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Introduction to Anarchism and Resistance in Bogotá

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On March 11, 2007, downtown Bogotá was filled with soldiers, snipers, undercover cops, and riot police on account of George Bush's visit to Colombia. Nevertheless, hundreds gathered at the police barricades to burn flags and express their opposition to neoliberal capitalism. When the police turned water cannons, tear gas, and batons upon the crowd, the protesters tore lampposts and park benches out of the sidewalk to defend themselves and smashed the windows of banks and shops.

Thanks to the internet, many anarchists in the United States have seen photos of clashes like this one, but few understand the context in which they take place. We paid a visit to Bogotá recently to get more background on the political and social climate there and the role of anarchists within it. With the helpful guidance of our Colombian friends and the understanding that we can only offer limited insight into the complexities of their situation, we'd like to share some of what we learned.

Colombia is located at the junction of North and South America, a strategic position that has brought dire misfortune upon Colombians since the first colonial invasions. A century ago, the US forced the secession of Panama from Colombia to obtain control of trade passing from Atlantic to Pacific, and today the rich ecosystems south of Panama are being devastated to open the way for pan-American highway traffic. Unlike practically every other major South American nation, Colombia was not explicitly ruled by a dictatorship in the latter part of the 20th century—instead, the pretense of democracy was maintained, with representatives of the Liberal and Conservative parties alternating rule under the Frente Nacional between 1958 and 1974. This means that today, unlike Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, Colombia has yet to enter the post-dictatorship era; it is a “democracy,” but one in which every serious opposition candidate has been murdered or bought off and corporate rule is maintained as often by brute force as by political machination.

Having not entered the post-dictatorship era, Colombia is still wracked by the kind of internal armed conflict that other Latin American countries suffered between the 1960s and 1980s. Politics in Colombia are framed by the brutal forty-year civil war between the US-supported government—and its paramilitary supporters, who are interlinked with the drug cartels the US claims to oppose—and guerrilla insurgents, who are also now involved in narcotrafficking. The two primary guerrilla factions are the FARC and the ELN, both communist groups formed in 1964; the FARC is descended from Liberal and communist guerrilla groups formed by campesinos in the late 1940s, while the ELN was organized by students returning from Fidel Castro's Cuba.

Every year thousands of Colombians die violently in this struggle, but Bogotá is the eye of the storm: a space of relative calm in which the conflict takes more subtle forms. Latin America has megapolises like nothing in North America—Brazil's Sao Paulo is twice the size of New York, and Mexico City is the biggest in the world—and Bogotá is as sprawling and heavily populated as any city in the United States. The north is known for its wealthier districts, while in other areas some neighborhoods still retain their “popular”—that is to say, class conscious and defiant—character¹. The government has moved paramilitaries from their rural territories into some of these neighborhoods in recent years, ostensibly in an effort to demobilize them but certainly with an eye to destabilizing centers of urban resistance as well; locals describe the atmosphere of fear created by gangs of shaven-headed belligerents drinking on the streets all day. The paramilitaries were withdrawn from one neighborhood after a bombing directed at them, showing that perhaps there is a proper time and place for every tactic.

¹ The expression “Barrios Populares” is also used to denote the shantytowns around the periphery of the city; it is an alternative to “Barrios de Invasión,” the bourgeois slur for the same areas. In Latin America, the “suburbs” are not the enclave of the wealthy, but the poorest neighborhoods built by refugees driven from their rural homelands.

legendary groups such as Abuso Sonoro, No Violence, Dir Yassin, and Los Crudos, not to mention a full booklet of lyrics and political statements from all the bands. We were also given an excellent CD by Resplandor, a frenetic, metallic hardcore band who combine Krishna consciousness with the rhetoric of anticapitalist liberation.

Colectivo Situaciones; these are not strictly anarchist books, but cover horizontal, autonomous movements around Latin America.

Piromanía

One of the people involved in CCL and the Anarchist Black Cross in Bogotá also has a publishing imprint, on which he has released 'zines about the armed anarchist opposition to the Argentinean dictatorship and the famous anarchist criminal Alexandre Marius Jacob. He also has a wide-ranging collection of anarchist texts.

