

Neo-Liberal Colombia - Where Life Has to Defeat Death

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In one of the poorest neighborhoods of Bogota, Belen, I saw two people bleeding in the middle of the road. One person was clearly dead. A group of onlookers was moving frantically, shouting loudly. There was an attempt to resurrect an injured man. I asked the driver to inquire whether our help was needed, but he was told something insulting by the locals, and insisted that we leave the scene immediately.

Was it a traffic accident? Or a murder? The driver did not know. He actually did not want to know.

“Look,” he said. “You may be a Russian or Chinese Communist, or whatever, but here, in the middle of this slum, you kind of look like a gringo, and that is a damn big disadvantage to both of us, and to my car. So, if you don’t intend to bury your bones here, we should not stop in the middle of this neighborhood, for too long.”

“I thought they love *Gringos* in Colombia,” I uttered, sarcastically.

“Down there, yes,” my driver waved his hand towards the financial center of Bogota. “But not here. Not up here.”

Before becoming a driver, this individual used to be a top manager, at one of the biggest South Korean electronics companies operating in Colombia. I have always been having good luck with my drivers. During the Dirty War in Peru I once was driven, for weeks, by a retired and thoroughly broke army general, and in Bulgaria, after the East European collapse, by a former ambassador to the United Nations.

Neo-liberal Colombia has some of the greatest and most bizarre disparities I have witnessed anywhere on Earth.

After filming and photographing in the middle of various tough slums that have mushroomed along the hills ‘above’ the capital, I returned to my hotel.



The underclass continues to grow at a rapid rate (Photo: Andre Vltchek 2019©)

Just a few kilometers away from the misery-stricken dwellings, in a coffee shop of my hotel, a group of upper-class Colombians from Cali was having a casual dinner. The people were loud and I could not avoid overhearing their conversation. They spoke about their dogs having diarrhea, regularly, and how it could actually be stopped or prevented.

“It is outrageous,” one of them lamented. “Poor animal has been shitting and shitting. What is it telling us about the quality of Colombian food and water?”

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Obviously, someone had enough of such contrasts. Or more precisely, few millions of Colombian people decided that the situation is, should we say, “indigestible”.

And, so, on November 21, 2019, Colombia exploded.

Like Chile did, a few weeks earlier.

The explosion has been spontaneous, angry, and for the extreme right-wing government of President Iván Duque Márquez, very embarrassing. Some would say even, scary. His approval rating hit the bottom, 26%. Not as bad as in Chile, where the admirer of Pinochet’s dictatorship, President Pinera, ended up with just a pathetic 10% support from his citizens. Not as bad, but bad enough.

Imagine that you are presiding over a fundamentalist neo-liberal country with hardly any public education or healthcare, with monstrous disparities, with some 9 U.S. military bases (it really depends how you count them; could be bit less or more), and with a foreign policy which has been shamelessly dictated from the North. Imagine that you still have those semi-active left-wing guerilla movements on your territory, but at the same time your government is simply super-hostile towards anything socialist, Communist, red or pink or even slightly progressive. And that many people in your own country actually strongly dislike the direction in which you are moving the nation.

Imagine that you have all sorts of problems at home, and that the left-wing guerilla movements are not the only issues you have to face here: you also have fascist militias which are murdering and disappearing people, you have those narco-mafias which sometimes have better social programs for the poor than your government does, and you also have the anti-imperialist Venezuela fighting for its survival immediately next door; a country which the United States has been trying to destabilize, ruin and turn into a regressive, oppressive Gulf state.

You have hundreds of thousands of the Venezuelan ‘refugees’ on your territory. Some say millions. People who have been escaping from the monstrous U.S. sanctions and from the outright U.K. and German theft of the Venezuelan gold, and monetary assets. It is scary, isn’t it? You have no idea who these people are. Are they really against the Venezuelan President, Maduro? For decades, millions of your people, Colombians, were crossing the border, escaping misery, seeking a better life in Caracas and Maracaibo. You know why it is now the other way round: because Venezuela has been raped, plundered by your masters in the United States and Europe. And it was done with your help, Mr. Duque. Now nobody knows, what is coming next.

