

An unstable terrain for peace: illegal gold mining, socio-environmental conflicts, and ecological degradation in Colombia¹

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Peace agreements are usually openly welcome by those who have experienced the fierceness of civil wars. However, that is not the case of Colombia, where the deal² signed between the national government and the Farc³ -the oldest guerrilla in Latin America- has caused noticeable controversies. The terms and conditions of the agreement, mainly the political participation of Farc's members, have raised suspicion among right wing sectors which endorse military operations against rebels, rather than mediation. In contrast, those who approve the deal consider it and its related policies and programs as seminal opportunities to break the long national history of violence and exclusion. As a strategy to involve Colombians into the agreement, and subsequently make it more legitimate, Colombia's government is promoting a referendum (to be held October, 2016) which grants citizens with the prerogative of approving or refusing the pact. During the last months, the referendum has taken the public debate, thereby polarizing the disagreements in two opposite positions: "Yes to the peace deal" and "No to the peace deal". Nevertheless, at present, it is not very clear which would be the consequences of a massive refusal.

In a way, these dissents foresee the challenges of the post-conflict scenario, e.g. the reincorporation of the combatants to the civil life, war victims' reparations, and the rural development of regions where the war took place. In fact, one of the components of the deal is the Integral Agrarian Reform -described in the document *Towards a New Rural Colombian*- which attempts to structurally transform Colombian's rural areas. The text is noteworthy due to its marked accent on land redistribution and women's rights, but also because it could operate as a guide to navigate through the tangled context of land struggles in Colombia. Land is the predominant element of the document, meanwhile others aspects, such as nonrenewable resources, are almost invisible. The recurrence of land is revealing of how the government and Farc are imaging rurality in Colombia, i.e. how rural lives and rural spaces are presupposed, devised, and planned by the most visible actors of the transition. Is it land, and its correlated values, practices, and institutional arrangements the only means by which rural people in Colombian negotiate the sense of their own lives in the countryside? Moreover, is it land the only fruitful terrain for examining the dilemmas of the post-conflict?

During my last trip to Colombia, I visited some gold mining areas in the Magdalena River Valley Region (Photo 1) and several governmental institutions in those zones and in the country's

¹ The fieldwork for this article was funded by the Tinker Foundation through a Summer Grant of the Latin American Studies Center at UC-Berkeley and by the doctoral grant of the Fulbright Commission and Colciencias-Colombia. One of the goals of the trip was providing the doctoral student with material for the drafting of a preliminary proposal of the dissertation research project.

² The deal was signed on August, 2016.

³ Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, Farc.

capital, Bogota. Having talked with miners, public servants, journalists, and NGOs' members, I realized that illegal extraction of gold is a key scenario where the predicaments of the post-conflict transformations are constantly unfolding. During the last decade, the increment of global minerals prices transformed resources such as gold, platinum, oil, and coal in profitable, thereby disputed, assets. Colombia's mineral extraction grew and with it different sociocultural and environmental dynamics emerged. The unintended result of the Colombian mining boom was the proliferation of informal mechanized gold exploitations carried out by thousands⁴ of rural inhabitants. They could be mestizo, black, or indigenous who (i) alternate agriculture and mining, (ii) are dormant peasants who temporarily give up to agricultural activities, or (iii) rural inhabitants that may never have practiced agrarian activities. Bulldozers and backhoes are the most used machines by these informal miners. They pair the digging labor with the use of mercury and arsenic to accelerate the separation of gold and soil. Altogether these practices are severely damaging crop lands, protected areas, and streams. Within the context of neoliberal extraction, these miners are unwanted rivals of large foreign companies.



Photo 1. View of the mountains in the *Magdalena River Valley* region in the state of Tolima in central Colombia. Gold deposits located in the mountains and in placers have encouraged informal (mechanized) extraction of gold, July 2016.

In Ibagu e, the regional capital of Tolima state, that covers highlands as well as lowlands of the Magdalena River Valley, social workers, engineers, and lawyers working with the regional government hope that the peace deal give them tools and money to convince informal miners to leave this type of extraction or formalize it (Photo 2). Tolima's government already started a process of livelihood conversion (*reconversion laboral*) with forty-eight associations of informal miners. The later ones formalized their organizations and designed different income generating

⁴ Miners involved in the informal mechanized extraction of gold are estimated in 60.000 (Censo Nacional Minero, 2011).

projects that might serve them to drop gold production. However, the projects lack of funding; thus, they are transitorily undevelopable. In Bogota, the Ministry of Mines' and *Agencia Nacional Minera*'s high officials hope that the ongoing national transformations (Photo 3), associated with the post-conflict scenario, contribute to “definitely bring informal miners into the domain of law”.



