

The Refrigerator

An Ontology of violence on the periphery

Many scholars have researched the social, economic, and political roots of violence in the peripheral areas of Latin America's largest cities, studies, which in some cases – Medellín, for example – have helped reduce the violence. Here I would like to broach the problem from a different viewpoint. In order to find solutions to the violence in peripheral neighborhoods, it is true that we have to have justice, seek political participation, and promote the citizenship of all people. However, we also have to seek out the conditions that allow the formation of human relationships between the very people that live in these communities, as well as between them and those who “live on the asphalt”, as slum dwellers would say. The philosophical category of mediation is fundamental in this search.

The word “mediation” has a specific use in social contexts: it is understood as a form of conflict resolution without violence. This article stems from my experience working with mediators at the Center for Conflict Mediation, a social movement in Medellín, Colombia, which helped create and strengthen the peace that is taking root in the city. However, these conversations with them taught me that mediation is actually an ontological question. Mediation is not only the promotion of a conversation between two sides of a conflict; rather, it is a bridge between two people, between the past and the future, between desires and realization, between God and the human being. According to them, the work of the mediator is the work of a philosophical practice that tries to connect with the difference between “one” and “many”. This is the problem that has concerned Western thinkers from Parmenides and Plato.

However, this is not a philosophical article and less so, a treaty on ontology. I hope to use tools developed centuries ago to think about the question of “being” to imagine new strategies to bring about peace in violent neighborhoods. In several other texts¹ I showed how violence stems from the lack of mediation with the other or with the desire. Here, I would like to broach the problem directly.

Iconoclasm

The first question I would like to pose here seems as if it has nothing to do with peripheral communities in Latin America: How come the God of the Israelites prohibited images of divinity? In Middle Eastern religions, the icon was the essential and central part of the cult. Gods were in the temples through their images. It was therefore impossible to imagine a religion without an idol at its center. In contrast, the commandments created a religion without idols, and the first act of Moses after descending from Mount Sinai was to condemn Aaron and his people for worshipping the golden calf. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests a fascinating interpretation of this commandment. According to him, iconoclasm is a fundamental part of a new religion that wants to promote everyday justice among the people.

"The Jewish commandment that prohibits images of God is the obverse of the statement that relating to one's neighbor is the *only* terrain of religious practice, where the divine dimension is present in our lives."²

¹ Agony Street, State of Violence, Oedipus in the Street; all are available in “Articles to understand the street” from www.shinealight.org

² Žižek, Slavoj. “Neighbors and Other Monsters.” In Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2005. p. 141

According to this interpretation, worshipping God – in the form of an idol or indirectly – is a derailing of the fundamental principle of religion: treat thy neighbor with love and fairness. When God is removed from the temple, the human being only has one way of practicing his/her religion: “What is it that He expects of you other than to be fair, love thy neighbor, and humbly walk with your God?”³ In this way, what seems to be a paradox is not: the *absence* of God promotes justice because God refuses to appear when the believer is alone. God will only be with the believer when he (the believer) treats his/her neighbor with love and fairness.

This reflection appears to distract us from the question of how mediation can reduce violence, but it is a fundamental step in understanding the problem of violence as much as the solution that is being built in Medellín. The problem is that in the Western tradition, The Law of God appears to be a *guarantee of an ethical relationship* between one person and another: I don’t steal from and I don’t kill my neighbor because God forbids it, and I am going to go to Heaven because I have obeyed. Žižek challenges this idea in his radical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, saying that this “mediation” is really a barrier to mediation. If I only do good to obey God, then I don’t have a true relationship with my neighbor as a person. It is the *absence* of God that forces me to encounter the other, to recognize him, and to learn from him.

A similar process happens in the neighborhood of Moravia, in Medellín, where the Center for Conflict Mediation began its work. In Colombia, as in any other human civilization, there are many cultural institutions, traditional or State run, that regulate community life. In one of the rural villages, a landowner regulates production, enslaving or employing the farmhands, in exchange for money or other benefits. The family controls adolescents so they don’t

³ Micah 6:8

prematurely enter into a violent or sexually active life. Cultural expressions such as dance and fine arts exist to maintain the social fabric. The State, which was never strong in Colombia, intervenes to offer some services or to protect/exploit the community in the middle of a war. All of these are factors that regulate behavior in the community and help maintain the peace.

