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‘Ser Eleno’: Insurgent identity formation in the ELN

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‘Ser Eleno’: Insurgent identity formation in the ELN

In conflict studies, identity has been posited as an explanatory factor of the resilience of insurgencies. This article focuses on the identity formation of the National Liberation Army (ELN), a leftist insurgency group in Colombia. As Marxist-Leninist organisation, the ELN aims to overcome capitalism. In their perception, this is possible via the transformation of the individual into a ‘collective personality’. Along the dimensions of ‘content’ and ‘contestation’ we will demonstrate the mechanisms they impose for such identity formation. Identity, as we will argue, is a main factor in explaining why people participate in this insurgency and thereby enhance its resilience.

Keywords: Colombia; ELN; identity; ideology; Marxist-Leninist insurgencies; guerrilla movements; resilience of insurgencies

Introduction

Establishing a viable insurgency is not an easy task. Guaranteeing the structural and operational resilience of an insurgent movement is even more difficult. According to numerous studies, creating cohesion and forming a stable organisational structure are the most important obstacles insurgent organisations have to face.¹ These studies correspond with the ‘Fourth Generation of Revolutionary theory’ stating that one of the three decisive factors leading to successful revolutionary collective action is identity formation.² While the question of identity is just one among a whole range of factors discussed as an answer to these challenges in the scientific articles dealing with violent insurgencies, we will argue that identity should be one of the core factors to be examined when investigating the resilience of insurgent organisations.

The formation of a politically salient identity is a key factor in overcoming the many obstacles a guerrilla movement has to face and overcome if it wants to be operable.³ While this argument is in accordance with propositions recently posited in the field of terrorism studies⁴, empirical research on how such processes of identity formation work in insurgent organisations is still insufficient. Therefore, this paper enquires into the main factors contributing to the creation of an environment attractive enough for individuals to join an organisation under conditions such as subsuming oneself under a ‘collective’ organisational will and, not least, risking one’s life on an almost daily basis.

Whereas in the context of violent conflict identity is usually related to factors such as ethnicity, nationality – especially if there is a context of divergent languages and historic backgrounds – or

religions,⁵ we will present an interesting case in which identity constitutes the core factor of an insurgency's resilience. The Colombian *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) does not utilise any of the afore-mentioned identity markers. Hence, the ELN does not have the 'advantage' of being able to pursue ethno-political or nationalist arguments in the recruitment and further development of their members and militants. After the fall of the Iron Curtain (as well as many related small wars), the ELN thus represents a rare case.

Given these historic circumstances, the ELN was remarkably able to deal with the monumental loss of popularity of Marxist-Leninist ideas that coincided with the end of the Cold War. For this purpose, the organisation created a heavily normative and ideological identity which they call '*Ser Eleno/Elena*' (meaning 'being an ELN member'). As we will reveal, during the past 50 years of the Colombian conflict the ELN has been able to create such a resilient political identity that neither time nor the various changes in the dynamics of the conflict have succeeded in destroying the group. The ELN has demonstrated remarkable adaptability over these past 50 years; the group had to face just one minor internal fragmentation, but without any substantial loss of its political perspectives. It is therefore highly probable that even peace negotiations and subsequent demobilisation procedures will not compromise the core of the organisation due to their strong identity formation.

To discuss the main elements of this identity formation, the article is organised in the following manner: the first section will give an overview of the main interpretations of the complex conflict setting in Colombia. Particular emphasis is laid on studies concerning deserters and reintegration. The second chapter describes our analytical framework as well as the methodology. In the following section we will explore why identity matters in the Colombian struggle, in particular regarding the ELN. Subsequently, we will elaborate along the variables 'content' and 'contestation' – using the framework developed by Abdelal and colleagues⁶ – the main factors in the formation of a resilient 'collective' identity within the ELN. The variable of 'contestation' deals with the internal decision-making process of the ELN, showing how a highly decentralised, military organisation functions through a kind of democratic system, thereby creating possibilities for organisational malleability.

Constructing identity – a missing piece in the Colombian puzzle

Explanations of the Colombian conflict

The present scholarly debate on insurgency movements in Colombia can be divided into three main approaches. Although these approaches do interact, distinct schools of thought have evolved from them and constitute the present state of research regarding the Colombian civil war.

The first approach emphasises political grievances, with a particular focus on the history of the Colombian 'labyrinth'.⁷ The conflict is traced back to a period in Colombian history called 'La Violencia' (1948-1953). It was in the aftermath of this period that the two large, still existing insurgency

movements ELN and FARC were formed. 'La Violencia' is characterised by an exclusive two-party system of Conservatives and Liberals that explicitly excluded every form of political participation outside of these two parties. This situation, according to the historical approach, very much provided the stage for violent political uprisings. This school of thought is mainly pursued by Colombian scholars called '*violentólogos*'. In analytical terms, it is focused on internal causes rather than external factors.⁸

A second approach emerged in the 1990s and is mainly concerned with the disintegration of the Colombian state. It applies a more comparative methodology and therefore has gained the attention of a broader range of international scholars.⁹ Furthermore, this approach lays stronger emphasis on the socio-economic grievances, especially the vast inequality faced by Colombian society. Structural causes hence play a key role in this kind of research and its explanation of the emergence and persistence of the internal conflict.¹⁰

The third approach is derived from the works of Paul Collier and his colleagues about the economic factors underlying civil war, and thus focuses primarily on the 'greed' factor behind violent conflict. It stresses the role of – mainly natural – resources in carrying out armed violence and maintaining a rebellion. Political motivation, in contrast, is largely neglected.¹¹ Collier's works have been subject to considerable criticism, especially in the case of Colombia. Critics have drawn attention to, for example, the complexity of war systems¹² and stressed the differences between war zones.¹³ Particularly regional studies have argued for the necessity of taking into account the close ties between regional particularities, resources and conflict.¹⁴ Most importantly for our purpose, there have also been studies on the internal justifications of the guerrilla groups¹⁵ and deserters which dispute Collier's argument from an empirical social science perspective.

