

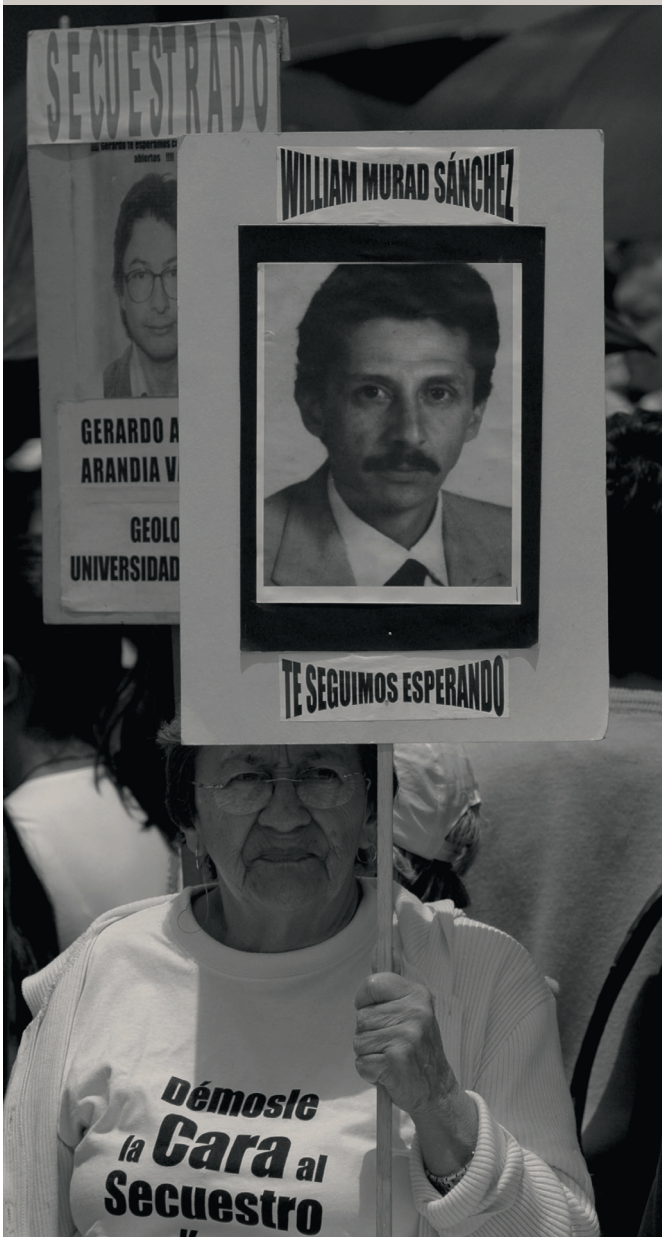


THE TENTACLES OF EVIL



Research from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies on Peace and Conflict at the Universidad del Rosario highlights the “residues of evil” that linger in the aftermath of totalitarian regimes and political violence, threatening the construction of solid and inclusive democracies around the world.





“Evil is never radical; it is only extreme, and it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste to the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface.”

Hannah Arendt

“We want to point out the dangers that remain like seeds of malignity in post-totalitarian societies, and we want to see how we can use philosophy, law, and ethics to respond to the evils that still plague us, and to avoid their recurrence.”

← The study stresses the importance of interpersonal forgiveness and political apologies as the starting points for true acts of reconciliation.

This is how Camila de Gamboa, of the Interdisciplinary Group for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and the Post-conflict Period (JANUS) of the Universidad del Rosario summarizes the overall mission of a research project aimed at defining the responsibilities of contemporary societies in relation to these “residues of evil”, that show up in the form of the extreme violence held in their roots over decades.

THE RESIDUES OF EVIL

For the last three years, the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry, and Competitiveness has financed a research project called “The Residues of Evil in Post-Totalitarian Societies: Responses from a Democratic Political Perspective”. Directed by Professor Cristina Sánchez (principal researcher from the Autonomous University of Madrid), the study has brought together a group of researchers from Germany, Argentina, Spain, Chile, Croatia, and Colombia, all with extensive experience in the analysis of contemporary violence.

