
Critical Human Rights

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Books in the series **Critical Human Rights** emphasize research that opens new ways to think about and understand human rights. The series values in particular empirically grounded and intellectually open research that eschews simplified accounts of human rights events and processes.

Is the current age of human rights activism a historical rupture? Is it the story of a vision of rights that took off in law, politics, and social action since the 1970s, and *displaced* an earlier politics of social justice? Or is human rights activism a new chapter within a longer and more continuous story of organizing for social justice? In this compelling study of front-line human rights activists and their adversaries in Barrancabermeja, Colombia's oil capital and a zone of intense dirty war conflicts, Luis van Isschot shows that the human rights movement emerged organically from a century-long experience of struggle against socioeconomic exclusion and repression. This book offers a profoundly original history of human rights in Colombia, and a critical complement and challenge to global histories that emphasize short timelines, transnational actors, and legal developments as keys to understanding human rights.



The Social Origins of Human Rights

*Protesting Political Violence
in Colombia's Oil Capital,
1919-2010*

Luis van Isschot

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To
Jordi
and
Nicolasa



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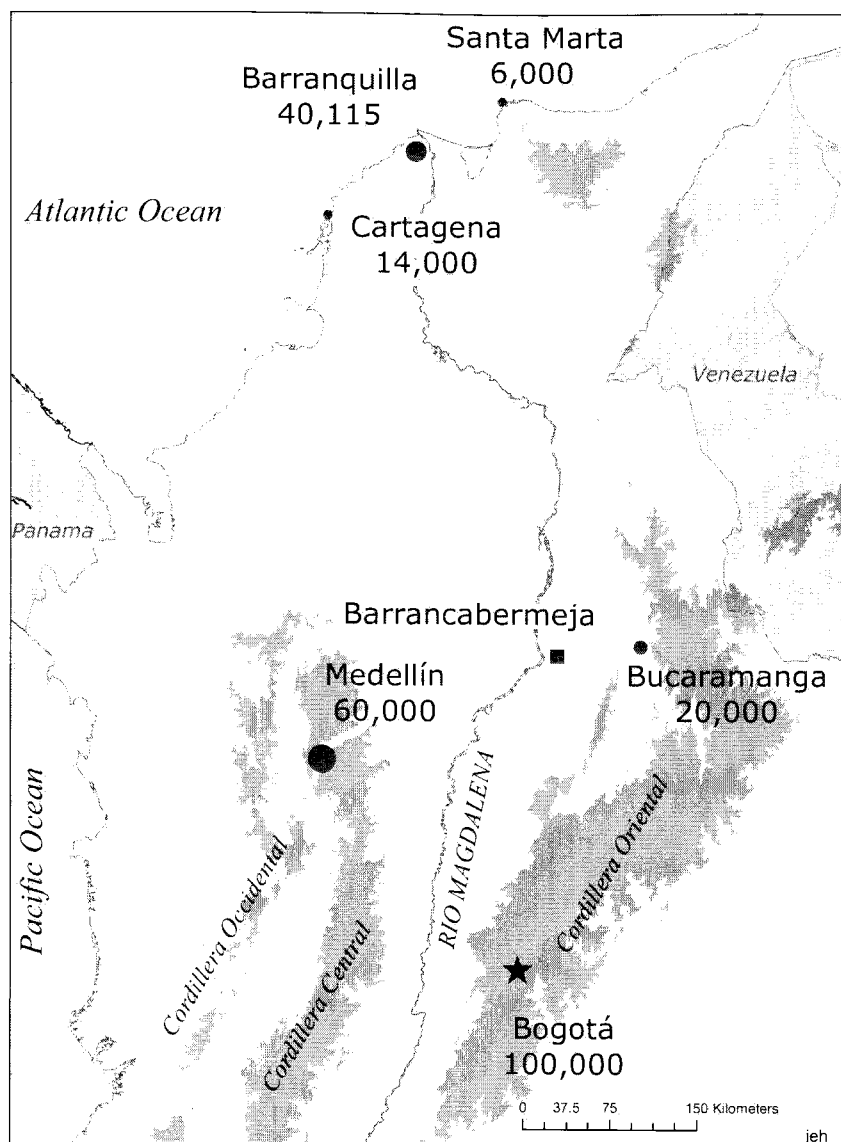
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Preface