While all these approaches stress important points, we still see that identity is a missing factor in the explanation of the persistence of insurgency movements in Colombia at least. A possible explanation for this surprising fact is that the debate only resorts to the identity variable when all other factors fail to provide a satisfactory answer. We argue, however, that identity might be the missing piece in the Colombian puzzle: not only as a further reason why people become and live as insurgents, but also why they are willing to die as insurgents. As Clapham showed in his influential work about African guerrillas, creating an insurgent identity is an outright necessity: 'Any insurgency, dependent on mobilizing local-level support, almost necessarily must articulate concepts of identity which bind together its supporters and distinguish them from their adversaries'.¹⁶

Some research has been conducted that focuses on the reasons for becoming a member of insurgent groups, with a particular emphasis on Colombia.¹⁷ Most of these accounts concentrate on the recruitment phase, yet they acknowledge that joining a rebel group and being an insurgent are different entities: '[...] the reason why someone joins a rebel outfit may differ from the reasons why he/she stays, and these are very likely to change during the course of the conflict.'¹⁸ Among these works, the study by Ribetti is the most important to date, especially because she elucidates that a sense of belonging is an important factor

for joining and staying in the insurgent organisation. Still, as is the case for most of the other studies concerning Colombian insurgent groups, she concentrates on the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the biggest of the Colombian guerrilla groups. Therefore, her findings are not easily applicable to the ELN. For example, she highlights the fact that it is not allowed for members to leave the organisation unsanctioned, which is true for the FARC, but not for the ELN.¹⁹ Herrera and Porch, as another example, also deal with the particularities of the FARC, discussing the integration of female fighters into the masculine culture of the organisation.²⁰

Other research accounts of the Colombian civil war dealing with a comparison of the insurgent organisations also focus on the FARC, its particular resilience,²¹ or – in a more general sense – the subjective motivations for joining and leaving insurgent formations.²² The latter studies stress the importance of identity formation; Patiño and Patiño in particular deal with the identity transformation of former fighters after their demobilisation. These studies do not, however, engage in a discussion on the question of how identity formation works inside the insurgency. The two studies by Gutiérrez and Camacho examine the motivations and benefits of Colombian guerrilla fighters as a response to the greed approach posited by Collier. Their findings very much contest the greed thesis; for example, Gutiérrez demonstrated that in the Colombian case the rank and file of the guerrilla fighters do not receive a wage or any other monetary benefits.²³ Nevertheless, these accounts are also not able to sufficiently address the research deficit concerning an explanation of why people actually stay in these groups.

As shown above, the main strand of research deals with people who have left armed groups; such defectors, however, are – due to their potential bias – a questionable source in explaining why people are willing to stay in the organisation, despite all the hardship they might have to face. As Herrera and Porch precisely identify: ‘[...] interviews with deserters frequently emphasize the negative aspects of their experience in the guerrilla war, in an effort perhaps to ingratiate themselves with their interviewers, and to justify, both to outsiders and in their own mind, their decision to flee the organization.’²⁴

An important exception is Florez-Morris’s study on demobilised guerrillas from the three insurgent organisations which were reintegrated into the formal system after successful peace negotiations (M-19, EPL, CRS).²⁵ His findings are rare and valuable insofar as proving that collective demobilisation in connection with successful negotiations does not bias the feelings of the individuals towards the group as individual desertion does; for this reason, we will use some of his material, gathered in interviews with collectively demobilised guerrillas, in the empirical part of this paper. While he raised the question why members stayed until reintegration on an individual level, the study still did not discuss in detail how the organisation’s mechanisms of socialisation, and identity construction in particular, worked.

Despite the lack of research in the Colombian case, the connection between identity and conflict is a well-established research field. The studies of Kriesberg and Lederach are the most prominent in this regard.²⁶ Other studies have posited identity as a constructivist category in relation to violent conflict as

an answer to how better to understand the interrelation between collective identities and violence.²⁷ In relation to our endeavour, case studies from African examples draw the most parallels, foremost Pool's analysis of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.²⁸

Analytical framework and methodology

Identity, particularly from the perspective of constructivist epistemology, is a highly contested concept. The most influential critique concerns the notion of fluidity when approaching identity from a constructivist approach.²⁹ Nevertheless, identity should not be dismissed as a factor when explaining human action, as is shown by Abdelal et al.³⁰ The interdisciplinary team around Abdelal, mainly from Harvard University, develops a systematisation of the identity variable in a way that makes it comparable, while at the same time maintaining its flexibility for a broad variety of utilisations. This approach is especially applicable insomuch as it does not focus on individuals, but on collective identity formation.

The two main categories suggested by Abdelal et al. are 'content' and 'contestation'. Content is divided into four sub-types: constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparison and cognitive models. Constitutive norms can exist in a written form, but this is not necessary as long as they have fixed meanings for the in-group members. In the case of the ELN, we will mainly use their statutes, but also other papers which explicitly aim to regulate and set expectations about their behaviour, for the empirical analysis of this category. Social purpose refers to the specific common goals of the organisation, as goals set motivations. As a left-wing revolutionary movement, the ELN unsurprisingly identifies their goals as social equality and a specific variant of communism. Relational comparison aims to delineate 'us' from 'them'. In the case of the ELN the other is represented by the USA, the Colombian oligarchy, but also other revolutionary groups like the FARC. Cognitive models are considered broadly as worldviews, a way to make sense of their conditions, whether social, political or economic. In relation to the ELN, we interpret this as the main category since it is where they code their particular understanding of themselves and their purpose. Obviously, ideology has an impact here.