Your people are waking up, rising and starting to demand your resignation, or even the demise of the entire Colombian regime.

What do you do; how do you react?

First you pretend that you are listening. Even that you have some sympathy with your own people. But when you see that the protesters think that all that you offer (actually, not that

much) is not enough, you deploy the special forces; you do it the Chilean way; you start using brutal police and military contingents, as well as under-cover para-military units. That is what your masters in the North tell you to do, and you are a good obedient servant of the U.S. government and those several “international organizations” controlled by Washington, including the Organization of American States” (OAS), World Bank, IMF, to name just a few.



Dilan Cruz: Not forgotten (Photo: Andre Vltchek 2019©)

You get a clear and loud message from Mike Pompeo in Washington. You can go ‘all the way’. You can kill, without being criticized. You can torture. This is all in the frame of the *Monroe Doctrine*, or, as some say, of the *Second Operation Condor*. As long as the killing and torture are done by the “right” people, against the “wrong” ones, they can never be criticized.

You begin frightening people. People begin getting injured, or even dying.

You killed a boy. A young kid. His name was Dilan Cruz. His entire life was ahead of him. He was only 18 years old. Your forces shot him in the head with a bean bag round.

I went there, where it happened. People waved torn Colombian flags; where Dilan was murdered.

That’s where Colombia is at this moment.

National strikes are shaking the capital and other major cities. Smoke and teargas are filling the air above several major streets. The atmosphere is tense. Nihilist, frightening graffiti is everywhere. The glass at your idiotic, overpriced ‘public’ transportation system (just glorified buses, nothing else) is shattered.

It may be just a beginning. Most likely it is.

Your regime is waiting. Will the demonstrators get tired and return home? If they retreat, fine. If not, it is likely that the state is ready to protect the *status quo* by crushing them; by killing many, injuring thousands, like in Chile.

In neo-liberal Latin America, which is governed by the U.S. and its “*Monroe Doctrine*”, human lives are worth nothing. What people demand is listened to, then analyzed, and in the end, used against them.

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In Bogota, in front of the building of the Attorney General of the Nation (*Procuraduria General de la Nacion*), hundreds of protesters, mainly indigenous, were blocking a square, despite a heavy police presence in the area.

One of the protest leaders, Mr. Felix Rueda, spoke to me, in front of the camera, while the notorious Colombian police force, “Esmad” (the Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron), was slowly closing in on us, controlling all the nearby streets:

“We are victims of the armed conflict. We are people who were hit hard by violence; something we thought would never happen again in this country. I represent the victims.

And I fight for human rights. All these people around here are victims of the armed conflict.”

A lady behind him begins to shout:

“Here, almost all of us are victims. We are peasants, with no protection, whatsoever.”

Mr. Rueda continues:

“These people are victims of the state violence; perpetrated by the armed groups.”

I asked him why there are no mass media outlets covering their plight.

“Sometimes they come. But mostly just when we break down some doors, or when someone dies. One person has already died during the last weeks. Many were injured. Again, Colombians are now fighting against Colombians.”

Another woman from the crowd screams at me:

“There are also rapes; girls are being raped, even boys...”

Police, military and the para-military response to the protests in Colombia has been so outrageously tough, so violent, that even some mass media outlets in the West had no choice but to notice and to report the gravest excesses. *The Guardian* wrote on 11 December, 2019:

“For the past three weeks, Colombia has been racked by demonstrations triggered by widespread discontent with the proposed economic reforms of the rightwing president, Iván Duque, whose approval rating has dropped to just 26% since he took office in August last year.

Protesters are also angry at the lack of support for the historic 2016 peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), which formally ended five decades of civil war that killed 260,000 and forced more than 7 million to flee their homes.