The central inspiration for their research is the work of Hannah Arendt, one of the 20th century’s most important political philosophers, who in several publications analyzed the phenomenon of totalitarianism in Germany and the Soviet Union, (in particular the struggle against the National Socialist regime of the 1930s imposed by the Nazis, and the Stalinist regime), and who demonstrated the

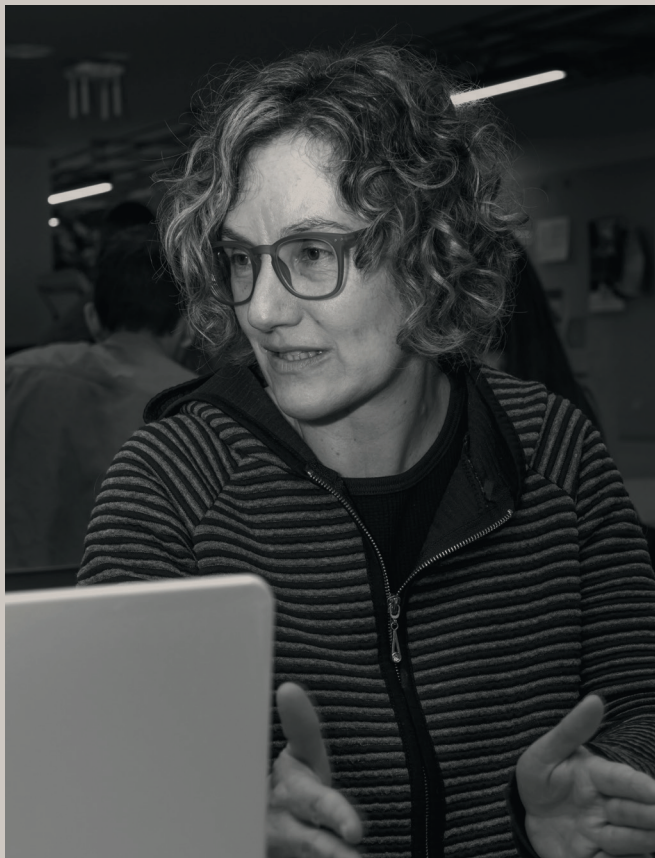
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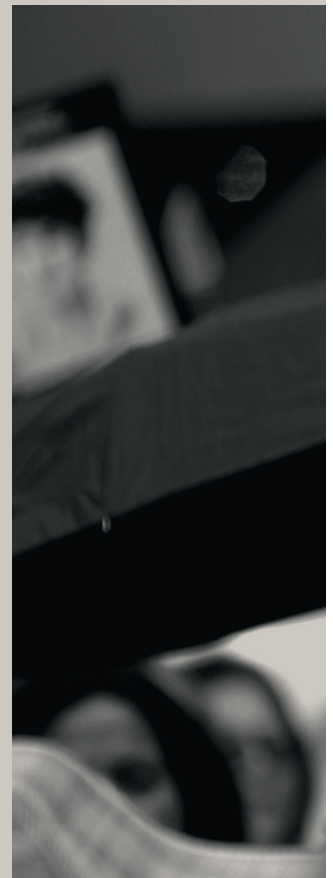
TOTALITARIANISM IS ESSENTIALLY EVIL BECAUSE IT IS A VISION BY WHICH THE STATE AIMS TO INVADE PEOPLE'S PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIVES, ONE IN WHICH A SINGLE IDEOLOGY IS IMPOSED THROUGH FORCE AND FEAR ON THE REST OF SOCIETY

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Camila de Gamboa
Janus researcher



The study tackled the subject of “evil” and extreme violence, as well as its persistence in societies that have gone through traumatic experiences.



dangers to societies of the unpredictable consequences of turning into totalitarian states.

Arendt put forward a new thesis laying out how totalitarian movements take control of ideologies and worldviews, converting them through terror into new forms of the State, a process that up to 1966 had been consummated only by Nazism and Stalinism.

“Totalitarianism is essentially evil because it is a vision by which the State aims to invade people’s public and private lives, one in which a single ideology is imposed through force and fear on the rest of society,” affirms Gamboa.