Contestation ultimately aims to explain levels of in-group contestations about content. The ELN's adaption of 'central democracy', in our analysis, is the main issue in that regard, since this form of organisational governance links identity formation to the formalised political-military structure.³¹ Identity is a crucial factor in any conflict setting because it differentiates 'us' from 'them', thus shaping and being shaped by the conflict at the same time.³² Although it is widely acknowledged that identity is a viable explanatory category for collective behaviour, especially in conflicts, the empirical application of this variable has not yet been well explored. This is particularly true for non-ethno-political insurgencies. Hence, a qualitative research approach based on explorative case studies is important to gain insight.³³

In our empirical study – in which we applied a qualitative content analysis – we used fourteen primary texts by the ELN: their statutes, indoctrination and inspirational talks, strategy papers, internal interviews with the Central Command and political writings of the group’s middle command, and exchanges between the ELN and FARC. The time frame of the study is set between 2002 and 2008, in line with the peace process during the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, various violent struggles between the ELN and FARC and the availability of sources. In addition, interviews with two spokespersons of the ELN were conducted during field research in Colombia in 2012. Further six interviews were conducted with people close to the organisation; since these interviews do not represent primary sources, they were not coded, but included as important background information while analysing the main corpus. While the primary material demonstrated clearly that ideology is important for cohesion and formation processes as well as for organisational purposes, it also showed that being an ‘*Eleno/Elena*’ is considered the core construct of membership. This particular construction corresponds with political identity formation.

ELN history: Why identity matters

The ELN was founded by Fabio Vasquez Castaño in 1964 with a strong reference to the Cuban revolution. The period of the early 1960s also saw the emergence of other guerrilla outfits in Colombia: especially, the FARC and the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL). All these formations usually are considered to be a result of ‘*La Violencia*’ and the subsequent merger of the Liberal and Conservative Party in Colombia known as ‘*Frente Nacional*’ (1958-1974), which de facto excluded any other political participation.

In contrast to the peasant origin of the FARC, the ELN’s membership was composed of student organizations, former liberal guerrillas and worker’s unions.³⁴ In its early years, the ‘Foco’ theory of Ernesto Guevara served as the main ideological guidance; consequently, the ELN put its emphasis on the armed struggle. The ELN made its first public appearance in January 1965 when it captured Simacota, where the group then announced a political program. Besides a strong anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchic stance the ELN then pronounced an abstention from official elections; the latter point interesting insofar as it should change significantly in later stages.³⁵ It is also worth noting that the ELN was proposing rather a people’s democracy than socialism.³⁶

The most characteristic organizational feature of the ELN in its founding years was the authoritarian and absolutistic leadership of Fabio Vasquez Castaño. Internal political controversies were at times solved by executions, leading to insecurity inside the organisation and doubts regarding its leadership. Persistent features of the ELN since these early times are a messianic belief in their mission and the definition of ‘*Ser Eleno*’ as the becoming of the ‘new man’.³⁷ The entrance of the Catholic priest Camilo Torres Restrepo in 1965, bringing with him elements of Liberation Theology, and his death four months

later created the first celebrated martyr of the organisation and reinforced the mythic image of the 'Eleno'.³⁸

In 1973, the Colombian military nearly extinguished the ELN during 'Operation Anorí'. In the subsequent years, the organisation was therefore forced to undergo a serious period of restructuring. Fabio Vasquez was expelled as the leader, the Spanish-born priest Manuel Pérez Martínez took his place and remained in control until his natural death in 1998. His main supporter in the organisational leadership was Nicolas Rodríguez Bautista, who took his place after his death and leads the organisation up until now.

During the following decade, the ELN developed its decisive organizational features which are still valid nowadays: (1) Marxism-Leninism as main ideology, (2) central democracy as internal decision making process, (3) decentralized structures, (4) the aim of cooperating strongly with the population guided by Christian norms and (5) the disapproval of execution as punishment.³⁹ Furthermore, the ELN attempted to establish alliances between several of the guerrilla groups present in Colombia in the 1980s. All these alliances, however, broke down by the mid-1990s at the latest, despite the ELN's initial belief that a common enemy would enable the diverse organisations to overcome their differences. According to Medina Gallego, though, these failures were not caused by political disagreements in the first place, but by different histories, habits and internal practices of the organizations.⁴⁰

While the FARC and the emerged paramilitaries grew exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s – among other reasons due to the drug trade – the ELN predominantly refrained from financing by drugs. It considered the drug trade as a severe security risk for the population, which would suffer the following violence, and as an assault on national sovereignty. Moreover, the ELN realized that a connection to the drug trade would delegitimize their political aspirations and further strengthen the arguments for an US intervention in Colombia.⁴¹ Nonetheless the ELN also grew during the 1990s up to 5000 members, financially facilitated through rent extraction from the oil and mining sector, still one of their main ways of income generation. In the mid-1990s, the ELN took a decisive political and strategic shift, with consequences for the present day: (1) the overall goal changed from seizing power directly but to build up the so-called 'people's power', (2) the ELN no longer considered itself as the revolutionary avant-garde, but the people, and (3) the revolutionary struggle was no longer considered the only way to achieve communism, instead, a combination of all forms of struggle would have to take place.⁴²

There are several issues to be raised to demonstrate why identity matters in the ELN. The first point that has to be mentioned is the heavy competition the ELN is facing. The organisation is a self-styled revolutionary guerrilla group, which – in the current Colombian setting – has a much larger competitor, the FARC. As mentioned before, the difference in size is mirrored by the research work conducted on these two insurgent groups: whereas extensive literature exists concerning the FARC, their actions, behaviour, structure, organisation and ideology,⁴³ little attention has been paid to the ELN.

