

Legitimacy in Colombian Shantytowns

The gang as a social agent and founder of ideology

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Translated by Louise Marsh

One July morning, a few days after the start of the summer holidays, I arrived at *Altos de Cazuca*, a hillside shantytown south of Bogotá where tens of thousands of families who had been forced into internal exile during the final years of the war now live. The main street looked the same as it did any other morning with street vendors, a few shops and small local buses making the journey up and down the hill. I was collaborating in an investigation with a well-known NGO who operated there and walked up to the few simple rooms above a communal lounge that made up its headquarters.

Inside the building, the mood was not the same as it had been the previous day: the children and young people were chatting in hushed voices and there was an anxious look in their eyes. When at last I approached a teacher to find out what had happened:

“Early this morning 16 kids were killed,” he told me. “They left them lined up on the main street, next to the bus stop by the park. That’s 21 kids they’ve already taken out this week”

Tragically this is a common scene in Cazuca and last year forty-three children and adolescents were killed during the first week of September¹. Nevertheless, it is a reality that is barely recognised: not one of Bogotá’s newspapers reported the mass slaughter and, even amongst human rights groups and NGOs, the news never spread beyond the teachers working directly in the area of *Altos ed Cazuca*. As in many marginalized neighbourhoods, such killings have become a normal part of the tragedy of daily life.

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1 Statistic compiled by the Colombian NGO based in Bogotá, *Taller de Vida (Life Workshop)*. Personal communication, 9th September 2003.

When young people from Altos de Cazuca talk about these killings, they refer to the social cleansing that is carried out elsewhere by paramilitaries, self-defense forces or death squads. Other countries may label them mobs or gangs (or the *gangu* or *quadrilhas* of Brazil) but they all follow the same institutional structure of an armed para-state organisation that supports itself through organised crime and social control. We generally think of these armed groups affirming their power through the use of weapons and imposition of fear, and the situation that I discuss in Cazuca is no different from this common understanding: indiscriminate killings cultivate terror in the community as a way of overthrowing any possible threat to the gang's hegemony.²

In this essay I aim to challenge this common understanding. In addition to the power that is fundamental to gang politics, I wish to analyse how the armed groups come to legitimate themselves before the town, and how is it that they gain the support or collaboration of such a large proportion of people who live in the areas they control. In order to understand the legitimacy of the armed para-statal groups, it is important to recognise that they are also *social* groups who provide services and who gain command through the necessary resources they offer the community.

In the pages that follow, therefore, I will analyse the input of resources (by way of security, employment and social services) that gangs offer their communities, which will lead us to examine the practice of *clientelismo*, the popular client-based patronage system that forms the basis of power relations in many Latin American countries. I will subsequently investigate the process by which gangs create the problems to which they present themselves as solutions and how, therefore, they construct the need for their own existence. Nevertheless, this is not merely an academic concern for I believe this also offers new alternatives in considering political activism amongst communities controlled by armed groups.

The gang as a social agent

Hernando Roldán is one of the keenest observers of violence in Columbia and he describes the history of Medellín's violence according to the following system:

- Stage 1. Period of anarchy where several *parches* or small gangs fight to control the territory and drugs-trade.
- Stage 2. One of these gangs, or possibly another external agent, gains victory and imposes order.

² In this essay I use the word 'gang' to refer to the larger organised armed groups who are hegemonic in the neighbourhoods, while the smaller informal groups (whether criminal or not) are referred to as *parches*, in keeping with Colombian slang.

Stage 3. Since this new agent has no opposition, it starts to become corrupt by selling drugs and contracting assassinations etc.

Stage 4. The armed group dissolves with internal conflicts and the neighbourhood returns to the anarchy mentioned in Stage 1.

Stage 5. Tired of the corruption and violence, a new armed group presents itself to re-establish order (as in Stage 2).

Stage 6. The process continues...³

This system explains the organisation of the *Medellín Cartel* that emerged during the 1980's through small informally organised gangs, and which was succeeded by armed self-defence militia soldiers, guerrilla control and paramilitary force to date (currently between Stages 2 and 3). The important thing to recognise is that this process occurs dialectically with the public who embrace the imposition of order and, at the same time, are tired of the corruption and violence. In a context of anarchic violence, the public is prepared to award legitimacy to the agent who offers an alternative and it is important not to allow the military aspect of this process (the victory of one gang over the other) to hide the political (people's legitimacy).

Francisco Gutiérrez interviewed a number of paramilitaries, militia soldiers and other armed leaders in an attempt to understand the reasoning behind their speech. He summarises his fascinating conclusions accordingly:

“Those interviewed, with few exceptions, make a special point of establishing a specific order which is rooted in notions of reciprocity, local education, defending traditional values (certain sexual moral conduct, for example) and calm frames of mind which may be aggravated from afar.”⁴

Authorities in violent neighbourhoods will substantiate some of these justifications for the gang's control and will invariably add others. In *Altos de Cazuca*, I noted four grounds for the legitimisation of gangs, which I shall examine in the following pages:

1. Security

2. Economy

³ Hernando Roldán, Mónica Arias, y Gerardo Vásquez, personal communication, 19th July 2004.

⁴ Gutiérrez, Francisco, "¿Ciudadanos en Armas?" in Centro de Estudios Sociales, *Las Violencias: inclusión creciente*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (Ciencias Humanas): 1998, p. 190.

3. Social Services

4. Values

Although we do not wish to believe so, it is true that these services do offer a certain kind of legitimacy. Not only are the gangs free from armed revolution, but the people of the area also become subdued and reticent in the presence of the gang. In reality, a 1997 survey showed that people living in poor neighbourhoods actually wanted change *less* than the higher classes, a fact that can be confirmed by a very worrying statistic:

“The percentage of homes that declares its accordance with the status quo is almost 2.5 times higher amongst those with lower incomes than those with higher incomes.”⁵

Although we should use this survey with caution, it indicates that those who live in areas that are controlled by gangs, guerrillas and the paramilitary endorse authority more than those who live in areas under government control.⁶ In effect, many gangs hold more legitimacy than the State itself.

Peace and Security

It is easy to think of gangs as violent groups, particularly on consideration of statistics regarding assassinations in Medellín, Bogotá or Rio de Janeiro’s marginalized neighbourhoods, but when the gang becomes established, it no longer identifies (or is it identified by) the town in this way. In contrast, the violent actions of the gang are seen to ‘construct order’; they *put an end to violence instead of participating in it*. Graffiti in *Altos de Cazuca* serves to illustrate this ideology with examples condemning thieves, drug addicts, rapists and guerrilla-supporters, all signed by the umbrella group for the paramilitaries, the United Self-Defence Forces of Columbia (AUC).

Gutiérrez conducted his interviews in 1997 during another period of violence when armed organisations were made up of guerrillas and militia soldiers instead of the paramilitaries we see today, so it is fascinating to note that the way in which people speak about security has not

5 See Cuellar, María Mercedes, "Valores, instituciones, y capital social," *Estrategia* # 268 (1997). Cited in Rubio, Mauricio, "Rebeldes y Criminales." Centro de Estudios Sociales, *Las Violencias: inclusión creciente*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (Ciencias Humanas): 1998, p. 125 (footnote).

