Citizenship, Class and Violence in Historical Perspective:
The Colombian Case

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Antioqueños have historically thought of themselves as a culturally distinct group of no-nonsense, driven, industrious, devout and efficient individualists and of Medellin, the region's capital, as the urban embodiment of regional identity and pride. The city's better off inhabitants boast of the efficient and incorrupt management of municipal services; of sewage, water and electricity coverage for 95% of the urban population[1]; a 24 hour number for pothole repair; the most successful municipal tax assessment and collection system in Latin America; excellent phone service; and Colombia's only Metro.

These services are complemented by a kind of civic consciousness notably absent in other parts of Colombia. Shopkeepers and domestic help scrub the sidewalks outside stores and homes every day in Medellin, the city's inhabitants queue up in orderly lines to board buses throughout the city, and there is rarely to be found the accumulated refuse on the city's streets or private vehicles inconsiderately parked on public sidewalks that are common sights in Colombia's capital, Bogota. The perception that Medellin is a much better run city than any other in Colombia and a more pleasant place to live is widespread: in a recent poll (February 1997) conducted by the Bogota based daily *El Tiempo* Colombians were asked what city they would prefer to live in, and Medellin won by a considerable margin.

There is another side to Medellin of course, the side that has received the greatest international attention. That Medellin is characterized by routine weekend massacres of males in the city's poorest neighborhoods and a murder rate that averaged 19 victims a day in 1991 and only a little less (17) in 1995.[2] It is a city where the private charity hospital San Vicente de Paul resembles a "war hospital" that relies on boy scout volunteers and reusable plastic soda bottles to catch lost blood and recycle it back to homicide victims when transfusion equipment runs out[3]. It is also the Medellin that invites comparisons with modern day Sierra Leone where 14 and 15 year old boys on motorcycles toting semi-automatic weapons were the common emissaries of death[4].

How can we reconcile these two divergent views of urban reality? How can one city and its citizenry be imagined as both paradigms of efficiency and good administrative management and the epitome of urban violence and disorder? The answer may be sought in an analysis of urban class differences and the ways in which such differences inflect understandings of the root causes

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[1]*Financial Times*, July 22,1993.

[2]Medellin continued to lead the nation in per capita homicides in 1995 (248 per 100,000 inhabitants). *El Espectador*, 10/15/96, p. 7A.

[3] *Cambio 16*, December 12-19,1994, pp. 20 and 22.

[4]General Maza Marquez estimated these to number 8000. *El Espectador*, February 13, 1994.

of violence and their impact on political participation and
citizenship in Medellin.

For middle and upper class residents represented by
Medellin's captains of industry and local authorities such as
former Medellin mayor and ex-governor of Antioquia, Juan Gomez
Martinez, the darker view of Medellin is the product of a recent
(atypical) phenomenon, the international narcotics trade and its
corruption of the city's "traditional values."[5] More
specifically, the corruption of local values is attributed to the
criminal organization lead by Pablo Escobar and an urban
underclass which is perceived to have constituted Escobar's and
the narcotics trade's principal base of support.[6] In fact,
regional and local officials explicitly locate the epicenter of
urban violence in the *comunas nororientales* -- the poor
northeastern section of the metropolitan area where the majority
of the city's assassins and gangs are perceived to reside.

The elision of criminality and poverty has had at least two
far reaching effects: 1) it has justified the arbitrary and
frequent violation of the basic civil rights of the urban poor in
the name of law enforcement and narcotics interdiction; and 2) it
has deflected attention away from more complex, longstanding and
intractable issues of urban inequality, economic dislocation and
political exclusion that predate the emergence of the narcotics
trade.[7]

The attribution of Medellin's violence to the combined
effect of the narcotics trade and the urban poor's participation
in it might thus be taken to amount to nothing more the Colombian
variant of a historical tendency to selectively use issues of
public order to justify the repression of popular sectors -- a
tendency, which as Liz Leeds notes in her work[8], is widespread

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[5] "Regreso a los Viejos Valores." Alcaldia de Medellin,
Comision para la Paz, 1989.

[6] In this respect, the attitude of Antioqueño authorities
differs little from that of their counterparts in Rio de Janeiro or
for that matter, the attitude of authorities in cities such as New
York or Los Angeles where the tendency is to ignore the illicit
participation (either as consumers or accomplices) of the middle or
upper classes in order to focus almost exclusively on the illegal
activities of the poor.