Although both insurgencies perceive themselves as Marxist-Leninist, there are considerable differences between them. These differences even led to violent quarrels between the groups during the 2000s, which only formally ceased in 2009. The FARC has put in place strict army structures. This makes them more potent in military terms, which has ultimately led to greater victories against the state army; this is certainly one of the reasons why the FARC draws greater political, scientific and also media attention. The ELN, in contrast, is organised in a decentralised way. It has obtained much stronger social ties with the population in their regional strongholds and, until recently, refused to take part in the Colombian drug business on a larger scale.⁴⁴ Although the right-wing paramilitary groups – often in collaboration with the Colombian army – tried to extinguish the ELN during the 1990s, the group was able to survive, albeit severely weakened. At the moment it boasts about 2000 fighters, which is still a formidable number for an illegal insurgency group.

The key question is how the ELN could survive against considerable assaults and, simultaneously, uphold its position against much more potent rival organisations like the FARC or the various right-wing paramilitary groups, which were able to provide regular salaries to their fighters. It must also be considered that being a member of an insurgency involves the risk of dying, while at the same time – at least in the ELN’s case – there is no significant material benefit for members.⁴⁵ Consequently, one has to ask what the reasons are for joining the ELN instead of the FARC when the risk of being killed appears to be much higher, while the opportunity for financial gains is much lower. We argue that this environment produced the constant need for the ELN to present itself as outstanding. This is what they achieved through their identity construction, a process that is actually easier for smaller groups as a result of being embattled more often and thus gaining a higher sense of allegiance.⁴⁶

A second argument concerns the fragmentation of Colombian state territory. A strand of literature connects this fragmentation with the formation of political identity in Colombia. A quantitative study, for example, found that violent insurgencies arose in those regions where insurgent collective action had taken place before and thus made and still makes mobilisation more feasible. The same findings apply to left-wing as well as to right-wing non-state armed groups.⁴⁷ Exploring this further, Romero highlights that paramilitaries in Cordoba managed to form ‘an imagined political community’, thereby also arguing that the Colombian conflict is fuelled by the existence of divergent political identities.⁴⁸ In another case study regarding the city of Apartadó, Steele sees the enormous problem of internal displacement in Colombia as strongly related to the matter of political identity, as displacement is tied to political preferences, collective action and strategic cleansing by divergent actors.⁴⁹

The ‘Eleno/a’

People’s power – social purpose

The overall goal of the ELN is to bring about communism. The way to achieve this goal, however, is no longer to seize power directly, but to build up the ‘people’s power’ (*poder popular*), primarily through the creation of a particular Colombian national identity:

‘[...] our fundamental goal must be the construction of an identity as nation, hence the construction of the power of the people. The elements that should be recognised in order to achieve this are the territory, the economy, the revolutionary army [...].’⁵⁰

The ‘people’s power’ is established through societal transformation and democratisation, as is expressed in the following quotation:

‘the battle of the insurgency in urban areas is dedicated to constructing a new model of life which guarantees and benefits the development of human dignity, constructs solidarity attachments, guarantees to men and women the opportunity to exercise their fundamental rights and their social obligations. [...] the essential goal of human life will be tranquillity, welfare and happiness [...].’⁵¹

This belief is strongly linked to the ELN’s overall worldview of a flexible interpretation of Marxism-Leninism interspersed with revolutionary Catholicism. Ideology as a belief system has a strong impact on group cohesion, as it has an explanatory function regarding how the world works, but also provides problem-solving mechanisms for the individual.⁵² It has a legitimising function, as it gives the group and the individual an explanatory cause and a meaning about who they are and what they do.⁵³

Marxism-Leninism is omnipresent, expressed through the belief in Marxist ‘materialism’. In the thinking of the ELN, the social world is comprised of class struggle. Just as there has always been an oppressing empire – represented in the Colombian case by the USA and the national oligarchy – there have also always been some enlightened people to fight the oppression. One of the cited examples for this never ending class struggle and the people’s resistance is the story of Spartacus.⁵⁴ Adapted to Colombian circumstances, the history of class struggle is perceived as a three-stage war: the first war was the Simón Bolívar-led independence war, the second wave headed by the liberal party and Elicier Gaitan⁵⁵ in the late 1940s, and the third instance finally initiated by the radical priest Camilo Torres, whose legacy the ELN continues – at least in their thoughts.⁵⁶ In this sense, the ELN perceives revolution as a historical determination with itself as the continued and almost logical consequence. This development process of the organisation and its aim for ideological continuity even beyond the time span of its existence follows Goldstone’s notion of retooling already existing cultural frameworks.⁵⁷

The Christian element, in contrast to Marxism-Leninism, is not officially propagated. It is more a heritage derived from the involvement of Camilo Torres, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian, in their founding years, and of the Spanish priest Manuel Pérez Martínez, their former long-time official leader (1982-1998). Despite the non-official character of Christian ideological elements, it is still a vital element in the ELN’s thought, and the main reason for their strong attachment to moral values. This also

explains, for instance, their refusal to take part in the Colombian drug trade. The combination of such Roman Catholic morality with a strict belief in Marxist materialism is the core ingredient of the ELN's oft-cited 'moral' character. This moral component is consequently present throughout their documents and exemplified by their emphasis on living with dignity. Martyrdom for a just cause thereby becomes a messianic feature.