The refugee crisis that began in Colombia with “The Violence” of 1948, and that still persists today, changed this fabric of social regulation. A land based society and small villages transformed itself into a largely urban country where displaced farmers live in the slums of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, Barranquilla, and other big cities. These slums, (often called “comunas”, “altos”, or “colonias”) are almost always constructed against the will of the State. As a proud community leader Moravia told me, “There was total indifference from the State. What we have here is a result of the effort of each of the neighborhood residents.”⁴ The same thing happened in the famous Brazilian slums, where this absence of the State – and other traditional forms of social regulation – forced the people to be proactive. The problem is that it also opened the door to endless violence.

Peripheral communities, constituted of people displaced from their homeland, lost the traditional regulation supplied by the patron, the father, or a strong family. According to historians of modern times, this loss was exchanged for a new institution: a State that efficiently and rationally regulates society. But in the Colombian slums, as in other informal communities all over the continent, the State ignored its responsibilities. The most powerful slum residents took advantage to exploit or exclude the weakest members. Young people used armed and physical force to form gangs. And the small conflicts over land, dwellings, or rent found its solution in

⁴ Interview with Mari Rojas, 11 November 2005

violence. So, we have arrived at what various commentators have called “Hobbes in the tropics”, for the violent “state of nature” that is produced there.

Over time, the residents of Moravia, as in other war-torn communities in Medellín, asked the State or international aid agencies for help. However, the institutional responses either did not arrive or were inadequate. Over time, great armed actors – the drug dealers organized by Pablo Escobar, the militias, the guerrillas, paramilitary troops – were able to install peace in the communities. However, this was a very fragile peace, and was always broken in a few years.⁵ If we go back to Hobbes’ thinking, the people searched for Leviathan, but Leviathan was incapable of regulating a community.

Thinking in terms of Hebrew Law, Moravia found itself in the moment that God left the temple, when it was no longer possible to search for divine power or the almighty. It could have seemed like the end of hope, but for Moravia, it was not. In reality, the death of the “Other” that was going to save it was what gave the possibility of salvation to the community. When Moravia perceived that neither the State nor armed groups nor the international community was going to come to her rescue, the people of Moravia began to construct their own history.

⁵ See: Legitimacy in the Favela in “Articles to understand the street” from www.shinealight.org

The Center for Conflict Mediation

The armed groups that controlled Moravia had won a great part of their legitimacy by resolving conflicts within the neighborhood. Whenever there was a problem between neighbors – a question of debts or territory, for example – the two neighbors would go to one of the “boys” (an armed young man) to ask for a solution. The relevant issue here is not only that the solution was authoritarian and violent, but in the very fact of seeking out the armed youth looking for a solution, they recognize his authority. He gains power when people ask him for things.

Aware of this problem, a group of unarmed young men and women, along with Hernando Roldán, a lawyer with a lot of experience in negotiation, created the Center for Conflict Mediation. Until then, it had been the militia who exercised the function of the State in Moravia, defending the community and attempting to exercise justice to the gangs. The militia was a military group, but it claimed to want the best for the community... and took its own discourse seriously. As a part of the negotiation between the militia and the city (coordinated by Hernando Roldán), the community got an extremely important result: the militia decided to no longer resolve conflicts/disputes between neighbors. When people would approach the militia with problems, the militia would refer them to the Center for Conflict Mediation.

Within a short amount of time, this negotiation became the foundation for peace in Moravia. During 1989-1994, it was common to have 20 violent deaths a week in a neighborhood of 10,000-15,000 inhabitants. However, by 2005, there were hardly any assassinations in the

community. The fundamental question is why. As I analyzed in another place⁶, it was essential that the community stopped viewing the armed group as a legitimate group. The armed groups depend on the good will of the community, as stated by an Evangelical pastor in Santander, another neighborhood in Medellín that just got out of war: “It is the people that legitimize the armed actor, because they recognize his power. But when the people decide to take the power into their own hands, the armed actor cannot do anything.”⁷ With the dissolution of the legitimacy of the armed group, each person in the community was personally in charge of crossing the bridge of where they were to where they wanted to be. Without the State, tradition, or the armed group as the protector, people had to search for their own mediation.

