Church-State assemblages in Colombia’s peace-building scenarios: ¿re-writing the Catholic Social Doctrine?

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In this presentation I want to tell some of the story of a forceful civic uprising that took place recently in mainly Afro Colombia’s pacific littoral, Buenaventura’s Civik Strike, and the leadership role played in it by the local Church; and from this I want to reflect on two challenging questions that an attentive exploration of this dated and localized event brings back to confront some important aspects of the Catholic Social Doctrine. The first of these questions is this: Is not there a performative contradiction within this Doctrine, in that its courageous commitment to the struggles for social structural transformations coming from the most disenfranchised communities (from “the poor”), in the face of increasing socio-economic inequalities and increasingly concentrated political privileges, reproduced and accentuated in our world today, might at times be hindered by this same Doctrine’s secularist scruple? And the second question would regard not this time a possible performative contradiction that the Doctrine, as it stands, might on occasion give place to, but rather a conceptual deficit in its capacity to understand the topography of the social, and the ontology of the political. This is, a conceptual deficit in its capacity to orient us in how to understand and describe the social space and what happens in it; and in how to think through the way of being of agents and agencies in political conflicts, and their effects. In what follows, I will narrate specific angles of the Buenaventura’s Civic Strike process, and will proceed from there to explain why these two challenging questions regarding the performative coherence, and the conceptual reach of the Church’s Social Doctrine might emerge from this historically situated and contingent experience. At the same time, I hope to make clear that my concern with respect to this possible performative incoherence, and conceptual deficit, is not so much intellectual or theoretical as much as it is pragmatic. Having followed the process of this popular Civic Strike movement through an ethnographic encounter with it, and having interviewed at length some of its participants, religious and lay men and women, I have come to be concerned with how the social and political transformative potential of forces that this Social Doctrine mobilizes, can be “weakened” or “neutralized” by the Church’s official stances vis-à-vis issues like the
permissible or desirable reach of religious political activism in organized social movements of resistance, and their agonistic or tense interactions with State governance, and socio-economic elites. From this concern, I believe it is necessary that the Church’s Social Doctrine, especially its promotion of a struggle for social justice and peace that demands structural social transformations, to counteract structural forms of violence and injustice, opens itself to be re-written out of experiences of popular uprising like the Buenaventura’s Civic Strike process. I emphasize that when I employ the notion of “writing” or “re-writing” here, I am not just taking it as a metaphorically substitute term for re-thinking, re-interpreting, re-describing. Rather, I am taking seriously and literally, the challenge that Jacques Derrida’s thought brings with its radical re-signification of the notion of “writing” to the axioms of Western metaphysics, and its political ontology and semiotics. This is, to the implicit understandings of the agencies, the spaces, and the ways of acting of political subjects, and the role of language in defining them, that have been dominant in the history of western philosophy, theology and culture (dominant also perhaps, in the Catholic Social Doctrine and liberation theology’s epistemic field).

I will invite you to reflect on these issues by commenting on two images: a photography of trust, and a scheme of a suspended Social Pastorate plan.

