colombia

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Why has the oldest armed conflict in the western hemisphere failed to be solved for so long? Is the end of the conflict in Colombia not long overdue? Many generations of scholars have addressed these questions, and hardly we can say that anyone has come with the correct answer. After multiple peace agreements and even more peace processes, including the latest accord of 2016, Colombia is experiencing a new cycle of violence. Although new, it is not an unprecedented outcome of many efforts to achieve peace. History has shown us that every failed effort to transform society through democratic means underpins old and new efforts to transform it through violence. My PhD thesis aims to provide a systemic analysis of why this has been the case.

I try to innovate with my analysis in several ways. I embrace the approach to the conflict that sees it as a social and armed conflict instead of the most common analysis that sees mainly its armed dimension (Estrada Álvarez, 2015; Fajardo, 2015; Vega Cantor, 2015). Based on this distinction between social and armed dimensions of the conflict, I argue that the social conflict that embeds the violence in Colombia originated during the establishment of the hegemony of the capitalist classes since the early 19th century. Thus, I characterise the armed conflict as one of the many cycles of violence within a protracted social conflict. I have also designed a concept called the hegemonic vehicles. With it, I theorise how ruling groups manage to earn the consent of their subordinate groups by providing them with the necessary conditions to pursue their life chances. Thus, these subordinate groups renounce pursuing their class and vested interests, arguably associated with the transformation of the conditions of subordination. I conceptualise the hegemonic vehicles as institutionalised historical practices that structure situational logics enabling and reinforcing subordinate classes' consent for the capitalist hegemony. Finally, I employ a critique of capitalism that discerns its structural, systemic and relational dimensions (Azmanova, 2020) in order to argue that the

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conflict in Colombian, at some point in history, around the 1950s, turned into a hegemonic vehicle. My research focuses on the development of the conflict in a sub-region of the Antioquia department called Urabá. Despite being one of the most significant hubs of capital creation in the country, this subregion is infamous for its war intensity and the longstanding victimisation of its population.

My characterisation of the conflict as a hegemonic vehicle enables us to understand why the protraction of the conflict. It explains its function to the country's status quo and the capitalist system of social relations. First, it has created consent over the protection of the fundamental institutions that structure the social relations in the country, namely the private property of the means of production. With the discourse of defending the society and by polarising the subversive actors, the ruling class has managed to bind working-class Colombians to agree to respect private property and earn their legitimacy to employ the state's monopoly of violence to protect it. Second, the violence of the conflict has been a means to accumulate capital enabled by the displacement and dispossession of peasants living in unproductive lands. The war has enforced capitalism's operative logic of competitively producing profit into areas that before were means of subsistence for millions of poor Colombians (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Third, the conflict has polarised Colombia into those threatening society with their subversive projects and those who embrace the rules of the ruling classes (Fals-Borda, 1968). The "good" Colombians are those who let forgo their grievances for social transformations and concede to act within the system's guidelines. For these reasons, the conflict is a powerful institution that bestows power and legitimacy to the ruling classes. And its resolution requires not only disarming the "evil" side but tracking the structural and systemic causes of the conflict and transforming them. That was the spirit of the 2016 peace accord. And that is an argument for why it has failed to bring longstanding peace to the country.

The research employs a historical analysis of the political economy of Colombia and deepens research into the case of Urabá. This region has been an interesting social laboratory to understand the conflict for the multiplicity of armed actors that have dominated it and its paradoxical social relations (Bejarano, 1988). Despite being one of the country's most productive regions, it shows alarming inequality, poverty, and violence rates. I demonstrate throughout the research that the history of Urabá mirrors the history of capitalism in the country. It has been an area of violent expansion of capital (Marx, 1981). However, this process has been achieved by combining coercion and consent among its inhabitants. The interest of this case is that despite the violent nature of their rule, the ruling classes meet the essential and most salient interests of the workers. Urabá is a perfect scenario for using Gramsci's (1985) hegemony and understanding how bourgeoisies rule despite crises, contradictions, and conflicts.

Despite my thesis's critical and sometimes pessimistic tone, it endeavours to provide an academic contribution to peacebuilding. This work has shown that the only way to move forward and transform Colombia from its foundations is by ending the violence. Therefore, my analysis gives a central role to the agency of the different actors. It acknowledges that resistance, although hard in the country, is a genuine alternative for peace militants to achieve change. The conflict may be a hegemonic vehicle, but the hegemony and the social institutions are enacted by people's practices. People still and always will have the chance to transform everything. My work simply aims to shed light on what must be studied, critiqued, and transformed. If I could define its main goal and value, it would be: to provide critical insight and be a conceptual tool for transformation.



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