This is why at the beginning of this article I said that we couldn’t understand mediation as an activity where the two parties in conflict sit at a table, and with the help of a mediator, resolve their conflict. Mediation is a fundamentally “ontological” question: the necessity to face the fact that the world isn’t exactly how we want it. In this way, the conversation between a landlord and a tenant is mediation because the conversation serves to build a bridge between the wish of the landlord (the money for the rent) and the wish of the resident (of not losing the house and to have money to spend on other things). But mediation is also the sweet-talk of an adolescent to a young girl; it is also considered mediation because of the steps I take to get the future that I want. We also have to recognize that violence is mediation because it functions as a bridge between me and the other, between my desire and its realization.

⁶ “Legitimacy in the Favela”

⁷ Interview with Juan Polanco, 27 October, 2005

Those who work with children from a psychoanalytical perspective see how people develop the capacity for mediation as infants. A baby wants everything, and for a little while, the parents try to realize as many wishes as possible. However, after some time, the baby/child has to realize his own desires. He wants to eat, so he look for a banana or some chocolate; the mother forbids chocolate, so he learns how to say “please”. He wants to sleep, so he lies down on the floor; it is not comfortable or people step on him, so he learns how to walk to the bed. The child learns that his/her desire and the condition of the world are not the same, and that s/he has to put forth an effort in order to get what s/he wants.⁸ It is a daily occurrence for every parent, but we cannot forget its importance.

An adult or a community has to pass through the same process. As in the case of the child, it is easier to ask someone to do what I want. Moravia wanted sewers so that the sewage wouldn't spill out onto the streets; so they first asked the city council. They wanted to escape the daily gang violence so they accepted the militia's proposal to “cleanse” the neighborhood. But mediation, as a desire, always remained in the hands of others, feeding the dynamics of violence and passivity. The change occurred when the community took responsibility for the construction of the bridge from where they were to where they wanted to be. The Center for Conflict Mediation was the seed of this process, not just because the mediators were able to resolve the conflicts in a non-violent fashion, but because they taught the residents that each person was capable of getting what s/he wanted, be it in a conflict over rent or to negotiate peace with the gangs.

⁸ For a more in-depth reflection on this topic, see the interviews with Teresa de Kakisu in the CD-ROM “Mi Dolor se hace Murgancia” (Shine a Light, 2005)

In Brasil, the “pedagogy of desire” model, created by Projeto Axé (Salvador de Bahia) is now recognized as one of the most important innovations in working with marginalized children and adolescents. During our infancy, we all have impulses: for food, love, pleasure, etc. But this impulse is always far away from its object, and people have to learn that they have to get the object through action. For the individual, desire is the first step to mediate between the impulse and satisfaction. Because of this, the pedagogy of desire doesn’t teach us to want things (this is natural and commercials already do it well!); it teaches us to build a bridge between what I am and what I want to be.

Projeto Axé takes advantage of Jaques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, an extremely complicated theory with a marvelously simple, practical application: through music, through drums, through singing and dancing, children learn to perceive their desires and their bodies, and their minds and art can serve to mediate between the “I” and the world. If we think of the Center for Conflict Mediation’s work as a community pedagogy of desire, we can see similar processes.

“La Bombonera”

The Center for Conflict Mediation promoted a non-violent gathering of parts in conflict, which was extremely important in order to subvert the climate of war that dominated the neighborhood. But its work is not limited to the negotiation table or to conversations. Mediation is a much greater process and the Center supported the creation of various social spaces where each person could learn how to mediate with the world. The most important of these spaces was an informal soccer field called “La Bombonera”.

