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Victims' collective memory and transitional justice in post-conflict Colombia: the case of the *March of Light*

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Abstract

The construction of victims' collective memory in post-conflict Colombia is crucial to understanding the violent past and its social consequences. This article argues that victims' initiatives, such as the *March of Light,* are facilitating an active role of local communities in the configuration of their *memory regimes* after the war. Addressing a participative action research approach, this article's significance rests in the idea that Colombian victims' groups from Eastern Antioquia are establishing three particular types of collective memory developing the *March of Light* every week. It establishes that this effort is a powerful instrument to claim truth and reparation in Colombia; helping the on-going process of transitional justice in the country. It demonstrates that the tension between official and non-official narratives of collective memory is an essential part of transitional justice scenarios in which the clash of values defines positions of power, visibility and recognition inside contexts of social transition.

Key words

Collective memory, memory regimes, victims, transitional justice, truth, social justice

Introduction

According to the National Centre for Historical Memory of Colombia - NCHM- (2018), the result of decades of confrontations in Colombia is that in total there are more than eight million victims, including approximately seven million internally displaced, with civil society being principally affected. The NCHM has officially established 1,982 massacres against civilians between 1980 and 2012. The numbers are intense: the Colombian armed conflict has claimed the life of at least 352,786 civilians, almost 26,000 enforced disappearances, up to 40,000 kidnappings, the use of more than 17,000 child soldiers, nearly 8,952 landmines incidents, and 15,222 acts of sexual violence during the years of the armed conflict (NCHM, 2013, 2018). In a global perspective, this data is informing us that Colombia is the world's second largest population of internally displaced people after Syria, it was one of the oldest armed conflicts in the world (almost six decades), and 16.9% of the population in Colombia has been a direct victim of the war (HRW, 2010; NCHM, 2018). In this context, the construction of collective memory from the victims' point of view is essential to understand this violent past and its social consequences. How is constitution of plural discourses of collective memory central to help processes of transitional justice in the country? By what means can victims' memory initiatives help to reconstruct social cohesion inside local communities affected by the war, and promote peace, reconciliation and social justice?

In order to address these questions, this research took a multi–strategy qualitative research approach (Bryman, 2008; Hancock and Mueller, 2010) and used action research techniques to reconstruct the socio-historical evolution of victims' organisations from Eastern Antioquia from 1998 to 2018. A participative action research approach (McNiff, 2001) was adopted, based upon approaches to enquiry which is participative, grounded in experience, and action-orientated (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Over the course of twelve years, groups of victims of the Colombian armed conflict participated in research to understand and document their struggles for recognition, visibility and inclusion. Principally for this research, from 2013 to 2018, sixty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of people from different victims' organizations from Eastern Antioquia. Specifically, interviews were conducted with female victims from *the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia* (AMOR), and *the Provincial Association of Victims to Citizens* (APROVIACI). As a result, this article will highlight women's memory initiatives and struggles (particularly, the case of the *March of Light*), and the ways women have been both victims and protagonist over the decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia.

During these five years conducting research, twenty-three towns across Eastern Antioquia were visited. The final sample of interviews by gender was thirty-nine women (61% of the sample) and twenty-four men (39% of the sample). It was an average of three/four interviews per town, and the length of the interviews was between forty minutes to two hours. For the purposes of this article, the results focused on understand and comprehend principal motivations and reasons for the victims' memory initiative of the *March of Light.*

The article is set out in four sections. The first part traces theoretical antecedents of the concept of collective memory from a sociological perspective. It revisits the relationship between memory and transitional justice. It emphasises the importance of comprehending the construction of collective memory as a social process, where notions of power, ideology and authority are crucial to redress the tempestuous past to understand the present. The second part examines the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations initiatives. The third part analyses the case of the *March of Light,* a victims' memory strategy to build collective memory narratives and demand truth in the on-going process of transitional justice in Colombia. The final part concludes with some views on understanding the crucial role of collective modes of remembering as a powerful instrument to claim justice and reparation in post-conflict Colombia.