Every day thousands of people travel to and from Barrancabermeja by boat. Most come from the countryside to look for work, to sell produce and fish, or in search of safety. Water taxis known as *chalupas* and low-slung motorized canoes known as *johnsons* buzz and skip across the Magdalena River in the shadow of Colombia's largest oil refinery. Concrete ramparts extend for two kilometers along the shore. Before reaching the city, vessels originating from Puerto Wilches, Cantagallo, Puerto Berrío, Simití, or other small towns may be subject to searches by Colombian security forces, paramilitaries, or guerrillas. Barrancabermeja is the unofficial capital of a vast, resource-rich and war-torn region known as the Magdalena Medio. The Magdalena Medio is a hot and humid lowland territory that extends over an estimated thirty thousand square kilometers and includes parts of seven Colombian provinces, or *departamentos*.¹ Despite the fact that much wealth is produced in the Magdalena Medio, it has been estimated that up to 70 percent of the area's one million residents live in poverty, nearly double the national average.² Since the middle of the twentieth century the Magdalena Medio has also been the staging ground for insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. Economic hardship and violence have led tens of thousands of people to permanently abandon rural areas.

At a navy checkpoint just north of the refinery, travelers are questioned and registered by young conscripts. From here, it is a short journey to the municipal waterfront. Migrants then make their way up from the port area, through the congested commercial center of the city, past modest rows of apartments. Along the way they might catch a glimpse of el Cristo Petrolero (see fig. 1), Christ the oil worker, a 26-meter-high ironwork sculpture of Christ, his hands raised to the sky, erected in 1995 in the Ciénega Miramar, the marsh that separates the refinery from downtown Barranca. City buses



Map 1. Northern Colombia, with population figures for main urban areas, circa 1905. Source for population data: Frederick Martin, Sir John Scott Keltie, Isaac Parker Anderson Renwick, Mortimer Epstein, Sigfrid Henry Steinberg, and John Paxton, *The Statesman's Year-book*, vol. 45 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), 868. Map by John Harmon.

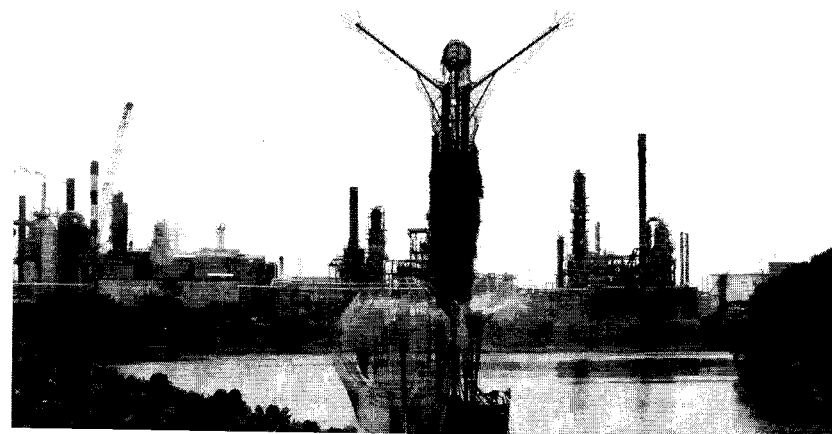


Figure 1. Christ the oil worker, el Cristo Petrolero, symbol of Barrancabermeja. Photo by the author.

and scooters rumble and grind past the oil workers' union headquarters, eventually crossing the tracks into the city's ever-expanding popular neighborhoods. The *barrios orientales* that a majority of *barranqueños* call home consist mainly of small concrete cottages, with clusters of newer wooden shacks assembled at the edges. The land on the other side of the railway overpass known as the *punte elevado* is surprisingly verdant yet physically isolated from the more prosperous city built with the proceeds of the oil industry.