[7] The active urban presence of guerrilla organizations in
Colombia, moreover, means that targeting lower class inhabitants as
the primary purveyors of urban violence is also intimately linked
to counter-insurgency efforts and the state's desire to crush or
cripple popular claims for more participatory access in urban and
national political affairs.

[8] Elizabeth Leeds, "Cocaine and Parallel Polities in the
Brazilian Urban Periphery: Constraints on Local-Level
Democratization." *Latin American Research Review*, 31, no.3:47-83.

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throughout Latin America. In the specific case of contemporary Medellin, however, targeting the poor as the basis of the narcotics trade and blaming them for the "loss of traditional values" and the rise of urban violence has other far reaching implications.

Official documents and studies funded by the Governor's office indicate that the number of broken or single headed households, rampant unemployment (the nation's highest), male vagrancy and criminality -- the kinds of indicators that the city's authorities point to when discussing the impact of the narcotics trade on popular sectors and the breakdown of the region's "values" --have been characteristic of Medellin and the source of considerable concern among urban analysts since at least the mid-sixties. If even from the point of view of official sources the "breakdown of traditional values" occurred at least a decade prior to the emergence of the narcotics trade, how might one interpret the tendency of Medellin's authorities to date the city's problems solely to an alliance between drug dealers and the poor?

I think we may understand the rhetoric of Medellin's authorities to represent a recognition that although the narcotics trade hardly made Medellin a violent city, what it did do was make violence the vehicle for the city's least powerful to contest the distribution of urban political, social and economic power in ways that threatened the primacy of a historically exclusionary system of political control and a hierarchical social order. As Medellinenses themselves are prone to note, the narcotics trade "rompio" or broke apart the city's parochial insularity and rigid social customs in part by introducing unprecedented levels of conspicuous consumption, but also by bringing into close contact social worlds that had until then remained largely separate and isolated from each other.

The rhetorical deployment of the phrase the "breakdown of traditional values" refers then not to the incidence of violence per se but to the *democratization* of violence (affecting the city's wealthy as well as the poor) and to its use as an instrument through which the poor were/are able to inspire fear and give political meaning to their discontents. On the one hand, in the course of working for the narcotics trade and observing the terror inspired among the traditionally powerful by men of popular extraction made rich by an illicit commodity, much of the mystique of traditional power crumbled and the taboos of social and political transgression that had kept the poor in "their place" disappeared.

On the other hand, the struggle between narcotics dealers and the state unleashed a multifaceted dynamic of violence that was primarily played out within the confines of poor neighborhoods. Poor urban dwellers became increasingly caught between the repressive forces of the state and struggles between competing bands of criminals, forcing them to develop mechanisms of self-defense and political expression that indirectly became the basis for the emergence of more democratized and popular forms of local organization.

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The narcotics trade thus served to turn society upside down;
it rearranged prevailing tastes and cultural practices, realigned
the local economy and introduced new patterns of political
practice and social relations. This reversal of the order of
things had many effects, but perhaps one of the most significant
was that it permanently destroyed any remaining awe that might
have inhibited poor urban inhabitants from challenging the
structure and process of political expression and participation
imposed from above.
    An understanding of the implicit meaning behind elite
perceptions of a "breakdown of traditional values" as a loss of
social and political control is reinforced by an exploration of
how Medellin's poor understand the root causes of violence. In
the deliberations between the representatives of popular urban
organizations (often ex-gang or militia members) which emerged as
city officials and the central state in desperation sought out a
negotiated resolution to Medellin's explosive situation in the
early 1990s popular neighborhood representatives repeatedly
linked violence to the exclusionary, unequal and paternalistic
society created *by* traditional values rather than to a breakdown
of these.
    Popular sectors emphasized the long term effects of economic
decline and the absence of democratic mechanisms of political
participation and voice on the status of the urban poor. The
state and its representatives in their guise as arbitrary
enforcers of a legal system both victimized the poor and rarely
recognized their rights as citizens, were perceived as a greater
catalyst of violence than even the disruptive presence or actions
of drug lords.
    Popular perceptions would suggest two important conclusions:
1) that the determinants of urban violence must be traced to the
way power and citizenship have been imagined and articulated over
the course of Medellin's history, and the way these articulations
have been mediated and instantiated in geographic, cultural,
political and economic terms; and 2) while the narcotics trade
did not introduce violence, the poor's participation in the
narcotics trade and the effects of their being targeted by the
state as the central locus of urban violence achieved
(unintentionally) what ironically neither traditional political
parties nor the radical left had been able to do: the
mobilization of poor urban neighborhoods into a vocal defense of
their interests against the power of the state.
    The latter was aided in some measure by the inability and
unwillingness of legal authorities to reach for new approaches to
the resolution of urban conflict, approaches that might have
taken into account a dramatically changed society and offered
truly democratic and participatory mechanisms of inclusion for
the poor. Instead, Medellin's leadership tended to revive old
discourses, slogans and policies of a distinctly paternalistic or
clientelist bent.
    But attempts to revive a paternalistic order -- in which
economic elites and state authorities offered to build low income
housing, establish more schools, invest money in neighborhood

