'Culture of Dialogue' as a Decolonial Peace-Building Tool: The Case of Colombia

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Abstract: This article is based on a four-month placement with the Colombian peace-building organisation Rodeemos el Diálogo (*Embrace Dialogue*, ReD) in London, as well as three years of working with the organisation in Bogotá, Colombia. It discusses the causes of violence in Colombia, the conceptualisation of dialogue, and ReD's notion of a 'culture of dialogue'. First, by explaining the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being in the Colombian context, I argue that the contemporary armed conflict is a legacy of colonial logics that are still being reproduced. Then, through a literature review on the concept of dialogue, I describe its origins, its potential to be a useful method to peacebuilding and the danger of it reproducing coloniality and control. Finally, I explain how ReD understands the 'culture of dialogue' and why it has the potential to resolve conflict in a non-violent way and take action against colonial-inherited inequalities and oppressions. I argue that to resolve Colombia's violence it is necessary to address the coloniality of power, knowledge and being taking place. However, to address these it is of utmost importance to be able to acknowledge the existence of violence and to recognise the multiplicity of epistemologies that coexist in today's world. Within these processes of recognition, culture of dialogue plays an important role.

Introduction

My life has been shaped by the Colombian armed conflict, even though I am not a direct victim and I was born in a position of privilege. Like many Colombians, I grew up thinking that the war would not end any time soon, least of all through dialogue instead of military means. The peace negotiation announced in 2012, and the Peace Agreement signed in 2016 gave me a glimpse of hope regarding the possibility of transforming the country to one that resolved differences in a non-violent way. I was eager to collaborate in whichever way possible, which was why in 2015 I joined Rodeemos el Diálogo (*Embrace Dialogue,* ReD), a network of people that supported the ending of the armed conflict in Colombia through peaceful means, encouraging what the organisation calls a 'culture of dialogue'. For the last four years, I have been thinking about, developing and working on this concept that brings dialogue to a cultural status.

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As part of my Masters in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy at Goldsmiths, University of London, I carried out a four-month placement in the (re)emerging UK branch of ReD (there called *Embrace Dialogue*), with the objective of researching their concept of 'culture of dialogue'. The placement was divided into three phases: 1) Archival research on the organisation's documents, inquiring about the genealogy of the term and its development; 2) Semi-structured interviews with its members both in the UK and in Colombia, to comprehend how they understand and bring to life the concept; and 3) A literature review about the concept of dialogue and its relation to peace building to analyse how the concept of 'culture of dialogue' and ReD's processes and practices converge with and diverge from it.

In this article, I will reflect on my work with ReD, focusing on the placement I undertook between February and May 2019 in London, but also including experiences from the work done in Colombia where relevant.

I ground this article on the thought of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality (hereafter MCD) collective, the group of authors of Latin America that have been thinking about the decolonial option since the early 2000s. *Coloniality*, according to these authors, is the logic of domination that continued to function after colonialism was dismantled (Escobar and Mignolo 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 1989). It involves a series of mechanisms that reproduce the western way of understanding the world (modernity) as the only possible interpretation.

Throughout this article, I identify and examine the hegemonic features concerning coloniality. In this sense, one of the purposes of this paper is to contribute to the analysis of dialogue from the perspective of decoloniality. From an MCD perspective, I understand decoloniality not as a romantic vision of returning to a better past, but of recognising the multiplicity of epistemologies that coexist in today's world (Ibid). It is a twofold process that, on the one hand, reveals and challenges existing hierarchies within the supposed universality of modernity, and on the other, proposes possible 'options' that acknowledge the existence of other ways of understanding, living and knowing the world that is silenced by the epistemic violence of coloniality.

The historical and geographical background of this article will focus on the contemporary Colombian armed conflict, its history of coloniality, and the possibilities that the recent peace agreement opens for rethinking the hegemonic features of peacebuilding. My argument is that a culture of dialogue can be a way of practising decolonial peacebuilding in Colombia that acknowledges the logics of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being that are taking place and have done historically and can actively seek to undo them. My purpose is not to prescribe a correct way of peace building or dialogue. Instead, I intend to develop a decolonial option, one of many possible options, to take advantage of the early stage of the implementation of the

Peace Agreement to deconstruct coloniality logics in Colombia. I write with this urgency in mind.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will further explain coloniality and how it operates within the Colombian context. I argue that Colombian contemporary armed conflict can be understood as a legacy of colonialism. Therefore, I will explain, in a non-linear narrative, how the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being have operated historically in Colombia to pave the way for unending violence. I stress the need to look at decolonial options to dismantle the processes of violence in Colombia and the coloniality logics that continue to take place in the country.

The second section concerns the concept of dialogue. I will first discuss the origins of the concept of dialogue in Socrates, Hegel, and Marx as a tool to seek knowledge and critical thinking. Then, I will give a brief overview of how dialogue has been used in relation to peace building. Lastly, I will describe how it has been abused and the dangers its misuse entails.

