Construction and contestation of Criminal Identities: The case of the Cocaleros in the Putumayo and Baja Bota of Cauca

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Abstract

Peasants who settled in the Colombian Amazon region as a result of different waves of migration and who today grow coca, have been stigmatized as criminals with no regional identity. The central state does not accord them a place within national society except as guerrilla auxiliaries or narcotraffickers and as such, they can be object of state violence. I argue that collective identities in the Amazon region are shaped by the sense of exclusion and abandonment from the central state, and that politicized identities emerge as a protest against exclusion and misrecognition.

In 1996, the United States decertified the Colombian government from receiving further U.S. aid because their counter-narcotic efforts did not meet American parameters. As a response, the Colombian government increased the aerial spraying of coca plantations in the Amazon region, as well as the control of the sale of gray cement and gasoline, used for processing coca into coca paste. This increased enforcement of laws against illicit drug cultivation and processing sparked an uprising among coca growers and harvesters (cocaleros) in the departments of Putumayo, Caquetá, Guaviare, and the Baja Bota region of the Cauca department in the Colombian Amazon. During the months of July, August, and September of 1996, more than 200,000 peasants, including women, children and indigenous people, marched from their farms to the nearest towns and departmental capitals to protest this increased threat to their principal source of income. The cocalero

1This paper forms a part of my Doctoral dissertation in the Anthropology Department at Harvard University. The fieldwork was carried out in Putumayo and the Baja Bota of Cauca as part of a project that I directed for the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, funded by Colciencias, that also covered Guaviare and Caquetá. My
campesinos\textsuperscript{2}, who have been stigmatized as guerrilla auxiliaries and criminals, made themselves visible to the state as political actors in the midst of drug-related violence.

In this paper I argue that the “politics of recognition” (Taylor 1995) was fundamental to the movement, which means that the cocalero colonos in Putumayo and in western Amazonia were questioning their stigmatization\textsuperscript{3} as people on the margin of the law, migrants in search of easy money (not seeking to improve their standard of living, as they themselves describe their motivation), without identity, without roots in Amazonia, and always looking out for their own interests alone, based on a desire to return to their places of origin.

At the Colombian center, the perception of the Amazon borderlands, of the periphery, is mediated by these identifying markers, as is evidenced by the repressive measures taken in response to the civic mobilizations. Although the demonstrations have not been violent, they have repeatedly been characterized as “guerrilla instigated” since the 1980s. This has effectively denied the region’s inhabitants their agency, subsuming their demands, their

\textsuperscript{2}The term \textit{cocalero campesinos} refers to the identity of small peasants who cultivate up to three hectares of coca and have been fighting to be differentiated as a social group. Cocalero colonos is also used to define this group. Colonos is the name given to the white settlers and the local-born-non-indigenous population who has moved to the Amazon as a result of different waves of migration since the beginning of the XXth century. Colonos migrated to the Amazon region in response to the social, political and economic upheavals in Colombia’s heartland. Residents of th Putumayo and Baja Bota of Cauca make it clear that they are colonists and they have constructed an identity as people who have arrived from elsewhere, without this meaning they do not have roots in Amazonia, as they have been represented by the central government. These slightly different terms in themselves, illustrate the ambiguous identity of the social group, an identity in construction.

\textsuperscript{3}Goffman (1963:3) defines the term “stigma” as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” with the qualification that it acquires such meaning in a given situation in relation with other people: “An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself… A language of relationships, not attributes is needed.”
needs, and their construction of a collective local identity into the dynamic of the armed conflict and more recently into the local implementation of the international war on drugs and/or on the insurgency.

I begin an examination of the construction of collective identity during the 1996 cocalero movement with two fundamental assumptions: In the first place, we see evidence to support Melucci’s comments (1988:242) on collective action as a social product, a set of social relations, and a process that is constructed and negotiated.

I will show that the collective identity constructed throughout the cocalero movement was negotiated among the participants and contested the identity ascribed to them from the perspective of the legal authorities as people outside the law and considered “bad” citizens, or as a group to whom citizenship is denied. The collective identity that they demanded was closely linked to the construction of a Putumayan citizenship.

Secondly, I will take into account the position of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) that collective identity is constructed in relation to other ascribed meanings. The identity ascribed to the group by the larger society plays an important role in the construction of a collective identity as colonos or cocalero campesinos, together with the identities ascribed to them by other social groups in the region who may or may not participate in the growing, the harvest, processing, or marketing of coca. It is worth reiterating Roseberry’s point (1994:36) that subordinate populations use forms, images, symbols, or hegemonic organizations to confront, understand, accustom themselves to or resist their domination.
A collective identity is not given, it is constructed. It is frequently molded by the very process of domination. Individuals may choose to identify or not identify as a member of a particular category, either to contribute to its meaning or to produce new meanings for it. It will be demonstrated that the articulation of meanings also pertains to spatial categories, for example in the meanings ascribed to the *veredas* and the municipal seats within the recognized and differentiated regions of the department (i.e. Upper and Lower Putumayo).

**The construction and ascription of a criminal collective identity**

In July of 1996, *campesinos* of Guaviare, Putumayo and Caquetá began to mobilize against the declaration of a special law enforcement zone\(^4\), against the consequent army abuses, and against the widespread fumigation that was being carried out in the department. The idea that the guerrillas were behind the strike was again put forward by the Armed Forces and the central government, as it had been in previous civic strikes. This permitted and legitimated the use of force to repress the movement.