projects, etc. while retaining the power to determine who among the poor were "worthy", what their needs were, and how money should be spent -- were repudiated by popular leaders who demanded including their communities as active agents rather than passive objects in the distribution of largesse.[9]

Interestingly, it has been the poor who have articulated modern definitions and proposals of "participation", "democracy" and "inclusion", forcing the authorities to move beyond wornout platitudes that emphasize moral obligation, hierarchy and philanthropy in the resolution of urban problems. The state's focussed use of repression against neighborhoods such as the *comunas nororientales* -- repression that has appeared to escalate in recent days even as the actual threat of the narcotics trade has waned -- may thus be read as the state's recognition and reaction to popular challenges to official authority and not just as a continuation of a historical pattern of selective violence against the historically least powerful sector of urban society.

In the following essay, my intent is to trace the longterm factors which contributed to the rise of violence in Medellin, to analyze the philosophy of government that characterized Antioqueno and Medellin policy makers in the years preceding the emergence of the narcotics trade, and to demonstrate how the latter contributed to the ease with which the narcotics trade and its organization found a welcome environment among the city's poorest sectors. Finally, I conclude by examining the ways in which participation in the narcotics trade transformed the distribution and exercise of power in Medellin and enabled the poor to rethink their position within society and to challenge traditional forms of authority, and I reflect on some of the contradictions at the heart of popularly instigated re-definitions of democratization in Medellin.

The Historical Background of Urban Development

The region of Antioquia of which Medellin is the capital is a place that since the 19th century has distinguished itself as one of Colombia's richest Departments. Mining, commerce and coffee production in the 19th century, and industry in the 20th contributed to the formation of considerable fortunes among a select group of capitalists. Placer mines worked by individuals rather than capital and labor intensive extraction of gold and the cultivation of coffee on small to medium sized plots of land, moreover, ensured a modest but significant distribution of wealth among a broad sector of the region's inhabitants.

In addition to a diversified economy Antioquia also developed several distinctive political and cultural features that distinguished it from other areas of Colombia and which came to form an integral part of an emergent regional identity: economic, political and social power tended to be concentrated in the hands of a broad network of extended families with diversified fortunes (coffee, mining, commerce, finance,

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[9] *Semana*, "El Costurero", October 12, 1994, p.65.

ranching); political differences notable in other parts of Colombia as a source of strife played a secondary role to bonds defined by mutual economic interests, kinship ties and regional residence; and social peace tended to be guaranteed through the complex exercise of a combination of access to economic opportunity and the assertion of paternalistic philanthropy.

By the early twentieth century when Antioquia also emerged as the premier center of industrial production in Colombia, the region boasted more private charities and joint public/private philanthropic or mutual aid societies than Colombia's capital, Bogota (a far more densely populated city), but far fewer labor unions or autonomous popular organizations. Despite a large working class population, Medellin experienced fewer strikes than other Colombian industrial cities and fewer outbreaks of violent social protest or unrest. Poor urban voters also tended to favor official party or elite candidates over openly populist or radical candidates.

Part of what may have contributed to the seemingly low level of popular urban mobilization in Medellin may have been the extraordinary level of cohesion among the region's elite, a level of cohesion that enabled them to shift with relative ease from the private sector to the public, and to integrate the interests of these two spheres in a way that continues to distinguish the exercise of authority in Antioquia from that in other regions of Colombia to this day.