In the last section, I will explore my findings of ReD's 'culture of dialogue'. I make a distinction between violence and conflict, suggesting that conflicts are not inherently bad because they are a manifestation of dissent. I argue that to resolve Colombia's fragmentation and violence it is necessary to address the two critical points; but to do this, it is of paramount importance first to be able to engage in dialogue without resorting to violence, and to seek to undo the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being. This is where the culture of dialogue plays an important role.

Methodology

Since this research was grounded in decoloniality thought, it is important to acknowledge my positionality as a student at a university from the so-called 'global North' analysing a 'global South'[1] organisation of which I have been part for the last four years. This entailed challenges such as departing from the colonising epistemological premises of academia.[2] From the early stages, I reflected about the insider/outsider position of the researcher (Altorki and El-Solh 1988), thinking how my clear 'insider' position could 'bias' the findings or how it should be treated with special caution as it posed challenges that an 'outsider', a more objective researcher, would not face. During the research, however, I understood how the insider/outsider

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1   I acknowledge the problematic of these terms to perpetuate symbolic and material unequal global power relations but use them here in quote marks to illustrate precisely those unequal global power relations.

2   For a deeper take on this matter see Al-Hardan, A. (2014) 'Decolonizing Research on Palestinians: Towards Critical Epistemologies and Research Practices.', *Qualitative Inquiry* 20(1):61-71.

is a false binary as my position changed depending on the person I was talking with, the stage of the research, and other contextual features. Sometimes I was read as an insider, helping organise meetings and training new members, and sometimes as an outsider, a type of consultant carrying on an investigation that would end up in a product that would help the organisation. Thus, I saw this research as a conversation – or even better, a dialogue – rather than a 'discovery' and it was done in a respectful way that acknowledged the people in the organisation as actors (active agents) rather than 'informants' or 'sources' (passive 'objects of study').

The historical recounting of the history of violence in Colombia was purposely done in a non-chronological way to avoid the western imperative of history as a succession of events whose only logical outcome is 'civilisation'. Rather, I searched for those features of Colombia's history that illustrate how the country has been submerged into coloniality of knowledge, power, and being. Then I dived into the sea of references about dialogue and peace building. I decided to use the theory beginning from the seminal western thinkers on those fields, such as Socrates and Galtung, to set up a theoretical common ground of how these concepts are understood and build illustrations from there about the benefits and dangers. These two activities, however, were done during the last stage of the research: the literature review. Previously, I had done archival research, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

ReD defines itself as a 'transnational, non-partisan foundation that supports building a comprehensive and inclusive peace through the promotion of a culture of dialogue in Colombia'.[3] The objective of my placement was to deconstruct this statement, enquiring how the organisation and its members understand and practice a 'culture of dialogue' and whether or not this contributes to a 'comprehensive and inclusive peace.'

At the beginning of the placement, I endeavoured to organise ReD's documents while conducting archival research about the genealogy of the concept of a 'culture of dialogue' and its development within the organisation. ReD did not have one archive, but multiple private archives from its members, with possibly duplicated documents. I contacted a dozen people involved with ReD throughout the years, developing a personal archive, and received more than 2,500 files in total from seven of them. I searched for documents containing the terms 'culture of dialogue' or 'cultura de diálogo' either in their name or content, which resulted in 300 files. I codified, classified, and organised them with a filing system that respected the guidelines of archival classification (Shellenberg 1961) and set up an Excel table containing pertinent information about the concept of 'culture of dialogue.'

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3   This statement appears through many private documents found in the archival research.

Then, I carried out semi-structured interviews with ReD members to comprehend how they understand the concept. Since the organisation is almost entirely made of volunteers,[4] the activities are led and advanced by 15 people. The sample was chosen from these key actors, trying to be representative in the sense of having at least one person representing a section of the organisation. Therefore, from March to May, I interviewed six members of ReD in London and Bogotá, and via video-call: the director in Colombia, the director in the UK, a co-founder, the head of the education team, an administrative member, the projects leader, and a member of the youth section (ReD-020). I then transcribed and systematised their answers concerning my analysis objective.

Meanwhile, I was doing participant observation of ReD's activities, looking closely at the mechanics of their processes and how they apply the concept to their activities and taking notes in a field book. From October 2018 to August 2019, including the four months of formal placement, I conducted participant observation at 22 events convened by ReD in London: 1 book launch, 2 demonstrations, 2 Embrace Dialogue Academia (EDA) closed-door discussions, 7 internal meetings, 3 open dialogues in a panel format, 2 presentations, 2 documentary screenings followed by discussions, and 2 *tertulias* (gatherings). Most of these took place on University College, London campus and at the home of the director of the organisation. Others took place in pubs or on the premises of ally organisations such as Bertha Doc House at the Curzon or Christian Aid. The most recurrent topics at these events were the Truth Commission and the role of civil society in supporting the implementation of the peace accord.

Coloniality and violence in the Colombian context

It is widely accepted that the contemporary Colombian armed conflict has its roots in the unequal distribution of land throughout the country. Although some other causes such as limited political participation, the fragmentation of the state, and the pressures of the international community are often mentioned (CNMH 2016), the conflict is not frequently linked to the legacies of colonialism. The country's colonial experience is seen as a completed process left in a far past. Nonetheless, as the authors from the MCD group argue, once colonialism was dismantled as an administrative structure, their institutions and practices were transformed according to a narrative of modernity in order to maintain that control, thus shaping a certain type of subject and producing a particular type of knowledge that maintained relationships of domination typical of colonialism. This process is understood as *coloniality*.