\(^4\) Decree 0717 of April 18, 1996 established Special Law-Enforcement Zones subject to the declaration of a national State of Internal Disorder. The designation of these Zones was authorized to be granted at the request of the Military Commandant of the relevant Major Operative Unit or its equivalent with regard to the municipalities in question. When such request involves a geographical area that comprises two or more departments, the delimitation of said area will be determined by the President. The law enforcement zones were defined as “those geographical areas in which, in order to re-establish public security and social harmony which have been affected by criminal or terrorist organizations, the application of one or more of the exceptional measures described in the Articles below becomes necessary, without prejudice to other measures that may have been taken as a result of the previous disorder and that remain in effect. Restriction of the rights of residence and movement... Such restriction entails the limitation or prohibition of the exercise of these rights by means such as curfews, military checkpoints, the requirement of special authorization for travel and of safe conduct documents, citizen registration with municipal authorities, previous notification of municipal authorities of the intention to travel outside the municipal seat.” (Decree 0717: April 18, 1996)
For General Bedoya, who was directing military operations in the zone at the time of the marches, drug-trafficking and the FARC were equivalent. Thus from his point of view, the priority of Operation Conquest was to oppose the insurgency, or narco-guerrillas, as the military calls them, and to be directed only secondarily against illegal cultivation, the target as defined by President Samper. This logic explains the statements of General Bedoya after the initiation of the marches in Guaviare: “We’re going to take back this territory that is flooded with illegal crops. The government and the Armed Forces are going to combat this scourge. This is a war and we’re going to win it. We’re beginning it; it’s going to take a while, but we’re going to win it completely.” (Statements on Noticiero AM-PM, July 7, 1996)

The conquest of Amazonia becomes the narrative that dominates, directs, and legitimizes the actions of the Armed Forces. A group identity is imposed on the cocaleros. They are represented as “the Mafia’s masses, sponsored by the FARC cartel.” (Statements of General Bedoya in: Padilla, Cambio 16 #164, August 5, 1996:18) They are assigned, that is, a negative collective identity as a social group outside the law. The movement cannot be seen as essentially a campesino movement then, because it is reconfigured when the cocalero campesinos are said to be criminals dedicated to illegal activities and therefore politically, socially, and economically marginal with respect to the central region of the country.

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5 President Samper described Operation Conquest:
It is the most important anti-narcotics operation carried out in the world. It has entailed the destruction of more than 27,000 hectares of coca, which represents 70% of the coca cultivated in Colombia and approximately 15% of the world total. To this end, the Armed Forces and Police will carry out an anti-narcotics operation in an area of Guaviare Department where nearly 60% of the illegal crops in Colombia can be found. About 3,000 Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police personnel will participate. Our goal is to begin a series of massive cleanup operations in order to sweep drug trafficking out of strategically located zones. This operation, as we now see, combined vital elements such as intelligence, communications, and rapid response capability. With Operations Condor and
What’s more, General Bedoya emphasizes that the mafiosi lend money to these migrants to plant, harvest, and process the coca and that once they begin to collect on those loans, “these migrants from every part of the country have no way to respond and are trapped, kidnapped by the FARC, which obliges them to promote strikes like those we are seeing.” He asserts that the repressive measures must be sustained and the special law-enforcement zones maintained “to protect the people who are prisoners of the mafia. They are slaves, moved around like herds of animals by the FARC terrorists.” (Statements of General Bedoya in: Padilla, Cambio 16 #164, August 5, 1996:18-20) It is thus denied that the campesinos are independently motivated, that they take any initiative, even comparing them to animals.

Various authors (Leach 1972, Sibley 1995) have indicated that the dehumanization of others by means of ascribing animal attributes to them is a way to legitimize their exploitation and their exclusion from civilized society. With these identity markers imposed upon the cocaleros as a social group, they are represented as under the domination of the FARC and even as hostages, kidnapped by the FARC. Thus it is claimed that “They accept the help of the Army to flee from FARC abuse.” Based on this idea, the Armed Forces began to forcibly displace the people of Guaviare and move them towards Villavicencio. One hundred fifteen people were evacuated. According to General Bedoya, this displacement, along with crop and laboratory destruction, is intended to put about 100,000 cocaleros out of work in Guaviare, Caquetá, and Putumayo,” and “When the work dries

Conquest, [the government] continued to move forward in the consolidation of the National Plan for Alternative Development--PLANTE program.” (La Nación, July 10, 1996: 17)
up, they will have to leave just as they arrived because, to cite the case of Guaviare, not even 2% of the inhabitants were born there. We are helping to relocate them.” (Statements of General Bedoya in Padilla, *Cambio* 16 #164, August 5, 1996:18-20)

