

## VIOLENCE AND ITS “OBJECTIVE CAUSES” (Part I)

BY Eduardo Posada

The idea that relates levels of violence to the economic and social situation, says Mauricio Rubio, “has been the most important guiding principle of state policy in matters of violence, including efforts to secure peace.” (Crimen e impunidad, Bogota 1999 p. 82). In the academic language that permeated political discourse, this idea has become identified with the “objective causes” of violence. It means that violence has a structural origin: poverty, economic disparities, in short a lack of social, political and economic opportunities offered by the system.

The current peace process, like its predecessors since the 1980s, was conceived on this premise. In a speech on 8 June 1998 presidential candidate Andres Pastrana said that State action would concentrate on “the so-called objective causes of violence: poverty and the inequitable distribution of income. It is time that Colombia had a peace policy that involves this national purpose with the main political and economic weapons available to us”. (Hechos de Paz, Bogota 1999, p. 36). There was nothing new about this approach however. The belief that we needed to combat the “objective causes of violence” to achieve peace has dominated the language of successive governments and inspired their respective policies.

There has been a high degree of public consensus on this point. Politicians of all parties, businessmen, academics and members of the Church share this diagnosis. Naturally, the guerrillas justify their existence with this discourse, and this discourse has clearly defined their peace proposal. To the question “Peace – when? One of the FARC leaders replied in Spain’s El Pais, “... what we are looking for at the negotiating table is not demobilization and the laying down of arms, but an in-depth solution to the social, economic and political problems of the country... because peace will come when people cease to suffer from hunger, when they have employment, when they stop killing, when they have guarantees to hold a different opinion (El Pais, 02.03.2000)

The traditionally dominant interpretation of violence in Colombia, as the result of these “object causes”, is now being questioned. Since 1994 and the publication of Fernando Gaitan’s pioneering work (with Malcolm Deas, *Dos ensayos especulativos sobre la violencia en Colombia*, Bogota, 1994) there have been new explanations of the problem. After a careful review of several theories Gaitan concluded that neither poverty nor disparity nor any other structural reason could in itself be responsible for the extraordinary degree of violence in Colombia. Gaitan suggested that more attention should be paid to the consequences of crime, then judicial system and the high degree of impunity. After the publication of this essay others have systematically followed this revisionist line of thought, in particular Armando Montenegro, Carlos Esteban Posada, Mauricio Rubio and Alejandro Gaviria.

In a recent essay Fernando Gaitan and Santiago Montenegro embarked on a “critical look at 20 years of studies on violence in Colombia.” (unpublished, Bogota, July 2000). In this valiant attempt at synthesis the authors again underline the fallacies of the theory of “Objective causes” but conclude with some more general comments. They say that work

on violence in Colombia is “firmly supported by empirical data”, that “resist the test of time and international comparisons”, and allow the causes of violence to be arranged in order of importance and resources to be channeled into priority areas.

The latest work I have read on the subject is that of Fabio Sanchez and Jairo Nuñez “Determinantes dekl crimen violento en un país altamente violento: erl caso colombiano” (Bogota, mimeo, September 2000). Their conclusions , after a systematic study of several variables in the seven largest cities, reinforces the revisionist view of the origin of violence. As they say, “socio-economic variables such as poverty or disparity do not greatly affect the murder rate.; but “the basic explanation of the increase in the murder rate in the 1980s was the activity of the drug-traffickers and to a lesser extent the collapse of the justice system”.

So it is now time that the State’s peace policy – in this or any other government – took account of the results of this new research. In addition to Colombian work, foreign experts such as Paul Collier have further undermined the concept of objective causes to explain the origins of violence. A better understanding of the armed conflict ion Colombia – a basic condition of the possibilities of achieving peace – should start by appreciating the errors of diagnosis which have so far served to justify frustrated policies. A redirection of the State peace policy will probably not be possible, however, while the public opinion continues on its present course without paying due attention to the results of recent research.