At the end of 80s and in the 90s, when the war in Moravia was so fierce that 3-4 people died everyday, a ditch next to 55th Street served as an informal cemetery, where assassins disposed of the bodies of their victims (even though in other city neighborhoods, the assassins would put the cadavers on public buses to send to the police in the center of the city, the gangs in Moravia did not employ this method). In 1994, with the peace negotiations, this lot was paved over and was transformed into a street. As is usual in Colombia, since it was a strange place, more of a square than a street, people began to play soccer on the new asphalt. It didn't take very long for the people to organize a tournament for mini-soccer, with buses parked in the streets to prevent cars from entering. At the end of the year, when the militia turned in their arms during a peace ceremony, the rites happened in a soccer field.

After a short while, with typical Colombian irony, the field earned the name, "bombonera", in homage to the Boca Juniors stadium in Buenos Aires.⁹ "The bombonera is very small" says one of the founders of the Center for Mediation, "but for me, it is very big... a place that is not just a place, but where all of the social relationships are intertwined."¹⁰ The youth called the field "The Heart of Moravia" because now everyone goes there and soccer functions as a pump that takes people out of their houses and people end up meeting each other. It is the heart that maintains the circulation of the community, and makes people relate to one another.

In 2005 I helped the youth from the Center for Mediation make a documentary about the Bombonera, a project to defend the space in the face of an municipal proposal for urban reform.

⁹ In Commune 6, there is another field that is named "Maracañá"

¹⁰ Marcela Vergara, *La Bombonera* on the DVD "Civil Society Against Violence-Medellín". Shine a Light 2006

In the process, we interviewed various local businesses, especially the sponsors of the annual soccer tournament. The butcher of Moravia divided the history of Moravia in two parts: before Bombonera, when there was “violence and anarchy” and after Bombonera, a time of peace. This discourse – shared with many other neighborhood residents – makes the Bombonera a social actor, a conflict mediator between people and neighborhood groups.

The history of the “Iguanos”, the team that won the soccer championship in Moravia in 2005, demonstrates something important about the power of the Bombonera to teach mediation. “The Iguanos” is an informal youth group – a “parche” as they say in Columbia – that brings together all of the characteristics of a gang: they got together on the corner to drink beer and smoke, to make aggressive catcalls to girls, to sing rap, *vallenato*, and *reggetón*. In 1989 this group of young neighbors would have formed a gang to defend their turf and to earn money and respect; maybe they would have turned into hit-men for Pablo Escobar. In 1994 or 1996, the militia would have attacked this gang in an effort to cleanse the neighborhood. However, in 2005, during the time of the Bombonera, this group transformed itself into a good soccer team. They were recognized in the Bombonera, defended the reputation of their corner, and found a space for socialization.

A week after the Iguanos’ victory in the 2005 Moravia championship, I played in a “veterans” tournament (players older than 35 years). One of the players on my team had a prison-type tattoo, with the words “God and Mother”. The captain of the rival team had been the head of the militia. The organizer of the tournament had been a soldier in various gangs and later, various self-defense squads. It is not just about that end up being soccer teams in stead of gangs; gangs

and militiamen also turn into soccer players. The Bombonera is a space where youth learn how to mediate among themselves and between what they are and what they want to be.

Its almost always youth who are responsible (and victims) of a large part of the violence in wars, both in formal wars and wars in the slums. Therefore, it is important to note that the Bombonera functioned as a space that taught young people how to mediate among themselves and their own desires. The Bombonera also has a similar function for many other groups within the neighborhood: women and children also play soccer there. On Saturday nights, hundreds of people go to the field to watch the game, and there they also meet old friends and build new friendships. Fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters come together, overcoming the divisions that exist within each family. Neighbors discuss their problems and help each other, working together to find solutions. A large part of the power of gangs came from the fact that war had fragmented Moravia, making each house a fortress and prison, robbing the residents of solidarity and the advice from their neighbors. La Bombonera is a space for the reconstruction of the social fabric.