The invisibility of the region’s long-term inhabitants is such that General Bedoya even said that “There are places where it is impossible to plant anything but coca. That is the way it is in the south of Guaviare. What we need to do is to try to save that forest that the narco-guerrillas are destroying with the chemicals used for coca.” (Statements of General Bedoya in Padilla, *Cambio* # 164, August 5, 1996:18-20) Using the hegemonic discourse of environmental protection, the General prioritizes the condition of the Amazonian forest in relation to the needs of *campesinos* and coca harvest workers. The latter groups on the other hand, were organized into the *cocalero* movement, attempting to expose the social crisis in the region, a response to the dominant discourse of illegality emanating from the Colombian center. They demanded to be heard and recognized as inhabitants with roots in the region, not to be classified off-handedly as drug traffickers and subversives. The “cleansing” of the region of crops and laboratories and of migrants and adventurers at the margins of the law; the incorporation of this border region into the nation-state, and even more importantly, into the rule of law and civilization, are what legitimized the military operation. The military was portrayed as the “savior” that would take control of the area “…after decades of official abandonment,” in order to “…prevent the guerrillas from earning six billion dollars a month from the processing of ten tons of cocaine.” (Varela, *Cambio* 16 # 249, 1998: 21)
The military would advance then, from the center of the country to the periphery, the borderlands, represented in the event as conquistadors arriving to put the region in order and by extension one could say, on a civilizing mission. This analysis essentially recreates the historical period in which the Amazon region was represented by the Spanish conquistadors as being inhabited by savages, today by migrants and criminals under the orders of the guerrillas. In each case an “indomitable” people must be brought under control, dominated, and “normalized.” Thus is the public image of the campesino movement transformed

Amazonia is portrayed as an uncivil society\(^6\) needing to be civilized in order to develop into a true civil society. This seems to be the underlying logic of the discourse used by the central State in its approach to popular mobilization or, in the words of the military, “the disturbances” in the zone. This perspective legitimizes the use of repressive measures and the exercise of state violence to pacify these colonos, be they victims or accomplices of the guerrillas.

General Mario Galán Rodríguez illustrates this point of view, saying that “…the strike in Putumayo is unquestionably being led by Fronts 32 and 48 of the FARC, which have obliged the campesinos to come out and protest against the government. The campesinos don’t know why they are in these protests, and the terrifying thing is that they’ve been

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\(^6\)During the 18th century, when the creation of a modern civil society was at stake, “incivility was the ghost that permanently haunted civil society (…) civilization therefore denoted an ongoing historical process, in which civility, a static term, was both the aim and the outcome of the transformation of uncivil into civil behavior” (Keane 1998:117). This civilizing process was in hands of the privileged classes of Europe, because it was assumed that it was among the unprivileged that violence was reproduced.
compelled to leave their farms to gather in the three municipalities. The only interests at stake here are those of the narco-guerrillas,” and those interests are purely economic

**Civilized, ordered and clean towns vs. an uncivilized, disorderly and dirty countryside**

The *campesino* marchers represented the threat that “barbarism” from the uncivilized and marginal borderlands could overwhelm the “civilized” center. Take the example of the approximately 10,000 *campesino* marchers who were blocked in Santuario, Caquetá for over two weeks, prevented from crossing a bridge into the town center of Florencia, the departmental capital. General Nestor Ramírez explained to the press why the marchers were not allowed to cross the river:

> I am fulfilling my constitutional responsibility. I am protecting the property of the citizens of Florencia, of the decent people… I am not creating obstacles; I am not closing down roads. I am placing some limitations on the violent elements so that they will not so easily violate the rights of others. (Statement to Noticiero AM-PM).

A *campesino* marcher was interviewed at the same place, the bridge that leads into Florencia, and he stated forcefully that:

> We are not here to cause any disorder. Our goal, or the goal that I have heard all the participants express, is: **We march to demand our rights.** We march to claim what is ours. We are not marching to demand the end of fumigation, if maybe that is the way many people have interpreted this, no. The majority,
maybe all of us, agree that coca should be stopped; we say so. That is not what we are demanding, that coca continue. It is that there be guarantees of other work for people in the country, just like for people who are working in town. The people, **we all need our rights, so what we are demanding is our rights.**

(Interview on Noticiero AM-PM. Emphasis added)

The marcher emphasizes that the *campesinos* are demanding their rights as *campesinos*, but even more so as humans, contrasting them with the townspeople who, he says, *are* granted rights and whose rights *are* respected. By counterposing the countryside to the city this way the “uncivilized” nature of the former is again contrasted with the “civilized” nature of the latter. The *campesinos* saw the urban centers as the place in which to demand their rights, to which they had to go if they were to be able to negotiate with central government representatives.

In the words of another *campesino*:

We are expecting a local government commission to concretize some things and we are waiting for answers from the National Government. If not we will continue to Florencia or the national capital. The protest is to tell the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Defense and the Anti-Narcotics Commandant that they can’t do away with coca because that is the only means of subsistence that we have and they have not provided alternatives. We are just going to march, we are not going to close the roads or provoke any disorder, but if the
national government does not hear us, we will have to protest in some other way. We need them to come and negotiate so that we can move forward with these demands. *La Nación* August 1, 1996:10).

It was again stated that the march would be peaceful and that the marchers sought to negotiate with the central government and that the marchers were *campesinos* who felt obligated to grow coca as a means of subsistence since it was an income-producing product, well adapted to Amazonian environmental conditions. This constituted an implicit criticism of the regional economic and social policies developed by the State over the course of several decades. In these protests, the growers demanded that the Colombian State accept responsibility for their precarious socio-economic situation, the result of their years in the zone seeking to “improve their standard of living,” and unable to do so despite the State’s strategies. They did not intend to defend coca growing as such, but expressed the feeling that there was no alternative. The *campesinos* wanted these coca-growing regions to be declared “special social investment zones,” where structural projects intended to fundamentally transform the situation would be undertaken and the population would have the opportunity to participate in formulating State policies and alternative proposals for the region.