Concerning the implementation of 'people's power', the ELN nowadays pursues an alternative approach in addition to the traditional model of the revolutionary fight. They have developed a rather evolutionist model of societal transformation that recognises a transitional stage called 'peace with social justice'. In this stage, some modes of capitalist economics are tolerated. Peace will then be achieved through a comprehensive national consensus, delivered in the form of a new constitution. The guiding example for achieving such a consensus is the *Constituyente* process of 1991 in the aftermath of the peace accord with the M-19 guerrilla,⁵⁸ but with an even broader participation of the population.

For this reason, the ELN insists on the participation of the civil society in the ongoing peace negotiations with the Colombian government. Civil society is understood as an additional, linking element between the ELN and the state. This is a remarkable feature insomuch as it implies that the ELN does not consider itself the sole voice of the oppressed – a quite unusual feature for a Marxist-Leninist organisation. Consequently, civil society will have a prominent say in how to build a better Colombia. In peace negotiations, the ELN aims to work alongside some sectors of civil society to achieve change and clearly also to build greater popular pressure on the Colombian government.⁵⁹

Constituting the 'new man' – cognitive model

'Ser Eleno/a' – becoming a new man – is a cognitive model in the mode of a specific worldview. Marxist thinking, as shown, has a strong ideological impact on this worldview, which – mainly by bearing norms and beliefs – stimulates group affiliation. It draws on the historic notion of the 'new man', a rhetorical figure once made popular by Che Guevara and soviet propaganda. This rhetorical figure has been adapted to the specific needs of the ELN. In the following, we will describe and discuss this prototype of the perfect revolutionary to gain deeper insight into what 'being an Eleno/Elena' means.

Going back to early communist history, theories about the 'new man' (in other versions also the 'soviet man') are not a new concept, though a contested and inconsistent one. Its roots even trace back to Marx and Engels; according to them, communism would create 'a poly-functional, multi-talented, and socially-conscious individual, deriving pleasure and satisfaction from giving pleasure and satisfaction to others, who, by virtue of eliminating of everything in life that enforces economic and intellectual specialisation, will be able "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening [and] criticise after dinner ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic"'.⁶⁰ Marx and Engels did not give a detailed account, but it is clear that the concept involves the transformation of the

very nature of humankind. The general solution the concept has to offer is the formation of a ‘collective personality’, in which individuals are happy to sacrifice their own interests to the will of the collective.⁶¹

Nikolai Chernyshevsky elaborated the fullest description of the ‘new man’ in his work ‘What is to be done? Tales of the new people’, the main inspiration for Lenin’s famous ‘What is to be done’. Chernyshevsky emphasised that actively engaging in revolutionary action is the key to becoming a ‘new man’. This is a considerable development since it indicates that becoming a professional revolutionary is synonymous with becoming a ‘new man’. Furthermore, specific qualities of the revolutionary are highlighted in his writings: hardness, single-mindedness and courage would thus be qualities needed to carry out a revolution and suffer hardships on the long way to creating a new society.⁶² Similar notions can be found in the writings of Che Guevara – probably the most-represented communist author in the ELN’s thinking and writing.⁶³

The reason for transforming the human as a whole, following the ELN’s line of argumentation, is because capitalism implements its inherent logic not just economically, but also in the very self of every human being. Therefore, to achieve communism – the final goal of humankind in this rationale – everyone has to become a ‘new man’ to be able to actually overcome capitalism. Indeed, for the ELN the ‘new man’ is intrinsically linked to the process of revolution: ‘[T]he new man is none other than the revolutionary man, as by the same token the final goal of all men consists in being a revolutionary; the ultimate fate of mankind is revolution.’⁶⁴

This rationale has far-reaching consequences, as such sequences show: ‘The necessity of survival means we have to work on our identity as guerrillas in order to fight and to advance the whole human race; simultaneously, we increase our personal dignity through this fight.’⁶⁵ On the individual level, being a revolutionary (and the process of becoming one) is thus an end in itself. Through this connection, the transformation on an individual level is tied to the transformation of society – also on a global scale: working for the revolution is synonymous with creating a better world – and through this action the revolutionary is becoming a ‘new man’. The development of the revolutionary consciousness, an ‘awakening’ that enables individuals to see the class struggle and the necessity of revolution, is a mandatory personality development. This is what the ELN wants to achieve when imposing this worldview on its members, as is stipulated in their statutes:

‘Being an Eleno: Every Eleno/Elena is a new man/woman in construction, motivated by the ideals of humanism, dedicated eternally to the matter of the people. They personify radicalism as an element of the organisation’s identity, expressed in the desire to track the origin of things and consequently advance the revolution.’⁶⁶

In this process of mandatory personality development, the aim is to create a ‘collective personality’, which not only puts the aims and goals of the group before those of the individual, but interprets the essential individual needs as satisfiable in just such a collective manner. Hence, obedience to this guidance is not just necessary for the group’s sake, but for the individual him/herself. It is solely through

personal transformation that society as a whole can be changed. A former ELN member described this mandatory personal transformation as a deep-reaching process: ‘[...] even our personalities were moulded by the guerrilla movement...’⁶⁷ Another former guerrilla from the demobilised M-19 group described how any kind of self-worth is only achievable as a collective process in the group: ‘[...] one does not exist as an individual; each person is like a cog in the machine; [...] the individual [as an individual] is the least important element, compared to the group as a whole.’⁶⁸

Collectivising one’s will – constitutive norms

The focus of this section is the process of identity formation. This is a very challenging task, given that modelling a collective personality willing to fight – and, hence, prepared to die in this fight – is not easy for any organisation. Over the past 50 years, the ELN has developed organisational mechanisms consisting of rules, duties, prohibitions, punishment and rights. These mechanisms aim to ensure that, under all circumstances, the group stands above the individual and the subjective identity comprises the collective self-image as a guerrilla fighter. Rules regulate the knowledge of why to fight and how to fight, as well as showing respect to people, superiors and the group. Furthermore, the subordination of private life to the collective will is aimed for, as exemplified by the need to ask for permission before having sexual relationships and children.

