

Notes on a Visit to the Comunas of Medellín, Colombia

By Marcus Rediker

I first heard about Juan Guillermo Uribe from professor Ricardo Sanín, who was organizing an international congress on radical thought, politics, and law, to be held at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. When administrators refused to provide the necessary funding, Juan Guillermo found out about it and, in his capacity as leader of the university's radical student movement, marched straight to the office of university president Alberto Uribe (no kin to each other; Alberto is apparently a cousin of Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe). "Alberto," said Juan Guillermo, "if you don't fund this conference, we'll strike and shut the university down." I arrived in Medellín for the conference on July 5 and met Juan Guillermo soon after. He had made my visit possible.

Juan Guillermo is a man of modest height, strong build, and a severe limp. A serious motorcycle injury, years ago, left him unable to bend his left knee, so he swings it to the outside when walking. Every time he shakes hands with someone, he leans in with his head and upper body to maximize the feeling of the encounter. He is courteous, friendly, generous of spirit, charismatic, and given to speaking in short, clear, decisive sentences. It is not hard to see that he is a natural leader.

Over the next week, we would discuss the politics and recent history of Medellín and Colombia, especially the fierce fighting that has taken place over the last ten years in the *comunas* (or *favelas*) that stretch up the mountains from the city in many directions. Here left militias, organized primarily for self-defense, have battled drug gangs, right-wing paramilitary groups, and government troops, most fiercely in *Comuna 13*, as chronicled in an important series of articles (several in *CounterPunch*) by the journalist and historian Forrest Hylton. The *comunas* of Medellín are strategic hotspots.

The people who live in the *comunas* are for the most part the vanquished – those expropriated from land and jobs in other places, who migrate to the city in search of subsistence. Some have been displaced

by the endless civil war in the countryside, in which guerilla groups battle the government for regional control; some by multinational corporations which seize their land for farming or mining. They flee the terror of the paramilitary groups which work with both the government

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and the corporations. Some of the dynamics of expropriation are summarized well in Francisco Ramirez Cuellar's courageous book, *The Profits of Extermination: How U.S. Corporate Power is Destroying Colombia* (Common Courage Press, 2005).

It so happens that Juan Guillermo is a veteran of the struggles in the *comunas* of Medellín. "Have you lost friends in these battles?" I ask. He answers quickly and precisely: "Sixty-nine. Sixty-nine friends and comrades, disappeared and murdered." Most of these people were killed in the peak period of violence, from 1998-2003, but danger continues to surround Juan Guillermo himself, who, as the highly visible leader of the student movement, receives death threats from the paramilitaries on a regular basis. "What do you do when you get a death threat?" – "I must be careful and remain alert in all situations. I depend on my friends."

Soon after our first meeting, Juan Guillermo and I go with a group of friends

and colleagues to the metro cable, a ski lift adapted to urban circumstances to move people up and down the mountain from the center of the city to "*Comuna 1*" and the neighborhood within it, called Santo Domingo. This had been for many years a center of insurgency, I learned.

As we ascend, we look down below on the rich quilt of red brick buildings, their corrugated tin roofs, hanging laundry, pots of brilliant flowers, and iron bars on windows and doors. At the top, we find a new public park flanked by a massive library that resembles nothing so much as three tall bunkers, darkened by fire and smoke. A fitting symbol of the community's struggles, I think.

As we stand there, dazzled by the dense array of houses and narrow passageways that stretched endlessly upward, toward the mountain-top, my fellow visitor Costas Douzinas, professor of political and legal theory at Birkbeck College, University of London, and a veteran of the battles against dictatorship in his native Greece in the 1970s, asks with a touch of awe, "Have you ever seen a place more perfect for urban guerilla warfare?" I had not.

Not long after we have stepped out of the public transport station, we are surrounded by poor children, mostly boys, one of whom appoints himself ambassador of his community and gives us a confident, well-rehearsed welcome as he assumes the part of tour guide leader. Now, that former Medellín Mayor Sergio Fajardo has invested in the neighborhood and tourists ride up regularly to see it, this young man of words has found a good way to make money.

I see that Juan Guillermo has an easy and affectionate rapport with these youth; he loves them. He rubs their heads, scolds them when they do anything untoward, asks them questions, and answers their questions about who we are and why we have come there. When I told this story to Ricardo Sanín, he answered simply, "Juan Guillermo used to be one of those poor kids." So I would discover. A Colombian friend, the influential scholar-activist Oscar Guardiola, later added, "Some years ago, the boys would have met us toting guns."

On our way back down the mountain-side, I ask Juan Guillermo why the city government decided to invest in this particular community. Gesturing at the park, the library, and the metro cable, he says

with proud certainty, “They got all this because they struggled. And the people here know that this is the only reason they got it.”

What about *Comuna* 13? Isn’t that the place where the fiercest fighting went on? Momentary surprise turns to a smile: “That’s my community,” says Juan Guillermo. “That’s where I grew up. Do you want to go there?” A couple of days later, on a sunny afternoon, off we go. We are accompanied by Juan Guillermo’s friend, the attorney Juan Gonzalo Botero, and Natalia López, a law student who helped with translation.