Punk and Hardcore in Bogotá

Before going to Colombia, we were already familiar with Res Gestae and Reaccion Propria, two first rate hardcore bands that have released full-length CDs. During our visit, Reaccion Propria was working on new material rather than playing out, but we got to see Res Gestae play a superb handful of songs at an all-afternoon punk show in an outlying neighborhood. Other highlights of the show included the grind band Xtermino and a street punk band whose name I didn't catch whose last song remains stuck in my head to this day—picture a hundred Colombian punks of various genders in a circle pit, all bellowing “ANTI, ANTI MILITAR” in unison. Unfortunately, macho one-note hardcore has made its way to Colombia, along with the associated corporate fashion and violent “dancing.” A couple of those bands played that show as well, and we didn't need to speak Spanish to know what they were going to sound like as soon as the singers picked up the microphone.

The best introduction to Colombian punk and hardcore is probably the “Sonidos para Activar la Revolución” compilation CD that came out in 2004. In addition to ten Colombian bands, it includes

Like other Latin American metropolises, Bogotá excels all its North American counterparts in graffiti. Everywhere you walk—and people do a lot of walking—you can see exhortations from various communist and anarchist groups painted in three-foot-high letters.

The city only cleans the walls on rare occasions, and vigilante interference is limited to covering up the name of President Uribe wherever it appears in a negative light; this seems to have increased recently, perhaps due to the relocation of paramilitaries to the city. Other than this, the paramilitary presence in Bogotá is largely invisible on the walls, perhaps because the right wing controls the officially sanctioned media; in Ecuador, where leftist Correa just came to power, the walls of Quito bear more swastikas than circle-As.

Walking through Bogotá's lovely downtown district early in our stay, passing the Justice building occupied by the M-19 urban guerrillas in 1985, we came upon a packed concert in the main square calling for an exchange of guerrilla prisoners for soldiers held hostage in the countryside. The city government of Bogotá has recently swung to the left, perhaps following the trend sweeping Latin America for which Venezuela's Chavez would like to take credit². For city officials to permit such an event is doubtless a slight to the right wing national government, which has vowed never to parley with the guerrillas. This intra-government tension has resulted in the public investigation of some officials involved in paramilitary groups—as of this writing, six congressmen

² To hear our Colombian friends tell it, horizontal structures were all the rage around the continent in the wake of the Argentinean crisis of 2001–2002, while now that left wing candidates have come to power in several nations electoral politics is back in vogue. To anarchists, this chronology suggests the familiar cycle of co-optation: people build up grass-roots power until the rulers are forced to concede to some of their demands and offer them an institutionalized version of their movement; consequently, people invest energy in participating in the system rather than further grass-roots organizing, thus losing their leverage.

from Uribe's political party are in jail because of their links with paramilitaries—but doesn't seem to have changed anything in the daily lives of Colombians.

Universities in Latin America, especially public ones, differ dramatically from their counterparts in the US in that they are taken for granted as hotbeds of dissent and social struggle. The campuses of Colombia's largest university, like the walls of all adjacent neighborhoods, are adorned with spray paint urging people to "DEFEND THE UNIVERSITY!" and threatening "THE UNIVERSITY IS FROM THE STREET AND IN THE STREET WE WILL DEFEND IT," a claim that would be doubly false anywhere north of Mexico. This talk of "defense" addresses the government's immediate efforts to privatize the university system, but also extends to a more general notion of the university as a safe space for dissent: parodying her own feisty radicalism, one filmmaker explained that she documented anticapitalist protests "*because we are students in a public university!*" in the same tone in which an anarcho-punk from Minneapolis might joke "because we are THE ENEMIES OF CIVILIZATION!"

Indeed, the university is widely known to serve as a recruiting ground for radical groups of all stripes, both public and clandestine. As in Chile and Greece, police officers are not permitted on campus; in the militant demonstrations that erupt once or twice a semester, police gather outside the gates, firing tear gas into the university while students throw back *papas bombas*—projectiles made with black powder and coins or rocks, which can disable armored water cannons if used correctly³—and build bonfires to neutralize the chemical irritants. An enormous mural of El Che, looking somewhat younger than usual, gazes upon the central student plaza; university officials have ordered it painted over a thousand

³ *Papas bombas* can be very dangerous; we were told of a woman who died transporting them, and another person who lost a hand in a more recent conflict outside the university.