6 I do not wish to exaggerate here: there are poor people who live in government-controlled areas (in the north of Bogotá, north of the mountains, for example) just as there are rich people who live in paramilitary-controlled areas (farmers in Córdoba, for example) but as a general rule it is less likely for the poor to live in areas under the control of a parastatal group.

changed, despite the contradiction in the armed groups' beliefs. "We enforce civility", one militia soldier told Gutiérrez, while another declared that "the militia are the armed branch of the civic movement."⁷ The same idea still stands: the town wants peace and security and the only one capable of providing it is the armed group.

Given the situation of a State-less society, the violent group comes to legitimate itself by way of peaceful discussion, thus bringing new understanding that a greater force is needed in order to uphold security against delinquents and criminals. Some people in Medellín refer to the gangs as the 'Prison-less State',⁸ where authority's only castigation is violence. Young people in Cazuca explain the consequences of breaking self-defence rules: first come the threats; after the second offence there are beatings or other physical punishment; the third defiance will be met with death. Paramilitaries display the names of the young people who have been threatened in the park every week.⁹ Inhabitants of Cazuca usually defend the violence according to the belief that "they [the paramilitaries] had no other choice...with thieves, what can you do?" In this language of justification, the gang (a large self-defence armed group) *protects* the town against the depredations of the smaller groups (*parches*) and from common delinquency.

In analysing the nature of security, it is also worth considering the relationship between the gang and the police and, according to those living in Cazuca, there is close collaboration between the two. Police dare not go up the hill to *Altos de Cazuca* but they often provide the gang with intelligence and suggest whom they might kill¹⁰ while, equally, there is a lot to suggest that many paramilitary members are, in fact, police or militants working in the guise of plain clothes.¹¹ Other neighbourhoods reveal different accounts where gangs legitimise themselves according to their *opposition* to the police, so that much further investigation is needed before drawing a final conclusion.

Economy

Security is not the only scarce resource in marginal neighbourhoods and it is also worth

7 Gutiérrez, p. 200.

8 Ramos, Leandro *Formas de violencia urbana populares*. Bogotá, Universidad Nacional (Sociology Thesis) 2001, p. 269.

9 Interviews with children and young people in *Altos de Cazuca*, July 2004. One youth disagreed: "Here they don't give any warning of who they are going to kill. It's whoever it happens to be" (Interview with Carlos Cortés, 17th July 2004).

10 Interviews with children and young people in *Altos de Cazuca*, July 2004. Leandro Ramos observed the same relationship between police and paramilitaries in the Berlín district of Suba, Bogotá. Ramos, p.219.

11 In particular see *Colombia Nunca Más : crímenes de lese humanidad*. Bogotá: (various NGOs), November 2000. Vol. I.

considering the labour and consumer markets.¹² As in many of Latin America's marginal neighbourhoods, the majority of people in Cazuca work for the informal economy, providing domestic help, working as street sellers, rubbish pickers, couriers etc¹³ and gain a pittance of a salary. By contrast, the salary of a young soldier joining the paramilitary would be 400,000 pesos/month¹⁴ (US\$150), a fortune in this neighbourhood. A large part of the neighbourhood's economy also moves about with the trafficking of drugs that is almost completely under paramilitary control. Gangs campaign against the sale of drugs in an attempt to show the public that they are working in their best interests and for the security of the whole town but this also stands to defend their market; the paramilitary gang provides employment for dealers and drugs lords so they, in turn, need to be rewarded with loyalty.

The gang's profits also offer community benefits. The money from a large sale of drugs, or that made from a contracted killing, extends to local businesses including bars, brothels and local markets such that a number have come to rely on the gang's money in order to sustain trade and pay employees' wages¹⁵ but, equally important, the paramilitary leaders have more legitimate economic interests as they are the owners of pharmacies, markets and transport companies. According to the young people who live in *Altos de Cazuca*, "everybody" knows who the gang leaders are and they recognise that it is they who provide the employment, services and consumer goods to the neighbourhood. This is a system that ties the neighbourhood's insecurities to paramilitary affairs and has been referred to by some as '*Insecurity Capitalism*.'¹⁶

Armed groups taking advantage of the economy in order to connect themselves to the town is nothing new to Columbia's history, nor to that of Latin America.¹⁷ Later we shall see how this phenomenon increases the power of client dependency that is used by the paramilitaries and gangs, and how it manages to undermine the possibility of a civil society.

Social Services

12 In this section, my analysis is heavily dependant on the techniques developed by Luke Dowdney in *Niños en el Tráfico de Drogas*. Rio de Janeiro: COAV and Save the Children, 2003.

13 For a study of the forms of employment held by Cazuca inhabitants, see González, Celinda y Rey, Olga. *Niñez y Desplazamiento*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (Thesis, Social Work) 2001.

14 Interview with young paramilitaries: Altos de Cazuca, 19th May and 26th June 2004. Other sources suggest this to be the going rate for young recruits.

15 For an analysis of the consequences of this dependence see *Calle de la Agonía* by Kurt Shaw (April 2004), currently available in Spanish and Portugese from 'Ensayos para entender la calle' at www.shinealight.org

16 Cubides, Fernando, "De lo privado y lo público" in Centro de Estudios Sociales, *Las Violencias: inclusión creciente*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (Ciencias Humanas): 1998, p. 25.

17 Bello Marta et al. *Relatos de la Violencia: impacto del desplazamiento forzado en la niñez y juventud*. Bogotá, Universidad Nacional, 2000, p. 55.

The character of Robin Hood (which Eric Hobsbawm has called the '*Social Bandit*') is very important to our understandings of the gang's legitimisation. Pablo Escobar's social work is still pertinent in Medellín through the construction of houses, providing a basic food basket to the poor, creating football pitches etc., and the same phenomenon is evident in marginal neighbourhoods in many places, even forming part of the mythology of the North American mafia as can be seen in a large number of Martin Scorsese films.

“Everybody loves them [the gang's leaders] because they have never stopped caring for the community and helping the needy,”¹⁸ Marcos, the leader of a group of hired assassins, explained to Alfonso Salazar. The idea of ‘collaboration’ in this instance is fundamental as the leader buys the town's allegiance with gifts but, importantly, does so without forgetting his roots and thus maintains working class values of collaboration, solidarity and what is known in Columbia as *mamagallismo*. Though not said explicitly, Marcos’ speech makes reference to ‘the others’: the political traitors who stayed in Bogotá or Cartagena and the businessmen who grew up in the neighbourhood but who now wish to erase the evidence of their past. The gang provides services, but does so without cutting the organic tie to the community, which means services come without the stigmas of charity or ‘*assistance*’ that are associated with benefits from the State or the Church.