The Armed Forces responded with repression to these counter-interpretations that challenged the official version of events. They attacked the *campesinos* as violent subversives and drug traffickers. They were to be penalized for engaging in an illegal activity, i.e. growing coca. This made them a part of the drug trafficking problem, serving
the interests of the Cartels, including the so called FARC Cartel. The marchers were seen as being “out of place” and were treated like some kind of filth. They were rejected on the basis of a certain classificatory schema in the sense described by Mary Douglas (1966). If they had been granted access to the town centers they could have symbolically contaminated them with their incivility. Their humanity was denied, as was their agency as social actors. They were kept outside the town centers in order to protect the good citizens within.

While the Armed Forces impose this view of the marchers as a malignancy and want to exclude them from the established order as criminals, an inhabitant of Florencia disagreed with this view in an interview: “They are killing them, the police; they are heartless. They see as they arrive that they are unarmed; they are killing them one by one. They should let them in. (Interview with a woman in Florencia by Noticiero AM-PM) The inhabitants of Florencia supported the campesinos and identified with their demands. Another inhabitant of Florencia interviewed about the blocking of the marchers on the bridge said, “I think they should enter because they also are human beings and have a right to live. We should see if an agreement can be reached, because the campesinos should not be manipulated like that. They should be treated with solidarity.” (Interview with Florencia resident by Noticiero AM-PM).

In words of Mary Douglas (1966:35-40):

Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications... Defined in this way, dirt appears as a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications... If dirt is a matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.
Sibley (1995:15) notes that “Fear precedes the construction of the bad object. The negative stereotype –simplified, distorted and at a distance- perpetuates that fear… the bad stereotype may be perceived as a real, malign presence from which people want to distance themselves.” That contaminated dirty thing should be kept away. It must not be included if the desirable pattern intends to maintain its power and thus impose symbolic order. (Douglas 1966). Thus, when 8,000 campesinos arrived to peacefully occupy Mocoa, Putumayo’s capital, its inhabitants were fearful at the arrival of the cocalero “hordes”. Police Commandant Colonel Orlando Díaz tells journalists representing the national radio news: “The population is in terror because no coca is grown in Mocoa. We can say that campesinos and guerrillas have taken more than 23,000 people hostage in the municipality of Mocoa.” (Statement to Noticiero AM-PM). To the Police Commandant maintaining order meant protecting the capital from the marchers.

We can sense the idea that the departmental capital is pure and clean, not contaminated by coca agriculture like Puerto Asís and Puerto Guzmán. Mocoa is seen in a positive light while Puerto Asís, the capital of Lower Putumayo, is stigmatized as the capital of violence and illegal crops. Since illegal crops are not found in Mocoa, it is not contaminated by the associated phenomena of violence and the guerrilla presence. The two towns may be contrasted in the negative stereotypes of the cocalero colonos: Together with the guerrillas, they took the population of Mocoa hostage. Disorder was the consequence. A resident of Mocoa expressed this view:
A peaceful demonstration, an unarmed "takeover" of the city. That idea was unreal. That was absurd... Beginning yesterday, nobody travel in any vehicle in the streets of Mocoa, not even a horse-drawn wagon... Until yesterday Mocoa was an oasis of peace and tranquility; now we are in a crisis. The common people of a city that is the definition of peaceful, very conservative, very tied to their traditions and customs, are stressed-out and full of fear. (La Nación, August 11, 1996:9)

Mocoa is described as an idyllic city where the rootedness in tradition and customs explains why it must not be contaminated by outsiders and coca growers. Later in the article, called “Chronicle of the Absurd”, the resident of Mocoa explains that, “The authentic and true name of Mocoa is San Miguel de Agreda de Mocoa; it was founded by Spaniards more than four hundred years ago, but it has had a stable, progress-minded population for less than a century.” (La Nación, August 11, 1996:9). While the inhabitants of Mocoa are represented as traditional, conservative, peaceful, and rooted in their region with a four-hundred-year-long history, the campesinos and/or cocalero colonos are represented as violent, guerrilla collaborators, without roots and thus without identity.

This is the dominant representation in the magazine Cambio (Varela, March 28 1998:21): "Caquetá is inhabited by colonos without any cultural identity and suffers from abandonment by the State. Together these ingredients produce a perfect breeding ground for violence." In his assertion that the colonos have no cultural identity, the author confirms their image as a people who, uprooted from their places of origin, also lost their cultural
characteristics. She forgets that the *colonos* have constructed new cultural forms and local identities in their new environment. In asserting that the State does not exist in the zone, she ignores its institutional presence and strengthens the image of a marginal and empty region that should be re-colonized and civilized, in need of "culture" and a State presence, the latter in fact realized in the form of State repression at the hands of the Armed Forces, which promotes confrontation and violence rather than alleviates them. Acts of violence are legitimated through the evocation of historical events. One may say that political violence should be explained in the light of an underlying history, a bank of cultural forms and practices whose meanings can only be deciphered with an understanding of the historical memory and the social relations of the collectivity from whence they emerge and take form and effect. Coronil and Skurski (1991) stress the specific historical meaning of violence in Venezuela, coinciding with Feldman (1991:2), who in his work on the formations of violence in Northern Ireland, asserts that, “The cultural construction of the political subject is tied to the cultural construction of history.” Aretxaga (1993:223) for her part, argues that “the political conflict in Northern Ireland is shaped by and interpreted through cultural models deeply rooted in the history of the Anglo-Irish colonial relationship.” The historical interpretation of phenomena and the evocations of collective historical memory influence the manner in which violent events are generated, confronted, and understood.