Mercado Orgánico

Our friends from CreAcción took us to a collectively organized organic market composed of four major fruit and vegetable farms and a great number of smaller producers. The market is coordinated horizontally among the participants, and emphasizes healthy, natural food; volunteers offer trainings to farmers who want to learn more about strictly organic horticulture. On account of this approach, the market has developed a relationship with CreAcción and other similar groups; additionally, when one family retired from its farm, other members of the collective took it over.

We asked around about collective gardens in Bogotá, and were told that there are over one thousand; many of these are started by campesinos who arrive as refugees from rural areas of Colombia.

Colectivo Contracultura

Contracultura is an anarchist collective arising out of the hardcore and punk communities in Bogotá; they publish texts on radical theory and strategy and organize countercultural activities such as shows, presentations, and video showings. Their most recent publication, the seventh in a series of pamphlets that have included a text by the Argentinean group Colectivo Situaciones and a communiqué by the EZLN, is a translation of the CrimethInc. text "Déclassé War." CrimethInc. texts have been published in Colombia before in the newspaper *Heraldo*, which was produced by Crimetal, a node of the loosely-organized Spanish-language CrimethInc. network that spans three continents. That network is known as *Guerrilla Latina* CrimethInc. everywhere else, but for obvious reasons the Colombian group opted for a different name.

One of the participants in Contracultura has a book distribution called *Distribuidora Afinitat*, basically consisting of books from

is run by the military, and money from the United States has paid for both the construction of the six high security prisons and the training of the soldiers who guard them—on top of that, the US DEA sends agents to Colombian prisons to interrogate inmates. It is routine for such agents to threaten that inmates' families will be killed if they don't cooperate in US investigations inside Colombia. Thanks to lengthy struggles, political prisoners in many Colombian prisons have won the right to be held together in a separate section of the prison. In other prisons where paramilitaries and political prisoners are held together, the lives of political prisoners are in constant danger.

There is also a Colombian Anarchist Black Cross group in the circles of people involved in CCL; every Saturday they visit political prisoners, providing support regardless of affiliation.

Colectivo por la Objeción de Conciencia

Military conscription is enforced in Colombia, though as usual the wealthy are able to find ways to excuse themselves. Every man is required to serve for one year unless he can pay his way out, obtain a medical exemption, or avoid being caught. There are fifteen groups in ten regions of Colombia opposing conscription, and we spoke with a volunteer involved in one of these. She told us that few people are currently in prison for noncompliance; the pressure such groups exert on the government when a draft-dodger is arrested generally makes it easier for the government to release the arrestee quietly than to keep them in prison. In addition to supporting people in that situation, this anti-conscription group works to emphasize the economic and corporate foundations of militarism and to emphasize alternative means for young people to sustain themselves besides military careers. To that end, she was also involved in the Mercado Orgánico we visited.

times, but never succeeded in eradicating it. Passing through the university at dusk one evening, we beheld half a dozen masked figures in black dashing from wall to wall with stencils and spray paint, past other students who took this apparently regular occurrence nonchalantly in stride.

Both the FARC and the ELN maintain clandestine student groups in the universities, from which some of their membership is derived. The ELN student groups appear to be experimenting with more horizontal structures, though our sources doubt this extends to their rural cadres. It is rumored that the two guerrilla groups have clashed violently in the countryside recently, though the details of this remain obscure; in any case, those clashes haven't extended to the university.

The guerrillas are not in a powerful position in Colombia right now; decades of conflict with the US-backed government have taken their toll, and in much of Colombia the zeitgeist seems to be that people are exhausted and disillusioned by the ongoing armed struggle. Their reliance upon kidnapping and narcotrafficking to raise funds have compromised them in many people's eyes, and some say they have lost touch with the needs of common people in the course of their fight for resources and survival. To North American anarchist eyes, these are simply the inevitable results of a militaristic strategy predicated upon hierarchical organization. Despite all this, many who seek social change still see the guerrillas as the most "serious" opposition to the government, and those who wish to be "serious" themselves often end up collaborating—or at least sympathizing—with them.

Groups who organize against the government, corporations, and paramilitaries without working with the guerrillas are isolated from both sides. The government still regards them as terrorists, and can explain away repression by presenting them as a front group; the guerrillas still see them as enemies of The People, in traditional communist fashion. Villages in the countryside such as Cacarica have put up walls and declared themselves autonomous

from all armed groups, government and paramilitary and guerrilla alike, but this stance is not easy to maintain.