Revisiting the concept of collective memory as a social process

In 1930, Halbwachs (1992) began to analyse the social and political dimensions of memory. He argued that there can be no clear separation between the construction of individual and collective memory, highlighting that any construction of memory is a social practice fostered in a particular cultural context (Halbwachs, 1992). These arguments underpinned Durkheim's ideas about the creation of individual and collective representations in specific social structures, and introduced, for the first time, the idea of *memory as a social construction*. Halbwachs' novel notions about collective memory emphasised how power, cohesion and reproductive forces of memory can affect processes of collective identity, and the developing of social frames of memory in society. In the early 80's, Yerushalmi (1982) and Nora (1984) revisited Halbwachs's ideas, questioning his intention an institutionalised linear approach to the construction of collective memory as a social process. Yerushalmi argued that there is not a single collective memory but a multiplicity of memories, identifying the category of collective memory as a sacred form of remembrance different from historical consciousness (Yerushalmi, 1982). In the same perspective, Nora suggested that collective memory should be theoretically addressed horizontally rather than vertically, and it is an index of the relative weakening of traditional vertical structures that worked to secure collective memory as a single identity (Nora 1984).

Nora's notion of *liuex de mémoire,* where 'memory crystallizes' (Nora, 1989), is central for the case of the construction of collective memory in post-conflict Colombia. This concept underpins the importance of rituals, victims' initiatives and collective actions in the social attempt to constitute 'a narrative to collectively remember', and who is entitled to speak for the past in the present. This embodies a struggle to address the violent past and victims' power to shape communal representations and meanings about what happened during the armed conflict.

In the late 90's, Huyssen (1995) and Hirsch (1999) presented innovative concepts to comprehend the notion of collective memory and the social construction of the past and the present. Huyssen argued that the relationship between amnesia and memory is central to understand ethical responsibilities towards the past and to the collective construction of social belonging in post-traumatic societies (Huyssen, 1995). Hirsch suggested the concept of 'post-memory' to address topics about how second and third generations (who grew up with different social constructions of the past and the present through collective narratives) reproduce political preconceptions that do not necessarily correspond to present public remembrances (Hirsch, 1999).

In recent decades, Sontag (2003) and Arnold-de Simine and Radstone (2013) argued that when we confuse the concept of memory with the notion of 'collective acts of remembering', we are creating a smoke screen to understand political implications of the construction of collective memory in society. Sontag introduced the concept of 'collective instruction', focusing on questions about power and authority in the building of collective memory as a social process. This approach is central for this research because is highlighting how the characteristics of *origin* (official, oral, commercial or non-official), *status* (contested, consensual, shared or selective) and *substance* (historical, cultural, social or political) are crucial to understand the relationship between the construction of collective memory and frames of ideology in society (Sontag, 2003).

Memory studies and transitional justice

The relationship between memory studies and transitional justice can be understood as a component of the research field of the politics of memory and as a particular contested relationship of cultural and social memory-making in the aftermath of armed conflicts or authoritarianism. It places transitional justice studies in a broader socio-historical context, steaming the sociological, psychological, political and cultural perspectives that constitutes the discipline of memory studies (Barahona De Brito, 2010; Jelin, 2016). Current developments on this area focuses on four central aspects. First, mapping frameworks for how contemporary memories of violence can and should be known and acted upon, and what memory is and what must be done with it in the wake of atrocities and suffering (Manning, 2017). Second, exploring by what means the four traditional elements of transitional justice (truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence) are interrelated with the construction of political memory from the victims' point of view after the war (Dulitzky, 2014). Third, contesting facts from the past to the current problems of post-conflict societies, challenging official transitional justice policies of building memorials instead of creating more egalitarian and democratic societies; addressing locally grounded and open-ended narratives of social memory (Barahona De Brito, 2010; Kent, 2011). Finally, encouraging the state responsibility in guaranteeing the duty of restorative justice and symbolic reparation promoting diversity of proposals in relation to victims' initiatives of cultural memory (Manning, 2017).

In this context, transitional justice discourses are underpinned by an assumption that truth commissions, tribunals and trials will assist societies to 'come to terms' with, and move on from, complex legacies of violence. However, local practices of memorialization and commemoration developed by victims' groups can disrupt these assumptions. Local communities are endeavouring to turn the page of violence and conflict in ways that may contrast distinctly from the official approaches of the state, or the priorities of sponsored transitional justice institutions. As a result, these local practices of memory are indicating that survivors of armed conflicts are resisting, challenging and transforming official narratives of memory, stressing that the pursuit of justice in transitional justice contexts is more dynamic and contested than the positive narrative of post-conflict implies (Kent; 2011; Manning, 2017).

