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**Victim: an Identification Concept beyond the  
Internal Armed Conflict in Colombia**

**Aura Angelica Hernandez Cardenas  
Lecturer  
Universidad Minuto de Dios Virtual y a Distancia  
Colombia**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr  
URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
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## **Victim: an Identification Concept beyond the Internal Armed Conflict in Colombia**

**Aura Angelica Hernandez Cardenas**  
**Lecturer**  
**Universidad Minuto de Dios Virtual y a Distancia**  
**Colombia**

### **Abstract**

Law 1448 of 2011, known in Colombia as the “Law of Victims and Land Restitution”, began to refer to as victims, those people who had suffered multiple violations of their Human Rights or International Humanitarian Law, because of the internal armed conflict in the country. People who were not previously recognized as victims began to be named as such due to the fact that they lived under this armed confrontation. Thereby, the establishment of this category of victim has resulted in the identification process of these individuals who have suffered these victimizing events. This identification process, understood as a complex process that is built on relations to others and relating directly to identity, has caused the stigmatization of this population, where the marks of violence are recognized directly and can determine the actions of the victims in society and in their relationships with other. This paper aims to analyze how this new category of victim, created by an institution of authority and power, such as the Colombian Congress, has these material and symbolic resources that directly affect the individual, in their ability to relate to the world and build social relationships.

**Keywords:** Victim, Identification, Stigma, Colombian Internal Armed Conflict, symbolic resources, social relations.

## **Introduction**

Colombia has had an internal conflict for 50 years. This conflict has had consequence in different areas of Colombian society, and has touched the population in many different ways. Research about the topic has been diverse; and while it appears broad, the literature and research have not included all the different facets that the war. One of the most important questions about the war is the consequences that the conflict has left on the Colombian population as a whole, bearing in mind that the effects of this 50 year conflict have been many and continuous.

During these long years of conflict, the kidnaps, extortions, murders, forced disappearances, forced displacement of campesino farmers and massacres have not ceased. In Colombia there have been about 5 million victims in the last 30 years; that is to say 10% of the actual population of Colombia. Moreover, we can infer that every Colombian, has a family member or a friend, who has been touch by the war. For that reason, talking about victims in this country is normal; we live knowing and talking about victims although we try to forget this reality; every week we can contemplate acts that confirm that we still live an internal conflict.

This investigation was born from the relationship between the internal conflict, state recognition and the civil population; its aim is to analyze how the category of victim becomes an identification concept, to identify those people that have suffered violent acts due the internal conflict in Colombia.

This presentation is going to be divided in 3 steps, but first, I will clarify the concept of the term “identity”. This is necessary because there are multiples theoretical definitions. Second, we will analyze how the idea of victimhood began to help understanding the ambiguous and chaotic social reality of war, and the heavy stigma that victimhood carries. Thirdly, to conclude we will analyze the possibility of ceasing to be a victim.

## **Identity as Identification**

I want to make reference to the concept of identity defined by Roger Brubaker as identification, because it can help giving important and concrete facts to understand and analyze the reality lived by the victims of conflict in my country. Brubaker, states that the concept of identity begins to be a pragmatic category (that is used in everyday life), and can lead us to a not very precise analysis of reality from a social scientific viewpoint, as this often creates ambiguity that can lead to inaccuracies in the study. In that sense, the author proposes the following terms: relational identification; categorical identification and self-understanding. I will use these three terms to refer of identity.

When I speak with a victim, I can see the relational identification. The person explains the process where one individual identifies with another individual and at the same time where others identify that person through social

context and multiple variations. It is through social relations that the individual defines her/himself and determines what s/he is; in other words the individual self-identifies through 'otherness'.

On the other hand, the categorical identification makes reference of the formalized, codified, objectified system of categorization development by powerful, authoritative institutions. For instance, the modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization, because it has a monopoly on physical and symbolic violence and can therefore define, propagate and impose its concepts. This does not mean that the state creates identities, but the state can control or change those identities because they have some symbolic and physical resources allowing the imposition of these categories (Brubaker, 2000).

However, in the process of defining "who am I?" that follows a victimizing event, it is the process of self-comprehension that according to Brubaker is a dispositional term that assigns to the individual through a specific situation, the conception that "people have what they are"; this is based on the place and the social space that they have. In function of the place and social space is how people act; also it is the representation that people have of them. This is the way that people recognize, define and identify themselves.

In this way, meanings are born that make reference to socially constructed stereotypes, and it is from there that people start to answer the question of "who am I?", but burdened by images of suffering, death and the pain of war, of the dirt. Therefore, living a victimizing event becomes a burden that can change a person radically, that can change a person's own self-definition and the terms of their relationships with others. "Therefore, identity appears, as a result of a human process in which the interaction with the world can generate the production of feeling and, at the same time, orientates and directs experience and human behavior" (Bello, 114)

In conclusion, identifying as a victim involves a series of social relations established and determined by otherness, by experience, by relationships with the world, and by the social context that starts to identify what is and what should be.