Photographed trust

The image shows Msgr. Epalza, by then Bishop of the local Dioceses, marching with people in one of the epic street demonstrations during the 21 days long general Civic Strike that paralyzed the main city port of Colombia’s pacific littoral, Buenaventura, in May of 2017. One first question evoked by this image, is about the relations between photography, geography and affects that circulate in a place and that, in this regard, are somehow spatial. Affects that are in this case both religious and political, and relate to a recurrent motif in interviews conducted with both religious and lay men and women, who have participated in the Civic Strike process (not only a dated event, but also a complex, sustained and innovative effort in political organization). When asked about the leadership role played by the local Church in these event and process, people bring up “trust” as an epistemic and
political key. It is, then, a question of the inscription (or the writing) of an affect in a space (hence the relevance of taking literally the semantic weight of the graphic in geo-graphy, photo-graphy): How do affects get inscribed in places, bodies, things, institutions and how to narrate, map or re-write these inscriptions? These inscriptions are in motion, hence the inseparable question: how do they circulate, move, accumulate, sediment, add up, transform? The photographic image conveys an affective inscription and its mobility, evoking an affective texture that appears and doesn’t appear, in the threshold of the visible and the invisible: from the image of popular religiosity in the Divino Niño stamped in the young man’s t-shirt in the far left side, to the neatly ironed white robe of the Bishop, and his official belt and hat. From the uncanny presence of the police officer and the bodyguards, in days of a “state of exception” of sorts in which brutal police repression was unleashed against the people and remained always a latent threat in the atmosphere, to the caring figure of the “Bishop of the People”, as the bonaverenses named Msgr. Epalza, stamping his image in postcards sold now in tourist shops with that caption in the bottom. Affective motions or circuits that cross through the popular and the institutional as sites of devotion, through the State and the Church as institutional sites of authority, and in so doing destabilize otherwise naturalized social topographies: inside/outside (the State or the Church), up/down (the institutional/the popular). Affective motions that also cross through horror and trust, fear and hope, challenging us with one of the most daunting aspects of affective inscription, affective writing in an image and a space (photography and geography); affective writing in an image of a space (photography of geography): the constitutive and profound ambiguity, ambivalence, of its signifying force.

The photograph of Msgr. Epalza walking side by side to the people in the streets of Buenaventura (more than 70,000 are estimated to have marched in the most concurred demonstrations during these days), expresses these affective motions and circuits of trust that gave the local Church’s its religious and political role of leadership. And which, through an institutional slide, have also given force to the Civic Strike as a social interethnic and ecumenical movement. In a city’s population which is 80% afro, 15% indigenous and 5% mestizo. It is a law-making force. One of the points agreed to between the Civic Strike Committee and the national government, to put an end to the strike back in
2017, was that the investments and public-policy measures agreed upon to improve the living conditions of the people of Buenaventura, should become a law of the nation passed and approved through Congress, which it did, in December of that same year. And hence a second question: How does one map and the spatial (always also temporal) configuration of the social landscape, in this place, in this geography? These affective motions require us to describe the church-state assemblages at play here, for example, beyond the “inside/outside” and “up/down” flat social topographies; perhaps in terms of forms of church stateness (Johnson et. al. 2018). It is in this trail that one has to think these spatial affects, and also the institutional slides and affective edgings that facilitate these motions in cross-institutional church-state assemblages. The robe in the demonstration, but also the Divino Niño stamped in a young man’s t-shirt, are affective sensorial edgings that give force to a slide in a church-state cross-institutional assemblage. Photographs of the Buenaventura Civic Strike abound in these edgings. Father John Reina, by then director of the Dioceses Social Pastorate, appears always in the center of the Civic Strike Committee in the negotiation table with the government.

**Church-State assemblages in a suspended social pastorate plan**

In one of our lengthy conversations Father John Reina, still by then the Director of the local Dioceses Social Pastorate, explained to me how he conceived of the Church’s Social Pastorate as a lateral and sliding institutional regime that could facilitate passages and synergies between everyday life in the neighborhoods (a popular decentered religiosity of ecclesial communities), the Church as a social and spiritual agent, and the State’s institutions as site of a highly contested, and disputed governance. As his presentation made clear, the inspiration of this plan draws from passages of the Church’s Social Doctrine compendium which emphasize, which he calls “jewels from the Social Catholic Doctrine that we have but are not promulgated enough”. Passages like:

“Nothing that concerns the community of men and women — situations and problems regarding justice, freedom, development, relations between peoples, peace — is foreign to evangelization, and evangelization would be incomplete if it did not take into account the mutual demands continually made by the Gospel and by the concrete, personal and social life of man” (Compendium, # 66)
“The links [between evangelization and human promotion] also include links in the theological order, since one cannot disassociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored. They include links of the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of man?” (Compendium, # 66)