The Center for Conflict Mediation did not create La Bombonera; its creation was a spontaneous act that arose from the desire to play soccer during a brief moment of peace. What the Center did was to *define the soccer field as a place of peace and mediation*. There are many soccer fields all over the world, but few Bomboneras. In many cases, the field is the scene of many fights and abuses, and soccer becomes a symbol of machismo and exclusion. The mediators insisted that children, youth, and women had the right to play on the field. The mediators supported the refs in regulating the field and the cheering. They trained experts in fair play. And they created a

competitive environment in the Bombonera, but one rooted in peace. I spent close to one month visiting La Bombonera, and the only fight that I saw didn't happen on the field, but back behind a TV, where residents were watching the "Clásico" of Medellín vs Nacional (a soccer match). A drunk fan lost his way on the field and was looking to start a fight, but no one took the bait. His friends ended up taking him home.

The Center for Conflict Mediation also works with other cultural mediation spaces, from the customs of making beans or hot chocolate for neighbors to musical events, small business meetings, community restaurants, or political protests. These are events where residents are already the protagonists and act out of their own desires; what the Center for Mediation does is contextualize these events as spaces where people learn how to mediate. As in the pedagogy of desire, culture and people becomes the educator. The role of the mediator is to catalyze this process and define it as important.

The Patch

In Colombian slang, the word "*parche*" has a variety of meanings. A "*parche*" is an important place, like the corner or park where youth hang out. The word also means a group of people that get together in a central place, which are partners. And a *parche* is a patch, a fabric placed on top of another fabric that covers up or hides a hole.

In the peripheral neighborhoods, everyone knows the hole in the social environment. Looking at the map of basic services that the state provides to people – potable water, electricity, drainage,

garbage collection – the faelas slums are a hole/gap where these services don't enter. In many cases, violence fragments the community, leaving holes in the social fabric. As the experience at the Center for Conflict Mediation shows, forced dislocation and the lack of security opens a hole in the traditional ways of resolving conflicts. We can also talk about the gap between a person and their desires or the more ontological or theological issues such as the emptiness that each human being feels.

The *patch* tries to cover up this hole, it tries to close the gap in the social fabric. The *parche* (in the form of a group of boys or a gang) is a patch that brings together youth who are separated by the fragmentation of the neighborhood, where is patch offers a sense of belonging, friendship, and shared values. When the boys arm themselves or start being delinquent, they transform themselves into a patch between the material lack in their lives and what they desire. If the *parche* is part of a militia or self-defense squad, it seeks to put a patch on top of the lack of security that exists in the neighborhood. The word is important because it shows that violent associations have a goal of covering up holes and uniting gaps: like the idea of social cleansing by the paramilitary groups in Columbia, a patch or *parche*, seeks to normalize the world so that are no more holes or stains.

The problem of this practice is that the patch is a new stain: it will never be the same as the fabric it tries to unite: the militia, as much as it dreams of a past where the oldest members of society exercised an enlightened authority, will not be that same authority. In many cases a patch opens a new gap while trying to close another: gang violence was the major reason for the appearance of the militia in Moravia. The presence of a patch makes it evident that there is a

hole underneath: if there is a patch on the knee of my pants, you will know that I ripped them once.¹¹

In trying to solve this problem, the patch (group of boys, gang) changes its goal. Originally the patch wanted to mediate between both sides of the gap: it was the center. Now, however, the *parche* itself has become the purpose of the process. Many paramilitary groups, for example, arose to combat the common delinquent gangs that assaulted the neighborhoods. But after the elimination of these gangs, the paramilitary groups had to build new enemies in order to justify their presence: in many cases they literally created gangs in order to later destroy them. In the following sections of this essay, I'm going to reflect on some people in Medellín that illustrate this problem, especially the gang member that did everything in order to get a refrigerator for his mother.

"Without a Future"

The details here are not important; we can identify other places where mediation happens via other means: the development of grassroots support for children and adolescents in the favela of Santa Marta in Rio de Janeiro, or music in Alto Ze do Pinho in Recife, Brazil, for example. What is important to note is the absence of the State: the people had to build their own models to construct bridges between one person and another, between a person and his desire, and between the present and the future. Each person and each community had to do this work, and not wait for someone else (especially the State) to do it. The process is the same as the Hebrew

¹¹ Here, the term *parche* plays the same role that Jacques Derrida gave to his concept of "supplement"

commandment against icons: I establish a relationship with the other only after the Big Other disappears.