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4   Of the more than 50 members both in Colombia and the UK, only 1 has a part-time contract. The rest offer their free time to the organisation, not constrained by a specific number of hours per week.

Coloniality operates at different levels that are intertwined with one other, ensuring that processes of *subalternation* persist: coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. 'Coloniality of power' refers to the mechanisms that reproduce colonial hierarchies (Mignolo 2011), dominating and exploiting people based on the social classification of populations. Its epistemic dimension is the 'coloniality of knowledge', the production of knowledge and practices that legitimate who is human and who is less human (Escobar and Mignolo 2010). Those that hold the economic, political and cultural power impose the global design of Eurocentric modernity as universal. As such, coloniality always implies violence: that of negating and making invisible other ways of understanding the world, and other knowledges and practices different from those hegemonic western knowledges and practices. The 'coloniality of being' refers to the lived experiences of colonisation (Maldonado-Torres 2007). It therefore includes the experiences of the subaltern subjects that exist under the coloniality of power and knowledge.

The MCD project does not define a 'new' paradigm originating from Latin America, but rather an 'other paradigm', an option among other decolonial projects (Escobar and Mignolo 2010). Decoloniality is about acknowledging the diversity of experiences and local histories that are marked by coloniality and drowned by the imposition of knowledge and power systems that oppress them. The decolonial option attempts to think according to the 'colonial epistemic difference' to unravel the hegemonic Eurocentric perspective of knowledge and uncover its violent means that, even today, silence those dissociated from modernity. From this 'other paradigm', the silenced knowledge creates a space of articulation and a space for thought that enters in dialogue with other projects that share the perspective and critique of modernity.

Therefore, to review the history of violence in Colombia, I will not follow the modern idea of chronological narration of a succession of events according to a timeline of progression. Instead, predominant features[5] of the history of violence will be located in the three levels of coloniality previously explained (knowledge, power, and being).

Coloniality of knowledge

There are three epistemological axes of modernity on which coloniality in Colombia was (and still is) organised: the racial strategy, the imaginary of urbanity, and the discourse of development.

The racial strategy is configured in two different epistemic regimes: natural sciences and medical-based discourses and practices about the body, while social sciences such

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5   Although several features of the history of violence in Colombia can be identified, I will
     focus on the most important ones in order to understand its contemporary armed conflict.

as history and anthropology explained 'human nature' around Darwinist ideas. These two regimes are illustrated in the official narrative of Colombian independence. Drawing from biological explanations, the Catholic religion and the argument in favour of the defence of private property, Henao and Arrubla (1911), authors of the history textbook used in all Colombian high schools throughout most of the twentieth century, stated that white *criollos*[6] had an obvious racial and cultural superiority over black and indigenous people. It was for this reason, according to the authors, that only the *criollo*'s struggle for independence was successful. This official narrative established a clear hierarchy of the populations that inhabit Colombia, and an imaginary of *whiteness*.

Additionally, Colombia has been characterised as a centralist country organised and administered from Bogotá, where *urbanity* is a synonym of progress and development, while *rurality* is as associated with backwardness and even danger. In the context of an accelerated increase of urban centres due to the influx of international capital, medicine characterised the migrant population as poor, illiterate and unemployed peasants from Colombian rural areas (Díaz 2008). This population was labelled as the 'dangerous classes' that represented a potential danger to public health. Through this 'hygienic device', medicine could intervene in the lives of individuals (from food to clothing) and the social body (architectural distributions) to protect public health (Díaz 2008). These interventions were intended to produce clean citizens and workers, useful for the capitalist system and who would not bother those urban whites who were in the dominant position of power.

The notions of 'underdevelopment' and 'Third World' that emerged in the new global power structure after the Second World War (Escobar 2006) also impacted the coloniality of knowledge in Colombia. This epistemic strategy of development allowed coloniser countries to continue extracting natural and economic resources from the colonised countries, who now had to manage their entrance to modernity by achieving 'progress' with the 'kind' help of the 'developed' modern countries and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations (Díaz 2008). Furthermore, Colombia was considered a laboratory where international aid programs were tested.[7] The professionalisation of Colombian development experts

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6   The Spanish caste system divided the population into white (European), indigenous (native), black (African slave), *criollo* (child of two white people in America), *mestizo* (child of a white and an indigenous), *mulato* (child of a white and a black), and other combinations.

7   According to Thomson (2011), 'Colombia was the first developing country to accept a World Bank mission, apply for US "Alliance for Progress" aid, receive counterinsurgency support from the US "Military Assistance Program", and implement the WB's model of "rural development on a large scale"'.

can be interpreted as a way of normalising the discourse of underdevelopment as the fundamental cause of the country's problems.

