

Detours

Strategies for social movements

“With them, one cannot strike directly, but we can still fight.”

-Allan Basílio, Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro

“We do not fight from the military trenches, but from the trenches of citizenship.”

-Hernando Roldan, Moravia, Medellin

In the conditions which I describe, where violence seems to be the only mediator between young people and the recognition that they much desire and deserve, which ways can the civil society take to reduce violence in peripheral communities? Here I want to think about a confluence of ideas that emerge between community actors in two of the most violent cities in the world, Rio de Janeiro and Medellin, Colombia. In both cases, the success in the prevention of violence emerges from a decision not to face violence directly, but from the sides, subverting its bases instead of making direct combat.

Allan Basílio, a young intellectual and community leader in the slum of Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro offers the following argument in a video that he and Glauber Martins made with me about his work. There have been lots of programs that intended to fight the violence and criminality in the slums – especially in Santa Marta, once the headquarters of the feared *Comando Vermelho* – but they have had little success. The armed actors recognize that these programs act in the contrary of their interests, because their directors and sponsors speak clearly of their motives. Noticing that projects “against violence” are really against them, the gangs do everything they can to destroy projects that work directly against violence. These violent groups have strong roots in the slums, manipulate networks of dependence and clientele, and have great power over the weapons, likewise the projects “against violence” will always lose.

Although they cannot “beat them up front”, the civil society can still fight against the gangs, if they do it in a more strategic way. In their video, Basílio and Martins explain the obstacles that they faced to defeat armed actors without direct confrontation. All the people

who were raised in the neighborhood know the dealers well, because they played with them since childhood, went to school together, and everyday meet them in the streets. And the dealers speak openly that they know their way is not correct, and it would be better not to live this way: the Comando Vermelho motto – “the right side of the wrong life” – arises from the daily experience of each dealer. For Basílio and Martins, the strongest expression of this attitude in front of their own life is that dealers do not want their children to want to be dealers: in reality, they enter drug dealing to give a better life to their own families, not to create a “family business”. That is why working with children is fundamental, because it is a space that both the community and dealers agree.

In Rio de Janeiro, a child starts early in the life of crime, many times running small errands for the dealers when they are between 8 to 12 years old.¹ According to Basilio and Martins, the children want respect, money, and power, and associate themselves with dealers because the gang can promise these goods. The gang has such an appeal because it is the only power in the slum and it has what many children and teenagers want... but if another actor in the neighborhood offers alternatives, the children will consider it as well. And if the children have alternatives, they don't need to enter the gang, and the soldiers and salesman that the traffic needs, will not be not available. Grass roots program in education, sport, or art for the children subvert the support base of traffic. In this way, in the words of Basilio and Martins, the dealers also “want alternatives for their children” – and for other children – so they support the construction of new projects, evn though the projects will put an end to their own power. It's a powerful example of the strategic revolution proposed by Lenin: “We'll sell to the capitalists the rope with which they'll hang themselves.”

In the last five years, in part through this work of strengthening of the support bases for children – and in part for the change in the structure of drug trafficking –Santa Marta is no longer the capital of violence. Trafficking still exists, but without the force, power, or violence that it once had, and the young people say that the community is so great that they will never live in another neighborhood.

In Medellin, the vocabulary is different, but the idea is similar. After the death of Pablo Escobar, the man who had organized drug trafficking in Colombia, his organization fell into caos. The hired murders sold their services to anyone, the violent groups fought to defend their own territory or to conquer a new territory, and the crime increased at unbelievable

¹ Dowdney, Luke. *Crianças do Tráfico*. Rio: ISER, 2002

rates. The popular militias responded to the crises by making a stronger army of gangs to defeat them all, destroying many armed criminal groups and incorporating others inside of their own structure, by a very bloody process that people still lament. Shortly after, the militia also became corrupt, selling drugs then collapsing into chaos.

Inside the logic that has always reigned in Medellin, another armed group had to show up and impose a new order, but in the Moravia slum something new happened. After a negotiation with the militia, a group of young people established the Conflict Mediation Center and the militia, already tired of solving every disagreement in the community, agreed with the proposal of sending every conflict to the Center. At the time, some people at the community thought that the mediators were part of the militias, because the militia sent the problems to the Mediator Center, but it was this initiative that ended with the armed logic in the neighborhood.

Just like in Santa Marta, the people who wanted to make peace found common ground with the armed actor. In the case of Santa Marta, they could agree about the necessity of alternatives for children, but in Moravia, the common interest was more complicated. First, there was a pragmatic question: the Center wanted to mediate conflicts, and the militia had had enough of having to solve every problem between neighbors. But the second question was yet more important: the militia spoke of wanting the good of the community. Many people thought that this speech was purely hypocritical and cynical, but the young people from the Conflict Mediation Center recognized that many militia soldiers used the words sincerely – the speech of the community was central in the construction of the legitimacy of the militia for the residents –.

Doing good for the community resulted in a common interest between the militia and the Center, a place to start a conversation.