I argue that the construction of marginality in Amazonia is a long-term structural process with its origins in the colonial period. It is this conception that explains and legitimizes the policies that come down to the region from the central government. The relationship established between the Colombian center and this marginal region may be taken as a focal point in the analysis of each region’s representation of the other. The center represents the
inhabitants of Amazonia on the basis of exclusion and stigmatization of the other. Some part of the population in Amazonia accepts and assumes this identity of exclusion and stigmatization, reflecting the construction provided to them as from a mirror. This phenomenon is expressed time and again in the discourse of both groups over the characteristics and needs of the region and over the development of the cocalero movement.

The Politics of Recognition and the Emergence of Collective Politicized Identities as a Response to Stigmatization, Exclusion, and Marginalization

As it has been described, the campesinos are personally castigated because growing coca is illegal. They are metonymically associated with drug trafficking and the guerrillas, which characterizes them as criminals, rather than citizens in social and economic distress. Thus, the politics of recognition plays a role in the cocalero social movement. This is defined in relation to the construction of identities, as expressed by Taylor (1995:249):

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Taylor asserts that group identity is defined in relation or contrast to that of significant others. In the case of the people of Amazonia, the significant others are the representatives
of the central State. He also points out that recognition, misrecognition or distorted recognition play a role in the construction of identities. In this regard Young (1990:44) adds that groups themselves are expressions of social relations and that a given social group exists only in relation to another group. A social group emerges and is defined in its interaction with another as it experiences contrasting ways of life and of associations, even if the two groups belong to the same society. The meanings that define group members are recognized as identifiers either because they have been imposed on them by others, have been forged by themselves, or both.

As we shall see, Young’s contribution on the imposition of meanings by one group on another group is fundamental to the analysis of the collective identities that emerged in the cocalero social movement. Young extends her analysis of the social group to the point of saying that “Sometimes a group comes to exist only because one group excludes and labels a category of persons, and those labeled come to understand themselves as group members only slowly, on the basis of their shared oppression.” (Young 1990:44). Wendy Brown (1995:65) comments, in the same vein:

In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion augments or ‘alters the direction of the suffering’ entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it.

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8 Barth (1969) in the introduction to the edited volume Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, explains the need
Brown continues, saying that in identities structured by resentment, that very resentment may feed subjugation to the point that a collective identity presented as a self-affirmation may indeed assert and even require the rejection expressed by the other in order to exist. In Amazonia this self-affirmation stems from abandonment by the State:

This is one of the most remote zones of the country. We are ignored. The only thing you see here is isolation and abandonment by the government. The State doesn’t even want to see progress in Amazonia. Being in Amazonia is equated with being backward. (Comments of a Campesino in Piamonte, 1998).

These reflections are central to an understanding that collective identities in western Amazonia are being molded by feelings of exclusion and abandonment by the central State and the hegemonic political class, and as a result, the political identities that emerge do so as a response to this absent central State. When the State does make its presence felt during the civic strikes, is repressive and reinforces the marginality of movement participants. This was so during the cocalero movement and the civic movements that preceded it.

In this context of the central State’s nonrecognition or distorted recognition of the people of Putumayo, Caquetá, and Guaviare, the central demand of the cocaleros is to be recognized as inhabitants of the region, interested in its development and therefore listened to and taken into account when regional issues such as the eradication of the coca are being considered. In words of the campesinos of the Vereda Villanueva in the jurisdiction of Mayoyoque, Putumayo:

to study the relations established between differentiated ethnic groups rather than seeing the boundaries
Jentlemen of Corpoamazonia, of the Ombudsman, agriculture, how are we *campesinos* going to serve if the government fumigates all we have? Along with the illegal crops, they also fumigate the legal ones. We are suffering from hunger. Our pasturs have been fumigated along with the plantain, the yuca, the corn, the rice. *We campesinos what we want to do is make the government understand that like you we are human beings that we are also Colombians that like you we have children to.* The only difference between your children and ours is that your children will never be heard to say I’m hungry like we hear a lot from our children after the fumigation and the only thing we can say is the plain truth that the government did away with everything. (Letter sent to the Ombudsman’s Office, July 26, 1998. Spelling and grammar intended to reflect the original Spanish transcript. Emphasis added.)

This perception of denigration, negation and invisibility is found throughout the cultural and political discourse used in the region. Just to be called a *cocalero colono* implies exclusion, which generates resentment, being a negative identity as lawless people with no place in legitimate society. Even worse, if any place is recognized for them, it is as “guerrilla collaborators” and therefore objects of systematic violence. In addition, the central government’s labeling of Putumayo and the Baja Bota of Cauca as a *zona roja*, a conflictive zone, is something that, to local leaders, is another reason for the State’s absence, since national and regional politicians and public officials are even afraid to visit.

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9 The Strike Committee of the *cocalero* movement released a number of documents in which they rejected the national government’s position that there could be no negotiations regarding coca cultivation. They said, for example, “They must show us the respect due to human beings. We demand [that they delegate] intelligent negotiators, not clever agents or message boys for the central government” (*El Tiempo*, August 6, 1996:10A). The president of the Municipal Council of Puerto Asís, Álvaro Benavides, added, “If they don’t listen to us,
A community leader of the Baja Bota of Cauca expressed this idea: “Traditional politicians don’t show their faces here because it is a zona roja, a conflictive zone.” Another added: “And this is not the first or only time that it has been labeled a zona roja, so that doesn’t bother us. We are proud to live in this zone.” The advisor to the Minister of the Interior: “The thing is that this is still seen as a war zone by the Armed Forces, by the guerrillas, and by the paramilitaries.” The stigmatization of the zone’s inhabitants as violent, and the fear that that inspires, is another representation of the campesinos that they are obliged to deal with.