Coloniality of power

Those three epistemic axes result in three clear mechanisms of coloniality of power in Colombia: the establishment of a modern nation-state of criollo elites, the hegemonic economic system through the persistence of the hacienda model and the insertion in global capitalism, and developmentalist policies.

Colombia's independence in 1810 was brought by the criollo elites to establish and control a new nation-state linked to the modern capitalist world system (Castro-Gomez and Restrepo 2008). Since then, elites have divided Colombians into what have been presented as the only two possible political options: Santanderists and Bolivarians, centralists and federalists, conservatives and liberals. Both sides have confronted one another violently since Independence, and their hegemony has exterminated and made invisible other political options that exist in Colombia. This was how elites achieved the goal of maintaining political power at the expense of impoverishing and excluding the majority of the mostly rural population. This incited violence and established a state incapable of securing presence throughout the national territory and guaranteeing access to a dignified life through the provision of health care, education, and security (Camelo 2017).

Through coloniality of power, elites also succeeded in securing economic power. As independence did not change the conventions of land tenure, the only officially recognised titles were those originally granted by the Spanish Crown (Thomson 2011). This colonial *hacienda* model dealt with territorial divisions in productive units for agricultural exploitation by an owner through the slavery of indigenous people and the black population brought from Africa. While the white settlers and their descendants continued to have a status of domination, reproducing their economic, social and cultural power, the indigenous, Afro-descendants, *mestizos* and other subaltern populations, now 'free', sold their labour for a low wage in terrible working conditions. Over the years, presidents from both parties, with the support and pressure from the United States, continued to give priority to the 'modernisation of the hacienda' in their political decisions and laws (Thomson 2011, 337). This benefited landowners, including foreign investors, while repressing the *campesinos* who worked on the lands, and their unions.

Meanwhile, the developmentalist international aid projects in Colombia inserted the 'beneficiaries' into the capitalist markets as suppliers of food products and as consumers of their agricultural inputs, technology and credit, with costs up to 575 per cent higher than the usual production investment, which was covered by banking

loans (Thomson 2011).

Coloniality of being and the peace process

In this context, those *subalterned*[8] (campesinos, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and the urban proletariat) grew tired of being systematically dispossessed, oppressed, and excluded. Subsequently, in the 1960s, they transformed their resistance communities into revolutionary guerrillas such as the FARC-EP, ELN, EPL, MQL, and M19.[9] Despite their ideological and methodological differences, it is possible to say that they all fought against the political and economic monopoly of the elites. They fought to decolonise the people and the land from the deep colonial structures that continued to exist in Colombia because they could 'no longer breathe', and as peasants, they had 'nothing to lose and everything to gain' (Fanon 1963, 61).

As a result of the economic gains produced by the cocaine industry and other violent means of capital accumulation such as kidnappings, the FARC-EP consolidated their presence throughout the national territory as the strongest guerrilla group. They even replaced the state in some territories by providing services to the population (Thomson 2011). In response to this, landowners, businessmen, soldiers, drug traffickers, and political elites formed paramilitary organisations and strengthened existing ones, which were later grouped into the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). The paramilitaries, under the anti-communist discourse promulgated by the United States in the context of the Cold War, were dedicated to terrorising the rural population, whom they considered to be sympathisers of the insurgency (Thomson 2011).

However, many other members of the oppressed populations did not resort to joining guerrillas or paramilitaries. On the contrary, they continued to resist the material, symbolic, and epistemic violence in their territories according to their own ways of understanding the world. *Campesinos*, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, women, the LGBT population, and all those subjectivities that do not conform to the colonial model of the neoliberal modern subject have been victimised by the conflict. They have also resisted and remained caught in the crossfire between the state apparatus, the different guerrilla groups, the paramilitary groups, the drug traffickers and common criminals.

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8   Using the word 'subalterned' makes explicit the subalternity condition as a result of domination processes. It is therefore a more appropriate term than the essentialising 'subaltern'.

9   These are: the communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP), the Marxist National Liberation Army (ELN), the Maoist People's Liberation Army (EPL), the indigenous Quintin Lame Movement (MQL) and the urban April 19 Movement (M19)

After half a century of war, the Colombian government and the FARC-EP signed a Final Agreement to end their armed confrontation in December 2016. Unlike previous attempts at peace negotiations, this was successful because it enunciated, recognised and attempted to resolve colonial-inherited issues that caused the violent conflict. This included land dispossession, the imaginary of urbanity, and political exclusion, although these issues were not framed in terms of their coloniality and other colonial-inherited issues were not included such as the racial hierarchies and the development discourse. It also gave space for the participation of groups that were traditionally excluded from peace talks, such as the (mostly rural) victims, women, and ethnic minorities.

The peace process built on the successes and mistakes from the previous processes in Colombia and international cases such as South Africa and Northern Ireland. It had a solid peace-building, transitional justice and human rights theoretical basis, and a five-point agenda of dialogue between the government and the FARC-EP: land, political participation, drug crop substitution, justice, and victims. The signing of the Final Agreement came after five years of challenging negotiations in Havana, Cuba. In Colombia, however, agreements between citizens were more difficult to achieve, as evidenced in the negative outcome of the Peace Referendum: 50.21% voting against the peace agreement versus 49.78% voting in favour.