All this makes the position of Colombian anarchists very difficult. Most who have been active for any length of time have had friends murdered by the police or forced to flee the country. As in other nations in the Americas, anarchists in Colombia are able to maintain a handful of social centers, a presence in punk rock and other countercultures, some social programs, and sporadic eruptions of protest and resistance; but all this comes at great cost, and it's hard to maintain consistency. These activities can seem unimpressive next to kidnappings and bombings coordinated by clandestine groups, and more confrontational direct action is extremely dangerous because it is interpreted as guerrilla activity.

In this context, some—including some anarchists—see what they describe as “purist” anarchist approaches as dogmatic, isolationist, and insufficiently effective. In the US, the default setting for dissident thought is left liberalism, but in Colombia it's Marxism, and the circle-A's spraypainted around Bogotá with crossed hammers and sickles are just one example of anarchists trying to accommodate themselves to the dominant paradigm of resistance. In stark contrast to most parts of the world, in Colombia the anarchists who consider themselves flexible and willing to collaborate with authoritarian groups are often the ones most interested in militant confrontation, while some of the anarchists we met who limit themselves to strictly horizontal, autonomous activity believe the guerrillas have spoiled any possibility of progress through armed struggle. Throughout Colombia, there are many indigenous and civil society groups that are de facto antiauthoritarian, and the latter anarchists see these groups as their natural allies.

Relations between Colombian anarchists and anarchists in neighboring countries are sometimes strained on account of these internal tensions. For example, the anarchists in Venezuela who publish *El Libertario* explicitly oppose Chavez, the socialist President who has bolstered social programs with funds from

ers have lost their jobs, and workers and organizers have endured constant death threats.

Now, Coca-Cola is shifting from contracted to precarious (i.e., temporary) labor as a way to offset the power of the union. In our conversation, their spokesperson downplayed the centrality of workplace organizing, perhaps because it is inevitable that they will eventually be forced out by this shift. Official union status gives them some legitimacy in the public eye and a modicum of legal protection, but our impression was that they seem to be betting on international anticapitalist solidarity campaigns as their best hope to exert a counter-force against the corporations; to this end, they are organizing a series of popular “tribunals” around the world, at which workers bring the misdeeds of these corporations to light. If our first impression was correct, labor-oriented activists in the United States who truly want to be pro-worker had better not let our comrades in Latin America down by remaining focused on workplace organizing alone when they need us to get serious about organizing anticapitalist resistance outside the workplace too.

Comité en Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos

We went to visit a group that does legal support work for Colombian political prisoners; they're situated near the top of a high-rise office building, in a markedly different environment than most of the people with whom we spoke. Nonetheless, their spokesperson impressed us with her spirit, declaring from the outset that under the current Colombian government everyone is a potential target of government repression and expressing approval when we identified ourselves to her as anarchists.

There are over 5000 political prisoners in Colombia. Arrestees can be held for up to three years without trial. The prison system

Like others in Colombia, members of Kino Pravda spoke of the difficulties of maintaining autonomy in a context in which every faction wants either to absorb you into their camp or else lump you in with the opposition.

Mefistófeles Collective

Before we knew what it meant, we saw impressive graffiti signed “Mefisto” in the streets downtown, inside the university, and on the walls of CreAcción. Later, we met members of the collective responsible for some of the most impressive street art in metropolitan Bogotá. They simultaneously provide the public with illegal art and publish a magazine promoting it, a risky combination that has not yet resulted in serious complications. They believe that youth countercultures in Bogotá are growing, and they’re committed to sharing new techniques and technologies while encouraging radical political content in graffiti.

They shared a story with us about the reclamation of public space in downtown Bogotá. They obtained permission from the city to paint one wall on one block of a street there for one week; now both walls of the entire street are constantly painted and repainted, and the police don’t hassle anyone because the painting began on a legal footing.