We clearly see this process in the figure of “*No futuro*” (without a future), the key to understanding hit-men, drug dealers, and guerillas in Medellín. Toño, a small boss in Medellín expressed the idea of “without a future” to Alonso Salazar in his eulogy for a dead friend: “*He was a tremendous jokester, everyday he would say that we’re in overtime.*”¹² Another gangster from Bogotá, said something similar when he affirmed that the meaning of life was “*to be crazy as long as I can, because time will run out soon*”¹³ According to this thought, the future is an impossible dream, therefore only the “right now” has value. The expression “overtime” is very interesting. Thought of in the context of soccer, it will end as soon as one of the teams scores a goal. After that moment, the participants will attain the pride of victory, but the game is over.

But the real problem is not the absence of the future. The gangsta knows that the future exists, and still has some dreams for this future. The problem is that he doesn’t know how to see himself in this future. We should note that within the discussion of the gangsta, the dream that justifies his violence is almost always for the benefit of his mother: in books, movies and also in direct conversations with gangstas, the prototypical dream is to buy a refrigerator for his mom (or a house, jewelry... it depends on the context of the family). This dream may be authentically altruistic and based on real love for a mother. But it is also necessary because the young gangstas cannot be a part of his own dream. “*I don’t care if I die, if it means my mother can have a better life.*” The future exists and the gangsta still fights to make the future he

¹² Salazar, Alonso. *No Nacimos pa’ Semilla*. Bogotá, CINEP, 1994 p. 27

¹³ Ramos, Leandro. *Forms of popular urban violence*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional (thesis, sociology) 2001, p. 60

dreams of, but he can't see himself in this future, he can't find the mediation that will take him to participate in life of a family with a refrigerator.

The refrigerator illustrates exactly what I'm trying to show here, because it represents mediation, with both the future and his mother (another person). The refrigerator plays the same role as "heaven" or "God" and the *parche*: it motivates actions, promising a true relationship with desire and with the future. The refrigerator also seems to be a mediation between the exclusion of the slum and promised inclusion by the consumption of goods. *But in reality, the refrigerator is what makes mediation impossible.* The patch tries to cover or hide the hole underneath, but in reality it occupies the space between both sides, making mediation or communication between them impossible.

Amparo, a peace builder in the Kennedy neighborhood in Medellín, told me the following story. In her neighborhood, the gang leader was Jhonny, a killer and dealer of the worst kind, but a man with a great and sincere affection for his mother. He bought one thing after another for her: clothes, household appliances, and a house. Jhonny knew that what he was doing wasn't good, but everything he did was to improve his mother's life. Amparo met Jhonny's mother through a resident's association, and began talking to her about life in the neighborhood, the violence, justice, and exclusion. Amparo found out that Jhonny's mother didn't like what her son was doing, but she didn't want to criticize him because she thought that she could lose her son if she did so. Amparo, also a woman of the working class, was aware of how her life changed after she read Gandhi's autobiography and gave a copy of this book to Johnny's mother.

In the following weeks, Amparo and Johnny's mother talked about the book, reflecting on the possibility of fighting against violence with peace and ethics. Johnny's mother admitted that she was part of the problem: after all, accepting presents was what allowed her son to lead an unjust life of a criminal and a killer. Mother's Day arrived, a really important holiday in Medellín, and Johnny came over in the morning with a special present for his mother: a really expensive gold watch. The mother gathered her courage and said "*I don't want it, my dear son. But when you bring me a present that you earn with your own sweat, that will be the best day of my life.*"

Johnny, the big and tough gang leader cried loudly enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. In one week, he left his gang position and went abroad, where he is now the director of a conflict resolution program for youth, and from where he writes to his mother.¹⁴

Johnny wanted the refrigerator – and the house, clothes, car, and jewelry – to be the mediator between him and the person he loved most, his mother. It was going to be a patch to join the two sides of gap between mother and son. Yet, when his mother received presents that were a result of his crimes, his mother also become corrupt, destroying the very purity he wanted to defend. Johnny didn't realize how these objects changed the object of his desire: the refrigerator first *represented* his relationship, then *hid* the relationship, and finally *killed* the relationship. The relationship could only be revived when his mom rejected the presents, saying that conversation and love would be the mediators between her and her son.

