
Juan Pablo Aranguren (2016)

Cuerpos al límite: tortura, subjetividad y memoria en Colombia (1977-1982)

Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 311 páginas.

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In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, it seems that categories of unspeakable and inaudible issues have been tacitly created. It is possible to establish what happened and how it happened, but approaching pain and understanding how it is attached to someone's body remains a gray area, usually excluded of court proceedings and, therefore, suppressed in society. Studies of violence in Colombia focus mainly on analyzing the social and structural dimensions. Although not ignored, the subjective experience is considered to some extent. This issue of the subjective dimension is precisely what Juan Pablo Aranguren addresses. In his book, the psychologist, historian and professor at Universidad de los Andes wonders about subjectivity and the body in violent contexts. Aranguren focuses on a specific moment of Colombian history (1958 - 1982), in which social repression, supported by exceptional measures protected by a legal-military framework, such as the Estatuto de Seguridad Nacional (ESN), permeates the social dimension as a whole - including citizens' bodies.

Aranguren's work falls within the scope of body studies, a field that has recently gained importance in Latin American research. This field gives rise to an interest in analyzing and understanding ways of exercising biopower that operate in complex contexts, such as those seen in this continent - contexts pierced by convoluted regional processes (the colony, military dictatorships, internal armed conflicts) that involved the production of subjects by means of control and disciplinary action over citizens. These issues have been addressed by the author during an important part of his academic life. For example, in his earlier publication *Las inscripciones de la guerra en el cuerpo de los jóvenes combatientes: historias de cuerpos en tránsito hacia la vida civil* (2011), Aranguren analyzed how aspects such as military command, discipline devices, and discursive ordering mark and cross the bodies of combatants.

Cuerpos al límite is not a book centered on torture as a direct research object. Aranguren clearly states that his intention is not to document experiences of torture

or to make classifications or comparisons (5), but to unveil the reasons why torture practices were silenced, forgotten, and unpunished (6), and to glimpse at the legal and epistemological frameworks that, according to the author, determined these possibilities of repression over bodies. Aranguren fulfills these purposes; his work transcends the descriptive and monolithic intention into which such a proposal risks falling. This can be determined because the author's perspective on torture practices awakens reflections about otherness, places of victims' enunciation, self-coercion, and the intersubjective experience.

The methodological approach is historically and hermeneutically stained; it is widely supported by discourse analysis and testimonial sources. Firstly, the author resorts to documentary sources from official institutions, such as the army (mostly articles from military journals and governmental decrees) and human rights organizations (in this case, registers of arrests and torture, for instance). This, together with recollection of testimonies – some from interviews conducted by the author and others retaken from media interviews and autobiographies –, provide a wide view on the events and the historical moment the book addresses. Documentary sources allow for the understanding of the socio-legal scenario and discursive ordering that led to the militarization of social thought; testimonies, for its part, highlight the subjective dimension.

The text is prominently lineal, considering the chronological ambiance and the contextual path present in its seven chapters. Until chapter four, the analysis is centered on the process of militarization of society in detriment of social protest. Colombia was in state of siege for a quarter of a century, but it was during the presidential periods of liberal politicians Alfonso López Michelsen (1974-1978) and Julio César Turbay Ayala (1978-1982) that the ways administering life and pain (biopolitics) were intensified. The status of state of siege was normalized due to the legal framework that the government implemented, and the military forces (FFMM) acquired special faculties due to the instauration of contra-insurgent policies and strategies, where the civic-military strategy is the most paradigmatic example of this.

In the first and second parts of the book (chapters 1 to 5), Aranguren, supported by the theoretical proposals of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Espósito, resorts to the immunization theory. The author applies it to comprehend that social manifestations were perceived, in that specific moment of history, as an affirmation of subversion – as the inner enemy which, acting as a disease, threatened the social body and made the establishment of immunological measures, such as the strategies previously mentioned, necessary. From that perspective, another reflection arises: the dichotomy between universal principles and otherness: the first nullifies the second, the Other. In the context of violence described by

Aranguren, individuals who did not fit in the universal figure of disciplined citizen who promoted institutionalism – guerrilla combatant, student, indigenous – had to be corrected, dehumanized, or eliminated. Torture was then a means toward these ends.

Buttler, Lechner, De Certeau, Agamben, and Espósito are present in the intellectual debate. However, the Foucaultian theory predominates in the theoretical framework. The author does not restrict the theoretical discussions to the introduction or the conclusion, as he works with the sources he decided to include throughout the text. In this way, the book is an excellent example of how to create a dialogue between theory and the material collected, especially during the first five chapters. The debates gradually grow until they disgorge in daunting stories, mostly from ex guerrilla combatants in the 19 de Abril movement (M-19). Thus, it would be fit to point out that this work is enhanced by the experienced. Similarly, it is not wrong to state that, paradoxically, the most enriching aspect for the book could also be the most problematic. The testimonies are introduced in the last part (chapters 6 and 7), but their presence seem to be reduced to a narration and, in some cases, the role of the author is limited to that of a commentator. A more fluent interaction between the author and the testimonies would have brought more meaning to understand the subjective experience within violence. In other words, the testimonies presented lose

their power because the author does not find space to create this dialogue.

Exploring the book is enriching; nonetheless, it is still short of a debate about memory. For those who are interested on memory studies, the failure to deliver the promises made in the title of the book can be disappointing. However, this does not mean that its revision is dispensable, unless one has a simplistic and orthodox comprehension of memory. Considering the current outbreak of literature around the topic, it is possible to regard this book as an opportunity to read about memory with other clues. Aranguren presents memory in more tacit terms, exposing how can it be read by means of the body. Other kinds of materiality, such as the experience of pain and the fight for information, remain with (and in) the body, which creates emotional and social links.