

Film Review

- *Colombia: El largo camino hacia la paz después de la Guerra Civil (Colombia: The long road to peace)*, directed by Uli Stelzner. Germany, 2019.¹

In 2016, after four years of intense discussions between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a peace accord was signed to end the more than fifty years of the conflict between the state and the country's most powerful guerrilla group. The majority of the Colombian population first voted against this agreement in a national referendum, leaving the country in limbo as more than 220,000 people had lost their lives and a further six million had been displaced due to the conflict. However, after major student-led marches in favour of peace took to the streets, a revised agreement was pushed through Congress. It seemed, at least at the surface, that a solution had been found to end the long-lasting conflict. Could Colombians dream of their political system reaching maturity with efforts made to bridge the chasms addressed in the peace accords, such as land reform, political participation and illicit drug production?

Colombia: El largo camino hacia la paz después de la Guerra Civil is one of a handful of documentaries, including *El testigo: Caín y Abel*² (2018) and *Colombia in My Arms* (2020), designed to address the questions of conflict resolution and peace negotiations in Colombia. What sets this film apart is that it found new narrative forms to draw viewers in. Instead of exposing them to violent imagery that is so readily available, *Colombia* features detailed on-the-ground reportages and careful and thoughtfully worded interviews with local people, which prompted the participants to reflect, and to start coming to terms, with the past. We hear from the victims themselves as well as from Colombian academics and military officers.

Stelzner, funded by the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle, accompanied the dramatic events as they occurred. Besides creatively using archival material, the director frames the narrative by working with protagonists who express the horrors they experienced in their own words, which gives the documentary a very personal feel. Stelzner first takes his time to put the conflict into historical context and then shows the profound trauma suffered by the population. Many of the interviewees – among whom a farmer, a member of

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the Arhuaco Indigenous people, members of the armed forces, politicians and political scientists – are initially unwilling or afraid to talk about the horrors they have lived through. However, as the documentary progresses, they open up about their hopes and fears – a shift often considered the first step towards reconciliation.

One of the most striking interviews is the one with renowned Colombian sociologist and agronomist Alejandro Reyes Posada at the beginning of the film. In this opening interview, Reyes Posada explains the origins of the Colombian conflict and the oft-hidden struggle between the rich and poor. This emphasizes, to an international and perhaps unknowing audience, the complex minefield of political issues present in Colombia. Notably, apart from detailing the common history of the conflict, Reyes Posada also explains that, in Colombia, the rural poor are historically heavily suppressed by a feudal landowning elite, the country's most powerful group that has successfully cornered the discussion on agrarian reform to their advantage (and sidelined the growth of minority political parties). As Reyes Posada puts it in the film, agrarian reform is “indispensable” for social and economic peace in the country.

Released three years after the peace accords were signed, the documentary seeks to respond to doubts on whether the accords achieved what they were set out to do, i.e. create a sustainable peace between the government and FARC. The accords seemed to have the potential to come to terms with some of the profound inequalities and disparities inherent in contemporary Colombian society.³ However, throughout the film Stelzner implicitly suggests that peace in Colombia reigns in name alone and that there is much uncertainty for the future. The accord is artificial in its execution in the absence of former President Juan Manuel Santos, who pushed for peace at any cost. The country's current President, Ivan Duque, has represented a significant hindrance to the process. He has declared that he would “shred the peace agreement” and prefers the “*mano dura*,” or “firm hand,” as employed by his political patron, former two-term president Alvaro Uribe.

The final interview in *Colombia*, featuring General Alberto Mejía, the commander in chief of the Colombian armed forces at the time, leaves most doubts regarding a successful outcome of the peace process. Mejía emphasizes that the military is there to protect the communities at risk of recurring violence. The general sees the solution only as the complete militarization of Colombia's territory, placing the military at the centre of all political decisions. This shows a military doctrine that has been unable to adapt to a new social situation in the country, where individuals and communities seek social justice, not further military control.

Throughout the film, Stelzner does not sway from his core message of inequality in Colombia, as attempting to bring in voices from the opposition means including left-wing politicians. Herein lays one of the key issues in any political debate in Colombia: how to make left-wing political ideas acceptable to the Colombian public? For a long time, left-wing ideas have been associated

with the scourge of the FARC's crimes. *Colombia* successfully explores and explains Colombia's peace accords and the conflict in a straightjacket of 52 minutes. The documentary would perhaps benefit from a clearer positioning from the director, making for a stronger argument. Nevertheless, the narrative is effective in bringing invisible social identities to the forefront and addressing an underlying critique of power in Colombia from a pedagogical point of view.

Richard McColl, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana
rmccoll@javeriana.edu.co

Notes

- 1 The 52-minute documentary *Colombia* can be seen on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmFQEKfUG8A.
- 2 *El testigo: Caín y Abel (The Witness: Cain and Abel, 2018)* has been reviewed in ERLACS by Juan-Pablo Osman: www.erlacs.org/articles/abstract/10.32992/erlacs.10705/
- 3 For example, small farmers in isolated areas are more inclined to cultivate coca – the leaf from which cocaine is made – as this crop is more economically viable than a traditional cash crop, e.g. cacao, maize or yucca.