Since the early twentieth century, Barranca has also been connected to Bogotá and the outside world by air. When you arrive by plane, the first thing that hits you is the heat. Humidity fills the cabin of the Avianca Airlines twin propeller Fokker 50 as you descend toward the lush valley below. Barranca has an average temperature of 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit), but the mercury often exceeds 45 degrees by midday. Unlike the coastal areas of Colombia, Barranca is bathed in thick wet air. It is located five hundred kilometers (311 miles) from the sea. There is scarcely any breeze, and the leaves hang motionless on the trees. The groaning, silt-laden Magdalena River affords little respite. Managers and engineers working for the oil industry have been coming from the capital, and beyond, since Jersey Standard arrived in 1919. Under central government control since 1961, Barranca has remained the country's most important industrial center. Through the last decades of the

twentieth century the city became a major site of armed conflict, and of the official repression of social activism. Since that time, oil company personnel have been joined on flights to Barranca by small groups of human rights workers.

I lived in Barrancabermeja from January through December 1998. At the time I was working as a volunteer with Peace Brigades International (PBI), a human rights organization founded on the principles of nonviolence that has worked in support of threatened Latin American popular movements since 1981. We were sometimes described as “unarmed bodyguards,” and our work largely consisted of accompanying human rights defenders in their daily rounds.³ We spent many hours in the offices of local civil society organizations. When an activist received direct individual death threats, we would spend twenty-four hours a day at his or her side. We also undertook regular fact-finding trips to towns along the Magdalena River. Everywhere we went there were ordinary citizens, priests, trade unionists, peasant organizers, attorneys, municipal councillors, and schoolteachers who formed a regional network of human rights activists.

While in Colombia I met frequently with National Police, army, and navy officials engaged in counterinsurgency work. Some of these encounters took place in small villages, in bunkers pitted by machine gun fire. Young soldiers told us that they had to travel in pairs, fully armed, to make the short trip across town to call their families and girlfriends from the local Telecom office. I also met with high-ranking officers, such as General Fernando Millán, the once-indicted paramilitary organizer who was commander of the Fifth Brigade of the Colombian army in the city of Bucaramanga. As he spoke angrily about human rights activists from Barranca, denouncing individuals by name as bandits and subversives, I studied what appeared to be a photo of him posing with the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on the wall behind his desk. It was moments like these that made the dangers of human rights work clear.

On the evening of May 16, 1998, in Barrancabermeja, a large group of armed men wearing military fatigues killed seven people and abducted another twenty-five. Miguel, a PBI volunteer from Spain, called to tell us the news. At the time he was accompanying Osiris Bayter, then president of the Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS). The details were not yet clear, and nobody knew exactly how many people had been killed. Our fears and disbelief were fed by rumors and misinformation. The list of dead young men and women was updated by word of mouth. Over the next week Barranca was gripped by the largest protests in a generation. We spent five days and nights accompanying activists from different local groups as they stood vigil by the barricades that had been set up at strategic points around town. Taking turns at the Peace Brigades office, we wrote reports

about everything that was happening and sent them to human rights groups around the world, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Washington Office on Latin America, and the Inter-Church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America.

The 16 de mayo massacre and ensuing civic strike took place at a time when Colombian human rights activists were increasing their international profile as critics of the United States’ revived war on drugs. Prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Colombia was a leading foreign policy concern of the U.S. government. In June 2000 a \$1.3 billion U.S. military aid package was signed into law by President Bill Clinton following more than a year of public debate. Barranca was poised to become a focal point of international concern. Human rights groups sought to forestall the so-called Plan Colombia by exposing links between the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary death squads. To do so, many drew upon the history of Barranca as a cautionary tale.⁴ Longtime Colombia observer Adam Isaacson wrote following a visit to the area in 2001: “Barrancabermeja is hard to pronounce, and very little of last year’s billion-dollar package of U.S. military aid for Colombia will end up anywhere near this city. But as Washington edges closer to Colombia’s long, bloody conflict, ‘Barranca’ offers a preview of the nightmare to come.”⁵ As Plan Colombia was being discussed in the U.S. Congress, dozens of Colombian human rights activists made trips to Washington, DC, to convince lawmakers not to approve what amounted to a thinly veiled counterinsurgency plan. Liberal-minded Democrats insisted on humanitarian assistance for the thousands of people certain to be displaced by the Plan Colombia-funded military push into the rebel-controlled south.⁶ Opportunists jostled for arms contracts. The number of international organizations present in the Magdalena Medio would increase visibly during those months.