Very early on Antioquia's elite identified "good government" with regional economic development and tended to shy away from the intrusion of partisan politics in the day to day management of municipal and regional administration.[10] In effect this meant that while the process by which decisions regarding investment and development were made was hardly democratic, Antioqueno legislators and authorities did spend considerably more than other regional leaders on education, public infrastructure, health and other public services. These expenditures expanded avenues of social mobility, contributed to the emergence of a middle class of professionals (especially engineers and doctors) and fomented a relatively widespread notion of an Antioqueño equivalent of the "American Dream". Like the latter, achievement of the regional dream was predicated upon conformity to a series of bourgeois values and a kind of apoliticism that discouraged open class conflict or recourse to radical movements of any kind.[11]

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[10] See for instance the admonitions offered by Senator Tulio Ospina to his regional counterparts in the Chapter on "Civic Duty" in his widely read, *Protocolo Hipanoamericano o El Libro del Buen Tono* (Medellin, 1920).

[11] For a more thorough discussion of this issue in the Antioqueño case, see Mary Roldan, *Genesis and Evolution of La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia (1900-1953)*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1992, especially Chapter 4; for a discussion of the same issue in the U.S. see Mark Ruppert,

By the decade of the 1950s however, the careful balance of elite hegemony and economic access that had made class mobilization an unappealing route for the expression of popular ambitions began to fall apart. Like other Colombian urban centers, Medellin received an influx of migrants and refugees escaping the effects of *La Violencia* in the mid through late 1950s that permanently transformed the character of urban life, particularly for the poor. The majority of *La Violencia*'s refugees arrived with little or no property at a time when a once flourishing industrial economy had exhausted its ability to absorb additional workers; fierce competition for a reduced number of employment possibilities coupled with turf wars over the occupation of established working class neighborhoods and shantytown invasions made for an increasingly violent and precarious existence for a majority of the city's poor.

A study by the National Planning Department (Departamento Nacional de Planeacion) commissioned in 1991 in response to a special Presidencial Program created to address Medellin's alarmingly high rates of violence found that by the 1960s "two cities" had developed and that Medellin as a whole was characterized by a high level of "social, spatial and economic inequality among residents".[12] Most of the rural migrants to Medellin in the 1950s had had to settle on hillsides that are geologically perilous because Medellin's location in a valley meant that there was little available land on which to expand. 80% of the housing settlements established twenty years earlier were still illegal in 1990; these amounted to 30% of all the city's housing (or 100,000 settlements).[13]

The distribution of income in Medellin also contrasted sharply with tendencies in other Colombian cities during the same decades: whereas in the rest of Colombia income inequality has tended to decrease since the 1960s, in Medellin income inequality had increased to such a degree that the distribution of wealth was worse in 1989 than it had been in 1967. Of Colombia's four major urban centers, Medellin exhibited the highest concentration of wealth.[14]

Producing Hegemony: The Politics of Mass Production and American Global Power. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially Chapters 6 and 7.

[12]Presidencia de la Republica, Direccion Programa Presidencial para Medellin y el Area Metropolitana, Departamento Nacional de Planeacion. *Medellin: Reencuentro con el futuro* (Santafe de Bogota, November 1991), p. 8.

[13]*Ibid.*, p.20.

[14]*Ibid.*, p.10. Medellin's Gini coefficient was .516 compared to an average of .467 among the other three major urban centers and a national average coefficient of .474.

The sense of a nearly unbridgeable gulf between the residents in the *comunas* and Medellin's wealthier inhabitants is spatially, morally and politically defined. The *comunas* cling precariously to the hillsides that ring the city while the principal administrative, commercial, political and cultural establishments are located down in the valley in the center of Medellin. The physical location of the poor and the better off, of the powerless and the seat of power helped shape a discursive construction of the city in pathological terms.

The sense of a bifurcated urban consciousness in which half the population (over a million people) see themselves and are seen by others as carriers of moral contagion and "outsiders" is reflected in Victor Gaviria's 1985 film *Rodrigo D -- No Futuro*.[15] In it the main protagonist, who lives on slopes a mere 15 minutes from downtown Medellin, refers to Medellin as a distant place fraught with danger where people like him meet hostility and repudiation. To "descend into the city" requires traversing psychic as well as physical space. Shortly before the protagonist is overcome by his sense of alienation and anomie and commits suicide, the sense that he is the bearer of moral contagion and disease is confirmed by the disgusted reaction of the elevator operator in the elegant building which he chooses to throw himself off of in the heart of Medellin's financial district.