In Brazil, large *gangues* offer recreation to the town¹⁹ in the form of funk dances and large social events where the whole neighbourhood dances to modern music, while in other cities the gangs build football pitches or buy shirts for the local teams or provide food and drink for large local festivals. These activities may seem to us of little importance but they are an essential part of the way in which armed groups come to legitimate themselves within a community.

In recent years, paramilitary gangs in Medellín have started to create their own NGOs which offer social services to the community in the form of sports groups, women’s and youth associations, and bodies that promise to uphold security in the neighbourhoods. To add further complexity, paramilitaries offer independent youth groups considerable assets in exchange for their affiliation with the paramilitaries in their political system.²⁰ It is clear here that the paramilitaries' objective is not just in providing social services, but also in putting an end to independent social spaces.

18 Salazar, Alfonso. *No nacimos pa' semilla*. Bogotá, CINEP, 1994, p.112.

19 It is appropriate here to recall the old Roman saying that the town can only keep the people happy with bread and circuses.

20 Interview with members of the social movement “Picacho con Futuro”, Medellín, 21st July 2004.

Significantly, paramilitaries in *Altos de Cazuca* have not followed this same path towards their legitimacy: it is the municipality and not the gang that built the park, and the NGOs that organise popular local festivals. This may also explain why the paramilitaries receive less support from the young people than amongst other social groups.

Values

>From my analysis of the last three categories, I believe that every neighbourhood with a strong presence of criminals or armed groups would be able to recognise itself. Colombian armed urban groups distinguish themselves according to their difference in values:²¹ youth from both Cazuca and Medellín's popular neighbourhoods know they will be threatened not just for criminal behaviour or for activism against the gangs, but also for violating rules of social conduct. Women, for example, are forbidden from wearing tops that show the navel while long hair and earrings are not allowed on men. In May, paramilitaries in Cazuca killed a young black man because he had slept with a woman who was not his wife.²²

According to Gutiérrez, the armed groups believe that Colombian sub-development is the result of the disorder of daily life so that the solution to the problem is discipline:

“A discussion centred around self-control and what Foucault calls ‘governability’ (*self governance*), the capacity to manage and organise passions.”²³

The discipline that the gang imposes through their *cleaning* is a form of *armed instruction*, which forces the town to become disciplined. Equally, the act of participating with the armed groups brings the discipline necessary to live in the kind of society imagined by the paramilitaries: “Participation in the armed campaign also represents their acquisition of superior skills; the term *cleaning* here acquires a pedagogical inflexion.”²⁴

I believe it important to situate this practice into the Colombian social context. Several friends have told me proudly that Columbia spends more on hygiene and cleaning products than any other country, a detail which accounts for Columbia’s ‘moral superiority’.²⁵ Equally, we need to

21 This is not to say that gangs in other countries do not speak of values, more so that this discourse is particularly exaggerated in Columbia.

22 Interview with Carlos Cortés, 17th July 2004. Cortés speculated there to be an element of racism in this story, in that the gang did not tolerate the more open manner in which black people from the coast approached flirting and sex.

23 Gutiérrez, pp. 196-7.

24 *ibid*, p. 197.

25 I have been unable to confirm this information and, although it may not be entirely true, their pride is representative of an important system of values.

remember that the Columbian pedagogical model stems from the religious system where education was less concerned with the development of intellectual skills and more so about behavioural discipline such as how to make one's bed, standing with correct posture etc. The 'armed instruction' that is deployed by the paramilitaries comes from this definition of education, which tries to discipline passions in an even more secular context.

Gutiérrez discovered that the police and military used a similar manner of speech:

“The solution offered by both the military and the police was to submit to armed pedagogy; thus the armed organisation asserts itself as a civic educator in particularly difficult conditions.”²⁶

Evidently this is armed education in its perfect form, i.e. without teachers. Gutiérrez tells a terrible story of a young girl who was assassinated by the paramilitaries: he asked them why they had killed her, to which they replied, “We did not kill her. She killed herself.” It turns out that a month earlier they had threatened her after she wore a top that revealed her naval. She carried on dressing like this so they punished her physically. She continued to dress this way so they killed her. “They were her own mistakes and it was her inability to learn that killed her...there was no *agent nor victim*.”²⁷

These values are self-justifying and act as a way of clearing the conscience of murderers, though they also serve to legitimate the gang before the public. Inhabitants of both Medellín and Cauca's marginal neighbourhoods have been forcibly expelled from their homes in the countryside and now live in internal exile, caught between post-modern-urban values and those of the traditional-peasantry. Armed groups (today's paramilitaries as much as the militia and guerrillas from yesteryear) hold peasantry values with control over dress and sexuality, mutual exchange²⁸ and command respect towards authority, calling for honour and retribution.²⁹

They also maintain an element of peasant egalitarianism, as one community leader in Cauca lamented: “one struggles to do one's best but people are jealous.”³⁰ Although those in the gang are able to progress, everybody else is left in an equal position, avoiding the jealousy and envy that is always associated with the transition to modern Capitalism.

26 Gutiérrez, p. 192.

27 *ibid*, p.197. Many young people in Cauca told a similar story which suggests this process has already become widespread.

28 Bello Marta et al. *Relatos de la Violencia: impacto del desplazamiento forzado en la niñez y juventud*. Bogotá, Universidad Nacional, 2000, p. 219.

29 Ramos, p. 419.

30 González, Celinda y Rey, Olga. *Niñez y Desplazamiento*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (social work thesis) 2001, p. 131.

This whole system of armed pedagogy, which strives to maintain traditional values in the face of Capitalism and modernity, acts as a tool for the gang's legitimisation. The gang stays by the town's side, sharing the same values and identifying itself with it. The gang's activity is detrimental to community interests but this semiotic-ethical identification surpasses the material fight.³¹

The armed patronage system

In order to understand the power held by the armed gangs, it is not merely sufficient in recognising that they are social groups that come to establish themselves through the 'benefits' that they bring to the community. We also need to analyse the old Latin American tradition of *clientelismo*, the ideological instrument that ties the community to the armed/social group.

We can construct a genealogy of the patronage system starting with the Roman Empire when influential noblemen exerted their power by offering working-class clients benefits such as food, land, employment and security in exchange for their support in political armed fights. These relations outlived the fall of Rome; they became established in the Iberian Peninsula and arrived to the New World.

“The Spanish State controlled society *indirectly* through a structure of local and regional power: town councils made up of distinguished local landowners, miners and traders exercised local power and were the first to administer justice according to the power they had held previously... Military force was primarily exercised by the regional militia, generally under the direction of distinguished locals.”³²

In some Latin American countries (Mexico and Argentina in particular), modernization forced some changes to this system: industrialisation, worldwide commerce and immigration prompted the development of a modern State with more vertical, logical and bureaucratic controls over society. In Columbia, and other countries in Latin America, this process of State modernisation was never more than the project of a few cosmopolitan urban elites. The country remained fundamentally decentralised with authority held by local political bosses (*caciques*) who officially owed allegiance to the State (manifesting itself through taxes) although, in reality, they were completely free to exploit their territories as they wished. It was, and continues to be, closer

31 The process is the same within North American politics where the Republicans speak of 'family values' (anti-abortion, anti-feminism, anti-homosexuality) in order to gain working class votes.