This Church-State cross-institutional assemblage envisioned by Father Reina is constituted by a double slant through which the frontiers of the Church’s Social Pastorate would open up, centrifugally, in two potential flows. Through one slant, a flow from/towards the everyday concerns, struggles, experiences, feelings, of the people in the neighborhoods through the consolidation of already formed ecclesial semi-autonomous communities conceived of in the guise of a rather standard figure for the social pastorate promoted by the Latin American Church’s orthodoxy in this matters: the Integrated System for a New Evangelization, or SINE. And the other slant would open up the Church’s Social Pastorate in a flow from/towards the State’s institutions at the local level, starting with a, this time quite unconventional, religio-political summon from its part addressed to the first lower level instances of local political representation constitutionally recognized: in the urban neighborhoods the Assemblies for Communal Action (Juntas de Acción Comunal or JAL), and in the rural areas the afro Communitarian Councils, and the indigenous communities’ Cabildos. The summon to work, listening attentively to their people’s concrete situation and aspiration, on the collective composition of plans for a common living, also called “Plans for ethno-development”, first accorded at a neighborhood level, then at a sectorial level, and then presented with enough leverage before the city’s council. This, after having passed through an unprecedented instance of representation and articulation that is not constitutionally recognized anywhere, and yet appeared in Father Reina’s Social Pastorate plan, phrased in a sinuous formula: “space for the formation in the exercise of incidence to consolidate…. identity and development in the neighborhoods”, in the context of urban areas; or “….identity and autonomy in the territories” (Reina 2018), in the context of rural areas where the juridico-political figures of self-governance for afro and indigenous communities are in place.

This constitutional “no place”, would be a space enabled by the Church’s pastoral work of “solidarity and accompaniment” to the communities, in their already instituted
organizational practices and spaces of political representation. In this sense, the Social Pastorate plan would allow the Church to make the affective force of its practices of religious and spiritual commoning slide from its ecclesial base communities in marginalized neighborhoods (in this sense, from the “poor”), into the State’s institutions to transform them, so as to bring about those structural social reforms that are necessary to fulfill the prophetic role that the Church’s Social Doctrine assigns to its pastoral mission, that of seeking a “human promotion” (the term dear to Father Reina), in concrete situations in which “injustice needs to be confronted, and justice needs to be restored”. This double slanted and fluid cross-institutional regime that he conceived the local Dioceses Social Pastorate under his tenure to be, would do that by transforming what he had been handed down, the structure of neighborhood ecclesial communities under the SINE system (the first slant described above). Transforming them by bending them into what, in his vision and interpretation of the “jewels of the Catholic Social Doctrine that we have but are not promulgated enough” (June 09, 2018), they were meant to be: not only spaces of encounter for ethical and spiritual cultivation in community interrelatedness, but also, and precisely because of this, places for the cultivation of a distinctive ethos of citizenship that would strive for institutional, infrastructural and material transformations through this spiritual bonding in order to disrupt the inertia of an insensitive State totally unhinged from people’s everyday needs, struggles and aspirations. The praxis of Christian solidarity, implies here the formation at the base of a distinctive ethos of Christian citizenship, one which would allow, in the words of one of the closing slides of Father Reina’s powerpoint presentation for:

“(…) the solution to the multiple problems of the population which require the resolute support of all, and to start to build from the base a process of becoming conscious so as to change the unjust social structures that are pushing the community towards chaos. As pastoral agents we seek to make people aware of the need of assuming a central role in the social, economic, political, cultural and spiritual growth of the city (…) until we are able to live with dignity in our territory” (2018)

Again, echoes of the Civic Strike motto: “to live with dignity and peace in the territory”, and not merely by chanceful coincidence. This pedagogy in an insubordinate form of popular citizenship (an afro, indigenous, mestizo and Catholic one), didn’t come to happen in the structure of the ecclesial base communities as it was envisioned here. But it started to
happen somewhere else, in the Civic Strike’s street demonstrations, gatherings, and innovative practices of political organization.