In regards of these discussions, this research understands the concept of collective memory as a social process that indicates the complexity of reconstructing and readdressing former episodes of violence in society when a new generation, in transitional justice times, is responsible to revisit and dispute these traumatic events. The main challenge is how to establish initiatives of collective memory that can help local communities to comprehend contested socio-political ideas and support inclusive processes of transitional justice. With a view to helping engender a fuller understanding of how the construction of

collective memory from a victims' perspective is a powerful instrument to claim truth and reparation in contested societies, the next section will focus on analysing the *March of Light*, a victims' collective memory case that is taking place in post-conflict Colombia.

Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations initiatives

On November 24th, 2016, the Colombian government and The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace agreement, ending more than 50 years of armed conflict. After a divisive referendum process (50.2% of the electorate initially rejecting the peace agreement), and then further weeks of re-negotiation, the Colombian Congress ratified a revised peace agreement on November 30th, 2016. This date officially marked the end of the Colombian armed conflict, initiating a process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of FARC ex-combatants back into Colombian society.

Antioquia is the Colombian county with the highest number of victims of the former Colombian armed conflict (1.2 million), and Eastern Antioquia is the territory with the highest percentage of massacres in the last twenty years in the country (NCHM, 2013, 2018). According to the Regional Programme for Development and Peace of Eastern Antioquia (PRODEPAZ), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the NCHM, four in ten Colombian civilian victims, from 1993 to 2017, were women, most likely victims of a massacre, and coming from Eastern Antioquia. For these three organisations, there are four principal reasons why the armed conflict was high in this region and women were principal victims. First, nearly 70% of Colombian energy resources are concentrated in this territory, it is a geographically strategic corridor within the armed conflict, and women have an active role in local energy companies. Second, in the logic of the Colombian armed conflict, women were *war booty* and a specific target for warriors (UNDP, 2010). While a strong patriarchal society exists in this region, targeting women used to be a powerful way to debilitate local communities and damage its family structures (PRODEPAZ, 2009). Third, it is the characteristic of affecting civilians as a method of war. This strategy was utilised by both illegal and legal armed groups, and became the main objective of military operations (NCHM, 2018). By killing innocent bystanders they demonstrated power, superiority and ownership of particular Eastern Antioquia's territories to rivals, as well as a way to undermining the social base of support for the opposite armed group (García de la Torre and Aramburo, 2011; NCHM, 2018). The final characteristic was the configuration of a *regime of terror* in the region (Jaramillo, 2003), where one particular group used cruelty to dehumanize their war adversaries (García de la Torre and Aramburo, 2011).

The former armed conflict situation in Eastern Antioquia is a good reference to understand, in holistic terms, how the dynamic of the armed conflict in Colombia was. Eastern Antioquia was the first place where guerrillas groups used landmines to prevent territorial control from the Colombian army. It was also the territory where methodical implementation of massacres against civilians were used as a war strategy by paramilitary groups to spread fear and terror in the country, and where civilians experienced permanent suffering (Estrada, 2010). Thus the citizens of Eastern Antioquia had experienced all possible consequences of the war: stigmatization, forced displacements, massacres, persecution, marginalization, extrajudicial executions, torture; and they are victims of all forms of violation and human rights abuses (García de la Torre and Aramburo, 2011; Tamayo Gomez, 2017). As a result, three main aspects characterised Eastern Antioquia in the context of the war in Colombia. First, the on-going fighting between different illegal and legal armed groups for control over the territory and its resources. Second, the co-optation of local institutions such town councils or local governments by illegal forces to affect local democracy and control the economic resources. Finally, the establishment of illegal economies around drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion that strongly affected local and regional economies (UNDP, 2010; García de la Torre and Aramburo, 2011; NCHM, 2018).

In this context, in Rionegro (the principal town of Eastern Antioquia) *the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia* (AMOR) and *the Provincial Association of Victims to Citizens* (APROVIACI) were created in 1994 and 2007 respectively. This region has twenty-three towns and these two victims' organisations represent women from all of them. In 2018 both groups portray the

voice of almost 25,000 women; working in political, economic and sociocultural projects. According to Villa (2013) and Tamayo Gomez (2017), AMOR and APROVIACI reconfigured the traditional conception of women's identity for this region with the purpose of finding a balance between the construction of a *strong collective citizenship* (political and economic participation in the region) and an *active social identity* (sociocultural changes in local communities) in patriarchal public spheres. During the last decade, these two victims' organisations have established human rights projects and citizenship programmes in all twenty-three towns. Thus through those initiatives both women's groups wanted to valorise and nurture the political voices of women in the region, and encourage female civic activism in Eastern Antioquia.