Despite the attention being paid to Barrancabermeja, human rights workers would face terrible new challenges. As Plan Colombia went into effect, peace talks between the government of Andrés Pastrana and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia faltered, and political violence in the Magdalena Medio escalated. I left Barrancabermeja in December 1998, but continued to work for PBI’s Colombia Project until 2003. During my tenure with the organization, I traveled regularly between Washington, DC, Ottawa, and Bogotá to help rally civil society groups, diplomats, lawmakers, and ordinary citizens to the defense of human rights workers. I was able to return to Barranca a number of times during the final months of the eventual paramilitary conquest of the city in 2001. Along the way, I learned that long before Barranca became known as one of the most violent cities in one of the most violent countries in the world, it had been a model of social movement organizing. When I returned

to conduct the research for this book in 2005, I found Barranca transformed. The paramilitaries now exerted near hegemonic control over the politics and economy of the city. Frustrated by the setbacks that they had suffered, yet determined to neutralize the ongoing threat of violence, many of the activists with whom I spoke were in a reflective mood. During our conversations I learned extraordinary things about the city's popular movements, and their relation to the recent context of guerrillas, paramilitaries, and state security forces. The multiple threads of a long history of social activism unspooled as we explored personal journeys through hope, disillusionment, and survival.⁷

One of the people I interviewed while conducting research for this book was CREDHOS's president David Ravelo, who was arrested and imprisoned on September 14, 2010. On December 7, 2012, David Ravelo was sentenced to eighteen years and three months for aggravated homicide. Margaret Sekaggya, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (2008–2014), has stated that the case against Ravelo was part of a pattern of legal harassment of human rights advocates in Colombia.⁸ Dozens of Colombian and international human rights organizations and experts have denounced irregularities in the judicial process to which Ravelo was subjected. Many observers have pointed out that the case against Ravelo, like those against other social activists, hinged on the declarations of demobilized paramilitaries who traded their testimony for reduced sentences under the terms of the controversial 2005 Justice and Peace law. The key witness against Ravelo was the paramilitary commander Mario Jaimes Mejía, alias El Panadero, who is currently serving time for his part in the massacre of thirty-two people in Barrancabermeja on May 16, 1998.⁹ In 2014, investigations were announced against El Panadero on charges of fraud and false testimony, in relation to the case of David Ravelo, and kidnapping, torture, and sexual assault, in relation to the case of the journalist Jineth Bedoya. Since his arrest, David Ravelo has been the subject of death threats and intimidation.

The experiences of the many activists with whom I spoke, and the questions they raised, were the inspiration for this book. I have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to research, write, and teach about the roots of human rights movements in Latin America. This book was developed out of the creative tension between scholarship and practice.

As I write, most of the people I interviewed and consulted continue to work for social change in Barranca, such as the women of the Organización Femenina Popular, shown on the front cover in a march in Bogotá in 2002.



Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone in Colombia who shared their stories and expertise with me, many whose names appear in the pages that follow, and many others as well. Very special thanks to CREDHOS for generously allowing me into their archive.

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My many friends and colleagues at Peace Brigades International deserve recognition, and this project would have been inconceivable without them. If there are any insights in this book that ring true, it is because the clearest arguments are those that have already passed the test of consensus. This history therefore belongs to the dozens of Peace Brigades members who have spent time in Barrancabermeja over the years. On a research visit in 2006 I participated in an exercise of historical memory during which more than a dozen Peace Brigades members shared stories of this most extraordinary of Colombian cities. I hope that I have captured a small part of this collective wisdom in the pages that follow.

This book could never have been completed without the love and support I receive from Stephanie Conway. She has shared my passion for this work. Above all else, Stephanie and I have shared the joys of parenting our two beautiful children, Jordi and Nicolasa, to whom I have dedicated this book.