“What will you say when people ask, ‘*Quien es el gringo?*’” Juan Guillermo replies with mischief: “I’ll tell them you are my uncle.” We laugh, but the answer is not as far-fetched as it might sound, owing to the odd Danish ancestor who left Juan Guillermo even more light-haired and fair-skinned than I am. Then again, the people in *Comuna* 13 would have known his uncles and known, therefore, that I was not one of them.

Comuna 13 is made up of about twenty neighborhoods, chief among them 20 de Julio, Belencito, Corazón, El Salado and las Independencias I, II, and III. Its population is around 150,000, a motley crew with more indigenous and especially Afro-Colombian people than one sees in other parts of the city. At the peak of the struggle, in 2002, a writer for the *New York Times* called *Comuna* 13 the “epitome of urban chaos.”

As we slowly ascend toward the elevated heart of *Comuna* 13, we stop at a middle school in El Salado (the Salty One). No sooner are we in the doors than several 11-12-year-old girls surround and carry us off to their classroom. The teacher welcomes us, and the rest of the students gather around. Juan Guillermo asks the students to tell a story to the visitors about the neighborhood. What follows is one utterly traumatic tale after another, each narrated in a deadpan manner.

One morning one of these students found a man in front of his house who had been shot in the head (calling card of the paramilitaries); another spoke of a 12-year-old who had been shot seven times (but survived). Yet another told a story of the school, emphasizing how safe they felt there. On the way out we meet an experienced teacher named Angela, a friend of Juan Guillermo. She, too, gives us a short litany of horror stories, then

pauses, eyes twinkling, and adds, “We also perform miracles here.”

In 20 de Julio, we visit a small chapel and are greeted by Sister Theresa, a founder of the community and one of its stalwarts for almost half a century. Inside, four women from her congregation sit around a small table, singing hymns.

Sister Theresa is a vigorous elderly woman dressed in a nun’s habit, with warm, kind, and yet impatient eyes. She is an artist. The walls are covered with her paintings of indigenous people, among whom she has worked and for whom she has fought for many years. She is also the proud keeper of her community’s history: so, soon out come the scrapbooks, which include a photograph of her, taken thirty-odd years ago, surrounded by a crowd of 5- or 6-year-old children. She points to a fair-headed one: it is Juan Guillermo. She grins as he blushes.

Several pages of Sister Theresa’s scrapbook are devoted to “Operation Orion.” In October 2002, 3,000 government troops and police, together with unknown numbers of associated paramilitaries (the AUC – United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), invaded the neighborhood to root out local radical organizations and to “pacify” the locality. She makes it a point to show me a photograph of her streets lined with U.S.-provided tanks and armored cars, Blackhawk helicopters hovering above. During that violent time, she tried to protect the members of her congregation – with some success, she thinks. Still, dozens, if not hundreds, of people were killed in house-to-house fighting, although many rebels remained in the dense warren of brick-and-mortar buildings.

Onward and upward we go on narrow, noisy streets, thronged with people. Homes are tiny, so social life takes place outside, with knots of people talking, vendors hawking goods, guitarists strumming as singers join in. Life in the *comuna* is, well, communal. Juan Guillermo is well known here: a baker shouts out as we drive by, and soon we are being handed bags of *buñuelos* (deep-fried dumplings) and bread. We visit the home of the president of *Comuna* 13, a man who, like Juan Guillermo, is a veteran of struggles past and a target of persistent death threats to this day.

We arrive at a street corner that has special meaning for Juan Guillermo. Here, he explains, was where, in 2001, he

was shot by paramilitaries. Two men had been following him in a car as he walked on foot. When he heard them hit the gas, he dove for the ditch as they sprayed a round of bullets. He was hit in the back and the leg. He points to the bullet holes in the house on the corner.

As we leave, Juan Guillermo says, “Things are quiet in *Comuna* 13 these days. But the conditions of the people are basically the same, and the struggle is still there. It could explode again at any time.” How do the people here remember the recent battles? “With feelings of great sadness and great bitterness.” He pauses, “They want revenge. They want justice.”

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European Style: Nobody Loves It

By Serge Halimi

Imagine a man on trial for his life. The jury brings in a verdict of not guilty, so the judge immediately invites counsel for the prosecution to complete his closing speech, and then the accused is found guilty and sentenced to death. Similarly, the Irish rejected the Lisbon Treaty on June 12 by a large majority. The treaty cannot come into force unless it is adopted by all 27 member states of the European Union, but most European leaders immediately announced that the ratification process would continue, yet promised to “respect the will” of the Irish people. Europe is used to attacks on the sovereign power of the people by their overlords. That is now its style, even if it likes to be seen as the kingdom of democracy on earth.

The Irish rejected a “simplified” treaty so thick that the prime minister, Brian Cowen, confessed he had not managed to read it cover to cover. One member of