One of the characteristics of AMOR and APROVIACI is the developing of a variety of memory initiatives to claim human rights in the public sphere. It aims to overcome 'the imposition of silence tactic' (García de la Torre and Aramburo, 2011; NCHM, 2013), a strategy used by guerrillas and paramilitary groups to obtain the symbolic control of civilians in the region during the war. Showing pain in public for someone's violent death was forbidden by the armed groups in Eastern Antioquia, imposing a claim of fear and terror inside this territory. Romero (2012) argues that the imposition of silence as an ally of fear has been part of the sociocultural dimension of violence in Colombia for decades, with more enduring consequences than those caused by its physical dimension. Some examples of memory initiatives developed by AMOR and APROVIACI in recent years are:

- '*The walls of memory'*, big walls of photographs made to remember the victims of the armed conflict in Eastern Antioquia.

- '*The never again exhibitions'*, photographic exhibitions of people that have disappeared during the armed conflict, whose families and communities wish to commemorate them.

- '*Trails for life'*, initiative where groups of victims want to recover the meaning, significance and uses of public spaces where massacres against civilians happened by organising monthly walks to places where their relatives were killed, or where the bodies of missing persons are presumed to be buried.

- '*Memorial parks'*, green spaces created to commemorate war events in Eastern Antioquia. One of the aims is to generate public awareness to the actual transitional justice period and its implementation for the region.

Within this framework, this article focuses on analysing the initiative of the *March of light*. In this event every week people from different towns of Eastern Antioquia march across public roads with candles in their hands, claiming truth, justice and recovering of the good name of some victims that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group. This effort has similarities with other Latin American examples of construction of victims' collective memory such as *the Mother of Plaza de Mayo* (Argentina), *May our Daughters Return Home* (Mexico), *the National Association of Relatives of Kidnapped, Detained and Disappeared Persons* (Peru), *the Committee of Relatives of Victims of Human Rights Violations* (El Salvador), and *the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared* (Chile) (Tamayo Gomez, 2017). However, the *March of light* is a particular case that is catalysing local processes of transitional justice in the region. We could have a better understanding of how survivors of armed conflicts can promote peace, cooperation and reconciliation in fragile social contexts comprehending this case. Consequently, it would be possible to gain a clearer insight into the relationship between the construction of victims' collective memory and processes of transitional justice in South America examining this specific initiative.

Collective memory narratives and victims in Eastern Antioquia: the case of the *March of Light*

The *March of Light* is a process of construction of collective memory started in 2002 by two victims' regional groups of Eastern Antioquia: AMOR and APROVIACI. As was previously expressed, every Friday of the week different groups of victims and people from all towns of the region march across public roads with candles in their hands claiming truth, justice, and recovering the good name of victims

that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group. One of the aims of this collective action of memory is to empower, transform, and reconfigure the role of victims' groups in their social contexts. It encourages a more active participation of victims in the construction of their collective memory in times of post-conflict and transitional justice for the country. The importance of the relationship between the *March of Light* and the creation of collective memory narratives, from a victim's perspective in post-conflict times, is well described by one member of APROVIACI in the next narrative:

> "For us, the members of APROVIACI, the *March of Light* is about dignity, remembrance, and memory… especially about creating together our memory… memory about what happened here… memory to remember and remembering not to forget… we can feel more powerful together trying to express our feelings, thoughts and ideas just holding a candle. But, to be honest, the most important thing for us is how we are writing another chapter about what happened in the midst of the armed conflict here in our own words, with our own feelings, with our own memories, creating memories for the future, for our children, to never forget" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

This creation of memory narratives developed through the *March of Light* can be categorised in two levels. First at the collective level, where these group of victims demand truth, justice and reparation exercising their rights in the public arena. The second is at the individual level, where the aim of these victims' groups is to recover the good name of individual victims that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group. These two levels – collective and individual – are developing symbolic dimensions in the construction of plural memory narratives (Jelin, 1994, 2016; Barahona De Brito, 2010) in times of post-conflict in Colombia, shaping victims' collective political actions in regional public spheres. As one of the members of APROVIACI expressed:

> "We are demanding truth and justice as a group of victims every Friday because knowing the truth can help us to do juridical and political actions against perpetrators, write another kind of history about Eastern Antioquia and get collective reparation, real collective reparation, real emotional reparation, and do real political action in different places… this is something that we called 'collective political actions' because we are acting as a group to know the truth…at the same time, every member of APROVIACI is doing a huge individual effort to say to the community: hey! This person that you think that was a *guerrillero* or *paramilitary* was my brother, my father, my son and was not a bad human being… and when the people can fully understand and believe that this relative was not a bad person, I think this member of APROVIACI is going to get some reparation, no material, more like symbolic reparation… and this is good for us, because we are writing another memory about our victim… the real memory" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

In the 1990s Benedict Anderson (1991) introduced innovative concepts to comprehend the relationship between the symbolic dimension of the construction of memory narratives and the social construction of the past and the present from different perspectives. Anderson's concept of *imagined community* was not concerned with whether the social constructions of memories are false or real. He understood the narratives that people use to imagine their communities as the key to recognising the ways that people (inside these communities) develop a sense of belonging and identity through collective narratives about the past and the present. These types of collective narratives provide a sense of social cohesion inside those imagined communities, and generate processes of social construction of memory. Analysing the interviews with victims' groups of Eastern Antioquia, it is possible to argue that those modes of remembering, such as the *March of Light,* are expressions of the new imagined communities that victims want to shape in their towns after the end of the armed conflict. That is how a member of AMOR addressed this topic:

> "Every time that we are in the streets holding a candle or showing the pictures on the walls of memory in the public squares, I think we are addressing the past and we are creating a 'new community' in our 'actual community' at the same time… a kind of

> ‘new society’, you know what I mean? We believe that a new society can be reborn in this territory after all this violence, after all this bloody insanity… a new society in peace, inclusive, open, democratic, with dignity and respecting the past… where the people can truly respect each other, with opportunities for everybody without differences… a better place to grow up in and dream again…. but, definitely, I think that the most important thing in this process is imagination; to imagine that we can create this new society without violence and be part of a new group of people without fear, where everybody is welcome… maybe this can sound idealistic, but if one word can describe our group it is idealism, because we idealise that it is possible to forget the horror of the war and bury in a grave all our suffering and all our pain… and after that, we can be reborn again” (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

In this context, it could be relevant to address what happens when victims cannot develop a sense of belonging with the local community as a consequence of the war (Jelin, 2016; Manning, 2017). Some survivors believe that one of the biggest impacts of the armed conflict in Eastern Antioquia was the impossibility to be part of the community after witnessing massacres or extrajudicial killings. The stigmatization or defamation of particular groups of people inside those communities (*e.g.* human rights defenders, victims, witnesses or NGO workers) are the consequences of the end of the Colombian armed conflict. As a result, this is affecting social cohesion (particularly, in terms of collective belonging) in local communities, and constructions of plural memory narratives. This sense of lack of belonging is visible in the next narrative:

> “I’m dead in life you know? When some people in town start to say that I’m a supporter of the guerrilla because after I witnessed a paramilitary squad kill a peasant family with grenades, showing no compassion or mercy to these people, I demanded the intervention of national NGOs to expose this madness to the country and get some help from the national Government; some people from town started to say that I’m a *guerrillera,* and when this rumour started to spread no one in town wanted to talk to me again… It was like a social death, a kind of ‘ghost’ for these people… and I started to hate this town… I started feeling like ‘disconnected’… feeling alone… like erased from the history of this town… I think I don’t belong here anymore, you know? And, to be honest, I don’t want to be part of this town either… I think this paramilitary squad killed me as well… the only bad thing is that I’m still ‘alive’ in some way… but not for the people of this town, I’m dead to them” (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

As it was presented in earlier paragraphs, in the late 90s Huyssen (1995) and Hirsch (1999) developed defined categories to understand the relationship between the construction of memory narratives and the different dimensions of cultural memory. Huyssen argues that the so-called ‘memory boom’ in the 1990s signifies a reaction against the ‘culture of amnesia’, establishing, as a consequence, a new ‘culture of the memory’ as a tool to improve historical consciousness in public culture (Huyssen, 1995). In other words, for this scholar the intrinsic relationship between amnesia and memory is crucial in order to comprehend moral responsibilities towards the past, and the construction of a sense of social belonging in post-conflict societies. Also Hirsch suggested that individuals can be dispossessed of their family memories by a diasporic existence or by historical and ideological ruptures that can stigmatise their memories as taboo (Hirsch, 1999). As a result, Huyssen’s and Hirsch’s contributions started discussions around the notion of ‘the ethics of memory appropriation’, debates about the ‘false memory syndrome’; and triggered questions around of who has a right to certain memories, who is allowed to pass them on, and in which form they should, or can, be passed on successfully (Huyssen, 1995; Hirsch, 1999).