Abbreviations

AAA	Alianza Americana Anticomunista (American Anti-communist Alliance)
ACCU	Autodefensas Unidas de Córdoba and Urabá (United Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá)
ACDEGAM	Asociación Campesina de Agricultores y Ganaderos del Magdalena Medio (Association of Peasant Farmers and Ranchers of the Middle Magdalena)
ACMM	Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio (Peasant Self Defense Forces of the Middle Magdalena)
ACVC	Asociación Campesina del Valle Cimitarra (Peasant Association of the Cimitarra Valley)
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación (Colombian National Archive)
ANUC	Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (National Association of Peasant Users)
ASFADDES	Asociación de Familiares de Desaparecidos-Detenidos (Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared)
ASODESAMUBA	Asociación de Desplazados del Municipio de Barrancabermeja (Association of the Displaced in the Municipality of Barrancabermeja)
ASORVIN	Asociación Regional Víctimas de la Violencia en el Magdalena Medio (Regional Association of the Victims of Violence of the Middle Magdalena)
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)
AUSAC	Autodefensas Unidas de Santander y Sur de Cesar (United Self-Defense Forces of Santander and Sur de Cesar)

CAJAR	Corporación Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective)
CEJIL	Centro para la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (Center for International Justice and Law)
CINEP	Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (Center for Research and Popular Education)
CNRR	Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (National Reparation and Reconciliation Commission)
CODHES	La Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement)
CONVIVIR	Cooperativas de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada (Private Security Cooperatives)
CREDHOS	Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights, formerly the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights)
CSTC	Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia (National Union Federation of Colombia)
CUT	Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (Central Union of Workers)
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (National Administrative Department of Statistics)
DAS	Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (Administrative Security Department)
DIJIN	Dirección de Instrucción Criminal (Central Directorate of the Judicial Police and Intelligence)
Ecopetrol	Empresa Colombiana de Petróleos (Colombian Petroleum Company)
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)
FAM	Frente Amplio del Magdalena Medio (Middle Magdalena Broad Front)
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército Popular (Popular Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army)
FEDEPETROL	Federación de Trabajadores del Petróleo (Federation of Petroleum Workers)

FILA	Frente de Izquierda Liberal Auténtico (Authentic Liberal Leftist Front)
FUNPROCEP	Fundación para la Promoción de la Cultura y la Educación Popular (Foundation for the Promotion of Popular Education and Culture)
ILSA	Instituto de Servicios Legales Alternativos (Institute for Alternative Legal Services)
IPC	Instituto Popular de Capacitación (Institute for Popular Training)
IPS	Institute for Policy Studies
JACs	Juntas de Acción Comunal (Community Action Councils)
JUCO	Juventud Comunista Colombiana (Colombian Communist Youth)
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril (April 19 Movement)
MAS	Muerte a Secuestradores (Death to Kidnappers)
MRL	Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal (Liberal Revolutionary Movement)
OAS	Organization of American States
OFP	Organización Femenina Popular (Popular Women's Organization)
PBI	Peace Brigades International
PCC	Partido Comunista de Colombia (Communist Party of Colombia)
PSR	Partido Socialista Revolucionario (Socialist Revolutionary Party)
SIJIN	Seccional de Policía Judicial e Investigación (Local Branch of the Judicial and Investigative Police)
UIS	Universidad Industrial de Santander (Industrial University of Santander)
UP	Union Patriótica (Patriotic Union)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USO	Unión Sindical Obrera (United Workers Union)
WOLA	Washington Office on Latin America

Chronology of Barrancabermeja History

- 1905 Roberto De Mares gains rights to Barranca oil concession
- 1916 Drilling begins by Tropical Oil Company
- 1919 Tropical Oil Company sold to Standard Oil of New Jersey
- 1921 Refinery built at Barranca
- 1922 Incorporation of Municipality of Barrancabermeja
- 1924 First major oil strike
Strike leaders arrested and prosecuted by military tribunal
- 1926 Barranca-Cartagena pipeline completed
- 1927 Second major oil strike
- 1929 “Bolchevique” uprising in Santander and Tolima
- 1935 Third major oil strike
- 1938 Fourth major oil strike
- 1948 Fifth major oil strike
Uprising following murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: *La comuna de Barranca*
- 1950 Strike for nationalization of Colombian oil production
- 1951 Drilling operations nationalized
- 1958 Declaration of Sitges: end of La Violencia and start of National Front
- 1960 Unión Sindical Obrera “solidarity strike” with oil workers in other regions
- 1961 Barranca refinery nationalized
- 1963 First major oil strike in thirteen years
First *paro cívico* for social rights and local development
- 1964 Ejército de Liberación Nacional first military action in Magdalena Medio
- 1967 Establishment of the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC)