One of the main reasons why this plan didn’t come to be realized, was the lack of support of the Church’s national hierarchy, which even during the Strike days expressed disapproval for what it regarded as a too political involvement of the Church in the civic popular uprising. And then the more visible Church leaders in the process were castigated, in an underhanded way: Monseigneur Epalza and Father John Reina were soon removed from their posts as Bishop and Director of the Dioceses Social Pastorate, respectively. And the relation of the new Bishop in his public pronouncements with the Civic Strike process has been ambivalent, but over all has implied a very consistent withdrawal of the Church from this platform of popular emancipatory politics.

And yet, sadly now not thanks too but rather in despite of the Church, something changed out of the Civic Strike’s experience in the people of Buenaventura’s perception of their role as citizens, in their political culture. This can be further supported by the shift in voting patterns in regional and national electoral processes since then. Also, by the way in which the Civic Strike movement has organized a complex interethnic institutional platform open to all, which has been growing and now registers 211 official member organizations. In open assembly they elect an “executive committee” integrated by 17 representatives elected in a general assembly, who are responsible for conducting the ongoing negotiations with the national and local governments to implement the agreement with which the 2017 Civic Strike came to an end. This transformation in political collective awareness and engagement, and its force in shaping governmental institutions towards the necessary structural changes that can lead towards people’s vision of what means to “live with dignity in the territory”, is being mobilized by the Civic Strike process through quite different circuits to the ones envisioned by Father Reina’s Social Pastorate plan. In a cross-institutional slide whose slants or flows do not circuit between the ecclesial base communities and the local government, but between the Civic Strike process and the national government. Nonetheless, the Church’s institutional edging, including what happens at the level of the pastoral work done at the ecclesial communities, and the local
government, continue to overlap and dis-encounter in different and shifting ways throughout this process, beyond the intentions of specific agents (priests, nuns, filigrees) of these pastoral practices, but also conditioned decisively by them, in the spatial affectivities that they continue cultivating. A fluid church-state assemblage continues to take form in these dynamic overlaps and dis-encounters. Even if he has been left mostly alone by the current Church’s leadership in the Civic Strike process, there is the force of the spatial trust that this institution enacts, not without fractures and shades, re-affirmed and mobilized in his figure. In one of the meetings with the national government’s officials in order to follow up the implementation of the agreement, which I attended in early December, the meeting opened with a moment of prayer that he conducted:

“God we give ourselves to your Holy Spirit so that we can all have discernment, wisdom and openness to listen to the reasons of our brothers and sisters. I ask to all who are here present today to be grateful to You for this moment, a moment that is very important because there are here people that can make decisions in benefit of the people of Buenaventura that allow us to close and to heal so many rifts in our society” (December 09, 2018)

Then an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory to the Lord, collective prayers by all those present (among them ministers and vice-ministers of the national government), ensued. A very sharp edging of the at once institutional and popular religious affect: without this edging, no slide. Not the slide that he had envisioned in this pastoral plan, finally unrealized; but another form of slide of an affective force coming from a beloved people into an indolent State, pressing it to fulfill its undelivered duty on behalf of its common life and well being. Somehow in his figure and his performance the Church continues being this slide that allows for passages or motions of a spatial trust that comes from a historically weaved texture between the Church and the people, one that carries with it still some force to bend the State’s laws, and government practices, in the people’s favor.