In a country which not long ago suffered the highest kidnapping rate in the world – and whose security forces have themselves been implicated in forced disappearances – the videos of police snatching protesters evoked disturbing memories.

According to the national victims’ agency more than 150,000 people were forcibly disappeared between 1986 and 2017, with up to 80,000 still missing. Combatants on all sides of the conflict engaged in the practice.”

Since the beginning of the protests, Colombian forces have been disappearing people from the streets; something that is bringing traumatic memories to the citizens. In one case, a young woman protestor, was grabbed and pulled into an unmarked vehicle. Two people jumped into their car and chased the vehicle, persistently, until the victim was released. This was a well-documented case: “a young woman dragged into an unmarked Chevrolet”. But I was told that there were many other cases, that went unreported and almost unnoticed.

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I flew to Barranquilla, a city on the majestic River Magdalena. This is where this great Colombian waterway joins the warm turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea.



LOSING HOPE: Public mood manifests itself on the walls and buildings of Bogota (Photo: Andre Vltchek 2019©)

This is where one of the greatest novels of the 20th Century, “Love in the Time of Cholera”, written by the Colombian Communist writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, took place. This is where Florentino Ariza waits for the love of his life, Fermina Daza, for fifty-one years, nine months and four days. This is where he makes love to her, finally, on a river boat, at old age. Looking at the surface of this majestic river, Garcia Marquez, finishes his novel. I always thought that the book was fully connected to Cartagena, but I was explained to, that no; it was linked inseparably to the Magdalena River.

And this is where my friend, one of the most important Colombian journalists, Constanza Vieira, lives.

She picked me up at the airport, together with her partner, drove me to the long, new riverside, where we sat down and spoke for hours about Colombia; her beloved and tortured land.

Her father had met Mao, on two occasions. She knew all about the negotiations between the government and FARC. She is a walking encyclopedia, when it comes to Colombia. But this is not what I wanted to know, this time.

Latin America was in turmoil. The Bolivian government was overthrown in a brutal, fascist coup. Chile and Colombia were rising. Venezuela was fighting for its survival. Where was this country going?

Constanza spoke about corruption under Duque, about Uribe’s crimes, and about the grave violations of human rights in her country:

“Colombia in a setting of South America, is a conservative country; very conservative. It is suffering from one right-wing government after another. Here, the inequality is tremendous, one of the greatest in Latin America. When the protests had erupted here, the governments negotiated with the protesters, but never delivered on what they agreed. Colombia is a neo-liberal country. Now it is being shaken by huge protests. In this context, we have to thank Chile. Because whenever in the past Colombians were demanding true changes, our government would tell us: ‘look at Chile! Chileans and all of us have to be thankful to General Pinochet. The country is so prosperous. Capitalism works! So, the uprising in Chile, where people are rejecting neo-liberalism, is having a tremendous impact on Colombia.”

The situation in Colombia is truly grotesque, and the cynicism endless. Constanza mentions just one example, which would be hard to even imagine in most of the other countries on the continent:

“In this country, corruption is just enormous. And so are violations of human rights. Now imagine: the government of Duque decided to pay compensation to the victims of human rights violations, as well as victims of corruption – from the budget allocated to public universities!”

I asked her about the U.S. military bases.

"You see, it is not as simple as it used to be. United States is not staffing the bases with its own soldiers, permanently. The soldiers who come here are usually under-cover. It is often an intelligence unit or two, or these are soldiers who come and go, using local military bases only when they need them."

As we are parting at the airport, late at night, her partner, a writer, goes back to the "basics" - to Simon Bolivar:

"If you talk to people all over Latin America, the great majority will say that they admire Simon Bolivar. Our great Liberator! But if you listen and look closer, you soon realize that the Bolivarian ideals are being betrayed, almost everywhere, all around us."

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Colombia is boiling. There is not just one problem that the country is facing; there are dozens, perhaps hundreds.