32 González, Fernán. "La violencia política y la construcción de lo público en Colombia" in *Las Violencias*, p. 167.

to the medieval feudal system than to that of the modern State.³³ In this context, local leaders (*caciques* and town patrons) asserted their authority through official patronage structures, helping peasants and farm labourers in exchange for returned fidelity.

It was after the brutal civil War of a Thousand Days that the Columbian State saw the need for centralised authority but, with neither the money nor the military power to control all of the diverse, divided and mountainous territory, they decided to take advantage of local powers and incorporated them into the system.

“The State does not exert authority through impersonal modern institutions, but through the power structure that existed beforehand in the local or regional society.”³⁴

Thus, instead of incorporating people in a modern State of Law comprising legal systems and impersonal authority, power in Columbia continued to be commanded through traditional power mechanisms and was centred on the exchange of local benefits and fidelity towards the State.

The traditional political parties (Liberals and Conservatives) also tried to assimilate traditional power structures and used the State's money to support loyal patrons and to punish those in opposition. Riots that followed the assassination of Jorge Eliezar Gaitán contributed to the *Violencia* disaster and founded a new patronage system which Fernando Cubides has called the ‘*armed patronage system*’.³⁵ Under this new structure, local patrons were no longer merely traditional leaders or representatives of political parties, but also Conservative and Liberal guerrillas and, in time, these clientele systems would come to establish themselves into one of Columbia’s main terrorist organisations, the revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (*FARC*); the National Liberation Army (*ELN*); various paramilitary groups or senior armed drugs traffickers. In this new context, the State was just one of many armed groups capable of supporting a patronage system which was, in public opinion, highly inefficient in many ways.

This has brought us to the most important stage of my analysis: political legitimacy (held by State and para-statal groups alike), which is founded on the benefits that a patron can bring to his clients. According to modern political philosophy, the modern State gains authority through its

33 Idea proposed by Ligia Inés Vélez Ceballos, personal communication, 22nd June 2004.

34 González, p. 173. The best analysis I have found of this process is in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, when the politician Apolinar Moscote attempts to exercise authority (that has been given to him by the State without any real foundation) over Macondo and Buendía. García Márquez, Gabriel, *Cien Años de Soledad*. Barcelona: Argos Vergara, 1981, p. 53 onwards.

35 Cubides, p. 25.

capacity to uphold law and its position as an impersonal and objective agent but, according to the majority of Columbians (and also, I believe, the majority of Latin Americans), the State never entered into this game of legitimacy so that instead of looking to legitimise itself in any modern sense, it does so through consideration of the benefits it can offer its clients.

The problem is that, despite its own corruption, the State's patronage system will never be as effective as that of the armed or para-statal groups; its drugs trafficking will not be as profitable; it has human rights obligations that the gangs do not have and the State has much more bureaucracy to deal with. More importantly, perhaps, there will be some sectors that wish to construct a modern State, which creates conflict that impedes the workings of the patronage system.

“Strangely (but reasonably I believe) they accuse the State and their agents of similar behaviour.

The State does not play fair since it fluctuates between the internal and the external...”³⁶

It is interesting to note that the State's rhetoric that speaks of itself as an impartial arbitrator actually causes it to *lose* legitimacy in marginal neighbourhoods. “The government says it is there for everybody, but it only helps those in the North [the rich part of Bogotá],” a young boy from Cazuca told me, “It is so hypocritical: you cannot trust anything it says.”³⁷ In contrast, the scrupulousness of the armed groups is so great that they are rarely accused of hypocrisy: everyone understands their actions to be founded entirely on the patronage system, while it is the government's actions as the ‘patron’ that are taken as ‘corrupt’.³⁸

Ramos notes how all of the favourable outcomes to have come from the Berlín neighbourhood of Suba (Bogotá) such as sewerage, access to community water and light and property legitimisation came about only through party politics.³⁹ People thank their representatives for such intervention with electoral votes, but they also know it to have been a large campaign as the town's loyalty would have passed easily to a gang, had they offered the same services. It is interesting to observe how in many cities, it is in fact the gangs who do provide light,⁴⁰ water,⁴¹ and refuse collection as well as the legitimisation of property.

36 Gutiérrez, p. 198.

37 Conversation with young people from Cazuca, 29th May 2004.

38 See my section on *Hypocrisy and Cynicism* below.

39 Ramos, pp. 40-49

40 In July 2004, a large proportion of conflicts dealt with by the *Centro de Mediación y Resolución de Conflictos* (Medellín), were concerned with paramilitary control over piracy of electricity in shantytowns. (Hernando Roldán, personal communication, 22nd July 2004).

41 The municipality does not provide Altos de Cazuca with piped water so it is private industry (often affiliated to the paramilitaries) that transports it up to the Altos in large trucks.

The result is that *current ideology situates the legitimacy of their authority above the benefits that a patron offers his clients*. In marginal neighbourhoods, the armed gangs (organised *pandillas*, paramilitaries or the militia) offer more effective clientele-relations than those of the State and it is in this way that gangs gain legitimacy: through more effective manipulation of the patronage system.

We still need to understand how the gangs manage to achieve this ideological game and how they come to define legitimacy according to these terms, but for this analysis we need to return to everyday life in the marginal neighbourhood.

Constructing legitimacy

The process I have just described - that the armed group plays with client and patron relations more effectively than the State - hides the whole mechanism behind of the construction of legitimacy. The system that brings the armed gang into power also needs to deconstruct the legitimacy of all other groups and processes, traditional or modern (or post-modern). Consciously or not, *the gang constructs the problems in order to present itself afterwards as the solution*.

This analytic process is not easy to understand so I shall break it down into four different parts:

- 1.** The public only recognises the gang as legitimate because it offers a solution to **the chaos and the enemy**; so it is important to observe how the gang creates the chaos that it will afterwards order.
- 2.** The gang's legitimacy depends on a series of **egocentric values** as its authority is only meaningful within this particular world-view; so we shall consider how the gang destroys the sense of community and trust.
- 3.** The gang's "excesses" will be tolerated only when they appear to be the 'only solution' and it will remain the 'only solution' until the town takes action. It is necessary, therefore, to analyse how the gang maintains community **passivity and silence**.
- 4.** Finally, as noted above, public **cynicism** helps the gang to establish itself so we shall use the last section to explore the mechanisms used to construct this cynicism.

I hope that these steps will help shed light on our fundamental concern: how it is that the gang manages to gain support from the masses. I believe it will also help us understand the functioning (and dis-functioning) of the State, and prompt us to explore new possibilities in marginal neighbourhoods.

