

COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES

far more than our grandmas' old sayings

These expressions repeated over generations mean content we aren't even truly aware of. And they encapsulate representations, connote violence, and define us. Where do they come from? For what are they used? What do they mean? Responding to such questions is the motivation behind the seedbed project Imaginaries for Peace.

"Rules are made to be broken"

"Plenty Injun"

"Of course, it had to be a woman!"

By Inés Elvira Ospina
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"Laws are made to be broken." "The wise one lives at the fool's expense". "Plenty Injun" "It had to be a woman". "He says that because he's a homo."

We have all heard such expressions time and again since we were kids, regardless of the social strata, profession, or religion we move in. Such sayings express imaginaries present in everyday life. They raise expectations and feed interests, permitting certain actions. And several denote violence. This latter instance was precisely the concern that led Uriel Alberto Cárdenas Aguirre, professor of the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations to set up the seedbed project Imaginaries for Peace.

It was two-and-a-half-years ago when this academic proposed the idea. "My theory is that in Colombia we have popular refrains that represent violent scenarios; if we are aiming to build peace, these should be on the way out," affirms the philosopher and Master's Degree holder in Education Sciences and Quality Assurance. From the first moment, the University backed his request to call for assistance from students from all faculties.

It has not been a small task, involving field work to trace the origins of such expressions, see how they have been transformed lexically, how they are nuanced between regions, what documentation leads to their origin, how they reached Colombia, how they came up in the first place, and then putting all this into texts that allow for analysis and study. "If we are not capable of compiling a great palette of the use of these manifestations, we cannot be fully conscious of the complexity they have and the great cover of these imaginaries across so many scenes," explains the academic.

The research is ambitious. It is planned to take place over 15 years, and the dream of the director of the collective is to publish a book in which each chapter comprises one imaginary. To begin to construct this dream, a call went out to those interested in coming forward to deliver a written piece justifying their interest. Thus, once the professor had revised these, 17 young people from Political Science and International Relations, Liberal Arts, and International Business began to work on the first imaginary: "Laws are made to be broken".

"They really are a great young group. And their commitment has been invaluable because, for example, our meetings are held Saturday afternoons and they never fail. They are always up for it, although to be clear there are some ups and downs since they are undergrads. But, even during the holidays, some members who live in other regions have offered to do field work, and this information proves invaluable," said the seedbed project director with clear enthusiasm.



For Professor Uriel Cárdenas, "in Colombia we have popular refrains that represent violent scenarios; if we are aiming to build peace, these should be on the way out."



The main group is split into sub-groups, each working on specific subjects and supervised by the professor. The work is carried out according to a specific six-monthly agenda with five programmed general meetings to share readings, gathered information, and lessons learned. To capture information, these inputs are systematized, organized, and turned into academic texts, analysis, and work.

The development of the research also includes the organization of a focus group, visits to schools, dialogues with multiple communities, and a watch on communications media. "The media also reproduce these procedural forms, and that is why we involve them in the information gathering," explains the professor.

THE LAW MUST BE OBEYED, BUT...

On beginning to study the the first imaginary ("rules are made to be broken"), the seedbed students asked several questions: Where do they come from? What do people believe they are saying when they repeat it? Does it have different meanings for different people? The questions got clearer as more documentation built up and more field work was carried out.

Among the documents checked were several from the Colonial era, others from Colombian legislation, others from politics. These tasks were completed through interviews, surveys, and focus groups aimed at finding out what secondary and higher education

students perceive, and so too how informal salespeople and retired public service workers see issues such as informal sales, alcohol consumption in public spaces, fare evasion on the Transmilenio mass public transport system, and the Uber platform.

The team discovered, for example, that the Colombian origin of the refrain is not purely Creole, its origins going back centuries. Word for word, in Spain and Portugal it is repeated, although with a different connotation. Interviews with itinerant salespersons recorded a negative perception of authority, despite the understanding that police are enforcing laws. And when it comes to the police themselves, it was revealed that they put the salespeople in the same public space category as homeless people and sex workers, perceiving them all as a threat to safety for the citizenry. On top of this are the mechanisms used to enforce the law, which in general involved the use of force, ultimately resulting in tensions and conflicts between the police and sellers, and in persistent reoffending rates.

It is at this point that the constant evasion of the law, framed in the imaginaries of “rules are made to be broken” or “the law is obeyed but not enforced”, becomes functional, set as a necessary means for maintaining the itinerant sellers’ economic sustenance.

The Transmilenio transport system and its fare evaders is another important source of information for discovering the use and reach of the expression. A survey mostly among students of Finance, International Relations, and Jurisprudence shed some light on the imaginary.

In regard to the questioning line on whether bad behavior of users in not obeying the rules or fare evasion was justifiable, the group found that generalized actions allow justification of rule breaking. For example, if 19 schoolmates decide not to pay, there is nothing wrong in number 20 evading the fare too. Furthermore, en masse these actions lead to the authority fulfilling its function of observance and sanction from a position of contempt.

The other justification that leaps from these results is that, knowing full well that the behavior amounts to an infraction of a legal duty, the behavior can be justified or not according to what might befall the individuals or due to their contextual financial conditions. The case of Uber technology produced results whose analysis can lead to a similar conclusion: while the claims of these taxi drivers are considered just, the generalization of the bad behavior of these justifies its use, and



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Gathering
of research
seedbed
projects, 2017.

similarly with the fear of using a taxi as opposed to the good service offered by Uber. Some look to justification in the fact that “there are legal norms that can be unjust” or to the legal loopholes that prescribe illegality for something that might turn out to be just.

“The saying actually has its origin in the viceroyalty of the Spanish Empire, but also in the way that law is conceived and how its preparation leads to illegal practices. For Colombians, it does not only mean violating the law but tricking it so that it does not catch one. We detected that the key lies in the vivacity, in the cunning to get round the law,” assured Professor Cárdenas. The greater details of the findings and how the research has been carried out were laid out at the 3rd National Congress of Oral History and Memory, Uses, Constructions, and Contributions to the Peace, held in May 2017.

“This is something I carry in my blood. The whole subject of imaginaries is a passion I cannot turn back from. For me it is a philosophical and social problem because it creates unfortunate ties for coexistence that need to be changed in order to achieve a country at peace,” said the professor, who begins with a new young group at his side this semester. Once again there will be 16 students from diverse the Universidad del Rosario courses, plus one student from the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University, all helping in the task to explain the reasons and meanings for Colombians of the expressions: “El vivo vive del bobo” y “mucho indio” (“The wise one lives at the fool’s expense”. “Plenty Injun.” ■