In the personal career of the guerrilla fighters, their incorporation into the collective proceeds in several steps: at first, the aspirant has to live through a phase of preparation, after which he or she is formally inducted. This period can last for more than a year. After induction, he or she has to attend a harsh military base camp. In the camp, special emphasis is laid on ideological indoctrination. After the completion of the camp, the aspirant becomes a member of the organisation. The new guerrilla fighter must abide by all the rules and prohibitions of the organisation, but is also entitled to certain rights.⁶⁹ These rights comprise the opportunity to make proposals and dispense justice, being able to vote and be voted, and having 14 days annual holiday. However, the concrete arrangements of these rights differ depending on his/her respective rank inside the organisation.⁷⁰

During their early period in the organisation, members are not allowed to visit their families, since family ties should be replaced by the collective group identity. The most important duty of a guerrilla is hence to explicitly put the organisational will before his or her own.⁷¹ The indoctrination is mainly transmitted through martyrs. All propaganda material, especially if dealing with social instructions,⁷² is accompanied by the names or phrases of martyrs of the organisation or the wider ‘anti-imperialist’ realm, one of the most popular being Ernesto Guevara’s ‘Hasta la Victoria, siempre’. This strong reference to role models reinforces the idea that self-sacrifice for a greater cause is worthy in any case. As Florez-Morris states, the worshiping of guerrilla role models in songs, printed material and oral history spreads the idea of self-sacrifice and can be seen as a distinctive cultural feature of the movement.⁷³ Specifically,

the references to the ELN's own heroes – Camillo Torres in particular – create identity and legitimacy from within.⁷⁴

The members are divided into small units in which they work, live and fight. This creates lasting ties and group cohesion. Combat, of course, also has an unequivocal impact on the unity of the organisation. As a consequence, punishment is executed via the withdrawal of one's Self as a guerrilla fighter, for example by the confiscation of weapons (in case of which the guerrilla fighter has to conquer a weapon from the enemy, in order to prove his worthiness again) or degradation, or by the loss of emotional ties through redeployment. There are different levels of restrictions, requiring different methods of punishment. As a matter of principal, the most important thing is not to harm the cohesion of the group in any way, be it through the abuse of resources or persons, damaging the reputation of the organisation, or founding factions. The respective penalties reach from extensive self-criticism in front of the group, thus inflicting humiliation upon oneself, to death, for example for murdering another Eleno/a. In the latter case, however, the potential perpetrator has the right to a fair intra-organisational trial, which follows the principle of '*in dubio pro reo*'. In general, punishment does not affect the health and life of the members of the organisation, but aims at discipline through the collective.⁷⁵

Enemy perception – relational comparison

While the main enemy for the ELN is still the 'oppressing empire' of the United States, the main point of delineation is the Colombian 'oligarchy' which forms the government and is perceived as being controlled by the 'empire', as well as the Colombian military and the right-wing paramilitary groups. This final section therefore deals with the portrayal of the main opponents of the ELN. This enemy perception is also a decisive factor in all peace processes in which the organisation has participated; hence it is a factor of significant political importance.

As already shown, the ELN's Marxist-Leninist worldview generates a dichotomous world consisting of an antagonistic class struggle. Since the ELN is on the side of the oppressed, it is a logical move that any other party structurally contradicting the organisation and its aims must be an oppressor. This is demonstrated in a remarkable way by a statement of a former ELN member in a commanding position, concerning the ELN's first peace negotiation: 'It was difficult for me to speak with the oppressors. In the first meeting I saw myself placed opposite the opponent and it seemed difficult. I saw so much distance that it seemed impossible to find common ground. The reaction was more emotional than rational.'⁷⁶ Another account of such antagonistic self-perception is expressed by the statements of an ELN spokesperson, explaining his reaction when he was invited to dinner in the Presidential Palace for informal talks. He declined the invitation – though not the talks per se – stating that a guerrilla fighter is only allowed to enter the Presidential Palace on two occasions: to sign a peace accord or to capture the palace.⁷⁷

This kind of iconic oversimplification of the enemy also finds its expression in statements regarding the Colombian governments. All differences between those governments, also in the historical context, are negated: from the start of the ELN's struggle, when the Colombian government was headed by President Valencia, until the current President Santos, the ELN sees the same kind of presidency (the 'oligarchy') in place. Since all presidents represent the same state, they consequently also stand for the same class interest:

'In our Colombian case, the bourgeois state has been represented by the oligarchy (family Santos, Lleras, López, Turbay, Pastrana, Uribe, etc.) side by side with the owners of the monopolies, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the top level of the military. As a result, the regime is presidential, monopolist and dependent on the North American Empire. Their government is legal, but illegitimate, for it is neither backed nor acknowledged by the majority.'⁷⁸

Due to the lack of any differentiation, the ELN thereby creates a unilinear figure of one enemy out of the governmental multiplicity. Such simplification is an expression of a specific need of the ELN: the justification for their ongoing fight is the belief that nothing has changed since the times when they took up arms for genuine and legitimate reasons. If substantial changes had taken place in the country, chances might be high that the legitimacy for maintaining the violent fighting would diminish, even on an intra-organisational, theoretical and ideological level.