1968 The FARC opens a front in the southern Magdalena Medio
 1970 Conservative candidate Misael Pastrana Borero elected president
 1971 Oil workers' strike and occupation of refinery
 Court martial of strike leaders
 Split in national peasant organization ANUC
 1972 Organización Femenina Popular established
 1973 Army carries out Operación Anorí against the Ejército de Liberación Nacional
 1975 *Paro cívico* for public services and land for peasants
 Establishment of Barrio Primero de Mayo through land invasion
 1976 Magdalena Medio declared a "war zone" by national government
 1977 Series of short strikes by oil workers
 Oil workers' strike lasting forty-three days
 Military mayor named to Barranca
 National *paro cívico*
 1978 Formation of "self-defense" group that would become the Auto-defensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio (ACMM)
 Liberal candidate Julio César Turbay Ayala elected president
 1980 First evidence of human rights abuses by paramilitary groups
 1981 Formation of Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS) in southern Magdalena Medio
 1982 First human rights protests in the Magdalena Medio, organized out of Puerto Berrío
 1983 *Paro cívico por el agua* (civil strike for potable water)
 Creation of Coordinadora Popular civil society coalition
 1984 Massacre of Vuelta Acuña, followed by mass displacement to Barranca
 1985 Assassination of ELN cofounder and social activist Ricardo Lara Parada
 1986 Assassination of Patriotic Union party congressman Leonardo Posada
 1987 Grenade attack on three members of Patriotic Union party
 Paro cívico to protest attacks against Patriotic Union party
 Murder of fourteen-year-old Sandra Rondón
 First major human rights protest (*Paro cívico por la vida*)
 Paro del noroiente regional peasant protests
 Creation of Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS)
 Organización Femenina Popular becomes independent from Catholic Church

1988 *Paro cívico* to protest murder of labor leader Manuel Gustavo Chacón
 Peasant march and protest marking first anniversary of *paro del noroiente*
 Massacre of peasants by Colombian army at Llana Caliente
 Paro cívico to protest murder of labor leader Hamet Consuegra
 I General Assembly of CREDHOS
 1989 First Regional Human Rights Forum hosted by CREDHOS
 La Rochela massacre of twelve Colombian government judicial officials by military/paramilitary forces
 Paro cívico to protest murder of Patriotic Union city councillor Orlando Higueta
 Establishment of the Albergue Campesino shelter for displaced peasants
 1990 Creation of Human Rights Committee of Sabana de Torres, Santander
 II General Assembly of CREDHOS
 1991 Creation of the Colombian Naval Intelligence Network
 Oil workers' strike during collective bargaining
 1992 III General Assembly of CREDHOS
 Six members of CREDHOS exiled
 Paro cívico to protest murder of city councillor and newspaper publisher Ismael Jaimes
 1994 Peace Brigades International establishes permanent presence in Barranca
 1997 Marcha Campesina peasant march from Magdalena Medio to Cartagena
 1998 May 16 Massacre in *suroriente* (seven killed, twenty-five disappeared)
 Founding of Barranca branch of Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared
 Conservative candidate Andrés Pastrana Arango elected president
 Occupation of major Barrancabermeja public buildings by thousands of peasants from war-torn rural Magdalena Medio during Marchas Campesinas
 Exile of CREDHOS president Osiris Bayter
 1999 Funding for Plan Colombia approved by U.S. Congress
 2001 Paramilitary siege of Barrancabermeja
 2002 Election of Álvaro Uribe Vélez as president of Colombia

- 2003 Coordinadora Popular civil society coalition is dissolved
Creation of NGO Corporación Región by former CREDHOS directors
Establishment of the Espacio de trabajadoras y trabajadores de derechos humanos del Magdalena Medio
- 2005 Establishment of state-run National Commission for Reconciliation and Reparations
Establishment of the Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado by a coalition of Colombian human rights groups, including CREDHOS
- 2010 Arrest of CREDHOS president David Ravelo



