

Colombia's Summer of the Patriarch with Manuel Rozental, Former Deputy Minister of Health, and Witness Radio Executive Producer, Camilo Perez-Bustillo

"They are destroying the planet by transforming us and Mother Earth into merchandise. And that's why there is war in Colombia." -Manuel Rozental

Sarah Towle: Colombia has been the site of low-intensity conflict for over half a century with guerrilla groups and successive governments fighting over control of the country's lucrative cocaine market, and as paramilitary forces, trained and armed at the behest of international oil, mining, energy, and agricultural concerns, have routinely flouted the terms of the government's fragile 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia without any accountability.

Indeed, violence and repression have been a national plague in Colombia dating as far back as the tale told by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his famous epic: Autumn of the Patriarch.

But a post-pandemic tax hike aimed at the middle class and poor couldn't keep Colombians out of the streets this summer when a peaceful protest, resembling a street party, erupted nationwide, with the southwest city of Cali, population 2.2 million, at the epicenter.

Home to the largest Afro-descendant population in Colombia and the second largest in Latin America, Cali has also seen, in the past decade, an influx of internally displaced people, largely of indigenous origins, who've been driven off their land. Here, where racism and brutal police repression have long taken a toll, what started as a protest against the tax reform turned into a vocal critique of President Ivan Duque's mismanagement of the country during the pandemic, which has exacerbated unemployment, resulting in widespread hunger. His wish to raise prices on household products like milk, eggs and meat as well as gasoline and utilities, which citizens,

unions, and more moderate politicians, alike, concur would most hurt the most vulnerable, typified how removed Duque is from the people he is meant to govern.

The few news reports that managed to trickle up to us in the north suggested the protesters were violent vandals that deserved retribution and painted Duque as the victim.

But social media messages provide a very different picture altogether, showing us proof of brutality by armed security forces, particularly the Colombian Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD), that left many dead, mostly youth of Afro-Colombian descent.

The United Nations, European Union, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have all decried the excessive use of force by police on unarmed civilians demanding their basic human right to survival.

In this episode of Witness Radio, Executive Producer Camilo Perez-Bustillo talks with Manuel Rozental, Colombian physician and activist with more than 40 years of involvement in grassroots political organizing with youth, Indigenous communities, and urban and rural social movements, to discuss the protests and their link to climate change, environmental justice, and the defense of mother earth.

Camilo Perez-Bustillo: It's a pleasure to welcome you to Climate Justice, Environmental Justice and the Defense of Mother Earth, represented extraordinarily by Manuel Rozental, from Columbia as a case study of the struggle for global justice, and impact on forced displacement and forced migration.

With Manuel's help, we can learn from the grassroots movements on the ground, on the front line, primera ligna, from Colombia's movements in communities of African descent, Afro Colombian communities, and in Colombia's indigenous communities.

Manuel has dedicated his life to work accompanying those communities in their struggle for justice through the organization that he founded, Pueblos en Camino, People on the Road, on the Path.

Colombia has long been on the list of the five countries in the world with the largest number of people forcibly displaced, related both to the armed conflict and to all of the internal forms of structural injustice. And they continue to affect the most disempowered sectors. In the case of Colombia, this is Afro Colombian communities and indigenous communities.

Remembering an extraordinary rapper activist named Junior Jane who was gunned down in Cali as part of the ongoing war against human rights defenders and defenders of Mother Earth. I'd like to introduce Manuel Rosental, nuestro hermano from Pueblos en Camino in Colombia.

Thank you, Manuel. We're so honored to have you. Manuel, mi hermano, if you can give us a sense of how things are in Colombia. I know it's a very difficult situation.

Manuel Rozental: Thank you. Thank you. Camilo. It's very hard to listen to the song. The song is about a massacre, as you were saying in Giano Grandi. It's a neighborhood of Caligari that is surrounded by sugarcane plantations. It's a monoculture of sugar cane, and occupies the most fertile land on the planet. It is the Coca Valley, is the most fertile land in the world, and it is completely covered by the green desert of sugar cane plantations.

Well, these kids just went out there in August, and August is the month to fly kites. Every August, rich, poor, it didn't matter who we went out to raise kites. So with these kids in Giano Grande where children of impoverished Afro Colombian families, at least 60 percent Afro Colombian population, but that 60 percent is actually treated as a minority.