For some members of APROVIACI and AMOR, some issues that Huyssen and Hirsch touched upon can have another interpretation for this particular transitional justice context. Questions in regards of the historical responsibility to teach future generations about what happened in Colombia, and how to express this learning in open public spaces, are crucial topics for these collectives of victims. As two members of APROVIACI have expressed it:

> "We know in APROVIACI that any public demonstration that we do has ethical and political responsibilities with the past, with the present and with the victims… the question for us here is that we need to teach the people in our communities about what happened in the past in our town… about the killings, the massacres and the car bombs… but teach about the resistance, the hope, and our courage as well… I think this is our historical responsibility, our first and final motivation, teaching in dissimilar ways to all generations… You know what? I guess that the principal reason of our movement is to teach people about our personal suffering and teach our children to never, never, never forget… and be really proud that we are survivors of this war and spread and pass this proudness to our future children" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

> "I believe that when we are doing public demonstrations in our towns we are educating people about the armed conflict of Eastern Antioquia. I strongly believe that we have the right to create a legacy of memory for our children and for future generations… I don't want to be labelled as "a victim of this conflict" all my life, of course not, and I consider that the way to move from this label is educating people in the square, in the market, in the church about the reasons behind our actions and the history of our collective of victims… about our struggles, hopes and fights… and after all this, my dream is that these people can come with us to the squares and demonstrate together!" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

After analysing some motivations and reasons established by these victims' groups in regards to the *March of Light* initiative, four considerations can be made.

The first argument is that it is clear that these two collectives of victims have developed a strong relationship between the constructions of collective memories of the armed conflict as a form of communitarian identity. As a result, AMOR and APROVIACI have built victims' collective memory narratives as a way to create a sense of social belonging into their local communities. In the words of some AMOR and APROVIACI members:

> "Our memories are our identity… As a group of victims the one thing that we have is our personal and collective stories about the war and the resistance … and these stories make us what we are now… I belong to every story of suffering in this town because I can identify myself with this pain; with this misery… my identity is made of everybody's tears, hopes and collective resistance… I stand here for anybody who has suffered in this armed conflict… this is my identity" (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

> "I'm part of this group because I'm a victim, a woman, a survivor, a dreamer, a fighter and a citizen! I'm all of that! But the most important thing is that I'm a living memory as well… I belong to this community because I can tell everybody in the world about the horrors of this conflict… I belong to this communal memory and this memory makes me feel part of this community, of course! But, you know? I guess in essence my identity is made of every tear that my fellow friends of APROVIACI have dropped for their victims… my identity tastes like salt water" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

The second argument is that for this case it is possible to establish a relationship between the construction of collective memory and the establishment of democratic values in transitional justice times (Jelin, 2016; Manning, 2017). Through remembering their past these victims' groups are able to gain a public voice after the war, building a plurality of memories in the public sphere. This visibility of *counterpublics' narratives* (Fraser, 1992) or *counter-narratives* (Arnold-de Simine and Radstone, 2013) can create different *memory communities* (Booth, 1999; Whitehead, 2009), promoting victims' narratives about the past and political recognition in transitional justice processes. As a consequence, it is clear that these Colombian victims' groups are memory communities. AMOR and APROVIACI are

helping the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Colombia, and through their memory narratives are contesting power relations in the collective construction and (re)construction of the horrors of war.

A former treasurer of AMOR explains how this relationship between public recognition and memory has been really important to claim human rights in the public sphere:

> "The most important achievement for AMOR in recent years is how events as the *March of light* have brought us political, social and public recognition as victims in our town and given us the power to write the memory of our territory in our own words, making our relatives that were killed visible… Now we can claim for truth, justice and recognition of our rights without fear or shame because the people in our town know who we are and the reasons behind our claims and demands… I think to write our community's memory is the best tool to obtain recognition in our town; to get public recognition in the public space, in the square, in the park, in the market, in the church… thanks to all these actions we can creates public memory 'in public', and this is the most important thing of this whole process" (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

Furthermore, a former president of AMOR explains the role of this victims' group in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the country in the next narrative:

> "Our historical responsibility as a group of victims and survivors of this armed conflict is to claim the truth, demand the truth and help to get the truth for everybody, victim and non-victim… If one day it can be possible to create a particular commission of truth for Eastern Antioquia, AMOR will be the voice of the victims and the voice of women's memory… the voice of more than 25,000 women from this region that have been suffering this armed conflict for a long long time… and, most importantly, AMOR can be the organisation to verify if the versions of armed actors, officials and non-officials, are truth or not…I believe that we can help, thanks to our perspective, experience and our knowledge about what has happened here… we can help to build a more inclusive truth for everyone" (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

The third argument is that following the ideas of Jelin (1994, 2016) and Barahona De Brito (2010) building processes of collective memory denotes ways in which victims' social movements actively construct direct and indirect relationships with the past and the present, establishing three particular types of memory. First, a *communicative memory*, the memories of individuals, which are only shared with his/her immediate environment. Second, a *political memory*, collectively organised acts and public rites of commemoration. Third, a *cultural memory*, articulations and representations of memory which gain a wider forum in different cultural arenas in which they have different functions and are controversially discussed, and because they exist in material form, can be archived, rediscovered and reinterpreted. The focus of discussion in this article is that, for the case of AMOR and APROVIACI, both victims' groups are developing and establishing these three particular types of memory simultaneously and synchronically in their region of Eastern Antioquia through the *March of Light* initiative every week.

The value of the *March of Light* is that individual expressions of memory narratives can produce collectively public acts to demand human rights and the truth about what happened in this conflict from a victims' point of view. This long process of constructions of memories cannot be understood if we do not first recognise that those memory actions are touching on different communicative, political and cultural dimensions of memory at the same time. It seems that for the case of Eastern Antioquia there can be no neat separation between individual and collective constructions of memory in the public space. Thus the initiative of the *March of Light* is showing us that public constructions of memory are social practices developed and fostered in particular social contexts. As a result, this is a clear example of how to build a successful practice of victims' collective memory as a social construction in transitional justice contexts.

The final argument is that the creation of narratives of memory in post-conflict Colombia is a transitional justice situation where different social actors (particularly victims) are struggling to approach the past and the present, contesting power relations around the construction of collective remembrance. In simply words, the phrase 'history is written by the victors' could be most accurate in addressing the relationship between the construction of collective memories in post-conflict Colombia, and the power associations around the establishment of official narratives of the past. This sentence reveals how the category of power defines who is allowed to write the narratives of what happened at the end of war hostilities. In order to establish clear understanding about what happened in almost six decades of armed conflict in Colombia, it is important to note that this is a field of constant tension between *official narratives* about the war waged by the Colombian government, the Colombian army, Paramilitary groups and Guerrilla groups ('the official warriors'), and *non-official narratives* created by civil society organizations, NGOs, social movements, human rights defenders, civilians or victims ('the unofficial war actors'). This tension between official and non-official narratives shows how collective constructions of memory, collaborative constitution of narratives, and particular reconstructions of the past are set in place by agents, actors or institutions that have their own political, social, and cultural agendas (Erll, 2008; Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, 2012).

As a consequence, the construction of victims' collective memory, in transitional justice times, can be a battlefield in post-conflict Colombia. The final aim of official and non-official actors is to establish into the country's collective memory a particular set of views about what happened during the war; shaping specific social contexts, sites of memories, and meanings according to their particular values, narratives and identities (Erll, 2008; Manning, 2017). Thus this dichotomy (official and non-official narratives) is an example of how in post-conflict Colombia the constructions of different social frameworks of memory made by the victims are essential to understand the relationship between narratives and initiatives of memory (Tamayo Gomez, 2017). This tension (between official and non-official narratives) is a part of transitional justice scenarios in which the clash of diverse sets of values and social memories defines positions of power, recognition and visibility inside context of transition (Kent, 2011; Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, 2012; Jelin, 2016).

In order to understand the complexity of this tension for the case of post-conflict Colombia, the next example can provide an illustration of this intricacy. In 2005 the Colombian government submitted a bill to create a transitional justice framework for the demobilisation of paramilitary groups called the *Justice and Peace Law* which states "former combatants are given reduced sentences of up to eight years in prison in exchange for appearing before prosecutors in public hearings and confessing their crimes" (Romero, 2012:4). Addressing issues about victims' constructions of collective memory, this law made it the perpetrators' responsibility to reconstruct the truth about what happened during the conflict with a strongly limited participation of victims in these reconstructions. As a result, "victims were invited to ask questions of the paramilitaries, but they could not tell their own accounts" (Romero, 2012:5), and the truth about facts and reasons behind some paramilitaries actions, such as massacres or extra judicial executions against civilians, were unreliable or incomplete. For some victims from Eastern Antioquia, as the fieldwork demonstrated, the feelings of frustration, impotence and impunity were the result of these public hearings inside local communities:

> "I went to the public hearing of 'Lázaro' (former member of one of the paramilitary groups that operated in Eastern Antioquia) and I asked him why he killed and tortured my husband and my son… He didn't answer… He said that he couldn't remember the name of my husband or the name of my son but he could remember the massacre… and after these words just silence… silence… and I felt so annoyed and frustrated because I couldn't get the truth, the reasons… why he killed my family? Why could he not remember?" (Member of APROVIACI, personal interview).