More ominously, Antonio, the gang leader in Alonso Salazar's interview based study *Born to Die in Medellin*[16], envisions the center of Medellin as a cannibal, a living organism ready to consume the slum dwellers on the hillside above, "take a good look at the buildings in the centre," he warns, "You can see their long arms stretching out, trying to catch something. It's us they're trying to grab."[17]

While *comuna* dwellers perceive the city as a place of alienation and extinction where the centrally settled, better off inhabitants threaten to devour and extinguish them, the latter perceive the comuneros as the source and embodiment of violence in Medellin. *Comuna* dwellers are elided in their totality with *sicarios* (assassins), *milicianos* (militia members), and *pandilleros* (gang members) -- predators who threaten the integrity and boundaries of propriety and social place. Stallybrass and White note how the bourgeoisie in nineteenth century London imagined slums as filthy lungs, sewers and wounds that opened up to emit thieves and prostitutes, dangerous

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[15] The actors in the movie were all young comuna males, among them several ex-*sicarios* or youth assassins. By the time the movie had finished filming only the main protagonist was still alive in real life.

[16] Alonso, Salazar, *Born to Die in Medellin* (London: Verso, 1992).

[17]*Ibid.*, p.32.

elements that penetrated bourgeois suburbs and infected these.[18]
In a similar vein, Medellin's wealthier inhabitants invoke tropes
of invasion and contamination to describe their sense of being
besieged by a ring of slum dwellers who increasingly transgress
the ideological and physical space separating civilization from
barbarism.

If an ideology based on the notion of the poor as diseased
and disorderly shaped the distribution of power and the location
and use of the city's spaces, the evolution in the use of public
space also reflects political, economic and cultural changes
affecting not only Medellin but Antioquia, Colombia, and the
world in the last forty years. While the dissonances of urban
life in Medellin may not simply be attributed to a generalized
metropolitan crisis experienced throughout Latin America (and
parts of the third world too) as a result of debt, economic
restructuring and declining public investment in the 1980s, the
decline of manufacturing in what was once Colombia's premier
industrial center, rising unemployment and the explosion of the
city's informal sector are certainly linked to recent global
trends in downsizing and de-industrialization.

When Medellin's industrial base went into economic crisis in
the decade of the 1970s, the city's already high unemployment
rate soared, and the number of unemployed or "inactive" male
youths between the ages of 12 and 29 rose to become the highest
in the nation: the 1991 Department of National Planning study
estimated that in 1990 17.6% or 64,000 male youths neither
worked, nor studied, nor looked for employment in Medellin,
whereas the average among Colombia's four major urban centers for
the same age group was 12.2%.[19]

But the problem of violence in Medellin is not simply a
matter of material wealth or its absence. Medellin's shantytowns
are unlike those in many other areas of Latin America; the
streets are paved; the homes, except for those built by the most
recent and poorest migrants at the apex of the valley's
geologically perilous slopes, are permanent constructions of
brick and cement. A sewage system and electricity reach most of
the city's inhabitants. The percentage of unsatisfied basic

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[18]Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics
of Transgression* (Cornell University, 1985), p.133.

[19]*Medellin: Reencuentro con el futuro*, p.15. The
possibilities for future employment were also bleaker in Medellin
than in other urban areas: whereas other Colombian metropolitan
areas typically experienced a rate of employment growth of 2.5% per
year, Medellin boasted a mere 1.5% growth in employment, and while
total unemployment figures in other metropolitan areas fell from an
average of 10.6% to 9,9%, the average number of unemployed
increased in Medellin from 12.4% to 14%. It bears mentioning that
these statistics reflect "official" unemployment figures;
unofficial sources typically estimated the "real" level of
unemployment in Medellin at closer to 30% during the same period.

needs among Medellin's population, for instance, is considerably lower than the national urban average (23.6% vs 32.3%).[20] As is true in other parts of Colombia, the cost of public services is indexed to income and is subsidized for those in the lowest two strata.[21] (The difference is that in Medellin public services actually work and have a broad distribution).