The gang and its enemies

Two years ago when I was staying with friends in Medellín, the shootings and exploding firecrackers that occurred throughout the night were so intense that I used to hide myself behind the concrete walls. Now, as the locals are more than aware (and foreigners too have begun to notice) everything is different: people are free to walk peacefully through the previously frenzied district of Guayaquil and there are much fewer fights in slums across the city. This new peace is essentially due to the victory of paramilitary gangs who are affiliated to the United Columbian Self-Defence groups (AUC) and provide the people with a new sense of relief and respite.

The same process is evident in *Llanos* where paramilitary victory has liberated many rural peasants from the external war they endured. Feelings of relief and respite also resound among inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's favelas who almost welcomed the domination by Commando Vermelho's mafia after years of violence and common delinquency. The promise of security holds strong ground for the gang's legitimacy.

Nevertheless, there is one step missing before attaining this legitimacy and it is the question "*security against whom?*" The gang needs an external or internal threat to justify its existence and hide its crimes, so it will do all it can to create this threat.⁴² There are two stages here:

- 1** Ensuring the State is powerless and incapable of offering security.
- 2** Creating an enemy, real or fictitious.

⁴² The same logic exists between George Bush and the "terrorists": Bush needs Osama bin-Laden to justify and conceal the tyranny that he imposes on North American citizens and the world so it makes ontological sense that the US created bin-Laden and his gang during the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan.

The powerlessness of the State

The gang is not alone in its campaign to de-legitimise the State and it has many allies, from the World Bank, the IMF and the North American government to their very own corrupt government officials. All of these organisations constitute a system that opens up space for the armed gang to emerge as the legitimate group.

The gang's fundamental message is that *politics serves no purpose* and they maintain that the solutions to common problems will not be found in a public setting. Armed leaders view politics as a “fundamental disgrace.”⁴³ There are a number of stages necessary in informing the public of these ideals and we have already discussed how the gang shows itself to be a more effective patron than the State. We should also note, however, that there are two consequences of bribing politicians: on the one hand it achieves the gang’s concrete aims but on the other, it discredits politics so that such corruption undermines the entire ideology and, more importantly, it fosters the idea that “all politicians are thieves.”⁴⁴

In this way, the gang justifies and legitimates itself according to the principle that “the State is only another armed group, another gang.” This is an ideology that works for them but it also holds true for all those living in poor neighbourhoods who will be familiar with the situation: the police force does not serve the town and politicians only come to the area to tell lies and search for votes. In the words of Haidy Duque, “water and politicians come up to Cauca in the same way: in the trucks of the local authorities, although politicians only appear every four years.”⁴⁵ Everybody (or better said, those with power) is concerned with delegitimizing the State.

Such abandonment and corruption by the State serves to justify the gang's domination:

“So we see a double renunciation of the State (moral and pedagogical) which justifies at the same time as creating territorial differences. In those excluded areas there are no laws so they need to be proved false.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, it is interesting that the language of post-modern legitimacy works better for the gang than it does for the State, equally true for both right-winged neo-liberal speech as in left-wing anti-assistential speech. It is fascinating to listen to a conversation amongst Colombian

43 Gutiérrez, p. 192.

44 Ramos, p. 54.

45 Duque, Haidy. *El Papel de la Escuela en el contexto de guerra. una mirada al contexto urbano marginal*. Bogotá: Save the Children, 2004, p. 22.

46 Gutiérrez, p. 197.

paramilitaries speaking of human rights, local autonomy and social participation; “It is as if everyone had attended a ‘national school of paramilitary rhetoric,’” Hernando Roldán told me after witnessing a peaceful lull of activity between the community and the paramilitaries, “because now they all speak like that!”⁴⁷

“Therefore, in a perverse u-turn, the moral economy that was created by the *Traitor State*⁴⁸ is linked to notions of citizenship activated by the armed groups. It allows violence to be joined together in a language of rights and inclusion which is similar, therefore, to that spoken by the local people.”⁴⁹

This process both *creates* and *is created by* the ‘Traitor State’ (*Estado Faltón*).⁵⁰ State hypocrisy not only validates the gang, but “incredibly, tragically, in a bizarre game of mirrors, the State imitates its imitators, and it justifies its crimes, abuse and violence on the grounds that ‘*others do it too*’.”⁵¹

The enemy

Both politicians and the gang take advantage of this “bizarre game”, because this is how politicians win votes (and hence money and power), and how the gang gains legitimacy (and hence money and power). It is only the town that suffers in this game and we must therefore return to the construction of the enemy; had there been no enemy, the town would not have supported the gang. Without the State’s presence as an impartial arbitrator, the gang has the power to define the enemy as it wishes.

When the gang emerges as the independent power, its enemy is easy to find and lies in the remains of former gangs, amongst guerrillas, the militia and in the memory of the notorious gang leader of the Medellín drugs cartel, Pablo Escobar. The gang gains authority by re-establishing order that had been quashed by other armed groups. In this way, gangs become involved in a witch-hunt against the traces of their old enemy, less because they continue to threaten power, but more so as a reminder that the gang came to power to save the town from the former threat.⁵²

47 Personal communication, Hernando Roldán, 23rd July 2004.

48 The *Traitor State* (*Estado Faltón*) is a term which stems from the dialect of the Columbian gangs where, roughly translated, ‘falconiar’ means to betray, promise and fail to deliver, and thus refers to the State lacking the basic characteristics needed to be strong (and therefore loyal). A *faltón* in drugs parlance also has connotations as a ‘snitch’ or someone who confesses to the police.

49 Gutiérrez, p. 199.

50 Also see Cubides, p. 22.

51 Gutiérrez, p. 200.

52 Interview with the Director of the *Junta de Acción Comunal*, Moravia, Medellín, 22nd July 2004.

Often, the former opponent will continue to exist: shifting control between guerrillas, paramilitaries or local death squads and the Colombian army always justified power held by the gang through people's fear of the old oppressor returning. At the moment, however, the paramilitaries and the army are winning which is causing problems for paramilitary legitimacy, such that in Meta and Caquetá, two paramilitary sides have started to fight each other. In one sense this fulfils the logic of the *Insecurity Capitalists* but it also adheres to the rule that says an enemy is needed in order to authenticate the gang.

Nevertheless, it will always be the smaller disorganised groups that best serve to legitimate the gang. As people are afraid of the petty thieves and assailants, they prefer the oppression of the organised gang to the chaos of common delinquency, which is a situation we already know well. What we still need to understand, however, is how the gang creates and constructs the small group and how its actions will create an enemy that will justify its power. My discussion will refer to the particular case of Cazuca although I believe these can also be applied further a field to the situation in Medellín, Rio de Janeiro or San Salvador.