This research, which adheres to Arendt’s thinking on the construction of public spaces and democratic political institutions, as well as the banality of evil and totalitarianism, focuses on countries that have experienced repressive regimes, such as Germany and Nazism, Spain and Francoism, military regimes in Argentina and Chile, and political violence such as the armed conflict in Colombia.

COLOMBIA AND EXTREME VIOLENCE

In the Colombian case, the study tackled the concept of “evil” and extreme violence, as



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well as its persistence in societies that have gone through traumatic experiences. “We try to take a deeper look at areas such as ‘the experience of the victims’, the narrative of evil, the responses of civil society and of social institutions to bring about the restoration of democratic politics, of public space, and of political life,” says Gamboa.

In Colombia, three researchers from the Universidad del Rosario participated in the study: Wilson Herrera, María Victoria Uribe, and Camila de Gamboa, as did Marieta Quintero of the Universidad Distrital and Fernando Cardona of the Pontifical Xavierian University; They covered topics related to armed conflict, memory, political responsibility, guilt, and victim testimony. Later, they collated their conclusions in a book soon to be published in Colombia, and which currently forms part of the project, *The Mapping of Evil in Contemporary Societies* (*Cartografías del mal en las sociedades contemporáneas*).

One of the focuses of Camila de Gamboa’s research was the Colombian armed conflict and the transitional justice period from 2005 to the recent agreement signed in Havana between the government and the FARC. It set out to determine if the tools designed in this process really do lead to a more democratic, equal, and peaceful society.

Camila de Gamboa sees as essential the points of the agreement that do not refer to transitional justice (political participation, replacing illegal crops with legal ones,



and agrarian reform, among others) since these really do appertain to a far more inclusive Colombia with much greater distributive justice.

In this context, the research recovers the importance of interpersonal forgiveness and political apologies as starting points for true acts of reconciliation, since they are pertinent acts of acknowledgement on individual and collective levels. Nevertheless, she points out the risks involved if expressions of remorse and forgiveness are made without deep respect for victims. “It can be very important for victims that the victimizers—if still alive—recognize that they should not have done what they did and express remorse for their actions. This is an acknowledgement that damage was done and it aims to underline the human dignity which was intentionally de-based,” explains the researcher.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

As the study warns, greater transformations are needed to achieve a democratic society. “If we really want to proceed to peace, then there must be no more victims of violence in the fu-

ture. If we really want a more peaceful, more equal, more inclusive society, we will have to produce a number of changes that are not necessarily contingent on transitional justice. Transitional justice is a golden opportunity to bring about such transformations,” says Gamboa.

The study emphasizes that these changes should stem from the needs of people on the ground, which may be identified through a variety of dialogue. It must also be understood that the “residues of evil” are still present in different spaces. “We are a society that is culturally very authoritarian,” she explains.

The research indicates that this new “cloak of evil” is present in all societies with authoritarian visions of how power should be exercised. “It’s not that democracy fails when voters make wrong decisions; it’s that our democracies were not really inclusive or deep enough; they always excluded many social groups (minorities),” she says.

In such contexts, populist visions stand out as those preferred by these forgotten, indifferent majorities. “That’s where you see the residue of evil and the seeds of totalitarian societies.” ■

THE MAPPING OF EVIL

The book that will be published by *Siglo de Hombre Editores* in Colombia currently has only a working title, but it is based on the project *The Mapping of Evil (Cartografías del mal)*, edited by Camila de Gamboa and Cristina Sánchez.

The book analyzes evil—contemporary extreme violence—in different geographical contexts (Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Germany), and at different historical moments of the 20th and 21st centuries. Its principal sections are:

- **The language of evil.** An analysis of the contemporary conceptualization of the phenomenon in all its variations, collating the most recent reflections on the topic.
- **Memory and its battles.** This section analyzes the possibility of constructing memory out of trauma, the difficulties involved, and the role of victims in constructing collective memory.
- **In the face of violence.** An account of the different responses to evil through democratic citizenship and politics, taking stock of the importance and limits of forgiveness.