So these kids went to fly kites and they were butchered to pieces. Eventually a witness spoke in the midst of fear and said clearly the police was involved, that there were

policemen with machetes covered with blood after these kids were killed. So it was one of many massacres that have been happening in Colombia under this government.

It's at least seven and a half million internally displaced in Colombia now.

Camilo: I want us to look at how issues of forced migration connect to issues of forced displacement. Forced displacement is what goes on within a country's borders, forced migration is crossing borders. And often it's the same causes, the same people involved. So it begins first with a process of internal displacement that becomes a process of forced migration.

Manuel: Hektor Mondragón, a Colombian economist and writer, a good friend and activist, in exile. He actually made the statement this is a summary of this whole situation. He said that there is no displacement in Colombia because of a war. There is a war so that there can be displacement.

So the history of Colombia is a history of permanent terror against the population to create land, that's how Laureano Gomez, a former president of Colombia, who was a lover of fascism and an admirer of the Nazis, openly, he promised in 1940 as a president of Colombia, he says, I will make this republic unlivable. So that gives you a sense.

Mandela said, when a country has to resort to violence to maintain its power, it's deemed to destruction and to failure Colombia has always resorted to violence that's its essential resource.

So that's what I would like to begin to express the situation.

Everything in Colombia is violence. The elites are violence. And the structure of the society is a violent structure from above. But it is always blamed on the poor, on the impoverished, and on the victims of violence.

So it's this double armed sword against us. On the one hand, they use violence against the people constantly to impoverish people, to displace people, to murder people. And

then whenever people react in any way, people are blamed as being the violent ones and then it justifies violence.

So what happened recently was on the 28th of April, a massive strike began and the pretext for the strike was a tax reform. Actually, after the year of the pandemic the proportion of Colombians who are in absolute poverty rose to an unbelievable level. It rose by almost 30 percent in one year of the pandemic. And it was already a terrible situation.

I don't want to go into statistics, but I do want to provide you with one idea: the number of single mothers are growing in Colombia, 60 to 70 percent of them can only provide one meal a day to their families. So this is the context.

Now in November of 2019, the Colombian government did another tax reform and this tax reform exempted transnational corporations, particularly US corporations, extractivist corporations, oil, mining, et cetera, and the wealthiest Colombians. So it led to a situation, it was predictable that the foreign debt would grow so that the pressure came from international financial institutions to carry out a tax reform in order to cover its obligations.

Those who developed this debt and who benefit from this debt, under these circumstances of terrible impoverishment within a year of the pandemic worsening from before, then tax those suffering from these conditions and to make us pay for everything: gasoline, funerals, 20 percent taxes on everything. And that was the pretext for an explosion.

And I'll give you an idea of magnitude. Colombia has about forty five million in terms of total population. For the 28th of April, the day of the uprising, fifteen million people were out in the streets, and eight hundred of the one thousand one hundred and twenty municipalities were out.

The government of Colombia began immediately massive repression and a manipulation of information and media to portray themselves as victims of this uprising.

You can't take a bus. There's blockades that don't allow food and gasoline to reach, etc. This was all a manipulation. Colombia's corporate media, the mainstream media, is not a manipulator of information. No, it is an accomplice to genocide.

The front lines showed the wealthiest, the ones that impoverished the country, the corporations that were exempted from taxes, and the government, as the victims. And then if there was one policeman wounded or killed or one hundred people that were murdered, that one policeman was the one shown in the news.

But the tax reform was removed by the government and the minister of finance was also removed. And then other reforms that were coming were also removed, like a health reform. Yet we haven't stopped. We're still in the streets. Why? And the answer is, we are fed up with this regime and we have nothing to lose.

Millions of mostly youth, men and women, mostly Afro Colombian, but not only and indigenous, we call them the "*desechables*", "disposable". That's the name that is used for them.

So these people love soccer. That's the only joy they have. So they join teams and they become the groups that accompany the big soccer teams in the country. They're millions. And those millions came out during this strike and they were in the front line. And for the first time, they are respected by every one of us. We acknowledge them. We feel for them, and we see them chanting to the government and the politicians, you do not represent us. No nos representa, and they chant as well with all of us. The bullets that you shot against us will go back to you.

Now, I want to put this briefly into perspective. Colombia produces 92 percent of global cocaine. Sixty percent or less of it now goes to the US where a pound of cocaine was sold last year for twenty thousand dollars. More than 40 percent goes to Europe, the Middle East and Australia. In Europe, it's sold for forty five thousand dollars a pound, in the Middle East it sold for ninety thousand dollars a pound. And in Australia, for two hundred thousand dollars a pound. In other words, most of the money from cocaine flows into Colombia. It's a huge market. It's an enormous amount of money. And the

problem is not the coca producers in the fields. The problem is not the cartels in the fields. The problem is this is global capitalism.