State violence, along with the growing exclusion, stigmatization, and marginalization to which the inhabitants of western Amazonia have been subjected for decades, and the global importance that coca cultivation has acquired due to the war on drugs, have created a social movement to demand the presence of the civilian State and the joint State–community development of economic alternatives to coca cultivation. The paradox is that the expansion of coca cultivation and the pressure for United States certification have impelled the Colombian government to enter into negotiations with the cocalero campesinos.

normal life here will remain paralyzed. The voice of 80,000 inhabitants from the entire municipality and its rural areas is the voice of 80,000 Colombians.” (El Tiempo, July 29, 1996:6A)
The Demand for Recognition as Social Actors and as Legitimate Negotiating Partners: Seeking to Recover Campesino Agency

A main conceptual point in the negotiations between the leaders of the cocalero movement and the central government was the quality of campesino participation in the problem-solving concertación, a coordinated effort to meet their needs. In the document they sent to the Ministry of the Interior before the negotiations, the campesinos expressed their interest in contributing “…to the search for viable and cooperative solutions.” Accordingly, they felt that, “The campesino who submits to voluntary eradication and substitution should be a social actor and a legitimate negotiating partner in the search for solutions, not a completely distant subject. We believe that as part of the problem we are also part of the search for solutions. (A campesino leader at the negotiations, August 1996. Emphasis added.)

Along these lines, the proposed of agreement presented by campesino representatives states that, “It is the responsibility of the national, departmental, and local governments, along with the organized community, to make common decisions that will assure comprehensive processes of regional development to complement crop eradication and substitution. In this sense, the small grower who participates in voluntary eradication and substitution is a social actor and a legitimate negotiating partner in the search for comprehensive solutions. For these reasons, the social problematic deserves a different approach from the State and the government than that taken towards the drug traffickers and the insurgency.” (First Draft
Proposal of the Civic Movement for a negotiated agreement, courtesy of Teófilo Vásquez, 1996) With this position, the campesinos challenged their assigned identity, an oppressive stereotype that made them invisible and precluded the idea that they be consulted over their own situation. A campesino expressed it well:

And if we actually continue growing coca, then how can they tell us that we have to submit to national and international public opinion, to say that it’s we campesinos who grow coca, when it’s part of the problems that you yourselves have recognized? We’re depicted as drug traffickers or narco-guerrillas all around the world, when we have a right to some honor as campesinos. We’re demanding that it be recognized that we’re forced to break the law, that’s exactly what it is, and that’s just as much of a right too. Do we have to put up with seeing ourselves portrayed to the public as criminals because we plant coca to support our families? Isn’t that against the constitution too? (Spokesperson for the campesino communities speaking at the negotiations. Orito, 1996)

To the campesinos, recognition as social actors means making themselves visible to the State as people with a voice in the delineation of regional policies, autonomous from the guerrillas and the drug traffickers. This is in keeping with Iris Young’s (1995:221) conception of a demand for political participation with social justice:

A democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged. Such group
representation implies institutional mechanisms and public resources supporting
1) self-organization of group members so that they achieve collective
empowerment and a reflective understanding of their collective experience and
interests in the context of the society; 2) group analysis and group generation of
policy proposals in institutionalized contexts where decision makers are obliged
to show that their deliberations have taken group perspectives into
consideration; and 3) group veto power regarding specific policies that affect a
group directly, such as reproductive rights policy for women, or land use policy
for Indian reservations.

The cocalero campesinos were constructing in practice these representational mechanisms
of a defined group through their demand for recognition as social actors. A picket sign
said, “Ignorant Campesinos? Bull. We’re Audacious!!” They asserted that their experience
in the region insured their capacity to participate in the relevant discussions and contribute
to the elaboration of solutions.

The government representatives, for their part, put the legal problem ahead of the social and
economic problems of the region:

In a country like Colombia there are certain laws that we must obey, let’s be
clear on that. A number of us have reiterated that on several occasions. When
the Minister of the Interior was asked about the scope of the commissions, he
was very clear. The Colombian policy towards the drug problem, towards
trafficking in narcotics, would not be negotiated. One of the elements of that
policy tells us, specifically Law 30 of 1986 tells us that the person who grows coca is committing a crime. That’s what impedes us from considering gradualism. There are things here that we can discuss… for example, the idea that the small grower is a valid negotiating partner in the search for comprehensive solutions, but in what way? Dr. Díaz told you a moment ago that that was completely acceptable, not as a social actor but as a valid negotiating partner, because the recognition of a social actor can’t be based on the fact that that social actor is committing a crime. (PLANTE representative speaking at negotiating session. Emphasis added.)

To be denied any role but legitimate negotiating partner to implement programs is seen by the campesinos as depriving them of their agency, of their full and active participation in the definition of those programs, and of their recognition as a social group. It is a continuation of the State practice of setting policies and designing programs for the eradication of coca without consulting them, a way of doing things that has meant the failure of the substitution projects in the Amazon region.

