

PEACE AND ITS CLIMATE OF OPINION

By Eduardo Posada

Political vocabulary is always ambiguous, as the English philosopher Michael Oakshott has noted. And nothing more ambiguous today in Colombia than the expression “peace”. Some interpret it in its most limited sense -the end of armed conflict- others identify it with full social aspirations -the eradication of all forms of violence, and of the causes which allegedly started the problem. Oakshott also observed that the ambiguity of political vocabulary has merits and defects. The merit of referring ambiguously to peace would be to permit dialogue only common ambition, despite the different forms of conception of the term. I believe that the defect in this case however may override the merit, to the extent that the ambiguity of purpose would make it impossible to achieve peace, however it is defined, in the near future. Indeed, far from ambiguity, a maximalist concept of peace has been imposed on us, in a climate of opinion which needs some analysis.

Peace is proposed to us as some great Utopia. It is a Utopia constructed in opposition more than anything to the contrary image of a historical barbarous nation. Colombia’s past is described simply as an interrupted succession of civil conflicts. Therefore, since independence, we would seem to be identified only by war. The Colombian personality which has been forged in that war like past has been exclusively characterized by intolerance and extremist attitudes. Miriam Jimeno has shown the many and repeated messages from public opinion daily: we are “insensitive”, we “accustom ourselves to violence”; it is “a natural form of coexistence”; we have “a cultural violence”; we do nothing “to combat violence”; “death is a routine”; “violence is a way of life”; “we are people naturally condemned to violence”...“the worse enemy of a Colombian is another Colombian”. In conclusion, “we are the most violent people in the world”. (In Museo Nacional, ed., *Las guerras civiles desde 1830 y su proyección en el Siglo XX*, Bogota, 1998, p.252). On this language, as Jimeno describes it herself, there arises “a monstrous, incarnate and personified being, the activation of social life, the hallmark of the Colombian being” (idem, p.253). The Utopia of peace is therefore presented to us as a road to conquer, once and for all, that “perverse national identity”.

Alternatively, the Utopia of peace is also built upon a contrast with a malevolent and incapable governing class. The responsibility for violence here does not fall on the entire nation, but on a group which is indiscriminately called “the elite”, “oligarchy”, “establishment”, “traditional political class” -the historical creators of an unfair system with no opportunities. In common parlance, that “governing class” appears as an immovable and continuous block, which since independence has managed the leaders of power to its own convenience. Other current expressions describe this domination as “the usual lot” in a closed society, through an extreme version, a “two-party dictatorship, which has been exclusive since the time of Bolivar”. This language projects a false image of a traditionally and politically static country, during two centuries of constant frustration. In this language, the history of Colombian democracy has no value, except in formal aspects which in all events are considered to be corrupt. Here, we are frequently told, there has not been and never has been any democratic opposition.

In this climate of opinion, the Colombian state is not recognized to have much legitimacy, and much less so, its political system. The expressions “crisis in legitimacy” and “illegitimacy” have become common phrases to explain the ultimate origin of problems. It is a de-legitimizing discourse, which as Hernando Gomez has admitted, contributes to the aggravation of the “deficit of legitimacy”. Electoral processes, which occur regularly, seem not to be understood as the source of legitimate power. There is a worrying disdain for the practice of voting, which is simply identified with the patronist system, except in votes for candidates running on “independent” tickets. The same exercise in constitutional engineering which happened in 1991 -in great part, to facilitate the incorporation into politics of the guerrilla groups which accepted the peace negotiations with the State at the time- have lost any effect in re-legitimizing the institutions. There are almost no references to the successes of the previous peace process, and only its supposed failures are mentioned.

We should note that this climate of opinion is the result of absolutist language, full of value judgments, in which rhetoric prevails over reasoned argument. It is also confused language, in its form of expressions, and in the values which it defends. What impact does this climate of opinion have on the peace process, and on the problem of violence itself? If we identify violence as yet another characteristic of the Colombian personality, we discourage state policy to mount an effective result on those responsible for violent acts. As Miriam Jimeno has said, in these generalized judgments against our national character, there is a dilution of “the specificity of forms of violent action, which is lost in the name of global and undifferentiated violence, which is difficult if not impossible to combat”. Similarly, when judging not the nation but the system, we end up by “defending more openly the men of violence, as the great victims of an unjust society”. Under these conditions, it is not difficult to appreciate the weak position of the State at the negotiating table, although it has taken the legitimate representation of society to their table. And in any case, implicitly or otherwise, the diagnosis of national ills which arises from this climate of opinion favors the quest for maximalist peace. The cease-fire, demobilization, disarmament -the end of armed conflict- then becomes secondary objectives to the utopia of transforming everything. Thus, cornered by the pressure of arms, and without intellectual defenses, any achievable peace means further away, and barbarism imposes itself, and threats against the future of democracy continue to grow.

*This article is the fourth in my series on the dominant language in political analysis in Colombia