While indigenous people have been marching on Bogota, protesting and struggling for their rights and culture to be respected, the coca leaf cultivating farmers (most of them indigenous families) are demanding that their crop finally gets legalized.

All this, while the Colombia peace court is exhuming some 50 bodies in extra-judicial killings cases, presumably committed by the military.



Protesters, mostly indigenous, gathering outside government building in the city (Photo: Andre Vltchek 2019©)

As recently reported by *Reuters*:

"False positive killings numbered at least 2,248 between 1998 and 2014. The majority of the murders took place during the term of former President Alvaro Uribe, according to the attorney general's office."

People were defined as dying in combat, but in reality, they were victims of extra-judicial killings.

Extreme poverty, extra-judicial killings, corruption, unemployment, an embarrassing foreign policy, police brutality, extremely high crime rate - everything is inter-connected. Everything seems to be explosive.

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One night, all around rebellious Bogota. Graffiti everywhere. Police on high alert. Clusters of people, assembling, then disappearing into the night.

Behind the airport, in the center of a town called Fontibon, there is a meeting of the committee which is organizing one of the strikes. I am being taken there by David Curtidor, a prominent Colombian activist.

He introduced me to Ms. Luz Janneth Zabaleta, a professor of mathematics, who is deeply involved in the organization of the protests. She explained to me:

"Until now, all those government's so-called reforms were made against the workers, indigenous people and students. This uprising will change everything."

Her comrade, Arturo Partilla Lizarazo, a labor lawyer passionately supported her words:

"Now Colombia is entering a huge struggle; it is fighting for the dignity of human beings, inhabiting this country. Neo-liberal policies have failed, here and elsewhere. And Colombia is ready to defeat those neo-liberal policies, which have already destroyed so many lives of our people."

We talk about the former government of President Uribe, which according to both, was basically following a policy of war. We also discuss the awful plight of the common Colombian people, of millions of starving children, the horrendous unemployment rate among young people, and the unimaginable hardship endured by elderly, retired people.

Later, at Parkway, which is a narrow park in the center of the city, I witnessed protesters waving Colombian and Chilean flags. There is live music. Young people are dancing. Units of the riot police are moving along the edges of the park. Are they going to attack? If yes, when? Nobody knows.

I drive through the now empty Bolivar Square, then near the Presidential Palace, barricaded, blocked by the military. Several government buildings are covered by black, protective curtains. Somehow, they look like a funeral halls.

Right next to the government district, there is a red light district'; full of sex workers, pimps and police units. In Colombia, power and misery shamelessly coexist next to each other.

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On my last day, before departing Bogota for La Paz, Bolivia, I was visited by a legendary educator, German Vladimir Zabala Archila, a liberation theologian who used to work with, among others, with Ivan Illich.

Still very active all-over Latin America, helping to set up revolutionary educational systems in various, particularly indigenous-majority countries, Vladimir is promoting the so-called "Pedagogy of Otherness" (*Pedagogia de La Otridad*).

Vladimir is an eternal optimist. He believes that Colombia, as well as the entire Latin America, are undergoing tremendous, irreversible transformations:

"We are in the middle of great cultural changes. I can see it even in my own middle-class part of the city. My neighbors, whom I thought were very conservative ladies, are these days banging their pans in the middle of the street, in what is clearly a protest against the system and the government. We call it here "I am scared, but I am marching!""

"One of our previous presidents used to say: 'All we have to do is to become part of the United States.' Colombian paramilitary groups infiltrated Venezuela, on behalf of the West. But look now. There is growing solidarity among black and indigenous people in such places like Cali. And even Evo [Morales] was here, marching with us. He is beloved by the people of

Colombia.”

“And now?” I asked Vladimir. “Evo... How does it all look from here?”

He does not hesitate:

“We didn’t expect this coup. We were quite certain that Evo’s popularity in Bolivia would protect him. We were confident in Cuban intelligence. We did not think that Santa Cruz would succeed, with its horrible Nazis like Camacho, who are connected with narco-traffickers, and backed by the West...”