I shall start with the following definition suggested by a young girl for the Colombian term *pandilla* or *parche*:

“A *pandilla* is a group created between friends united by the same way of thinking; they share the same view that anything they need can be secured through stealing and it is their vices that unite them all.”⁵³

A number of people have reported on the activities of Colombian gangs and many have noted this same phenomenon of their “vices uniting them all” but few have considered *where, or whom, this corruption actually comes from*. In Cazuca (as in Rio de Janeiro or Medellín) the gang is responsible for trafficking and selling the drugs that lie at the heart of their wealth. The gang tries to control drug-use by limiting consumption to authorised crack houses because it will lose legitimacy if consumption is seen on the streets. Nevertheless, as many police already know, nobody can control the drugs; they will find their own market and addicts will continue to use them. Small *parches* become established from within these drugs outlets (through the drug that unites them) in order to organise the robberies that are needed. *Consequently, the gang's actions will produce the enemy that afterwards serves to legitimate the gang in the public's eyes.*

53 Ardilla Pedraza, Amparo et al, *Pandillas Juveniles: una historia de amor y disamor*. Bogotá: Secretaria de Educación, 1995, p. 37.

This argument also serves to perfectly exemplify Michel Foucault's power theories: power constructs its own resistance and this resistance legitimates the power.⁵⁴ The speech of small armed groups will be full of references to the injustice caused by the hegemonic gang and their consequent wish to defend and stand up to the gang's violence. Cazuca, however, reveals the limitations of this philosophy because it is clear that not all resistances serve in the gangs' interests or in their rise to power as the singing, dancing and theatrical performances by the young people who attend the *Taller de Vida (Life Workshop)* serve to demonstrate.⁵⁵

Despite many examples of creative resistance amongst communities controlled by armed gangs, we can safely say that gangs have been successful players in this game of mirrors. By delegitimising the State and relieving it of its position as an impartial arbitrator, it becomes possible to create groups that appear to threaten the town so that when the gang arrives to 'save' the town from the danger, it manages to establish itself in the community.

Subjection

Legitimation is an ideological process. It is not just a question of offering services, goods or security to the community; the gang must also construct an intellectual environment where its 'services' are important. To use the terminology of contemporary sociology, the gang must construct the subjectivity of the people that will take it in. In this section I wish to analyse how, in line with medieval values, the gang creates selfish, frightened and inactive subjects who will be easily subjected.

Almost all of Cazuca's inhabitants have been forced into internal exile; the majority come from the countryside and have suffered badly from war-related violence. Rio's favelas, Medellín's shantytowns and San Salvador's poor communities have something in common which is caused less as a result of war, and more by peasant poverty, urbanisation and deportation from the United States. All produce migrants who have lost a large part of their community and a lot of faith in human relations. It is these human relations and the grass-roots community networks that were established which permitted coexistence in traditional communities, but they also offered an alternative to the gang's control. If the community has integrated systems for resolving conflicts, locating economic and social resources or controlling violence, then it does not need the gang. So the gang needs to destroy the social fabric that is left behind after their migration to

54 Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow), NY: Random House, 1984, pp. 51-76.

55 See the *Taller de Vida (Life Workshop)* article at www.shinealight.org

the city.

Haidy Duque mentions how armed organisations establish *capitalist sins* of ‘jealousy, aggression and anguish’ amongst the community and it is through these that they exert social control.⁵⁶ We see that even in Medellín, where the ideological aspect of urban conflict seems most significant, the majority of assassinations are motivated by personal or economic interests, such as revenge for corrupt business or disputes over spatial conflict.⁵⁷ The violence that is endemic to marginal communities creates cynical and selfish subjects who believe they can only get what they want through violence, and who operate according to the understanding that everybody has the capacity to lie and be deceitful.⁵⁸ Salazar interviewed Marcos, the leader of a gang of hired assassins who told him:

“This is why people think that it is up to the individual to save himself however he can. Nobody believes they are going to be helped out...that’s just the way it is!”⁵⁹

One of the youths interviewed by Ramos holds a similar viewpoint, that “people are only concerned with their own interests”⁶⁰ What is important here is not to criticise these voices for their ‘selfishness’ but to observe how the environment of the violent neighbourhood constructs this subjectivity. Migrants long for their lost paradise which was based on peasant solidarity, saying that “it is not the same here as it is over there: everyone is left to his own devices”⁶¹ and they come to adopt the newfound values of Capitalism.

Modern Capitalism replaces inherent family and community trust with market and State security so that if a contract is broken, the police and courts of law will be on call. The gang is in search for an even crueller form of Capitalism that breaks bonds of trust and allows itself to be presented as the only arbitrator of justice. “Your neighbour seduced your wife? So we’ll kill him.” “The woman next door built her house on your land? So we’ll whip her.”⁶² Without traditional techniques to settle conflicts, and with the *Traitor State* as their only rivals, the gang

56 Duque, Haidy. "Niños y niñas víctimas de la guerra de los adultos" in *Éxodo, patrimonio, e identidad*. Bogotá: Museo Nacional, 2001. p. 339.

57 See Ramos, p. 260 *et seq.* This is also confirmed by the *Centro de Mediación y Resolución de Conflictos*.

58 Restrepo, Manuel. *Escuela y Desplazamiento: un propuesta pedagógica*. Bogotá, Ministerio de Educación, no date, p. 116.

59 Salazar, p. 117.

60 Ramos, interview with “N”, p. 61.

61 Molano, Alfredo. *Desterrados: crónicas del desairrago*. Bogotá: El Áncora, 2001, p. 96.

62 It is also important here to note the perspective lacking by the armed groups and the discrepancy between cause and effect. Ramos relates how the president of a local Colombian community action group, *Junta de Acción Comunitaria de Berlín* (Suba, Bogotá) received four death threats in the space of a year, all trivial and relating to either the maintenance of roads, broken pipes, blackmail or the location of a bus stop; the only solutions offered to small problems were death threats.

becomes essential for enforcing order and ‘justice’. *Selfishness (cultivated largely by the gang’s actions) forms the ideological foundations for the gang’s function.*

There is, however, an interesting paradox, or a contradiction at least, which is concerned with the production of values in communities controlled by armed groups. The gang needs to cultivate Capitalist values such as selfishness and individualism in order to maintain its power, but its direct speech is based on a series of pre-modern values such as honour, revenge, decency, patriarchy and traditional authority. It will even go to the extent of killing those who violate this old code of honour, in particular as retribution, but the gang erases all the integrity of the traditional system of values such as solidarity, trust and community ties.