The Social Origins of Human Rights



Introduction

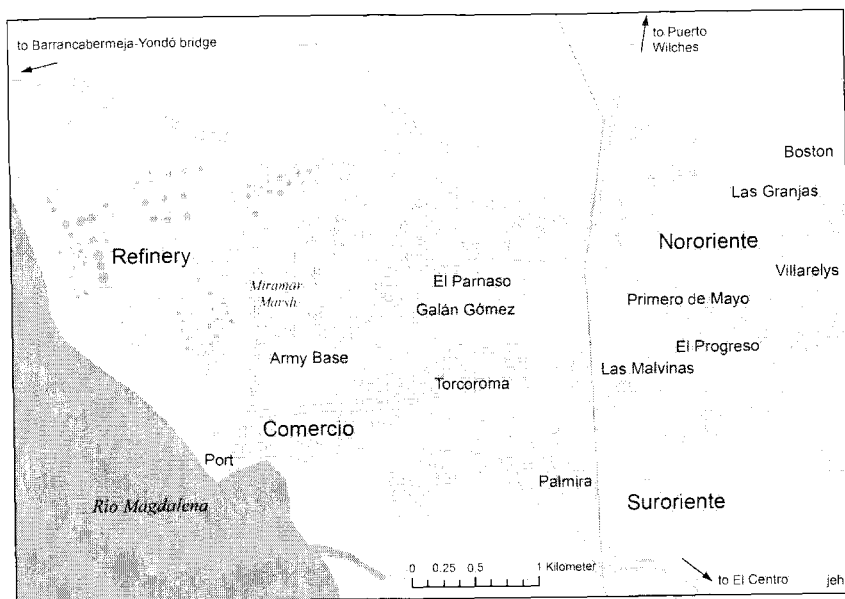
“My basic training took place in the street”

CREDHOS's birth was not accidental. It was born in the heat of everything that was happening at the time, on the one hand the violence, and on the other hand the efforts to build an infrastructure worthy of Barrancabermeja. . . . Social movements were on the threshold of a very important struggle.

Rafael Gómez Serrano, human rights activist¹

Paro Cívico por la Vida

The May 2, 1987, murder of fourteen-year-old Sandra Rondón by paramilitary gunmen in Barrancabermeja inspired the first general strike for human rights in Colombian history. Rondón was on her way to church on a quiet Sunday in the central neighborhood of Torcoroma when two men pulled up on a motorcycle. The man riding on the rear opened fire at close range with a 9 mm pistol. Struck multiple times, she died instantly.² Rondón had recently been identified by local media as a key witness to an attack on three left-wing political activists. Two weeks earlier, a hand grenade had been tossed into a crowded ice cream parlor, injuring eight people, including Rondón's younger brother.³ Hers was not the first murder in the dirty war in Barranca.⁴ But the killing of Sandra Rondón shocked local residents as only the death of an innocent child can, and she immediately became a symbol of the city's struggle for human rights. While local elected officials and social movements



Map 2. Barrancabermeja, selected neighborhoods, refinery, downtown, and northeastern *barrios*, circa 1998. Map by John Harmon.

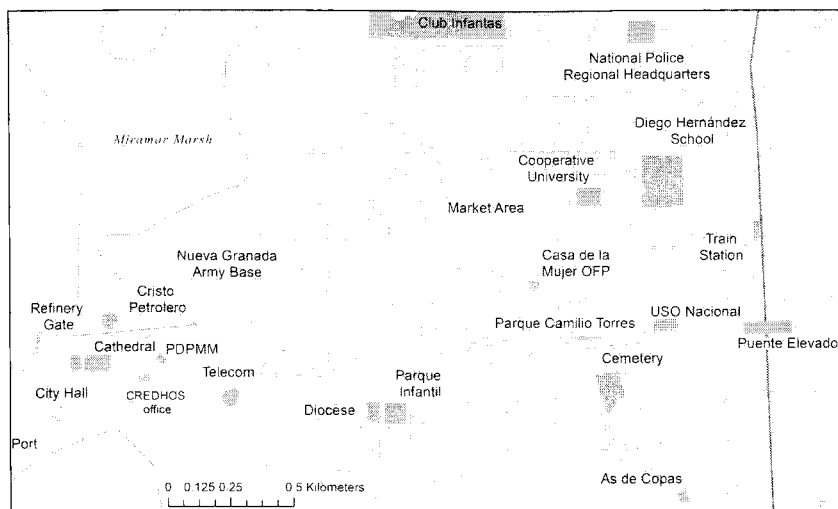
denounced Rondón's murder, there was no response from Bogotá. Catholics, Communists, Liberals, trade unionists, and community organizers in Barranca then staged a mass demonstration, as they had dozens of times before, to demand that the national government guarantee fair wages and public services such as water, education, and health care. This time, however, they called for the protection of civilians from violence.