Furthermore, such perception of the enemy leads to a justification of their own practice not from inside but from outside. Indeed, the ELN receives attention and creates internal cohesion not least through their criticism of the existing order, in particular the socio-economic challenges Colombia is undeniably facing. Along this line of reasoning, the ELN portrays their enemies as 'terroristic' and 'fascist'.⁷⁹

Decision-making process – contestation

Contestation is an important notion in the constructivist approach to identity formation because it allows for malleability. The ELN's norms and its behaviour in that regard have surely developed over several years and have adapted to different conditions. One reason for the survival of the organisation is their means of internal decision-making. The background of this decision-making process is a very specific understanding of democracy. The ELN has developed and practises a so-called 'central democracy' with strong elements of direct participation. Consequently, they perceive themselves as being democratic, and consequently as legitimate, in contrast to the Colombian government. The organisation is therefore willing to accept the remarkable practical difficulties resulting from this 'central democracy', particularly inflexibility and time-intensiveness.

All single units of the ELN are subordinated to the level directly above; still, the main principle applies that the majority is superordinate to the minority. The political structures are centralised, whereas the

executive structures are decentralised.⁸⁰ In the lowest structures (single combat units), the unit itself nominates the persons they want as their commanders. This list is given to the next level and – if approved – these persons can be elected. Hence, every unit chooses their own commander: a monumental difference to the FARC – where commanders are designated by their superiors – and one of the main points of divergence between the two organisations.⁸¹

The next, and also the main, national level of the flat organisational hierarchy is the ‘Congreso Nacional’ (National Congress). The National Congress meets every four to six years and determines the overall course of action for the upcoming period, in often lengthy discussions. An array of rules of exception exists in case the National Congress cannot meet, although specific strategic decisions would necessitate it. Every unit elects its delegates to the National Congress in a proportional manner. Some of the delegates are permanent members for a certain amount of time, and thus cannot be voted out. In the interim periods, the National Direction is the highest executive organ. Its delegates are chosen among and by members of the National Congress. Members of the National Direction are required to have been members of the ELN for at least six years. The National Direction is supposed to distribute the financial resources; it is itself controlled by the ‘Comando Central’ (Central Command).

The Central Command, the highest political organ, is chosen by the National Congress, and includes the two most prominent positions: (1) the so-called ‘political responsible’, at the moment Nicolas Rodriguez Bautista, and (2) the ‘military responsible’; additionally, there are three more military positions, often consisting of the commanders of the strongest wings in military terms. The overall task of the Central Command is, at least in conceptual terms, the political direction of the organisation; its function is explicitly to be the outward representative of the organisation. Furthermore, it is part of the National Direction. In plenary meetings of the National Direction, the Central Command represents the highest authority. Another commission, called the Ethics Commission, is also elected by the National Congress and functions independently of the other committees, with a particular responsibility for internal judicial matters.⁸²

Hence, the ELN has a certain ‘checks and balances’ system with a distinct separation of powers. When considering this hierarchy, it is striking that the ELN has no centralised leadership as such, since the Central Command is merely the political representative organ with responsibilities in coordination with the real power base, the National Congress. All decisions, strategic as well as with regard to content, are subject to the consensus of this National Congress. While this procedure slows down all political decision-making, the collective identity of the members of the organisation is strengthened at the same time by the – reasonable – feeling of close political inter-organisational representation.

Additionally, this system of representative organisational governance is an expression of the ELN’s federalist composition; it explains how they attain organisational cohesion in a situation of high fragmentation on the ground. As decision-making is indeed a collective process, subjected to a form of

democratic governance, the malleability of the organisation – and the collective of its members – is possible due to a discussion process that includes representatives of every organisational unit.

Conclusion

As our case study shows, the process of the formation of collective identities among the individual members of the organisation is highly important in understanding the attractiveness of becoming a member of an insurgent organisation. The applied theoretical framework proved useful, although the categories showed strong interconnections. Nevertheless, the analysis along these categories revealed the process of identity construction of a non-ethno-political or religious insurgency.

The ELN has developed mechanisms to impose a unique identity upon its members, which generates attachment to the group not just by collectivising every aspect of the members' lives, but also by creating a collective personality. These mechanisms are present in organisational aspects – for every decision requires a collective verdict – as well as in connecting with positive connotations the subordination of individual will to the group's will. The image of the 'new man' and its adaption plays a central role in the ELN's thinking and, subsequently, its implementation upon the individual.

As the main element of contestation, the internal decision-making process is the much-needed cohesive element on the level of organisational governance. This governance rests on democratic fundamentals: all fronts and units of the organisation, and their respective views, are represented in the overall analyses, perceptions, goals and decisions. This strongly suggests that the permanent process of negotiating and fixing the perceptions and goals of the organisation is only possible due to the intrinsic connection between these governance mechanisms of the ELN and the strong ideological foundation that targets the collective identity formation process of the individual members.

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Notes

1. Cf. Byman, 'Understanding Proto-Insurgencies'; Gates, 'Recruitment and Allegiance'; Gutiérrez, 'Telling the difference'; Gutiérrez, 'The Dilemmas of Recruitment: The Colombian Case'.
2. Cf. Goldstone, 'Toward a Fourth', 152-154.
3. Brannan et al., 'Talking to "Terrorists"', 4.
4. Brannan et al., 'Talking to "Terrorists"'; Schwartz et al., 'Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective'.
5. Schwartz et al., 'Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective,' 3.
6. Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable'.
7. Rabasa and Chalk, *El laberinto colombiano*.
8. Guzmán et al., *La violencia en Colombia*; Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*.