The gang will see itself as being “closer to the people”, as the community’s true representative. It will say that the State and politicians have lost their roots and their values and that they have entered fully into secular modernity of uncontrolled sexuality. Thus the gang preserves values of “honour, revenge and distrust”⁶³ as part of its campaign to gain legitimacy which helps to eradicate the fundamental fact that *it is the gangs that destroy the values of solidarity and friendship which people long for.*

This paradox can clearly be seen in the construction of public spaces in Cazuca. In traditional neighbourhoods, the streets and squares are meeting places for people to come together to gossip and for the community at large. This is where children socialise, where adults sustain friendships and where the community resolves its everyday problems and it is also the place for parties, sporting activities and flirting. Paramilitaries in Cazuca do all they can to destroy the community aspect of public spaces. The list of young people under threat is fixed to a wall close to the park; bodies are left on the main street between the bus-stop, and the park and walls are covered with threatening graffiti but this is not just *spatial* domination as the gang also colonises public *time* with the majority of killings taking place over Easter and during the school holidays.⁶⁴ Anybody taking to the streets after 6 o’clock in the evening will be a moving target for paramilitaries and popular celebrations will invariably end with a death.⁶⁵

The gang presents itself to protect the community and defend its values, but the logic of its very existence demands the destruction of places and situations where the community can establish

63 Ramos, p. 419.

64 Interview with a teacher of the ACJ- “Yo amo la vida” (Cazuca), 8th June 2004.

65 Ramos notes that in Berlin, during the summer in which he completed his fieldwork, every celebration had an *assassination* and many had two.

itself. Some local inhabitants, particularly the young people, recognise this paradox so they criticise the paramilitaries for their ‘hypocrisy’⁶⁶, although the majority are still unaware of this contradiction.

Passivity & Submissiveness

A discussion of the community’s subjection would not be complete without explanation of the central aspect, which relates to constructing the town’s passivity or submissiveness. Many of the ‘services’ provided to the community by the gang (such as employment, settling conflicts, providing support for the poor and homeless, security and entertainment) are systems that the community itself might achieve. However, if the community itself was to play a leading role in the process, the gang would lose its very reason for being and therefore its legitimacy, so the armed groups must do everything they can to subvert the prominence of the people; gangs need passive subjects.

Gangs are not the only ones who want passive people for so too do almost all of Columbia’s powers. One of the most perceptive observers of the situation in Columbia is artist Fernando Botero whose work displays an outstanding characteristic of overweight figures with their mouths closed. They appear to be people who are deeply entangled in clientele systems, where *they receive food in exchange for their silence*. The promise by almost all of Columbia’s ‘patrons’ (the State, Church, guerrillas or gangs) is simple: they guarantee a good life in exchange for no problems and quiet passive subjects.

Gangs may pay for silence but they force it too, as revealed in the Colombian peasant saying, “with the armed forces it is not a question of goodwill but of obligations.”⁶⁷ It is always the activists, the powerful community leaders or central figures, who find themselves threatened or assassinated by the gangs for they actively de-legitimise the gang and will consequently be condemned to death.

A group of Cauca’s young community leaders in a political workshop represented the diversity of Columbians, from the Chocó’s Africans to traditional peasants from Boyacá. Afterwards, two participants attempted to demonstrate how the human body holds itself in neighbourhoods controlled by gangs: their eyes remain fixed on the floor, their shoulders hunched with their backs bent over. They walked apprehensively, always looking behind them with sudden

⁶⁶ See the section on *Hypocrisy & Cynicism* below.

⁶⁷ Molano, p. 41.

movements. Young people said that fear in Cazuca was so intense that the body itself had to be transformed from a place of pleasure to one of control, a tragic contrast for those who have come from the cheerful Caribbean and Pacific cultures. They also spoke of gangs wanting to create physical bodies that were incapable of acting of their own accord, so that they became dependent and did not do anything.⁶⁸

The construction of submissiveness, through both fear and charitable handouts, therefore forms part of the legitimisation of the gang. It defines itself as the only protagonist capable of defending the community's interests, and in a sense this is true because it has destroyed the community's ability to act for itself.

Nevertheless, this leads us to another point where Foucault's political philosophy fails us because such exercise of power may bring about effective resistance. A young girl who had been internally displaced told me that "the saying here is 'you can't', which makes me want to do it, if only to show them they're wrong."⁶⁹ Amongst the young people, the submissiveness that the gang tries to impose only gives rise to rebelliousness and protagonism. It promises a different power relation from that of the old patronage system that produces fat people with their mouths shut. I think this is why the gang's hegemony never manages to stabilise itself in Columbia's marginal neighbourhoods: because the young people are not prepared to be passive.

Hypocrisy and cynicism

In order to understand the process of legitimising the gang in marginal neighbourhoods, we need to analyse one phenomenon further: how it is that the gang hides the evident hypocrisy of its actions. In Cazuca the gangs prohibit drug consumption on the streets, but they sell drugs in their own crack houses. They control the sexuality of everyone else, but they live a life of extreme sexual decadence. They condemn robbery, though they themselves steal. The list is endless and the chorus of a song (*La hipocresia (Hypocrisy)*) by the Cazucan rap group *Combo Negro (Black Gang)* serves as evidence of the insecurity the gang creates in order to justify its existence:

68 Workshop with young people from *Taller de Vida*, 25th July 2004.

69 Workshop with young people from the *Taller de Vida*, 22nd May 2004.

“La hipocresía y la maldad
son cosas que ‘n el barrio nos quieren perjudicar
sí.
La mentira
es un factor de venganza
que a nosotros jóvenes
nos deja sin esperanza...
Muchos desplazados de la guerra sin fin
No recuerdan cada día que ‘l que mata es un
ruin.”

“Hypocrisy and wickedness
want to harm us in the neighbourhood,
yes.
Lies
are a part of revenge
that leave us young people
without hope...
Many people who have been internally displaced by
the endless war
forget that he who kills is despicable.”⁷⁰

Despite the criticism that is offered by some rappers and young activists, it seems that *institutionalised hypocrisy does not de-legitimise the gang in the eyes of the community* and we ought to ask ourselves why. I think the answer lies as much in cynicism as in the ideology’s underlying structure.

There are a series of structural dichotomies within the thinking of marginal Columbian communities that will be evident only to those who live there. Amongst the most important, we find the opposition between the *parche sano* (rational *parche*) and the *parche duro* (hard *parche*),⁷¹ a distinction mediated according to its level ‘seriousness’. Two of the armed leaders who Salazar interviewed hold a firm understanding of the concept:

“There are a lot of children in the neighbourhood who want to get involved in crime. The only thing I say to them is that if they want to do it, that they do so seriously.”⁷²

“My work is very different from that of the corner-side gangs...we stay at home, with serious people, as it should be.”⁷³

Use of the word ‘serious’ tells us something very important about ethics and morality. Good does not exist for goodness alone; it exists in counter distinction from evil. If one was to insert ‘good’ into the dichotomy, with the idea that there is no better option, there would be no ethical problems.⁷⁴ For those in the gangs, there is almost no distinction between *good* and *evil*; the ethical structure that matters is that of *serious* and *not serious*. Gang members are clearly on the side of the ‘serious’ ones, so they are good – or as good as they can be at least.

70 Combo Negro. “*La hipocresía*” from the album *No a la Guerra*, 2004 [my translation]

71 Ramos, p. 208.

72 Salazar, p. 30.

73 Salazar, p. 114.

74 I refer here to the structural anthropology and linguistics of Saussure and Levi-Strauss.

Duque's synopsis is more in-depth and considers a system of three parts where child=street; young person=street corner and adult=home.⁷⁵ Each stage of the 'maturation' process brings the subject closer to a state of 'seriousness': notice how in the second quote Marcos, the leader of a gang of hired assassins, says that "we stay *at home* with *serious* people, as it should be" [my emphasis]. The child and the young person are not very serious, because they stay outside the home in public view. The adult, who stays inside the home and exercises his power behind closed doors, is not only *serious* but *correct* too.