### **Identification with the category of victim, the Modern State and stigma**

#### *State of Categorical identification*

As has been noted, the armed confrontation in Colombia has produced a huge number of victims, around 5 million people. The people that have lived these victimizing events know that the war has left indelible marks, in their memories, in their physical appearance, in their loss, of family, of their lands, of material possessions among other things.

Being a victim in Colombia during the second half of the 20th century was suffer the war in a lonely way. The State did not have an answer, and did not recognize their condition. In Colombia whole communities were forcibly displaced, political and community leaders were assassinated, kidnappings

became more and more common, and although we lived with this everyday violence, we did not recognize those who experienced it directly.

In 1997 Law 387 was passed, through which “measures are adopted for the prevention of forced displacement, and for assistance, protection, socioeconomic consolidation and stabilization of persons internally displaced by violence in the Republic of Colombia” (Law 387, 1997). It was in this moment that society started to recognize that there are people who had to leave their lands and goods due to the war, and society at large began to recognize that forced displacement exists and began to allow the displaced to reestablish their rights.

It was only in 2011, in Law 1448, Law of Victims and Land Restitution, that for the first time the State used the term and recognized “victims” as “people who as individuals or part of a collective, have suffered damages caused since 1st January 1985 as a consequence of infractions of International Humanitarian Law or of serious and manifest violations of international human rights norms, caused by the internal armed conflict (Art 3, Law 1448). From this moment,

Colombian society has decided to recognize 30 years of war and those affected by it.

For the last 4 years, since those affected by the war have begun to be named as ‘victims’ they are not silent any more, and now they have recognition in Colombian society, they are named, we know who they are “(...) the constant state of war that we have in Colombia [...] making silence a survival strategy and silencing a military tactic [...] a denial device [...] they showed us what death is like; to sum up, silencing a person is the way who is a vessel of feelings [...] their bodies like a text, a symbol of silence [...] (Castillejo, 2000:24) but they can’t stay silent anymore.

Giving a name, recognizing them, talking about them, knowing who they are, know how many they are, knowing what they lived and how they lived, all this is throwing away the silence which leads them to death and disappearance, so it is a political decision, that gives recognition to the people that have lived the war directly.

In this way we recognize the roll of the state as an institution that is able, through the use of its symbolic resources to categorize, formalize these categories and control the discourse about what it is to be a victim, specifically defining what it is, what the concept covers and who can be named as such. Consequently, we recognize 8 categories of victimizing events: murder; kidnap; forced disappearance; torture; crimes against freedom; crimes against sexual integrity and gender violence; landmines; recruitment of children and teenagers in the war; acts of terrorism; and forced displacement. People considered victims must have experienced some of these events, and since 1985. Those who suffered before 1985 are not recognized as victims.

The fact that the state can determine who is a victim and define the characteristics of the same, demonstrates “[...] the intrinsically political nature of these forms of representation. The discursive mechanics allow for the ability to comprehend the other. Naming can be, at least, a modality of control”

(Castallejo, 2000: 158). In this way, the fact that the state has recognized the victims becomes a method of social control that helps to understand 30 years of war, incomprehensible chaos, to be able to understand this ambiguity, to be able to grab what is vanishing, So in this way the discourse captures the otherness to enable its analysis. And why not? Maybe in a future post-conflict scenario, it will be able to change the term 'victim' and use another term, still unnamed.

Finally, it is important to recognize that "[...] the displaced (and according to this paper, the victims) are a modality of the strange inside our culture: their radical otherness is part of its definition as a problem. The ambiguity of its definition within the discourse leads implicitly to a difficulty in terms of its conception as a problem" (Castillejo, 2000: 187). In this way, it is necessary to parameterize, measure, control, through its name and definition, and this is what the State does with the law.

### *Stigma*

*"[...] yes we're seen as different. I say that because everyone is like, they don't want to be with us, that we're a danger, that they should be afraid. I don't know what people think, but it's like they think I'm going to be kidnapped again, so they better not have anything to do with me. Nobody actually told me that, but that is what I felt. It is like, I was a danger, I was an infection, and it is better being far away from me (interview with a kidnap victim).*

We can see through this account, that to be a victim is to be stigmatized. The answer to "Who am i?" becomes determined by a relational identity, for other people it is fear and closeness to the war. In this way "[...] the transformation of one image to another within a social space results in the archetypal case of understanding the phenomena related with the advent of the "other-danger" (Castillejo, 2001: 71). In this case the victim "[...] is left in a symbolic place of slow degradation of his humanity. The stigmatized carry their difference tattooed on their skin, and this is no more than an invention of the world we live in.

At this point, I realize that the concept of stigma plays an important role in the process of identification of a victim. According to Goffman (1963) "[...] society establishes the ways we categorize people and the compliment of attributes that we perceive as natural in members of society [...]" (Goffman, 1963: 11). The attributes that are undesirable, and do not correspond to the normal, socially speaking, become undesirable as there is no relationship between what I think an individual should be and what they really are.