Living and watching every stage of this peace process, in which two parties with very different worldviews and epistemologies sat down to talk and reached agreements (despite great difficulty) on fundamental social, economic, and political topics (which would impact the knowledge, power, and being of the people), led me to consider dialogue as an enriching conflict resolution tool in a society that has traditionally been violent. Moreover, the fact that Colombians were so passionately divided about the contents of the Peace Agreement and the very existence of the negotiation made me reflect on the potential and limitations of dialogue. That is why from the position in which I inhabit the world (and Colombia), from the knowledge that I have had the privilege to acquire, and from my experience with ReD, I want to contribute to the reflections on this concept.

Dialogue, Peace Building, and Colombia's Peace Accord

There are many ways to approach dialogue. From communication, mediation, linguistics, hermeneutics, or religion, dialogue can be described, analysed and called for as a practice, theory, or merely a condition of human life. The word is often used interchangeably with 'conversation', 'discussion', 'negotiation' or 'debate', and several authors have theorised different models about it. To understand the role of dialogue in resolving conflicts in violent countries such as Colombia, it is important to start from its origins and analyse its relationship with peace building in general and with the peace process in Colombia in particular, keeping in mind its potentials and the dangers that its misuse and abuse entail.

From Socrates to Marx: the origins of the concept of dialogue

The term 'dialogue' was coined in the fourth century in Greece, meaning 'through' (*dia*) 'speech/reason' (*logos*). Although the word might have been circulating before among sophist (Jazdzewska 2014), it first appears written by Plato in the Socratic dialogues. There, it is a type of conversation between two people consisting of questions and answers about a philosophical question, an argumentative exchange that aims to fuel critical thinking and reach wisdom.

This format of asking careful questions encourages the participants to be aware of their thought processes, monitoring the steps taken to argue something. This allows them to be in constant self-reflection about the coherence and discrepancies of their arguments, evaluating their words and correcting themselves if necessary. This results in the participants in dialogue being part of a guided process to scrutinise their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs; to acknowledge, as Socrates did, that they 'know nothing.'

From dialogue, Hegel and Marx developed the concept of dialectics. For Hegel, it was the process of finding the contradiction between ideas, resulting in a new idea. In this model, the dialogue between two or more people starts with a statement that is challenged with the goal of establishing the truth after an exchange of reasoned arguments; it is about making implicit contradictions explicit. Marx signalled that this focus on ideas ignored the contradictions present in the material world. For him, 'the subject of dialectics is change, all change, and interaction, all kinds and degrees of interaction' (Ollman 2003). Therefore, dialectic is not a formula but a method to study social processes and how to resolve them.

The *raison d'être* of the dialectic process is seeking a resolution or closure. A dialogic process, on the other hand, focuses on the exchange *per se*, highlighting the importance of listening without necessarily resolving an issue. That is also what differentiates dialogue from terms such as 'debate', 'discussion' or 'negotiation', which have the goal

to convince, gain knowledge, or reach an agreement. This unveils its potential to strengthen relationships and thus help avert violent conflicts and build peace.

Dialogue and peace building: the potentials and risks in relation to Colombia's peace process

In one of the darkest moments of violence in Colombia, philosopher Estanislao Zuleta published an essay where he affirmed that the 'eradication of conflicts and their dissolution in a warm coexistence is not an attainable or desirable goal' (Zuleta 1985) because conflicts are a constitutive space of social reality. To understand this, it is necessary to distinguish conflict from violence. Conflict is when two or more diverse positions confront each other; violence is one possible manifestation of conflict that implies aggression, either materially or symbolically.

The fields of peace building and conflict resolution seek to achieve an absence of violence (*negative peace*) and build the material, structural, and cultural conditions that eliminate the causes of violence (*positive peace*) (Galtung 2000) . Doing that requires establishing *relationships* between people at the grassroots level (members of communities, refugees, local leaders), at the middle-range level (academics, NGOs, ethnic or religious leaders, media) and top leaders (political and military leaders) (Lederach 1997).

As dialogue does not have a purpose or agenda beyond 'inquiring into the movement of thought' (Bohm, et al., 1991), and its object is not 'analysing things, winning an argument, or exchanging opinions but listening to everybody's opinions and simply sharing the appreciation of the meanings' (Bohm, 1996), it is an appropriate tool for peacebuilding. It has been used in the resolution of a wide spectre of conflicts, from the peace processes of Northern Ireland and South Africa, to climate change issues, to the socio-economic crisis in Argentina (UNDP 2009).

However, a dialogue is not merely a conversation between two or more people. Examining the theories of different dialogue authors, we find that it requires at least three internal and external conditions (Incerti-Théry 2016), 1) *will*, because those engaging in dialogue should do it without any coercion or pressure; 2) a *safe space*, a 'neutral' location and trusting environment where the exchange can take place without any threat or fear; and 3) *equity*, meaning that everybody has an equal possibility and time to speak, but also that there are no power imbalances between the participants. Once those requirements are fulfilled, a dialogue takes place when its participants listen carefully to the others, are open to sharing their thoughts, and have the curiosity to ask thorough questions (Bohm 1996, Gadamer 1975, Ikeda 2005).