The ideology of the small *parche* (*parche duro* in Bogotan slang) is the opposite, not based on 'seriousness', but instead on the idea of 'larking about' which demonstrates pure scepticism and the notion that joy can come only from the present, with absolutely no consideration given to a 'tomorrow'. When asked what mattered to him in life, one of Ramos' informants replied "clowning around as much as possible because time will run out." "Believe him, enjoy life"⁷⁶, his friend added. Toño, a member of a Bogotan *parche* who was interviewed by Salazar remembered a late friend: "He was a really fun-loving guy, everyday he would remind us we were on extra time."⁷⁷ In light of this absolute scepticism, the hypocritical lawlessness of organised gangs almost appears kind.

This contrast between the *serious* and *not serious* comes to be the principle that structures the marginal neighbourhood's ideology, so that everybody knows that the gang is up to no good but as long as this is 'serious', it will be legitimate. In this way the gang starts to surpass the criticism of 'hypocrite' because it does not present itself as "the good against the bad", but instead as "those who are serious against those who are not." *The gang's criminal behaviour and violence are legitimate because they are serious.*

The second stage of legitimating hypocrisy depends on the town's widespread cynicism. Both the State and the gang have shown the town that they are all corrupt and violent and that nobody ever tells the truth. No one can hope for anything better and there is no firm base on which to found criticism. If all are bad, it is better to stick with those we know than those who may be even worse in the future; everyone who promises a better future will only slip even further into hypocrisy.⁷⁸ The town itself is no substitute either because it is hypocritical too; as one of the

75 Duque, *Papel*, p. 18.

76 Ramos, p. 60.

77 Salazar, p. 27.

78 see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Theory and History of Literature, Vol 40) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

members of a poor neighbourhood told Gutiérrez, “the town is tired of violence...but it is violent.”⁷⁹ Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek says that true post-modern ideology is not neo-liberal Capitalism, but cynicism, because it is this distrust that upholds the world’s powers⁸⁰, a hypothesis that I see to be as true for marginal communities as it is for the United States.

The final stage of legitimising gang hypocrisy is the saddest because it comes from the community’s own participation. Perversely, people profit from the gang’s wrongdoings through local investment and economic spending, the security it provides and revenge it administers, but it is a sad fact of human nature that we choose not to recognise the bad side of what is done to give us what we want. How is it, for example, that 44% of the North American population continues to support George Bush, given that all are aware of the torture and ‘disappearances’ that are formally established policies in his administration? It is because these people *consciously deny* the truth and choose not to listen to it. They just want somebody else to do the ‘dirty work’ for them so that they can live peacefully and prosperously. This phenomenon, which Žižek calls “the wish not to know”⁸¹, is also pertinent to the situation in marginal neighbourhoods where people also want peace and prosperity but prefer to deny all knowledge of the gang slaughtering their youth.

There are also other ways in which the community complies. In considering Botero’s paintings we see that the only time the overweight figures are ridden of their silence and stiffness is in the midst of violence when suddenly their bodies become humanised, mouths opening with cries and shouts and their eyes filling with tears.⁸² Amongst the violence, the gang finds a pleasure – that of power as an officer of the law – but the town finds it too. If we look closely at the faces of people living in Cazuca or those from Medellín’s shantytowns, we see they become almost proud of the violence in their neighbourhoods. This is partly pride from being able to survive in a terrible context; partly from the pleasure of gossip; partly from the joy of being exceptional which is an aspect of international post-modern mythology; and partly from the pleasure of complaining about violence. In any case, the community’s pleasure ties to that of the gang, which involves them in the hypocrisy.

I do not wish to leave this discussion about cynicism on such a negative note, for we need to

79 Gutiérrez, p. 191.

80 See Slavoj Žižek. *Revolution at the Gates*. London: Verso, 2003. Kurt Shaw reflects further on this subject in *Calle de la Agonía*, available in Spanish and Portuguese from www.shinealight.org

81 Slavoj Žižek, Interview with “The Left Business Observer” (radio show), 17th April 2003.

82 Botero, Fernando "El arte como testimonio." Exhibition in the *Museo Nacional de Colombia*, Bogotá: April - June 2004.

recognise that there are many young people who reject this hypocrisy and who will not find the cynicism as reassuring. The rap ‘*Hypocrisy*’ which I cited at the beginning of this section starts by criticising the cynicism, but concludes with an alternative perspective:

“El mundo es también nuestro
la vida es una sola
al otro lado de la esperanza
haremos una ola.”

“The world is also ours
we have just one life
on the other side of hope
we will celebrate.”⁸³

Conclusions

By starting with a very simple question and asking ourselves why such a large proportion of the community lends its support to the gang who in fact detrimentally affects their interests, we have seen that there is nothing simple about this issue at all. The gang’s legitimacy depends on a number of factors, from corruption by the State and widespread cynicism, to the ‘services’ brought by the gang and the ideological structure of the client-based patronage system. The purpose of this essay, however, was not only to consider how the gang legitimates itself, but with it too to consider how the town can de-legitimate its power.

This is a concern that clearly cannot be covered in the space of an already lengthy essay and *Shine a Light* is launching the *Project Against Gang Violence* this year in hope to offer solutions. Here, however, I propose a few suggestions that have arisen from this essay for initiating this de-legitimizing process:

- 1.** *Promoting grass-roots civil societies’ own protagonism within marginal neighbourhoods.* When other groups can offer the same ‘services’ as the gang has brought, the gang loses its reason for being.
- 2.** *Deconstructing the gang’s values,* placing emphasis on community solidarity and rejecting the gang’s ideology which places money above all else by making the community aware of the other (non-monetary) things that are also needed.⁸⁴
- 3.** *Renewing and reconstructing traditional solidarity systems and practices for resolving conflicts.*

⁸³ Combo Negro, “*La hipocrisía*” from the album *No a la Guerra* [my translation]

⁸⁴ This idea comes from an interview with the coordinators of the grass-roots NGO *Pichacho con Futuro*, Medellín, 21st July 2004.

4. *Attacking the ideology of the client-based patronage system*, whether enforced by the State, the gang or by us as NGOs.
5. Exposing and reflecting on the *processes through which enemies and passiveness are constructed* which underlie the legitimisation of the gang.
6. *Subverting cynicism* by organising and mobilising social movements that fulfil promises and which allow all inhabitants of marginal neighbourhoods to be social protagonists.

We will certainly be able to think of other strategies appropriate to the particular contexts in which we work, but what is important is that the philosophical concept of legitimacy allows the opportunity to act in the most violent of neighbourhoods, thus permitting the construction of a better future for victims of injustice, exclusion and violence.