Aside from the serious problem of declining employment opportunities then, what troubled *comuna* dwellers was not so much the absence of basic services but the fact that even when the city provided needed services, it did not take into account the wishes or needs of the urban poor; public works projects might raze precarious dwellings, while curfews and states of siege were used to justify unwarranted searches and arrests. The tendency to impose from above rather than consult and negotiate ensured that sullen hostility and mutual distrust increasingly characterized the relations between the city's authorities and *comuna* inhabitants. Policemen, public works officials, the army, and politicians seeking election were the only contact between *comuna* inhabitants and the formal mechanisms of power based in Medellin.

The poor's alienation from state and official institutions is neatly summarized in a poll conducted in 1991 among the city's *comuna* residents by the mayor's office in Medellin: it found that 84% of the respondents distrusted the police, 69.5% extended that sense of mistrust to the Army, and 89.5% distrusted political parties.[22] The only institution that enjoyed any credibility among the poor was the Catholic Church. *Comuna* dwellers also revealed an atomized and parochial sense of identity; community was defined as the neighborhood whereas "the rest of the city did not count."[23]

The Advent of the Narcotics Trade and Its Impact on Medellin's Poor

As long as Medellin was relatively prosperous, exclusion from direct participation in the city's decision-making was balanced with the promise of a better material life. Access to jobs, housing, education and public health facilities overshadowed the exclusionary basis of urban political control and the natural limitations of the paternalistic ethos what underwrote Medellin's urban development. But by the late 1960s and 1970s, before the advent of the narcotics trade, the poor

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[20]*Ibid.*, p.10.

[21]Income is estimated in relation to physical residence and divided into 6 strata: the first two represent the poorest sectors, the third the "lower middle class", the fourth the "middle class", the fifth the "upper middle class" and the sixth the "upper" class.

[22]*El Espectador*, February 13, 1994.

[23]Ibid.

neighborhoods of Medellin were increasingly the sites of emergent gangs, petty thieves and turf wars between older working class residents and newly arrived, unemployed and dislocated survivors of *La Violencia*. When Pablo Escobar and other drug leaders such as the Ochoa brothers began to recruit troops for the narcotics trade they found a ready pool of unemployed and alienated youths in the *comunas*.

More importantly, however, the internal structure and culture characteristic of the narcotics trade generated precisely that which bourgeois politicians had once promised the *comuna* dwellers and never completely fulfilled: access to economic opportunity and social services in exchange for loyalty and obedience to the "traditional values" that underwrote bourgeois hegemony in Medellin.

This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but the cartel faithfully reproduced a hierarchical organization of authority, a glorification of "hard work", loyalty, and capitalism, even a near fanatical devotion to religion and the cult of Mary and the Saints that was completely in keeping with the prevailing regional ethos. In this sense, Medellin's schools of assassins or groups of young men organized to do the dirty work of the cartel like the *Priscos*, *Kan Kill*, etc., shared a common link to gangs in Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, California, and even coca producer unions in Bolivia; all of these associations provided the structure, discipline, solidarity and authority missing in "legitimate" society.[24]

Thus while not creating the bases of violence, the emergence and growth of the drug economy did effect a number of important changes in Medellin: first, it made possible the satisfaction of a regional ethos of economic success that had been closed off to the members of the *comuna* by structural impediments in Medellin's licit economy. Second, although it occured at the margins of legitimate society, the drug economy also redefined and altered prevailing codes of taste, consumption and behavior in Medellin, not only among comuneros, but other sectors of society as well.

The "Miamization" of Medellin's architecture, the proliferation of luxury items such as utility vehicles, foreign imports, nightclubs, discotecs, and shopping malls, and the introduction of garish clothing, jewelry "in excess", and the accouterments of lower middle class U.S. urban chic radically transformed the culture of a city where conspicuous consumption, frivolity, and ostentation of any kind had historically been eschewed and excoriated. A blurring of formal distinctions between social sectors increasingly occured.

Finally, once the drug trade in Medellin assumed a political character under the tutelage of Pablo Escobar, and it became

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[24]For a revealing discussion of the importance of order, discipline and hierarchical authority among gang members, see the interviews conducted with members of the Bloods and the Crips in Leon Bing, *Do or Die: The Bloods and the Crips Speak for Themselves* (New York, 1989).

imperative to train and deploy armed youths into the heart of
what had once been areas off limits to the poor, the last of the
cultural barriers between sectors of the city disappeared. The
areas of the city that had once seemed distant, unobtainable,
forbidden, became familiar in the day to day labor of death.