This is a massive amount of money that cannot be hidden, that flows up north through Colombia, and that within Colombia has established a new elite above and beyond the previous racist elite. Now we have a new elite that has articulated itself with transnational extractive corporations and financial institutions.

Colombia's strongman is Alvaro Uribe. And the US has known he's a drug trafficker. He's created paramilitary forces. He's involved in all kinds of corruption and massacres. He is the power behind the government and has been for the last two decades at least.

As soon as the uprising started, Uribe saw the opportunity to kill most of the people and it was free game for the police and the army to just go out and shoot. So the government's reaction to a legitimate strike from despair against an illegitimate government was to shoot.

The police was captured in images everywhere in the country murdering people. The reaction was to portray themselves as victims and defenders of a legitimate regime.

On the other hand, what we saw in the streets, what we see in the streets is a party. I don't know if anyone has read one of Garcia Marquez books, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. That book is a summary of what Colombia is. But in the end, the patriarch dies and the time of eternity ends. And so people finally can enjoy the party that they have enjoyed regardless of the patriarch being in power without realizing that he's gone.

I bring that image forward, because if you were with us in Colombia, that's what you see every day, 20, 30 new songs came out. The walls of this country are painted in colors expressing our feelings, our fears, our hopes, our commitment to freedom. This has been a party, a massive party.

Where it hasn't been a party is when the dogs are unleashed, the Colombian armed forces and police, together with paramilitary forces, killing.

So just a couple of thoughts more to provide the image. There isn't a health care system in Colombia. I was deputy minister of health when this system was created. And I know the principle was to transfer savings of Colombian population and public funds into private financial institutions for profit and investment. And so these institutions deny the provision of health care because that would mean spending the funds they have, injustice in every component. The third most unequal country in the world.

During the repression of this strike, The Colombian government sent Marta Lucia Ramirez, the vice president of Colombia, as the foreign affairs minister to the US to visit President Biden. She didn't see him, but she saw the secretary of state and the US secretary of state provided financial support, further financial support to the Colombian murderous police.

So I will just use the phrase that Obama used in your 2008 crisis, too big to fall. That's exactly what Colombia's genocidal fascist regime is for the US. Its interests and its profit is such that it's too big to fall and it's on our expense.

Camilo: Thank you so much. I wanted to ask you, your work with the indigenous movements in Colombia through Pueblos en Camino. Climate, justice and defense of Mother Earth, what does that mean?-

Manuel: That's the essence of the confrontation between the indigenous communities and this regime, and the essence of the struggle is to not allow militarization, to go back to the territories and become weavers of territories and between territories. And we know we have no future without this. So that is the essence of this whole struggle.

Now, the indigenous peoples during this struggle, again, the indigenous guard that isn't paid, these kids that were putting their bodies against the policemen and so on. Asked them in Cali: Why don't you feel fear? And they said, because we love Mother Earth and it has to be free. We will only be free when Mother Earth is free. When you realize that, you lose your fear as well.

Camilo: Thank you. Manuel, but also the broader question, which is about your vision of collective autonomous communities and your critique of the nation state, if you can just share those connections.

Manuel: Two images of specific situations that speak for themselves.

Minga is a collective action. It's an ancestral practice of indigenous peoples in the Andes. When a Minga is called, it takes precedence over anything else, everything else. So it's just a collective coming together and achieving something jointly, including weaving the community again together, it always ends up with a big meal and a party.

Mingas have become, for the last 20 years, collective actions to actually address political, social, economic issues, climate issues, etc. We traveled in the early 2000s throughout the indigenous communities of Cauca, the heart of the resistance in Colombia, ancestral territory. People wanted to learn about neoliberalism because they recognized the fact that the big landowners were not the problem anymore. They couldn't see where the problem was. So neoliberalism had to be explained.

This gave rise to these Mingas as national mobilizations with an agenda, constructed at five points.

First, the economic model leads to the catastrophe.

War and violation of human rights are a mechanism to the benefit of this model. They are not isolated.

Three, the legislation has one purpose is to dispossess us. So we have to begin to legislate from below because they will always from above legislate to dispossess.