In the same context, the following narrative is a good example of the tension between official and non-official narratives. The establishment of truth is always in permanent debate between antagonistic actors:

> "At the public hearing this paramilitary leader started to say that he never was involved in dodgy activities and this is untrue... He ordered my brother to do all sorts of things… make landmines, uniforms and work in drugs fields…. He had to work 20 hours per day making landmines… no food… no water… my brother said that the same thing happened with several other child recruits... Why if my brother told the truth to the Red Cross, the real truth, the Colombian Government believes the confession of this paramilitary leader more than my brother? Is this not a clear example of impunity or injustice? Why does my brother have to be in jail for more than 25 years and this paramilitary leader jailed for only eight?" (Member of AMOR, personal interview).

Saavedra (2012) and Rinke (2012) have demonstrated that previous mechanisms to build victims' collective memory of the conflict, that the Colombian state implemented in the years before the peace agreement, were focused on the role of the criminal acts, ignoring the structural causes of the conflict. As a result, this has undermined the role of the victims in the processes of construction of collective memory in the past. The consequence of this, in Rinke's (2012) words, was that for that time "the official memory of the conflict that is being created in Colombia is promoting a false peace that either prolongs the conflict or indeed is setting the stage for new conflicts in the future" (Rinke, 2012:1); and a lack of plural narratives, indispensable in the architecture of collective memory, was deeply affecting this social process.

This previous construction of victims' collective memory, where official narratives focused on perpetrators' point of view, has extremely affected the dignity of the victims. Official actors have the symbolic power to legitimize a social order and, in this case, those official actors established a preceding legitimization of a criminal social order against Eastern Antioquia's victims. This is why is extremely important this initiative of the *March of Light* and the processes of transitional justice that are beginning in Colombia. This is an historical opportunity to provide reparation to the victims of this armed conflict, delivering justice, and creating a more inclusive and plural collective memory narrative about the past, having victims' perspective at the centre of this transitional justice context.

Conclusion

This article began by outlining the concept of collective memory from a sociological perspective. With an emphasis to comprehend the construction of collective memory as a social process, it went on to establish how the notions of power, ideology and authority are crucial to redress the turbulent past to understand the present. It has reviewed the characteristics of the former Colombian armed conflict, focusing on the region of Eastern Antioquia and its victims' organisations initiatives. It has analysed the case of the *March of Light*, stressing the idea that the creation of collective memory from a victims' perspective is a powerful instrument to claim truth and reparation in Colombia, helping the on-going process of transitional justice in the country. It established that the tension between official and non-official narratives of memory is a part of transitional justice scenarios in which the clash of diverse sets of values and social memories defines positions of power, recognition and visibility inside this context of transition. The article, therefore, is an open call to victims' movements in contexts of transitional justice and post-conflict to understand the crucial role of creating collective modes of remembering as a powerful instrument to claim justice and reparation for their local communities.

Importantly, this article it also emphasised that the construction of collective memory in post-conflict societies is a struggle over power and the exercise of this power to shape communal representations and meanings about the violent past. The case of Colombia shows how different modes of remembering can highlight the idea that the past is not given, on the contrary, it is continually re-constructed and re-represented; where collective memories of previous events can fluctuate in different degrees or scales. As a result, victims' groups of Eastern Antioquia do not just focus on *what* is remembered (data, facts or events) but also on *how* it is remembered and publicly expressed. These two aspects (*what* and *how*) could define the quality and meaning of the past in transitional justice situations when the construction of memory is in permanent tension. Thus understanding the role of different modes of remembering in collective memory narratives is important to comprehend how specific mediums can influence socio-

political representations in post-conflict countries. This article has stressed, finally, that the effort of Colombian victims' groups to constitute plural discourses in the public sphere is a crucial element to encourage a more active role of local communities in the configuration of their *memory regimes* after the war.

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