Although it should not be its goal, dialogue sometimes has positive effects. As a

product of dialogue, people understand others in their own way. This can facilitate the reconciliation of traumas; it can generate trust, safety, visibility, or cooperation, which can lead to building relationships between participants (a key to avoiding violence); expand the horizon of the mind, defined by Gadamer (1975) as the range of vision from a point; or bring out the best in oneself and others (Ikeda 2005). That is why dialogue has the potential to be a revolutionary method.

However beneficial dialogue looks, it is necessary to keep a critical eye on its theoretical dangers and look closely at how it takes place in practice: how it is used and abused. It is worth saying that most dialogue theorists are men from the global North, and it is often applied to the global South.

For instance, peace building, as understood and practised by international politics, is a concept inherent to modernity. It originated within the United Nations as part of its 'responsibility to protect' discourse and has since marked an agenda to respond to conflicts that were before seen as internal affairs and might even be interpreted as imperialist (Schelhaas and Seegers 2009). It is a key part of the set of theories, ideas, and practices known as 'transitional justice' promoted by the international world system, that comprises a toolkit of trials, amnesties, truth commissions, and institutional reforms (Evans 2018). This way of understanding peace building entails a coloniality of knowledge that presents the transition to democracy and capitalism as the only universal answer to overcome conflicts.

One of the major criticisms of this toolkit is that it favours neoliberalism because its main effect is normalising the markets of the previously conflictive country to become a productive part of the globalised capitalist economy (Evans 2018). That is because it is assumed that the pacification of territories attracts foreign investment and international aid for development. Indeed, peace building frequently involves the intervention of international actors in political, social, legal, and economic spheres with the goal of inclusion in the modern international system. That is a coloniality of power that imposes the adjustment of society, organised as a country, within the hegemonic world system.

As a result, there has been a professionalization of the field, with most of the people trained in peace building coming from countries such as the United States and Norway to 'build peace' in countries like Somalia or Iraq. In this context, 'dialogue' (in the form of mediation or facilitation) is taught to peace-building professionals as a form of achieving 'sustainable change' (UNDP 2009) and thus is also a common activity in its programs and projects. This interventionist logic affects immediately the requisite of *equity*, as there are clear power imbalances taking place in such dialogues: a coloniality of being.

It is also worth looking at who is involved in every dialogue. Including some people means that others are being excluded, and it is pertinent to ask who is excluded, why, and how is the exclusion enforced. Those involved in the dialogue might be speaking on behalf of the excluded, in which case it is pertinent to talk about the implications of representation, or as Spivak (1988) said, if the subaltern can speak. The control of the contents of the dialogue is also important, that is, looking to see if something is off-limits.

Beyond the practical, some have used the concept as a controlling discourse, due to its vagueness and abstractive nature. In Turkey, for example, when neoliberal strategies were imposed and the working class started revolting against losing its access to the advantages of the welfare state, some workers were invited to a 'social dialogue' table where they never had a dialogue, but were 'forced to make further concessions silently, while being kept under control' (Akpinar and Akçay 2015). In this case, 'dialogue' is used to silence dissent, called when it is needed to keep people under control, and not used as a tool to effectively resolve conflict.

In Colombia's case, the peace process unfolded a triple-meaning of dialogue. First, the dialogue in Havana, meaning the table of negotiations between the members of the government and the members of FARC-EP, with the participation of victims, women, and ethnic minority representatives. Second, the dialogue in Colombia, meaning the conversation between citizens (sometimes even previous enemies), due in part to the attention of mass media, the international community, and multilateral organisations, and in part to a general environment pushing for reconciliation. Third, the lack of dialogue of the leaders opposing the peace process up until they won the Peace Referendum. This meant that while some sectors of society were able to sit down and dialogue to resolve their conflicts in a non-violent way, something unthinkable before, new fragmentations between the civil society and between political leaders arose.

Colombians like me saw how the peace process addressed some of the coloniality issues that sparked the origins of 50 years of violence and how different voices that had been excluded were humanised through dialogue. Other Colombians, however, felt excluded and refused to listen and be listened to, humanise and be humanised. The challenge now is to achieve a decolonial convergence of peace-building and dialogue that does not silence those voices in dissent, that does not make conflicts and differences invisible, and that includes the different epistemologies and ways of understanding and living the world we inhabit so that Colombians learn to live together without resorting to violence. This is one of the endeavours of Rodeemos el Diálogo through its 'culture of dialogue' concept.

'Culture of dialogue': an approach from the Colombian experience

Shortly after Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and his team announced and launched in Oslo a peace process with the FARC-EP in October 2012, a group of Colombians and 'friends of Colombia' living in London convened over breakfast with the idea of doing something to support the negotiation. They called themselves *Rodeemos el Diálogo*, which translates as 'Let's embrace dialogue'. This name also let them use the acronym 'ReD', the Spanish word for 'network', which described perfectly what they were: not an NGO nor grassroots movement, but a network of people interested in an issue.

