

THE LANGUAGE OF PEACE AND ITS ERRORS

By Eduardo Posada*

“Manipulation, and without doubt, fear” notes Mauricio Rubio “ have gone to the extreme in Colombia of contaminating the language. Things can no longer be called by their names”. (Crimen e impunidad. Precisiones sobre la violencia, Bogota 1999 p. 225). In effect, instead of “kidnap” we use “retention” or even “the bran tub” as a cynical way to trivialize the horror of that criminal act. Assassins receive the almost innocuous name of “victimizers”. Actions which international law doubtless describe as “terrorism” are here masked by a language which tends to “decriminalize” them almost entirely. The distortion of language occurs not only in the area of crime. It is also visible in political analysis and in our understanding of our past as a nation. Why have we come to these depths of confusion? What is the effect of the dominant language in the peace talks? How is it affecting the future of democracy in Colombia?

It should first be said that this is neither a banal nor an abstract subject. Mauricio Rubio also says “The language moulds thought patterns on which people base their actions. Actions may take on different forms depending on what they are called. Euphemism is a convenient mechanism to mask actions which merit reproach or even given them the aura of respectability” In the language which has now come into common use, we have also built our stereotypes, which as Fernando Cepeda says, are “fatal for Colombia (El Tiempo 12/10/00). Fatal in at least three ways. First, the nation has formed images which destroy it, ashamed of our entire history, with no trust in our present institutions and no faith in the future. Second, this fatalist vision is projected abroad, where opinion could become increasingly decisive in our future fate as the conflict becomes more internationalized. And third, the stereotypes in the end admit that the enemies of democracy and its State of Law in Colombia are right.

Manipulation? Fear? The reasons which explain the confusion of language in the analysis of our realities are many. In part, the confusion is the result of a long and slow historical process of transformation in our values and ideas, a permanent ideological confrontation such as all democratic societies go through, whose immediate effects are probably not perceptible. But this confusion is also fed by the dynamics of a negotiation in which the government believes that it should give way in its own political discourse. Malcolm Deas he said this most eloquently: “Due to the nature of the process on which it is embarked – this or any other government in such a situation – part of the natural pedagogical role has to be abandoned ... a supposedly democratic government sometimes speaks very little of democracy – that is not convenient. Or when the point is mentioned, it is approached in a self-flagellating tone ... It has to support a great deal of rhetoric, and a great deal of criticism, smile as it listens to tergiversations or receive very partial versions of the history

* This is the first of a series of articles examining the political language that dominates the analysis of Colombian realities and the effect on the peace process.

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of the country” (La Paz, entre los principios y la práctica” ed. Francisco Leal, Los laberintos de la guerra, Bogota, 1999 p. 176).

Revisionism in the writing of history is one of the clearest reflections of the dominant political language. All our national past now seems to be discredited in a narration which confounds us with a tale of continuous failures. In the words of Daniel Pecaut, we have lost the “reference points of history” and therefore the “role of public opinion” is enfeebled. We are often told that this country has always been “in the same boat”, always managed by “the same gang”; that democracy has been a failure since independence; that Colombians have never been able to tolerate the opinions of others. We are continually reminded that the institutions – all the institutions, yesterday’s and today’s – lacked and continue to lack legitimacy. And we reminded in absolute terms, with no nuances, in a dogmatic tone that allows no debate. In this interpretation of reality and in such terms, there is no chance of reforming what we have, since what is wanted is that what we have should disappear completely.

Are these thoughts relevant to the peace process? Very much so. As Mauricio Rubio also says, “ ... it seems that the vision of the counterpart has been imposed on the negotiating table, without reservation” (Crimen e impunidad p. XV). The image projected by the language of the analyses of political realities in Colombia, at home and abroad, is precisely the image of a State and a society with no legitimacy and no intellectual justification, faced by insurgent violence by those who justify what they do on arguments of a just war. This is not just a simple word-game with no practical consequences. Behind all language there are principles. To give up a language completely and without reservations, when democracy and freedom are at stake is to open the doors not to peace, but to tyranny.