The campesinos reacted to the government commission’s attitude by calling them small-minded, lacking any true desire for negotiations if they refuse to prioritize the social aspect as opposed to the criminal aspect of the problem of illegal crops:

    Of course we understand that the government commission can not change the law here, and we know that the problem of illegal crops is an eminently legal problem. This we recognize. But we also recognize and understand that it is a
social problem. These two truths cannot be ignored in the negotiations. That’s why we are saying that it be recognized here and now that we are dealing with a legal, social, and economic problem, and we recognize it as such. I don't see any willingness to recognize that, so we are proposing that the negotiations be suspended. (Comments of community spokesperson at the negotiations, August 1996)

The government was willing to concede the role of legitimate negotiating partner to the organized campesinos, but not that of social actor, because of the illegality of coca cultivation. Nevertheless, in an interview during the negotiations, when I commented to the presidential representative that I did not see a willingness on the part of the government to consolidate a major alternative production program in order to eradicate coca, he replied that for that political will to exist, “it would have to be clear that the campesinos are neither criminals nor guerrillas. That would be the starting point, and that they are legitimate negotiating partners, well, if you begin by calling them criminals, or guerrillas, then what we should do is use our airplanes against them… right in the middle of the negotiations, have the crop dusters overfly the area, a country of locos. (Interview with the presidential representative, 1999)

Although it would seem that to speak of legitimate negotiating partners would mean the recognition of the cocalero campesinos as distinct from the guerrillas or the drug traffickers, this recognition was subject to national and international political forces that were insisting on eradication without negotiations. I refer to United States pressure, and
that of the Armed Forces and the Attorney General, who argued that the commission was negotiating with criminals. For example, the press reported that, "While the government reiterated that it would not negotiate its policy on illegal crops, the Attorney General confirmed that his office was investigating the instigators and promoters of the protest in Putumayo for their criminal associations". (El Espectador August 3, 1996:1A) The next day a national periodical reported that “Attorney General Alfonso Valdivieso Sarmiento insisted on the need to fully investigate the circumstances leading to the protest”, and that “The return to Colombia of Héctor Moreno Reyes, the director of the National Plan for Alternative Development (PLANTE, Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Alternativo) was being awaited in order to determine the steps to be taken with regard to the complete eradication of illegal crops”. (El Espectador, August 4, 1996:12A) The Attorney, General, together with the PLANTE director and the Armed Forces, would close ranks in favor of the criminalization of the cocalero campesinos.

There is a general fear in the region of being tried and punished for growing coca. Nevertheless, a campesino commented that “The State can call them all criminals, but since it can’t imprison all of them, it will have to accept that they are not”. (Molano, Alfredo, in El Espectador, August 15, 1996:4B) And Juan Carlos Palou, a Solidarity Network official during the 1996 cocalero movement and subsequently director of PLANTE said, “The cocalero campesinos have demonstrated that they are a very powerful social force, able to put both the government and the State in a very tight spot. The government came through for the State in maintaining a very controversial stance, which was not easy, but they pulled it off.” (Interview with Juan Carlos Palou, September 15 , 1998)
The signed agreement and its importance for the recognition of the cocalero campesinos as social actors

To the leadership of the Civic Movement for the Comprehensive Development of Putumayo, the initial agreement had great symbolic importance and was considered the movement’s greatest achievement. It stated that the campesino representatives should produce an Emergency Plan for the Comprehensive Development of a Putumayo Without Coca, thus defining a decision-making role for them. It was also agreed that voluntary eradication and substitution would require a joint effort on the part of campesinos, colonos, indigenous people, the government, and cooperating international parties. In this way the small coca producer achieved practical recognition as “…a legitimate participant in the definition and implementation of comprehensive solutions.” (Agreement of 1996, Emphasis added.) In other words, their voice regarding policies and projects in the region was recognized.

In all my conversations about the cocalero movement, people emphasized the achievement represented by the agreement’s first two pages. Nevertheless, the goal reached and agreed

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10Negotiations between the leaders of the cocalero movement and government officials were suspended after three days of negotiation. In order to continue, one sector of the government which was primarily represented by the Solidarity Network (Red de Solidaridad), and by other officials at the table who had a history of work in the region, supported the Civic Movement’s proposal to sign an initial agreement for an Emergency Plan for Comprehensive Development, to be called “For a Putumayo without Coca and Sustained in an Economy of Solidarity”. They had insisted that the phrase, “Without Coca” be added to avoid conflict with the other more punitive sector of the government. Despite this initial agreement, the strike was not lifted until the seven sectoral workgroups established to discuss campesinos’ demands for social services, arrived at concrete agreements: commission one: for the consolidation of rural development policy and alternative, agricultural and agro-industrial development programs in Putumayo; commission two: electrification and roads; commission three: public health, basic sanitation and social security; commission four: education, recreation, sports and culture; commission five: housing; commission six: land planning; commission seven: human rights.
to on those pages was clearer to the movement leaders, than to other campesinos, who were specifically demanding no fumigation and the provision of services, as expressed on this poster: “Thirty Years of Oil Extraction Here and the People without Roads, Electricity, Plumbing, Schools, Credit, or Hospitals.” Another said: “We Demand Compliance with the Agreement: Health, Education, Roads.” Nevertheless, it was the initial agreement that committed the municipal, departmental, and national governments to promote “community-based and participatory processes” to strengthen local administration and the institutional capacity to support regional and sectoral planning and the implementation of agreed upon projects.

The active participation of campesino representatives in the definition of the Development Plan was emphasized in the initial agreement and stresses again in the Final Considerations of the Final Agreement. But the question of State compliance with specific points of the Plan would dominate the government’s and the campesinos’ follow-up of the agreement.