The entire structure, the entire regime failed. So we need to weave another one, a different one based on the knowledge and experience of the grandmothers, and we were trying to draw this agenda when an elder that lives in Toribio -- Toribio's at twenty five hundred meters of altitude. And he said mango trees should not flower in Toribio and they are flowering. So Mother Earth is telling us something.

That's the death project. That's what dominates the world. Mother Earth and life is a means to an end and the end is the accumulation of wealth. They are destroying the planet by transforming us and Mother Earth into merchandise. And that's why there is war in Colombia.

So under this understanding, this principle, we realized our approach is absolutely opposite to that. Life is an end, not a means, and the economy has to be subservient to life. Otherwise there's no future.

We have life plans. They have development. That's why development cannot be mentioned in indigenous communities.

There are these woven bags that indigenous women make and these represent the women's womb. And that's why you never put them on the floor. You always carry them with you.

The other image I wanted to give you was flying rivers from the Amazon -- evapotranspiration of trees -- that actually causes the flow of water that is much larger than the Amazon River and the rivers in the Amazon. Every day that water goes up to the air. And then at night, when there's no evapotranspiration, the air flows around and pumps this water to the entire South American continent.

Now, what's happening today in the Amazon, during the war, delivered these territories to transnational oil corporations, and this was before the peace agreement was signed. These territories are being delivered to transnational corporations and that forces cutting off the bush in the Colombian, Brazilian, Bolivian, Peruvian, Ecuadorian Amazon. So it's being actively destroyed.

Camilo: I don't know if we could talk about the gender dimension.

Manuel: We actually have a good discussion on gender here that we're beginning to understand and recognize more and more, is patriarchy. Patriarchy is at least five thousand years old. It's our mentality. We have it. We live it. It's in us. It's the need to dominate, first and foremost, Mother Earth.

Mother Earth and all the women have been subdued to this patriarchal mentality for five thousand years. Five hundred and thirty years ago, capitalism, which is a son of patriarchy, oppression, and then finally, two hundred years ago, nation states, what do they mean? Nothing at all. They don't represent territories, ecosystems, cultures, nothing. They rely for the purpose of extractivism and exploitation.

So actually, autonomies and weaving autonomies, territorial autonomies is returning to Mother Earth.

We will kill this planet. That death project. Economic end and life as a means will kill this planet is killing this planet today. And the only realistic approach is for us to weave ourselves to territories. Urban-Rural and that means autonomies. So autonomy is not an option. It's a necessity and obligation now.

If we want to feed ourselves, we have to feed the land. The agribusiness kills the land and doesn't feed us. So in every regard, autonomies are the only way.

Clearly, if we continue under nation states, we have no future and we should begin to stop lying to our children when we're killing this planet. It's either autonomy or it's death. And that's what there is, I think.

Camilo: Thank you so much, Manuel, if you want to say anything, just last word to close.

Manuel: Children of Mother Earth. That is the only power there is. We have to acknowledge and recognize this. So I think the connection is right there, like these borders and these migrations and this disaster. I mean, if you pollute the world, the air here, it's everywhere. And so this is what they're forcing us to recognize. The fact that we are children of Mother Earth and that she has to be free so that we can be free. And the liberation of Mother Earth is our liberation and our only future.

We have all been detached from the earth. How many citizens of the US have an attachment to land? In fact, the nation states are a mechanism through which we are dispossessed of our relationship to Mother Earth.

In saying this, what I'm saying is, thank you, because we know we're thinking about this together. To get rid of the establishment that is destroying the entire planet. Because right now, what we'll face is a massive massacre. Thank you all.

Camilo: Perfect Manuel, thank you so much.

Sarah: Thanks and gratitude to Manuel Rozental and Camilo Perez-Bustillo, for sharing this case study of Colombia today, where the perfect storm of factors, including repression, lack of opportunity, corruption, and forced displacement have pushed people into the streets -- despite rampant police brutality and and culture of fear -- simply because they have nothing to lose.

We join them in solidarity in their fight for broad social, economic and political reforms.

HUGE thanks as well to our Patreon patrons without whom we could not produce this show, and to you, our listeners, for joining us to consider the greatest crisis of our time: climate injustice, which is contributing to forced migration the world over and which has yet to be recognized and responded to with humanity by the world's most powerful.

I'm Sarah Towle, Host & Director of Witness Radio, where we aim to discuss all the issues plaguing the US immigration system today. This is why we witness.

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