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9. Arnson, *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*; Pizarro, *Insurgencia sin revolución*; Rangel, *Guerra insurgente*.
 10. Deas and Gaítan, *Canjes violentos*; Nasi, *Cuando callan los fusiles*; Rettberg, 'Business and peace'; Uribe, *Salvo el poder*.
 11. Collier, 'Doing Well out of War'.
 12. Richani, *Systems of violence*.
 13. Guaqueta, 'Dimensiones políticas y económicas'.
 14. Nasi and Rettberg, 'The Interlink Between Resources'.
 15. Camacho Guizado, 'Credo, necesidad y codicia'.
 16. Clapham, 'Introduction: Analysing African Insurgencies,' 13.
 17. Arjona and Kalyvas, 'Recruitment into Armed Groups'; Dietrich Ortega, 'Gendered Patterns of Mobilization'; Gutiérrez, 'The Dilemmas of Recruitment'; Espach et al., 'Why they join'; Herrera and Porch, 'Like going to a "fiesta"'; Ribetti, 'The Unveiled Motivations'.
 18. Guichaoua, 'Introduction,' 4.
 19. Ribetti, 'The Unveiled Motivations,' 4.
 20. Herrera and Porch, 'Like going to a "fiesta"'.
 21. Bakker et al., 'A preliminary Theory of'; Gutiérrez, 'Telling the difference'.
 22. De Posada Villegas, 'Motives for the Enlistment'; Patiño and Patiño, 'Configuración de la Identidad'; Guáqueta, 'The way back in'.
 23. Camacho, 'Credo, necesidad y codicia'; Gutiérrez, 'Criminal rebels?'.
 24. Herrera and Porch, 'Like going to a "fiesta",' 611.
 25. Florez Morris, 'Why Some Colombian Guerrilla'.
 26. Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts*; Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*.
 27. Cf. Byrne et al., *Handbook of Conflict*; Coy and Woehrle, *Social Conflicts*.
 28. Pool, 'The Eritrean People's Liberation Front'.
 29. Brubaker and Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"'.
 30. Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable'.
 31. Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable,' 697-701.
 32. Cook-Huffman, 'The role of identity in conflict,' 19.
 33. Choup, 'The Formation and Manipulation'.
 34. MOEC (Movimiento Obrero, Estudiantil y Campesino), JMRL (Juventudes del Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal), MRL (Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal), FUN (Federación Universitaria Nacional), AUDESA (Asociación de Universitarios de Santander, USO (Unión Sindical Obrera). Medina Gallego, *ELN*, 65, 81.
 35. Medina Gallego, *ELN*, 110.
 36. *Ibid.*, 122.
 37. *Ibid.*, 124.
 38. *Ibid.*, 166.
 39. *Ibid.*, 379-393;
 40. Medina Gallego, *Las FARC-EP y el ELN*, 531.
 41. *Ibid.*, 456.
 42. Medina Gallego, *ELN*, 563.
 43. See Notes 15, 19, 20 above.
 44. Camacho, 'Credo, necesidad y codicia', 145; ICG, *Left in the Cold?*, 1.
 45. See Note 21 above.
 46. Coy and Woehrle, 'Introduction: Collective Identities,' 3.
 47. Zuckerman Daly, 'Organizational legacies of violence,' 488.
 48. Romero, 'Political Identities,' 52.
 49. Steele, 'Electing Displacement,' 440.
 50. ELN, *Elenizar la Ciudad*, 28.
 51. ELN, *Elenizar la Ciudad*, 29.
 52. Cf. Florez-Morris, 'Why Some Colombian Guerrilla,' 226.
 53. Cf. Gerring, 'Ideology,' 17-18.
 54. ELN, *los 7 retos del Guerrillero*, 1; ELN, *Elenizar la Ciudad*, 15.
 55. Elicier Gaítan's death in 1948 was the initiation for 'La Violencia', a particularly violent internal conflict in Colombian history.
 56. ELN, SinPal Internal Interview with Nicolas Rodriguez Bautista, 2007; ELN, *A propósito de 40 años de luchar*, 3.
 57. Goldstone, 'Toward a Fourth', 155.
 58. For a dry, but nevertheless authoritative assessment of the *Constituyente* process, cf. Bushnell, 'The Making of Modern Colombia,' 283-285.

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59. ELN, *A propósito de 40 años de luchar*, 4-6; cf. ICG, *Left in the Cold*, 25-28; Vargas, *Guerra o Solución Negociada*, 283.
 60. Bergmann, 'The Idea of Individual,' 58.
 61. Cf. Bergmann, 'The Idea of Individual,' 70.
 62. Ibid.
 63. ELN, *los 7 retos del Guerillero*.
 64. Correa, 'Mi vivencia en el ELN,' 189.
 65. ELN, *los 7 retos del guerillero*, 7.
 66. ELN, *Estatutos*, 9.
 67. Florez Morris, 'Why Some Colombian Guerrilla,' 220.
 68. Ibid., 229.
 69. ELN, *Estatutos*, 10-30.
 70. Ibid., 29-34.
 71. Ibid.
 72. ELN, *Cardilla Ideologica* 2, 8.
 73. Florez-Morris, 'Why Some Colombian Guerrilla,' 224.
 74. ELN, *Cardilla Ideologica* 2, 1-4.
 75. Ibid., 28-38.
 76. Interview: Alejo Vargas with Francisco Galan 2006.
 77. Interview: Felipe Torres, 2012.
 78. ELN, *Elenizar la Ciudad*, 19.
 79. ELN, *Análisis de la situación política*, 4- 6
 80. ELN, *Estatutos*, 16.
 81. Ibid., 15.
 82. Ibid., 11-17.