They supported the peace process by understanding the causes and dynamics of the armed conflict and the development of the negotiations, keeping them in the public eye in the UK, and raising awareness of the importance and challenges of building peace in Colombia. They convened events to inform themselves about the developments of the negotiation table and to talk about their opinions, fears and doubts about them. Soon, it became apparent that the 'dialogue' in their name did not only mean the negotiations between the government and the FARC-EP, but also the debates, discussions and conversations that were being held at their events.

In 2014 some members moved to Colombia, with the idea of bringing the experiences of the UK. The group started convening weekly 'Peace Breakfasts' and *tertulias*, which followed the format of the UK events; designed a peace pedagogy strategy going to vulnerable zones in Colombia; founded ReD-020, a group of young people thinking about the role of youth; and partnered with a company to raise awareness of the role of the private sector in peace. Over the last seven years, the group has found that at the centre of their way of supporting the peace process, and broadly speaking, contributing to Colombia's peace building, is promoting what they called a 'culture of dialogue.'

In 2018, some of its members, including me, moved to London and re-launched a ReD team in the UK, recruiting new people and organising events promoting a 'culture of dialogue' and giving visibility to the Colombian situation. In this context, I began the four-month placement in which I researched the concept of 'culture of dialogue' via archival research and interviews while conducting participant observation at the organisation's meetings.

Conceptualising the 'culture of dialogue'

According to the data collected from interviews with ReD's members, the archival research, and my own observations, the culture of dialogue can be defined as a set of actions and behaviours that, by being practised regularly, become a habit, an ability,

and ultimately a way of 'living and cohabiting the world' (Gómez-Suárez 2019). These actions include 'listening carefully and talking assertively' (Méndez Ardila 2019), 'question[ing] one's own truths and mak[ing] our own positions more flexible' (Vejarano 2019), and 'respect[ing] diversity, understanding that there are no absolute truths, that there are different contexts and narratives and ways of seeing the world' (Gómez 2019).

The actions and behaviours of a culture of dialogue are materialised and framed within six values, summarised as follows according to the interviewees: *honesty* to say what we really think, without any fear of judgement; *respect* to listen carefully to the other person and to say our ideas assertively; *solidarity* to understand where the other person comes from, because each one of us has our own path that can always be enriching; *generosity* to share our own story, even if it means being vulnerable; *self-criticism* to rethink many ideas that might not be appropriate or that are better with the other person's inputs; finally, *co-responsibility* to understand our own important role within society. These values are promoted, taught, and practised in every activity of ReD, and for the people who participate in their spaces, 'they make it possible to constantly question whether I put into practice the culture of dialogue or not, if I am consistent with what is promoted by ReD with my actions' (Gómez 2019).

In fact, the emergence of the term 'culture of dialogue' responds to the concern of addressing the ruptures within Colombian society in the context of new peace negotiations, and the possibility of doing this outside of Colombia, in settings that could be seen as more 'neutral' to the Colombian armed conflict, such as a university in London. The term appeared for the first time in a 2014 article written by one of ReD's founders, where he argues that the dialogue spaces convened by the organisation in London had the positive effects of tackling the division within the Colombian diaspora, creating a favourable environment for the support of the peace process, and addressing the legacy of the Colombian armed conflict through peace building and reconciliation (Cousins 2014).

Since then, the term has been appropriated as an objective. Throughout six years of work, in all the events, workshops, projects, activities, and presentations, both the culture of dialogue and the six values are stressed as fundamental parts of its development. People who participate in them find it enriching that they 'enable human encounter' (Cousins 2019), 'build relationships' (Soler, 2019), 'build bridges' (Gómez 2019) and 'motivate us to act, they are not simply spaces for conversation and reflection, but mobilize us to commit ourselves to action' (Vejarano 2019).

The fact that the values are being practised ensures the existence of the conditions of *will* (by being generous, in solidarity, and self-critical)*, a safe space* (respectful, honest) and *equity* (co-responsible), which results in a dialogue and not various monologues.

As a result, people that participate in the dialogue are able to build *relationships* (as Lederach said) based on trust, learn to resolve their conflicts without resorting to violence (*negative peace*), and even take action to transform the causes of conflict (*positive peace*), such as rallying for land redistribution or supporting the alternative forces to change their political exclusion.[10]

As practised by ReD, a culture of dialogue starts at a micro-level as individual actions and behaviours (framed according to the six values) that become habits. It then moves to the macro level when the actions and behaviours become collective (which is what makes it a culture), when two or more people that practice them join, or when those actions and behaviours are shared with someone that was not aware of them and they start practising them in their daily life.

If widely spread, the culture of dialogue might be the key for people to resolve their conflicts in a non-violent way and be able to address structural and cultural causes of violence such as land dispossession, racial hierarchies, and developmentalist discourse – which are at the core of the now universalised modernity. It has the potential to be a decolonial tool because at its core it is making visible other ways of understanding and living the world (decoloniality of being), other epistemologies (decoloniality of knowledge) and practices (decoloniality of power) apart from the hegemonic western one, without dismissing the role of coloniality at the root of violent conflicts. It is foremost about epistemic reconstitution: acknowledging the multiplicity of knowledges and experiences, personal and collective, without imposing one over the others. It is a metaphorical space and practice where all the places of enunciation and thought convene.