By achieving economic success while reproducing the elements
of bourgeois order outside the boundaries of legality, the drug
trade also sparked a rethinking of the way society and power
within it was distributed. The aura of privilege, the sense that
political and economic entitlement was limited to a privileged
few, was breached. The presence of the drug trade and the
increased availability of arms and cash enabled the inhabitants
of the *comuna* to assert a presence and sometimes dominate parts
of the city from which they had previously been excluded.

Popular Responses to the Escalation of Violence: The Assertion of Community Organizations and Objectives

The imprisonment of Pablo Escobar in 1991 and the ensuing
internal disarray of Medellin's narcotics organization generated
a wave of unemployment in the city's poorer neighborhoods.
Former bodyguards, messengers, assassins, and operatives
increasingly turned to kidnapping, assault and robbery as
substitutes for lost earnings. Even those engaged in licit
activities in poor neighborhoods suffered as the ready supply of
cash that kept alive the local economy increasingly dried up.
Armed organizations proliferated within the *comunas* as the
unemployed forces of the narcotics trade emerged in reorganized
fashion and as other armed groups whose purpose was to eliminate
criminals, dealers and those perceived to speculate in goods or
abuse locals arose within the neighborhoods most affected by
violence.

Although *comuna* inhabitants were hardly -- as the elite
believed -- the exclusive source of urban violence, they were
certainly its primary victims: every weekend between 20 and 40
young men were found dead in the city's poorest neighborhoods,
the victims of either death squads (sometimes made up of rogue
cops), turf wars between competing criminal bands or simply the
innocent victims of an exchange of cross fire.

In response, young people within the *comunas* -- some of whom
had at one time or another been influenced by urban cells of
Marxist guerrilla groups such as the FARC or EPL[25], others by
Christian radicalism, and still others with no ideological
formation -- organized armed neighborhood groups to engage in
"clean up" campaigns to rid their neighborhoods of drug dealers,

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[25]Typically guerrilla groups had long since abandoned the
urban areas in which individuals who had once been exposed to their
teachings adapted these to the current situation of community
disorder in the 1990s. In other words, groups adopting the
ideological precepts of radical organizations were not operating
under the direct leadership of these.

prostitutes, homosexuals, molesters, rapists and thieves. In lieu of the state, comuneros created their own forms of private justice and accountability. Young men such as "El Loco Uribe", a militia leader in Villa del Socorro in Medellin, began to mediate complaints of speculation, robbery and bullying, gradually coming to have more legitimacy than "the legally established"[26] authorities.

At first, the militias enjoyed widespread support because they were perceived to eliminate only those who constituted "a threat to the community."[27] The power to regulate people's personal and social lives, however, soon became too great; militia members interceded in the domestic sphere to ensure that parents were caring properly for their children, and they held "people's courts" in which any individual found guilty of "speculating, cheating or double dealing"[28] was condemned to death. The contrast between the swift justice meted out by the militias and the glacial, frequently inequitable process of the legally constituted justice system was stark, but so too was the increasingly autonomous and arbitrary power of local "self-defense" units.

By 1993, many militias had begun to "exceed" their locally imposed mandate, and like those involved in the narcotics trade before them, began to prey upon their own neighbors. "The situation began to slip out of our hands ... [as] self enrichment through kidnapping, assaults, extorsion and threats"[29] replaced an earlier sense of community protection and loyalty. Dissatisfaction both within the militias and among the neighborhoods supporting these gradually generated among certain groups a desire to negotiate new formulations of local power and access to services between the state and the *comunas*.

For decades, inhabitants of the *comunas* had been forced by the inactivity of the state, but also by their own distrust of the state's objectives, to envision and generate solutions to their day to day problems that deviated from the accepted forms of authority and power inscribed in the city's official culture.
 In the course of doing so, the *comunas* experimented with and articulated a different vision of democratic and community participation, a different vision of legitimacy and authority, a participatory rather than merely representative form of political identity, that has fundamentally altered the definition of "citizenship" in Medellin.

Militia demands for putting down arms have included the creation of locally manned police forces; the demand that the

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[26]*El Espectador*, "Dialogos en un pais loco de violencias," February 13, 1994.