The character from "without a future" is the same. In reality, the gangsta has an idea of the future, of the things he is going to get through stealing, of the respect he is going to earn, and

¹⁴ Interview with Amparo. In the DVD "Civil Society Against Violence-Medellín" Shine a Light, 2006.

about the girls that are going to fall for him. He also has a tool to mediate between his desire and the future he wants: the weapon. The problem, once again, is that the weapon ends up being a thing in and for itself – not just a tool – and the gangsta’s goal is no longer to obtain a future with the weapon, but the weapon becomes an end in itself. In this way, we see that the “without a future” is really a transference of desire: in the beginning, the gangsta desired a future, but now, his desire is just to continue being a part of a posse/gang, and using his weapons.

The refrigerator, which appeared to be the condition of possibility of mediation with the other – the other being the mother and the other as future – ends up being the opposite: it is what makes mediation impossible.¹⁵ God had to prohibit icons in order to permit the relationship between human beings, the people of Moravia had to recognize the impotence of the State before mediating their own conflicts, and the mother had to refuse the refrigerator in order to create the possibility of a true relationship with her son.

Negativity

Its very easy to condemn the rhetoric of “without a future”, but reality is more complicated, and forces us to recognize that negativity can have very positive consequences. “Without a future” is not a denial of the future, but a denial of the present. The future becomes impossible because of the reification of the tool that the gangsta imagined would make mediation with the future possible. With this idea, we can begin to develop a philosophy of the history of violence in peripheral neighborhoods, a philosophy that recognizes – as did Karl Marx and G.W.F. Hegel – that history advances on the negative side.

¹⁵ See Zizek, “Neighbor” p. 175

The weapon, as a way of attaining what I desire in the future, negates the present. In the case of the gangsta, he turns himself into a weapon, negating his own personality in order to steal, to kill, or to be a hitman, employed by someone else. In the process, he negates who he was as well as the dreams that he had. Because of this, the only dream that remains is the desire to obtain a refrigerator for his mother. Something similar happens with the militiamen and self-defense squads: *“When one puts on a hood, it is as if he assumes another personality. He stops being what he is and only thinks about terror and in cultivating fear within the enemy.”*¹⁶ The hood and the mask are essential for “social cleansing” squads, not just to hide their identity but to permit them to “stop being who they are.” The hood is a negation. The problem, as any vigilante knows, is that it is impossible to return to what the person used to be after having donned the hood: *“There are things that have gotten out of hand. There are kids from the self-defense groups that are practically hit-men”*¹⁷. The self-defense squad turned into what it hated the most: it negated itself.

However, the present that violence denies is a present that is worth denying: exclusion, invisibility, and misery. In my essay on masochism among street children,¹⁸ I showed that what seems like self-destruction is really a process that allows children to break the ideological ties that bind them to the system. The masochist chooses his own pain and takes responsibility for it, hereby showing that there is an actor behind the oppression and affirming that the victim is capable of being an actor. In the same way, the denial of the present through violence shows that misery is not essential in the world: it comes from specific acts by people, groups, and systems.

¹⁶ Salazar, 84

¹⁷ Salazar, 95.

¹⁸ “Agony Street.” In “Articles for understanding the street” from www.shinealight.org

As strange as it sounds, the negation implicit in violence opens the gap that allows us to see oppression.

Now that the gangsta or the militiamen is in this circumstance, to abandon his weapon seems like suicide. However, the negation of negation is what opens up a chance for a real future. When Johnny's mother made him see that the "refrigerator" (house, clothes, jewelry) was not going to work in building a relationship with her, she negated the life that she had chosen in order to escape misery and exclusion. But this "negation of negation" was much more than a u-turn. For the first time, it forced Johnny to have a true relationship with his mother, not a relationship with the mother he imagined or with the things he thought she liked. In the history of the neighborhood, this transformation was the first step on the path to peace.