**Epistemological and ontological landscapes**

That Father John Reina’s Social Pastorate plan didn’t come through as planned speaks to how the country’s *status quo* (elites holding to their economic and political privileges), through the Church’s hierarchy, has worked out to disable and neutralize the Church’s leadership in the Buenaventura’s Civic Strike ongoing political process. But what I have
attempted to convey throughout this presentation, is that the problems and questions raised should go well beyond the recognition that the Church, as any other institution, is a conflictive scene where diverse views come into friction. The Church’s hierarchy has mobilized in this situation the normative paradigm of secularism, and of Church - State separation, to justify its cautious withdrawal from the political process, notwithstanding that its popular emancipatory force is fully attuned with the aspects of the Church’s Social Doctrine that have inspired the key religious leaderships’ support to the movement. Problems and questions arise regarding the epistemological field or landscape in which secularism’s normative paradigm is anchored: dominant forms of understanding the ethical and political subject and her agency, the public sphere, institutions emplacement in the social, and affective inscriptions in institutions. Perhaps an experience like the one I have narrated, in a brief and preliminary way, speaks to the need of displacing those transformative forces that come from the Catholic Social Doctrine, away from what I would call the logocentric and colonialist “metaphysics” implied in the pervasive language of political liberalism, and its axioms regarding citizenship, the public sphere, the permissible and impermissible roles of religious practices in it, etc.

Hence, I have intimated that it is timely, for example, to make a shift away from the habitual conceptions of “trust” as a subjective feeling experienced by someone towards a determinate object or person, with a specific motivational force, in order to understand this trust in its political and religious registers. This is, in order to think it through as an affective reality somehow integral to, and perhaps even partially constitutive of, the popular uprising that expressed itself in the massive demonstrations that took place during the Civic Strike; and even more, of the institutional transformations that have come about it through it. This shift requires that we de-subjectivize and de-personalize our way of thinking this “trust” as an affect with religious, political and ethical significance, in this experience’s context. Even if it is clear that “charismatic” religious leaders and leaderships have been involved in this history, and that the relations between these leaders and the people influenced by them have been crucial for it, these trust that is evoked as an affective phenomenon lived by in these relations is not something that can adequately be understood as happening at times “inside”, or at times “in between”, subjects or individuals. Hence, neither interior, nor subjective, nor
inter-subjective, this trust certainly takes place and its occurrence is forceful: people experience it, feel it, and speak of it. But it is impersonal, it becomes attached to places and things; and to institutional assemblages and their *sensoriums*, as much as it is associated and linked at times, and in certain relations, to specific persons or individuals. One could even say that it implicates individuals insofar as it impregnates or saturates the spaces they inhabit, and their sensible texture, and density. Insofar as these individuals can at times intensify or condense this affective spatiality and its motions (as we have seen the figures of Bishop Epalza and Father Reina doing during in street demonstrations and the negotiation table with the government during the Civic Strike days).

The sharpened religious edging dramatized in these figures, is intimately bound to the spatial trust between Church and people, historically weaved, that impregnates the geography and landscape of this city port, and beyond it, of the pacific littoral. How to reflect upon the way in which it necessarily circumvents liberal “secularism” as an interpretative and normative grid, but more importantly, how it requires one to take seriously a question that contemporary critical genealogies and ethnographies of “secularism” very seldom consider. This is, how can a religious “exceptionalism” of sorts, might take form in church-state assemblages that are not threatening to pluralism, as one could initially suspect, but rather favor a form of pluralization in a democratizing political process? Here, one has to render deeply problematical the political and social topography in which a by now emblematic argument like Jose Casanova’s recognition of a public role for religions in the modern world operates (1994, 219). That division between civil society and State institutions in an up/down vector, or that between Church and State in an inside/outside one, a topography which is resisted by a political process like the one we are describing, as I have attempted to show. One could even regard this topography and the argument built upon it to assess an “adequate” public role assigned to certain forms of religious discourse and practice in the modern world, as so easily re-inscribable in the fold of the “good” and “bad” religion logic critically diagnosed by recent contributions in the critical ethnographies of secularism, as one of the central mechanisms of the disciplining and regulating drive of contemporary neoliberal forms of governance over religious identity and difference in global geopolitics (Hurd 2015, 11).