[27]*Ibid.*

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]*Ibid.*

appointment of appropriate interlocutors and local authorities obey *comuna* rather than officially determined notions of "legitimacy"; increased social investment with community participation in the determination of that investment; and the development of permanent mechanisms of integration and non-violent forms of negotiation and representation.[30]

At first, representatives of the central State and Medellin's local officials were reluctant to accept the demands of the comuneros. The Assistant to the Consejeria de la Paz, Ana Lucia Sanchez, remembers how at first representatives sent from Bogota to negotiate with comuna dwellers refused to accept as legitimate the spokespeople named by *comuna* residents to represent their interests because the latter were ex-gang members, former killers and in the eyes of Bogota's officials "common delinquents."[31] But faced with empty neighborhood halls and no interlocutors to receive the ministers and advocates sent from the capital to impose order, the state gradually gave way and found itself forced to deal with individuals who had until recently not only been the enemies of the state, but who insisted on an unheard of degree of participation in the negotiating process.

The demands of the comuneros and the response of particular government representatives point to the significance played by political exclusion and marginalization in the emergence and development of violence in Medellin over the last thirty years. After signing a series of non-aggression pacts in which locals determined the appointment of "veedores" who would oversee the peace process, Medellin's government acknowledged that "the State must make its presence in the community felt to satisfy a debt with the community which it had abandoned during many years."[32] It was time, Antioquia's ex-Attorney General insisted, for the state to treat the comuneros as equals, not as victims: "[the state] should not act with pity towards them, but rather by giving them responsibilities and opportunities that they may be people [que sean gente]."[33]

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[30]It is interesting to compare the demands made by Medellin's comuna members with those articulated by members of the Bloods and the Crips in Los Angeles in the immediate aftermath of the Los Angeles riots: their demands were nearly identical (community policing; the creation of neighborhood associations with decision-making authority and say over urban projects; greater investment in small businesses, etc.) See, "Beat the Devil" in *The Nation*, May 1991.

[31]Interviews with Ana Lucia Sanchez, Medellin, 1992 and 1994.

[32]*El Espectador*, "Paz con las Milicias esta Madura," February 13, 1994.

[33]*Ibid*.

The recognition that paternalism inhibits the emergence of an identity as "people" represented an important step in the direction of acknowledging the long term limitations of a style of government and social organization in which a few made decisions for the many and in which the latter were permanently relegated to the status of minors, wards or children. However, the implication that the comuneros were not yet people struck a discordant note in the efforts of Medellin's authorities to come to terms with popular demands for political recognition and social integration. Despite significant success in forcing the state and local authorities to accept local interlocutors as valid and legitimate representatives of community interests, and forcing the state as well to support financially and accept locally run community centers such as the *Casas Juveniles El Parche*, the ambivalence of the state's attitude toward the comuneros implicit in the ex-Attorney General's comment has recently represented a retreat on the part of regional powers in their relation to comuna leaders.

In the last year, *Convivirs* -- para-statal rural security forces financed and run by members of the private sector with the support and legal sanction of the state -- have proliferated throughout Antioquia and given birth to 14 urban cells operating in Medellin.[34] In January and February of this year (1997) a series of bombings in downtown Medellin and assassinations of community youth leaders such as Giovanni Osorio Acevedo from the *comuna* Villa del Socorro[35] have seemed to indicate that the state has once more opted for a repressive response to popular mobilizations within Medellin, and that the slim victories achieved by *comuna* inhabitants after a decade or more of violence are in peril.

It remains ironic that after decades of prolonged, recurrent violence, it was the *comuna* inhabitants who generated and embraced democratic forms of participation and new ways of envisioning the distribution and exercise of power in Medellin, and the city's "forefathers" who were unable to make the transition to the political and social realities of the late twentieth century. So long as they do not, violence will continue to be a strategy with which the urban disenfranchised attempt to bring attention to their needs and force their presence upon Medellin's society.

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[34]*El Tiempo*, November 17, 1996, p.6A and January 30, 1997. For a more complete look at the advance of the Convivir organizations, see *El Espectador*, October 27, 1996 and November 3, 1996; and *Alternativa*, "Mano dura o tenaza militar?", #5, November 15 - December 15, 1996, pp. 11-14.

[35]*El Tiempo*, January 1, 1997.