*"a person that has a stigma is not totally human [...] on this basis, we practice different kinds of discrimination [...] we build a theory of the stigma and an ideology to explain the inferiority and to note the danger that this person represents [...] in our daily speech we use imagery and views directly related to the stigma." (Goffman, 1963:14)*

In this way, the story that the society establishes around the victim is that they have some undesirable attributes that are not normal:

*They called us displaced people. Everyone called us displaced. Everywhere we went they called us displaced. Being a displaced is like being a destitute person, or that's how I felt; it was the way people looked at me, like a poor person, like an abandoned person, like a degenerate, a pig, a filthy person. When I came to the city that was how people looked me. (Interview with a displaced woman)*

Bearing this in mind, we can see that the attributes that the society imposes on the victim are similar to pain, suffering, death of a loved one, the war, the armed actors, to things that Colombian society wants to forget, wants to sideline, does not want to recognize. In general things that the Colombian society does not want to forgive and does not want to recognize. So, to be a victim is a living memory that the war is still there, is real, that it exists, maybe far away, but it is not a sophistry, and so what has happened to them can also happen to me.

*" [...] So I always think that everyone is chasing me, everyone is going to commit a crime against me, but I have to overcome that; but it's like a stigma until I die and I am scared [...] I am scared of go to the open countryside, it does not matter if I'm alone or not, or if its day or night, I am still scared. Nowadays I am scared of people, I distrust people, I don't have confidence [...] (Interview with a kidnap victim)*

Castillejo puts it very well:

*" [...] the displaced person (we want to make reference to the victims too) is born of an uncertain space: horror, silence and the unseen, the impunity of the massacre. He is predefined by the violence that gave a "beginning": by the war, capture, and the imposed expulsion of a first rejection [...] the displaced is a displaced of another "imaginary disorder": of the violence. In the Colombian context, the slaughter, and the arbitrariness is a part of the unknown world, a world without rules, a world forgotten by politics"*  
(Castillejo, 2001: 92-93)

The victim is forced to carry this burden, the war and the stories of war. The relational identity is full of images, for other people, full of suffering, everyone else, wants to be far away of this figures. It is like a sickness that may be contagious, if we get too close it's dangerous.

On the other hand, as a victim, I want to hide. I do not want to tell who I am; there are a lot of people that have never talked about their victimizing events. Additionally, they do not want to admit to them because they know about the social reprimand they will have. They know how others will identify them and all the various negative stigma.



*“[...]in the beginning what i understood is that displaced people were something strange for society because the people looked at me like that, like something weird, in high school all my classmates pointed me out [...]”*  
(Interview with a displaced teenager)

We can see that the stigma can determine the identity of the victim. “I will never be the same after the victimizing events, I am another person”; there is an ontological transformation of the person, of their being, and another transformation of the person in their relationships with others.

### **In conclusion: stop being a victim**

Within this ambiguity that we live in Colombia, on the one hand failing to understand the dimensions of the war while at the same time trying to impose limits on it, there is a latent necessity to enter a new phase of society, move from the war and start a new era of post-conflict, the way to the peace. The State knows well this, and needs to parameterize and name the victims, so that their rights can be reestablished, and to control discourse so that these subjects cease to be seen as victims.

Moreover, through the discourse expressed by the Law of Victims and Land Restitution, we have built a series of institutions that have as their goal, the development of a public policy to attend to these victims, who following this attention must return to the condition of Colombian citizens without any difference from the others. They must cease to be victims.

This then begs the question of if it is possible stop being a victim after living through all of these events?

*I think that this condition of victim never will cease, there's no amount of money that can change that, for a person, that they can change everything that they've experienced, there's never enough money to bring back a loved one. You can never feel the satisfaction of being established again, of being normal again, of knowing that the government has stopped doing these things [...]*  
(Interview with a victim of forced displacement)

*One day, thank God, they'll stop saying the word so much. I know that if you stop using the word, you stop being it. What the government has done for me is nothing compared to what people think. People say to me “but now you're doing OK, you have a house”- and I tell them: “you do not know what suffering I've been through to get it”. I have been displaced three times, that's not easy, three times everything taken from you, and that's what stays in your mind and your heart, everywhere, in the psychosocial or whatever, that you will never stop being like this. They can give you money, but I will always be displaced; they can tell me that I am not displaced anymore, but I do not feel that; I feel that I am displaced. I will never be like I used to be. I do not feel*

*safe anymore, even though I've established myself again. (Interview with a displaced woman)*

In this way, it is possible that the hegemonic control of discourse leads us to think that this change is possible, and that in a few years there will be no more victims in Colombia. However the experiences lived leave marks on the individual, and identification in turn results in self-understanding that can determine in a significant way, relationships with the world around him.

Here a paradox is created around what I am, and what others see in me; the discourse might pass, but the attributes that determine the individual will remain.

In a society that has lived for more than 50 years with violence, passing to a state of indetermination and thence to peace and normality, requires a reflection upon what we have lived, but we cannot always be in this state of indetermination and ambiguity. To stop recognizing the tracks of war in a person or in society is to forget our own self-understanding of what we are.

It is necessary that Colombia passes through this process of self-recognition of what has happened. We must recognize victims and they must recognize themselves as victims. It is necessary to pass from a state of war to a state of peace. And for this reason it is important to understand that the attributes given to victims have become stigmas, and that although their meanings have changed, they will always leave a mark that determines who they are.

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