The challenges of the 'culture of dialogue'

The culture of dialogue is, as thought and conceptualised, a conflict resolution mechanism that moves away from the western peace-building model because it does not privilege the transition to the political and economic models of modernity (liberal democracy and capitalism) as the only way to overcome conflicts. On the contrary, it advocates for an epistemic reconstitution, for the re-establishment of the ways of thinking and living in the world that the rhetoric and institutions of modernity have denied. In the way it has been practised by ReD, however, the culture of dialogue entails a series of challenges for it to be truly decolonial.

Its first challenge is to spread beyond ReD's members and participants, to a wider, more comprehensive audience. ReD's spaces of dialogue in Colombia have a

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10   The members of ReD often participate in demonstrations asking the government to tackle those issues, write letters and statements addressed to those in power and the media, and make visible those issues through their activities.

diversity of participants in terms of age and gender, but they are homogeneous otherwise, composed mostly of educated, middle-class, urban people mainly from Bogotá. In ReD UK the situation is similar: most of the participants are somehow involved in academia, without including other types of migrant Colombians. The lack of resources and the fixed location in the north of Bogotá and universities in London, charging for the food, and scheduling dialogues during office hours might be excluding some people. ReD members are aware that 'more diversity is needed to avoid the dialogue becoming sterile and transforming the culture of dialogue into a culture of monologues practised in group' (Vejarano 2019) and 'it would be good to have more grassroots involvement' (Méndez Ardila 2019).

When people from other contexts participate, they are often the guests (or key speakers), which represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they have a platform to make visible their epistemologies and resistances. On the other, by doing that they have the burden of representing their cultures or people in front of a higher-class, whiter, urban audience. This has to be done without falling into exoticisation, with real *equity* in the power relations. When people from other backgrounds are not guests but only participants, sometimes the academic names of the events, their topics and the language used, both in the UK and Colombia, leave them 'feeling very intimidated, which led me to not being able to say I didn't understand' (Soler 2019).

The second challenge is to openly question modernity/coloniality as the hegemonic way of understanding and living the world. Even though topics such as land dispossession, political exclusion and subaltern subject construction are frequent in ReD's dialogues, they are seldom linked with the colonial structure of knowledge and specific institutions that enabled those oppressions and exclusions. The urgency of resolving pressing situations, the dynamic political landscape, and the availability, experience, and priorities of the guests might channel the dialogues to specific issues, without paying attention to a wider context, or to unveiling the violent consequences of having a universalised fiction of western modernity as the perfect stage of humanity, which is the objective of decoloniality.

The last challenge is to step out of the comfort zone of the theory and to engage in decolonial activism, especially in rural spaces and with subalterned people and communities. This must be achieved without falling into a 'salvation' rhetoric, or a discourse of development and progress. The culture of dialogue's action-focused nature could go in line with decoloniality's endeavour of 'advancing political goals in all the domains of the colonial matrix of power (knowledge, politics, economy, subjectivity, gender/sexuality, race/racism, nature/living)' (Mignolo 2017). Therefore, the organisation ought not to wait for people to come to the dialogue spaces, but instead get out and support the decolonial struggles taking place across the country.

Conclusion

The contemporary Colombian armed conflict can be understood as a legacy of colonialism. The imposition and reproduction of coloniality of knowledge (the racial device, the imaginary of urbanity, and the discourse of development), power (the nation-state project, the capitalist economic system and the developmentalist policies) and being (the lived experiences of the oppressed) have played a vital role in the persistence of material and symbolic violence in Colombia.

The concept of dialogue, since its inception in Greece to Hegel and Marx, appears as a revolutionary method that fosters critical thinking, identifies contradictions, and acknowledges that we 'know nothing'. It proves to have great potential in peace building as it can have positive effects such as establishing relationships and building both negative and positive peace. However, it is important to be aware of the dangers of promoting it as a controlling discourse and to constantly question who is being included/excluded, how representation is taking place and if the content is being controlled as it could be used to reproduce coloniality logics.

Since coloniality exists both in Colombia and in peace building, it is necessary to develop a decolonial critique. The MCD group and those who have worked with this perspective over the years agree that decoloniality is, above all, a bet to displace universalism and acknowledge the existence of other ways of understanding, living, and knowing the world that are silenced by the epistemic violence of coloniality.

ReD's concept and practice of a culture of dialogue has big potential as a decolonial peace-building tool because it seeks to break with traditional power structures and brings to the table the collectivisation of actions and behaviours that make people learn to resolve conflicts in a non-violent way and to be able to talk and take action to make material transformations of the structural causes of violence. If those inequalities and exclusion are not dealt with, and the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being keep being uncritically reproduced, a new wave of violence might occur, even with a peace agreement taking place. It is urgent to be able to sit and dialogue about what makes us different and what makes us similar – which might be that we are all still under a coloniality regime – and how to resolve it. That is where the culture of dialogue can play a key role.

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