Sinaltrainal

Sinaltrainal is the national union in Colombia that focuses on taking on multinational corporations, specifically Coca-Cola and Nestle. Perhaps you’ve heard of the union organizers murdered in Colombia for attempting to organize Coca-Cola employees? They were from Sinaltrainal. In the past couple decades of their existence, two dozen people have been murdered, thousands of work-

environmentally destructive oil extraction, and suspect some Colombian anarchists of supporting Chavez. In fact, there are Colombian anarchists who feel it is better to organize under a Left regime than a Right one, who prioritize working with people in popular movements even if they are “Chavistas” or receive funding from Chavez over struggling against his government. We were also surprised to learn that Chavez and the FARC are seen as sharing similar ideological positions; all this, not to mention the difficulties of open political debate under repressive conditions, make it very complicated for anarchists in northern South America to resolve their differences.

Considering all they are up against, we were impressed with the range of activities anarchists and other anti-authoritarians have organized in Colombia. Early in our visit, our friends made a list of all the groups we should visit during our stay in Bogotá; we scarcely made it to a fourth of those, and that kept us quite busy for well over a week. Here are a few brief descriptions of what we did see.

CreAcción Espacios

The largest social center we saw is in a big building at the edge of downtown, on the middle floor between a goth bar and a counter-cultural venue. Though not limited to anarchists, CreAcción is organized by consensus process and explicitly autonomous and anti-authoritarian. It includes a screenprinting workshop, an infoshop stocked with Spanish-language anarchist material from around the world, a library of thousands of books (with an emphasis on Trotskyism, on account of the politics of the primary donor), a kitchen and small bar, and several rooms that host meetings for many different groups and organizations. As of this report, CreAcción has existed for a year; the rent is paid from sales of food at the bar and similar small benefit projects, and also—like most projects in Colombia—out of the pockets of the members of the collective.

We presented a total of four workshops at CreAcción in the course of our visit, covering the “anti-globalization” movement in the US, confrontational unemployment as a tactic in the North American context, autonomy, and women’s sexual and reproductive health. Attendance ranged from two dozen people to almost fifty, and everyone was very patient with the inconveniences of translation.

Just about every time we went to CreAcción we saw Yuri, the father of Nicolas, the fifteen-year-old anarchist beaten to death by riot police at the 2005 Mayday demonstration. Yuri helps to organize a group for survivors whose loved ones have been killed by police violence; they meet regularly at the space. Since his son’s death, Yuri has put a great deal of energy into social activism, and he is loved and admired by others who frequent CreAcción.

Mujeres Libres and Mujeres por la Resistencia

These two collectives developed several years ago around issues of women’s autonomy and resistance culture—focusing on access to reproductive care, women’s health, gender, and sexuality. The campaign for abortion access has been a powerful force in Colombia, bringing together women from a wide range of backgrounds. At first, the women of these collectives were subsumed within the mainstream campaign for abortion access; they then broke from the larger campaign, and now have earned respect and space within it for autonomous and horizontal organizing. Mujeres Libres is now defunct, while Mujeres por la Resistencia still meets, creating a space for women in punk. The women of these collectives are also working together on the campaign for reproductive access and to organize radically feminist programming in CreAcción Espacios.

Centro de la Cultura Libertaria

We presented a workshop on direct action at CCL, another social center a little farther north. CCL is smaller and has a more punk-oriented atmosphere. It, too, includes a screenprinting workshop, an infoshop, and a library, the last of which is much better stocked with anarchist materials than the one at CreAcción; there are also records for sale and a space for bands to practice. It seems to be frequented by a younger, feistier crowd.

Kino Pravda

Kino Pravda—named after an early Soviet school of filmmaking, literally “cinema truth”—is a radical documentary collective that began in the university eight years ago and has managed to maintain the same eight or so members ever since. We saw some of their work from the beginning of the decade, a blend of street footage and video collage following and explicating the anti-globalization movement in Colombia. Their more recent projects include a documentary on the participation of a youth group of clowns and puppeteers in last year’s official Carnival parade and an inside view of the secret ELN training camps that spring up in the countryside. The filmmaker responsible for the latter described the harrowing process of sneaking into a region of the countryside almost entirely surrounded by soldiers and paramilitaries in order to shoot the documentary; afterwards, when he was smuggling his footage out, the bus he was in was stopped by men in uniforms and he had to spin an elaborate story about his work as a geology student. Apparently persuading the guerrillas to let him film them was the least difficult part of the project.

The broad range of the three topics described—anticapitalist protest, popular arts, and guerrilla activity—indicates the broad-ranging approach the group takes to radical documentary work.