To these officials it is clear that the structural problem of large scale coca agriculture in the region was not resolved and each individual has his or her own version of why that was. People say that it was due to political constraints or because the construction of a sustainable economy without coca would be a long process and they did not know how to proceed. Others suggest that because spraying had not yet arrived in Putumayo at the time, the nature of the issue was unclear, and some say that State representatives manipulated the process.
The position of the campesinos, on the other hand, was clear from the beginning. They sought to discuss the fundamental historical problem of the region’s social and economic structure in order to devise radical solutions. According to the then director of PLANTE, this was precisely what was not accomplished. On May 16, 1998, a Civic Movement leader expressed his disagreement with Plan Sur’s practice of using the number of infrastructural projects carried out to gauge governmental compliance with the agreement. (Interview at the occupation of the office of the ombudsman in Bogotá, May 16, 1998)

Campesino negotiations with the central government produced more than just an agreement. The agreement itself can be considered an indicator of how political relations between the State and the region’s inhabitants are being redefined. Although the respective negotiators brought irreconcilable principles to the table, they succeeded in reaching a common recognition of the economic reality in this marginal zone and began to speak openly about it, despite its illegality.

After the campesino mobilization ended, PLANTE began to reorient its crop substitution program. Persecution, criminalization, and threats to punish of small coca growers gave way to talk of gradual substitution without demanding the total eradication of coca as a precondition. In the words of the PLANTE director who replaced Hector Moreno Reyes after the marches:

The fact is that that model [PLANTE as a complement to forced eradication], could not function because there is no way the campesinos can accept negotiations, dialog, or conversations with a State that has just delivered them a
devastating blow that threatens their very lives, their means of subsistence, and then expects them to start negotiating alternative development, crop substitution, or income replacement. **To this extent there has now been a reformulation of the PLANTE program**, to try to make the program less coercive, instead laying out the idea that the primary responsibility of PLANTE is to take into account the social problems of *campesinos*, indigenous people, and *colonos* generated by illegal crops. We have nothing more to do with the problem of the commercial grower, who will still probably have to be dealt with in an completely repressive fashion. In terms of the *campesinos*, PLANTE must take up a proactive and persuasive approach, using dialog and negotiation."

(Remarks of the PLANTE director at the 1998 Environmental Congress. Emphasis added.)

The PLANTE and Network leaders’ recognition of the *campesino* problem and their new non-punitive approach to coca agriculture were definite achievements of the *cocalero* movement. The new PLANTE director:

Colombia must make it clear that the social problem produced by the cultivation of illegal crops is a strictly internal problem. The Colombian government must recognize the existence of approximately 500,000 *campesinos* who are involved with illegal crops and will only abandon that activity to the extent that the State or the private sector or society in general can provide some kind of opportunity, that there is some international assistance so that they can abandon their involvement with illegal crops with the least possible human cost,
the least harmful of human rights, of fundamental rights. [This will happen] only when a proposal includes this orientation, when Colombia seeks a solution to the social problem” (Remarks of the PLANTE director at the Environmental Congress, July 1998)

The cocalero movement, which first addressed the problem of coca agriculture as a social problem that merited the attention of the State and that required international assistance and the defense of fundamental rights, can also take credit for the adoption of such discourse by government officials.

The Putumayo strike lasted twenty five days. It ended on August 19, 1996 once the sectoral agreements were signed. Once the news of this agreement was known, Orito Mayor Luis Alfredo Urbano issued Decree 25, on August 20, 1996, officially recognizing the date. From that day on, August 20 would be celebrated for the welcome lifting of a strike that had cost the department millions of pesos. The municipality of Orito would promote an annual celebration of the agreement reached between the State and the cocaleros after twenty five days of hardship. (La Nación, August 21, 1996:9)

The declaration of the municipal day of recognition also distinguished the day as a historical referent and a culturally appropriated symbol of the movement’s negotiating strength and of the movement leaders’ recognition as legitimate campesino representatives and negotiating partners with the State. After almost a month of sacrifices, the realization by the cocalero campesinos of their organizing capacity and their power to exercise
collective pressure in the demand for their citizenship rights, gave them an identity beyond their accustomed representation as criminals. The mayor of Piamonte in the Baja Bota of Cauca, a member of the Inga indigenous group, referred to the *cocalero* movement as a marker of identity for the *colonos* of the region: “Before the marches, the *colonos* didn’t have an identity, but now they do, even though they don’t have a long history in the territory like ours [the indigenous communities]. But they weren’t going to sacrifice sixty days for nothing. As a mayor, I have to say that I have a lot of respect for the 1996 agreement.” (Conversation with the mayor of Piamonte, March 1, 1999) Even though the indigenous communities of Lower Putumayo participated, the mobilization was seen as a movement of the area’s *campesinos* and *colonos*. In sum, the 1996 *cocalero* movement conferred recognition and power on the *campesinos* and gave them an opportunity to contest the identity that had been assigned to them as guerrillas and/or drug traffickers.


Press Articles and Laws

_____ “Puerto Asís sigue viviendo entre la bala y el miedo”. August 4, 1996: 12A.
_____ “Paños de agua tibia para el polvorín del Putumao”. August 6, 1996:7A.

_____ “Una crónica de lo absurdo”. August 11, 1996: 9

El Tiempo.“Cuatro heridos en Paro en el Putumayo”. July 29, 1996:6A.
_____ “Desde Anoche se negocia en Orito.” August 6, 1996:10A.