

VIOLENCE AND MYTH

BY Eduardo Posada

Colombia has the highest murder rate in the world, and nobody know why. Since the curve began to rise so sharply just over 20 years ago, there were some explanations put forward about the origins of the problem, and they have become deeply rooted in the mind of the public. A recent report ion the magazine Cambio (08/07/01) on the “Myths of violence” , written by a research group at Universidad de los Andes, is another attempt to liven up a debate which merits more attention. What are the myths? How can be put them right?

The los Andes researchers Maria Victoria Llorente, Mauricio Rubio, Camilo Echandia and Rodolfo Escobedo identify three of the commonplaces of thought about violence in Colombia: (1) a “higher number of murders is produced by daily violence derived from a general cultural characteristic that is marked by a high degree of intolerance”; (2) “daily aggression steps up into more serious expression, of instrumental violence”; and (3) “there are objective causes which explain violence in Colombia”.

Due to the first of these three myths the country has acquired a sort of collective sense of blame, which in foreign eyes also makes us a nation of criminals. This is a perverse myth, which indeed only really favors organized criminals, whose responsibility for their acts is thus diminished. The second myth is closely linked to the first, as the next step in a sequence: from daily violence and acts of impulse we pass to organized or instrumental crime. The third myth also minimizes the responsibility of the criminal, but instead of attributing the origin of violence to national culture it points to the structure of society and “the system”.

The prevalence of these and other myths has been disastrous for the country. First, they distort the diagnosis of the problem of violence and therefore affect the policies adopted to combat it. Since public opinion tends to accept such myths , crime is seen to be no more than a product of society, alien to the will of the criminal. So the results of the most horrific of criminal acts, the damage to society and their conduct, seem to be of little importance. This upside-down logic therefore makes the criminal the victim, and his acts justifiable. On that diagnosis, a crime policy of repression would seem to be worth nothing and have little sense. The dominant expressions of policy therefore speak about structural reform, and empty calls for prevention, with a discourse that is often confused with demagogy. All of these myths also carry weight in the current peace talks, with an importance that we perhaps do not suspect.

We should note that the Cambio report on “The myths of violence” only collects up some of the results that have from time to time been obtained from research since the mid 1990s. The work of Fernando Gaitan,. Malcolm Deas, Mauricio Rubio, Myriam Jimeno, Fabio Sanchez, Jaime Nuñez, Armando Monetnegro, Carlos Esteban Posad and Santiago Montenegro, amongst many others, have systematically offered new perspectives and approaches to the problem of violence in Colombia. This “revisionist” approach has served to show the poverty of empirical observation of traditional explanations; but it would seem that the commonplaces are so strong that noone can remove them. Otherwise, how can we

understand that “the myths of violence” continue to dominate intellectuals, political leaders and officer of the State, and are still part of official discourse.?

One relatively new aspect of this in revisionist literature on violence is the participation of economists in the debate; but their suggestions that the whole matter be reduced to problems for economists seems less than a happy one, even if it is true that in some other areas of the academic world some economists believe that they can only talk in their language with other economists). The “new” literature on violence is multidisciplinary, and standing alongside the economists are the anthropologists, historians. Sociologists, philosophers and political scientists. From their different standpoints, all have helped to question the commonplaces which continue to dominate our thoughts about our violence. The studies make serious attempts to avoid simple explanations and test arguments empirically, identifying priorities in policies to be adopted in the face of such a complex problem.

There is no other way of correcting these myths than to insist again and again that they are there and that they are wrong. This is a difficult task. After reading Maruricio Rubio’s book *Crimen e Impunidad – Precisiones sobre la violencia* (Tercer Mundo, 1999), Eduardo Pizarro thought it incredible that Rubio’s thesis had not “aroused furious debate across the country” (El Espectador). The Cambio report on the myths of violence, of which Rubio is a co-author – again reviews the deep-rooted stereotypes which therefore merit intensive discussion. Cambio, in another document published the previous year (26/06/00) came down on the side of those who still believe that structural problems “are the real cause... of the culture of violence in Colombia.”. So we must acknowledge Cambio’s objectivity in opening its pages to the revisionists who still come up against resistance from important groups of intellectuals and opinion-formers who refuse to enter into an informed and systematic debate on the subject.