Photo 2. “Beginning the path of mining formalization is easy: (1) register as miners in the major office, (2) the mayor office verifies if the miner fulfills the requirements, (3) the miner is ready to work. Banner in the Tolima’s state government office, July 2016.

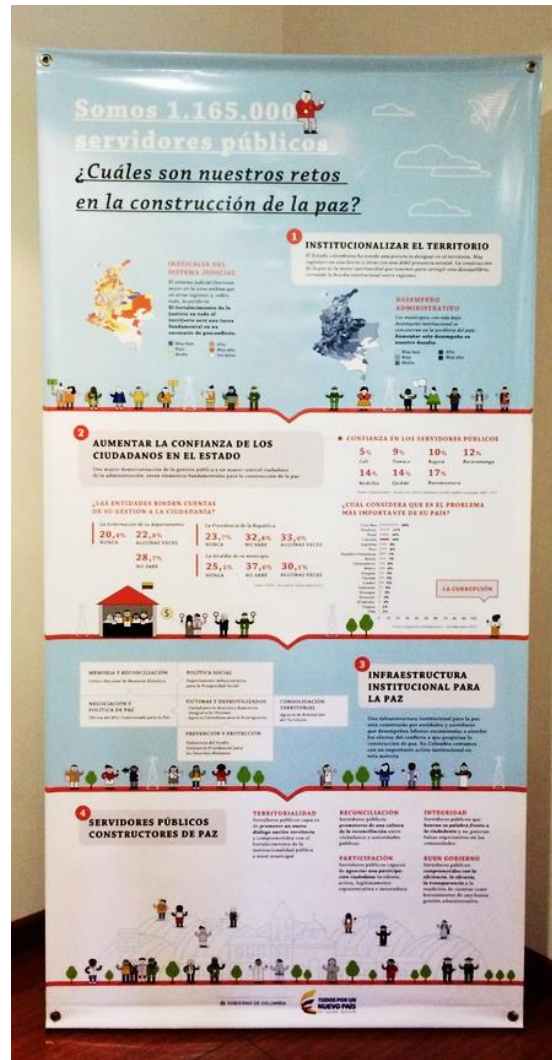


Photo 3. “We are 1.165.000 public servants in Colombia. What are our challenges in the process of achieving peace? (1) Institutionalize the territory, (2) increase the citizens’ trust in the state, (3) institutional infrastructure for peace, (4) public servants=builders of peace. Banner in *Agencia Nacional Minera*, Bogota, July 2016.

In recent years, the dominant narrative in Colombia's governmental institutions, such as the Ministries of Mines, Environment, and Economy, is that informal miners, dedicated to the extraction of gold, are outlaws who may put at risk the solidity of the state. Within the post-conflict scenario that Colombia is experiencing, informal gold mining is deemed as an obstacle that might hinder the achievement of peace. Informal miners have been accused of deliberately funding armed groups and criminal organizations. This reading is at least too simplistic to describe what is really going on between informal miners and different illicit groups. In any case, informal miners lack of licenses, do not pay royalties or taxes, and do not have plans to mitigate environmental damages. Their extraction could destabilize the groundings of the post-conflict by questioning the inherent attachment of rural lives and agrarian issues that underlies the transitional processes. Also because like coca cultivators, they are the main labor force of Colombia's illegal economies that traditionally have fired the war.

Unlike the national government and Farc, informal miners imagined (their) rural lives as entrenched with mineral resources extraction. In Tolima, they imagined their livelihoods not only in terms of "sustainability" or "subsistence", but also in terms of profitability. The case of Tolima is not unique, Tolima's informal miners, as well as other in the country, are not ready to call themselves "illegals". They say this category or word (*palabra*) "fell upon them" just few years ago and they are still coping with its effects. They are still dealing with what it means to be "illegal", mainly what it means to be illegal in terms of their relations with -what they consider- the state and different armed groups. More than conclusions, the fieldwork in Colombian opened up more questions: How these miners experience and live the gold rush and the subsequent status of illegality? How they negotiate different attempts to their criminalization and formalization/legalization"? That is to say, how informal gold extraction provides miners with a social, symbolic, and material terrain to negotiate their sense of who they are as rural inhabitants, as citizens, and as outlaws in the context of post-conflict in Colombia?