



# WHEN SILENCE SPEAKS

There are all kinds of silences: Complicit ones, ones that betray or intimidate; strong ones, traumatic ones, mortal ones. . . In violent situations, muteness is also a striking revelation of the individual and collective deeds and events which form part of history and may have a great social resonance. To investigate some of them and give them a leading role is the purpose of the book entitled *Los silencios de la guerra* [The silences of war], edited by Camila De Gamboa and María Victoria Uribe, researchers at the Universidad del Rosario.

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**W**hat do a prisoner in solitary confinement in a cell in the United States, the members of a community scourged by the mass executions done by Mexican gangs of criminals, the Germans who lived under the Nazi regime or the victims of the barbarity of the Colombian paramilitary leader, El Iguano, have in common? That all of them have been forced to practice the silence of the tomb, either because they are or were coerced by others or due to the very impossibility of finding a way to express themselves.

These, among other stories and situations, are analyzed in the book *Los silencios de la Guerra* (The silences of war), a collection of eight academic essays written by the same number of authors, who are from different countries and work in different fields of knowledge (philosophy, anthropology, history, literature and music). They provide a descriptive and analytical account of what silence – or silences – means in contexts of violence or conflict.

The idea for the book arose in the midst of the deafening roar which polarized – and still polarizes – Colombia, set off by the peace negotiations between the government of ex-president Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC guerrilla (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*). “In 2016, when the country was engulfed in the most critical point of the polarization which those talks caused and the languages of war and peace drowned out everything, we thought about dealing with silence, as an alternative approach to that other story which has not been told,” the anthropologist and historian María Victoria Uribe explains.

“There are many books about war and its consequences, but in Colombia there was no study of the silences it leads to nor the silent remains found in the spaces where a great deal of

violence has been lived through,” the lawyer and philosopher Camila De Gamboa adds.

So it was that these two researchers at the Universidad del Rosario asked Colombian and foreign academics to offer their views of silence from different experiences and standpoints, using, as the reference point, an essay on Walter Benjamin written by Shoshana Felman, who teaches comparative and French literature at Emory University in the United States and is an expert on trauma, testimony and psychoanalysis. In the opinion of Benjamin, the famous German philosopher of Jewish descent who had a first-hand experience of the devastating effect of two world wars, those wars marked the end of the art of narrating the experiences people live through and condemned that art to silence.

Felman points out that there were several causes of this loss (“the rise of capitalism, the sterilization of life by bourgeois values, the decadence of artifice, the growing influence of the media and the press”), but the first and most dramatic was the impact on society of the First World War. The destructive technology of that armed conflict and its scope were so great and unsuspected that it not only swept away the bodies of the combatants and millions of civilians along the way, it also did away with the survivors’ power to express themselves: They fell silent because they were not able to think about the unthinkable nor say the unsayable. The German philosopher went into shock after the suicide of his best friend during the First World War and years later, at the dawn of the Second, on the frontier between France and Spain, he likewise killed himself because he was afraid of falling into the hands of the Gestapo.

It is well known that history is usually what is told by the victors, but although the victims remain silent, they also weave a story; their silence indicate something else. What, then, is the relation between history and silence?, Felman asks. The answer: “In a philosophy of history which is focused (consciously or unconsciously) on power, those who lack power (the persecuted) are constitutively deprived of their voice. Given that the official history [of such events] is based on the standpoint of the victors, the voice which speaks with authority is a deafening voice: It does not allow us to realize that a discourse remains in that history which clamors to be heard but we are deaf to.”

It is that silence which Uribe and De Gamboa set out to hear from those who have not only lived through the reality of Colombia, but that of other latitudes; and that is the power which the different authors confer on the silent ones. Ana María Ochoa, a musician



by training, plunges into the strident silence of prisoners in solitary confinement in the prisons of the United States and Latin America, who have no contact with other humans or access to natural light – like the one in which the former president of Uruguay, Pepe Mujica, was confined –; cells which in themselves amount to a regime of torture which drives many of such prisoners into extreme states of psychosis.

Meanwhile, the sociologist Rigoberto Reyes deals with the silence into which small rural or semi-urban communities in present-day Mexico have fallen, in the face of the scourge of criminal organizations which have completely upset everyday life and shaped new states and definitions of silence in the affected populations. Mauricio Pilatowsky, a philosopher and historian, tackles another aspect of the same subject, the violence in Mexico which not only conceals political interests but also actors who theoretically represent the law but merge into organized crime. In addition, he thinks that the Spanish conquest and colonization of the territory of that country were processes which built a violent “enterprise” of terror which, in the end, wound up legitimizing hostile actions, conducts and languages which are very deeply rooted in Mexican culture.

Choosing a theme which is not very distant from those realities, the philosopher Ángela Uribe analyses the scope, limitations and characteristics of the apology Jorge Iván Laverde, alias “El Iguano”, a member of the now extinct United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Co-*





What is happening nowadays is that our societies are fragmented, because each social group hears what it wants to hear. We have become autistic, in a way, and that does not allow us to interact with others nor understand their diversity and cultural wealth", explains the lawyer and philosopher Camila De Gamboa.



tic challenges which traumatic experiences present and proposes the need for a grammar of silence. This idea is shared by another philosopher, Carlos Thibeau, who reflects on several kinds of silence, both positive and negative, the latter derived from the harms done by others. Dealing with and conceptualizing them not only require the right words, but also actions by institutions and human groups who should react to, not ignore them.

This is precisely one of the forms of silence which most strikes the editors of this book: That of the society which remains passive and defenseless in the face of the sorrow of others. It is an indifferent, complicit and even stigmatizing silence ("that must have happened to them for a reason"), which has become as natural as the violence which causes it.

But if our purpose is to build peace, then there is an urgent need to give a voice to those who do not have it and wish to express themselves, freely and genuinely. While one may think that this right is guaranteed in our present era of the Internet and social networks, Camila De Gamboa nevertheless believes that that is an illusion: "We have an enormous zeal to inform ourselves, but not to reflect on that which we inform ourselves of. All of these technologies are very suitable for enabling the little celebrity which is inside of us to be in the public eye, but not to create narratives which have a true meaning and much less lead to profound reflections. What is happening nowadays is that our societies are fragmented, because each social group hears what it wants to hear. We have become autistic, in a way, and that does not allow us to interact with others nor understand their diversity and cultural wealth." ■

*lombia*) made to his victims. To obtain the benefits of the Law of Justice and Peace, he asked for their forgiveness in a public act but without any sign of contrition when he spoke to the relatives of the 4000 people who had been his victims. In this case, Laverde believes, El Iguano should have kept silent, since his silence would have at least been a little more meaningful. For his part, the philosopher Wolfgang Heurer speaks of the paralyzing silence of the Germans after the horrors of Nazism

and how, decades later, literary and journalistic movements arose which set out to recover language and memory. The philosopher María del Rosario Acosta, in a rigorously philosophical analysis, approaches the linguis-



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