But Vladimir is still optimistic, and so am I.

Latin America is waking up. United, as they say here, people can never be defeated. And slowly, reluctantly, Latin American nations are finally trying to unite.

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Things will not change overnight in Colombia, but they *will* eventually change.

As I drive through Bogota, I see anti-government graffiti, I see damaged buildings, the remains of the battles fought between protesters and the security forces. But I also see some strange attempts to infiltrate the rebellion, like the clenched fists that look just too familiar; like *Otpor*, a symbol of the Western-backed “Color Revolutions”.

It is too early to draw conclusions, but Colombian rebels have to be vigilant. While people are fighting for a new South America, while they are getting injured, while some are even dying, the West is plotting, together with President Duque and his regime; they are analyzing and trying to figure out how to keep things as they have been, for those long stagnant decades. If the government can get away with it, it would give absolutely nothing – zero.

This will be a long and difficult struggle.

Colombia is one of the most damaged places in Latin America; one of the most turbo-capitalist, and one of the most sold out to the West.

On the other hand, its opposition is vibrant and diverse. Its people are amazing; many very brave, educated and determined people.

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My last day in Bogota, as I was falling asleep, I heard some loud gunshots right in front of my hotel.

After years in Beirut, I was used to such sounds. ‘Celebratory shooting into the air’, I thought, half asleep. But people were screaming, too. Exhausted, I fell asleep.

The next morning, on the way to the airport, I was told by my driver: “At night, they killed a French man, right in front of the entrance to your hotel.”

‘Too many corpses’, I thought. ‘Too many people are dying in Colombia. For whatever reasons, but dying unnatural deaths.’

At the airport, passport control check took almost two hours. Immigration officers were showing absolute and open spite towards the passengers. They were chatting with each other, banging into their mobile phones, even eating. While people waited in endless lines, like cattle. Absolute impunity.

On the Avianca flight from Bogota to La Paz, my neighbor was a typical US lady-apparatchik.

"Where are you from?" she asked me in an arrogant tone of voice, right before take off.

"Russia," I said.

"What?"

"Russia."

"What's that?"

"Russian Federation".

"Oh, *Ru-siah!*" She gave me a bizarre, pre-programmed, aggressive look.

I was leaving an old US colony for a new one, recently 'acquired' one.

The woman who was sitting next to me on the plane, was radiating the unmistakable chill of death. My body began shaking, slightly. But then I recalled the last words of Garcia Marquez's brilliant novel, written on the shores of the Rio Magdalena:

"The Captain looked at Fermina Daza and saw on her eyelashes the first glimmer of wintry frost. Then he looked at Florentino Ariza, his invincible power, his intrepid love, and he was overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limits."

My body relaxed. And I was suddenly certain that it will be life, as well as the great passion for it, that will finally liberate Colombia from the appalling embrace of death.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. Five of his latest books are "[China Belt and Road Initiative](#)", "[China and Ecological Civilization](#)" with John B. Cobb, Jr., "[Revolutionary Optimism, Western Nihilism](#)", the revolutionary novel "[Aurora](#)" and the bestselling work of political non-fiction: "[Exposing Lies Of The Empire](#)". View his other books [here](#). Watch [Rwanda Gambit](#), his groundbreaking documentary about Rwanda and DR Congo and his film/dialogue with Noam Chomsky "[On Western Terrorism](#)". Vltchek presently resides in East Asia and Latin America, and continues to work around the world. He can be reached through his [website](#), his [Twitter](#) and his [Patreon](#). He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His latest books are: "Exposing Lies Of The Empire" and "Fighting Against Western Imperialism". Discussion with Noam Chomsky: On Western Terrorism. Point of No Return is his critically acclaimed political novel. Oceania - a book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific. His provocative book about Indonesia: "Indonesia - The Archipelago of Fear". Andre is making films for teleSUR and Press TV. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and the Middle East. He can be reached through his website or his Twitter.

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