When I met the president of the resident's association of Moravia – a very powerful and important position within the Colombian political structure – I became worried. Alejandro Giraldo, the president, is nice, funny, a charismatic leader with a sense of justice; however, Alejandro had also been the head of the militia in the neighborhood. I interpreted his leadership in the community as proof that Moravia still had not overcome its history of violence. Later, I also found out that various other community leaders had also been in gangs, the militia, or self-defense squads.

After some time in Moravia, I realized that political power in neighborhood wasn't what I thought it was. The reality was much closer to the negation of negation that I am explaining here. "We, the ex-combatants," explained Alejandro, "we have the responsibility of compensating for

what we did.”¹⁹ This phrase doesn’t mean that he thought that being in the militia was a mistake: he insisted that it was the only way to defend the neighborhood against the depredations of gangs. What he wanted to say is that in order to have the future he wanted, he had to burn the bridge that he had used to cross to where he wanted to be. The militia made peace with the community and city council, and then disappeared as a political actor. With the negation of violence, he and other ex-combatants could enter peaceful politics, along with the mediators and peace builders that had done so much to eliminate the militia.

Moravia was successful because its leaders – both armed and pacifist – didn’t make a fetish out of the medium that they had created in order to advance towards the future. In a way, the Center for Conflict Mediation was a patch: it was a space where youth could get together and a model to mend the social fabric. But this patch never turned into a goal itself, it never became a refrigerator. It was always understood as a contingent and provisional solution, something that was not going to last forever. The most important thing is not the patch, but to teach the community how to weave new patches and how to throw them out when they are no longer necessary.

It is important to think through this history ontologically, because it shows that the world is a “not whole”,²⁰ that the basic gaps in the fabric of Being are intrinsic to human experience. Many people can interpret this lesson as nihilism or pessimism, saying: “So its better to do nothing, to stay quiet, and accept to the injustice of the world.” But the lesson from Moravia shows exactly the opposite. Today, out of all of the neighborhoods in the world that I know, Moravia is the

¹⁹ Interview, 14 February, 2005

²⁰ In Lacanian thought, the idea of “*Pas tout*” or “not whole” is fundamental to avoiding the danger of a totalizing ontology

most interesting, challenging, and fascinating. It is a place where strangers of many races greet each other in the street; where neighbors get together to cook a pot of beans on the corner; where at any given moment, one can encounter an informal *vallenato* or *reggetón* concert. It is also a neighborhood where a visitor can have conversations about philosophy, politics, or fashion with someone he's just met, and where people know how to mediate between who they are and who they want to be. Its an environment of energy, humor, and dreams.

The process of making a patch only to later remove it, to go from negation, to the negation of negation, was fundamental in the construction of Moravia as it is right now. Life in the slum is still filled with holes and gaps, but its violent history showed the people how to confront and mediate them.

Conclusions

This reflection does not offer an easy solution. Human beings are always searching for mediation with the other, with the desire, and with the future. The patch seems like a good solution: for some time God was a good incentive for one to deal fairly with others, but Moses realized that this process made social relationships between the Hebrews impossible. For some time, the State worked as a way to mediate between people, but now it can impede social relations, when each person seeks out solutions from the police or the courts instead of talking to his neighbor. And for some time, Jhonny obtained a relationship with his mother through gifts, but after a while, they too became corrupt.

The problem, in large part, happens when a solution calcifies, when it turns into an institution on which we depend. The process of mediation is not a thing, but a process, and each person has to put forth the effort in order for the process to happen. Later, they will have to have another process to do the same thing. Just as Che and Trotsky knew that a revolution had to be permanent, and just as Jefferson talked about how people needed a new revolution every twenty years as a “breath of fresh air”, relationships of mediation have to regularly revolutionized. The patch is just a patch: it doesn’t resolve the basic lack of human beings, the gap between desire and reality, between me and the other. When we think that our patch has solved a problem forever... that’s when we know that the patch has become the real problem.