Elsewhere, I analyzed the process of the construction of peace in Moravia in more detail,² but here I want to emphasize the strategic decision of the Center: instead of fighting directly against the militia, it decided to subvert its ideological base. When the people went to the militia to ask for a resolution of a conflict, they had recognized and fortified the authority and legitimacy of the militia, but when they went to the Center, this monopoly on power fell apart. And when the people – and the militia – learned that a pacific group could do

² “Ontologic Mediation”, in the articles of Essays to Understand the Street of www.shinealight.org

better for the community than an armed group, the militia lost its reason of being. In a few months, the militia began a negotiation with the State, exchanged their weapons for promises of a new school in Moravia, and abandoned the armed fight.

In both cases, the civil society learned that the fastest way between war and peace is not a straight line. To win the fight against violence, they had to follow a long detour.

François Jullien, in his treatise on the processes in the construction of the truth and meaning in the West and in China, writes about the same strategy that gave so much success to Moravia and Santa Marta. In the writing of the famous Sun Tsu, we found the following advice:

“To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles it is not an end in itself; however, to overwhelm the enemy without entering in combat is the apotheosis of excellence.”

“The best general is one whose merits a person never dreams to complement, because his victory is against an already defeated enemy.”³

In war, we can see the difference between Greek phalanx, which faces its rival in the battlefield – an “open” and “honest” space where the best army wins, according to the Greek thought – and the expertise of the Chinese strategy – always attacking the lines of supply, disclosing gossip, and making surprise attacks – .⁴ The civil society will always be weaker with the weapons – and many times, in political legitimacy – that an armed actor, thus we have to think how we can be more *strategic* in the fight against violence. But the lesson of Medellin goes beyond the Chinese way of thinking. Usedetours to win is not the only issue; more importantly is that the winner of a direct war will become corrupt just like its old enemy. This is why the militia like the guerrilla and paramilitary followed the same way to the traffic and tyranny.

The strategy described by Allan Basilio is clearly a war of detours: instead of facing them, the civil society went to the base of the gang: the children that were going to be the soldiers

³ Sun Tsu. *Sunzi bingfa*. In Jullien, François, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*. trans. Sophia Hawkes. NY: Zone Books, 2000, p. 35

⁴ In the West, this opposition is more clearly in Gramscian philosophy: the war of position versus the war of confrontation.

and dealers. They found the weak point in the gang – the fact that they did not want their children to become drug dealers – and opened a new battlefield, in a space where they knew that they would win.

In Medellin, we need another step to understand the victory through detour of the Conflict Mediation Center. The militia's discourse valued the community, and thought that its "social cleansing" practice was the best way to improve the neighborhood. At that time, there were people who went to the militia and told them that the war was not the best way to peace, but nobody believed them; the conflict was not mature enough. Instead of convincing the militia by *saying* the truth, the Mediator Center, had to *show* the truth,⁵ slowly unrolling it, so that the militia could learn the truth by itself.

Jullien interprets a poem by the famous Chinese poet Du Fu to show this process:

*At the bend in the stream -- the wind in the pines stretches far,
Rats slip by -- under ancient tiles.
I know not what king owns this temple.⁶*

The poet starts with a series of images that everyone can associate with: the peaceful sound of running water and the wind blowing in the trees, the slow footsteps in the woods. It is an image of peace. Small animals vanish in the bushes... but the rat becomes the symbol of corruption with the signs of humans: the broken tiles. When he sees the last sentence, questioning who is the owner of the temple, the reader already has a vision of peace and tranquility in decay, of the tragic loss of the beauty; he has become a co-conspirator in the construction of the meaning of the poem; because the poet *did not say everything*. The same way, when a Chinese painter has to paint a monastery in the mountains, he paints a monk carrying water from the river, because everyone knows that where there's a monk, there's a monastery.⁷

"The value of detour lies in its capacity for *unfolding*. By deploying a succession of phrases... it gradually *opens up* reality; and the continuous concatenation to which it gives rise enables us, by accompanying it, to immerse

⁵ See Jullien's commentaries about Confucius, 238. Also interesting in this context is the differentiation that Ludwig Wittgenstein made between "showing" and "saying".

⁶ Du Fu, "The Jade Flower Palace". In Julien, p. 344

⁷ Julien, p. 349

ourselves in it: not to seize hold of it all at once, as direct expression purports to do, but gradually to become imbued with it...⁸

Let us imagine that the poet wants more than to unfold the world of temples in ruins. His poem also criticizes the king, because he reminds us that as the owner, he has the responsibility of maintaining the sacred places, yet he allows them to decline.

The reader is the protagonist in the process of constructing meaning, thus he is paying more attention and listening to the lessons. Still more importantly, he is already co-conspirator in the meaning process of the poem, and will be more determined to listen to the poet's message, because he has found it himself.

In Moravia the Mediator Conflict Center was the poem. It was not possible to tell the militia directly that its effort was not best thing for everyone, because the militia was convinced that its armed politics was the only way to make peace in the community. The Center did not lose any time with direct arguments: the mediators only asked the militia's collaboration with referrals of their daily conflicts. The militia, like the reader of the poem, realized by itself that mediation helped the community more than weapons, and to participate in the construction of this knowledge, felt like the protagonist in the process. That is why the militia left the weapons with such velocity: they read the poem well.

⁸ Julien, p. 345