The Barrancabermeja-based Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) was established at a time when military and paramilitary repression threatened to reverse hard-fought gains made by local popular organizations. In the city a civic-popular movement had brought together the forces of labor, progressive political parties, and community groups. Barranca activists' confidence that they were close to achieving genuine social and political change was buoyed by dynamics being played out at the national level. Through the mid-1980s a record number of Colombians took to the streets to claim a wide range of rights.⁵ Colombians organized forty-seven citizen-led general strikes, or *paros cívicos*, in 1987. That was more than double the already impressive yearly average of *paros cívicos* during the previous decade.⁶ The year CREDHOS was founded was also the cruelest in Colombia's history since the end of La Violencia.⁷ Colombian authorities estimated that armed

conflict had resulted in 2,500 deaths and 200 disappearances in what the national news media dubbed "The Year of the Dirty War."⁸ There would be around 250 politically motivated homicides in Barranca alone in 1987.⁹ As many of the city's most prominent social and labor leaders were killed, human rights activism emerged as the dominant paradigm of popular protest.

Historic struggles for social justice provided Barranca's human rights activists with the bases to muster large numbers of citizens. As historian Mauricio Archila writes: "Civic movements in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the radical implications of people taking an interest in their own municipality."¹⁰ The *paro cívico* or "civic strike" as practiced by popular movements in Colombia was an intentional combination of the tactics used during industrial actions, urban land invasions, and peasant marches by workers, squatters, and poor rural farmers over previous decades. *Paros cívicos* entailed the stoppage of all commercial activity, the occupation of city streets, and the staging of mass rallies in public plazas. In this regard, *paros cívicos* were different from the strikes led by oil workers, which focused on conditions inside the refinery. Peasant movements were the first to regularly use what sociologist Leon Zamosc has termed "collective bargaining by disruption" for the purposes of forcing high-level talks between local communities and the national government.¹¹ Through *marchas campesinas* organized since the 1960s, which often culminated with the takeover of regional urban centers by thousands of protestors, peasant groups demonstrated that the mass mobilization of ordinary citizens could draw high-level officials into negotiations over land title, social services, and economic development. The influx of poor rural people into Barranca, notably politicized peasants fleeing war-affected areas, inspired new urban social movements along these same lines. The civic campaigns for social justice in Barranca in the 1970s would eventually become a model for the campaigns for human rights of the 1980s, and beyond.

Protestors took advantage of Barranca's unique urban topography. There was only one main road into the city and just a handful of routes linking the highly segregated central and eastern districts. A *paro cívico* would begin with groups of young people gathering simultaneously at two main strategic points within the city. One was an overpass spanning the railway line that divides Barranca. On the western side is the planned, formal Barrancabermeja. On the eastern side are the *barrios orientales*, or eastern neighborhoods, that since the early 1960s have been the site of organized land invasions by poor migrants. Known as the *punte elevado*, this bridge was the main road connecting these two halves. The other key strategic point was the As de Copas, an intersection situated at the top of a rise at the southern edge of the main urban area, named for a convenience store at this location. Also of strategic importance was the



Map 3. Popular landmarks, social movement offices, and main streets in central Barrancabermeja, circa 1998. Map by John Harmon.

fork in the road leading out of town toward Bucaramanga, to the east, and Bogotá, to the south. This point is known as El Retén, for the old security forces' checkpoint located there, complete with a heavy boom gate. Though somewhat isolated, this position was narrow, and could be held by a small group of protestors. By setting fire to rubber tires and other debris at two or more of these points, *paro cívico* organizers could effectively contain all movement within the city until exhaustion set in, or the army showed up in large numbers.

The 1987 *paro cívico por la vida*, a protest against political violence staged in the wake of fourteen-year-old Sandra Rondón's murder, was exceptional because of its scale, its spontaneity, and its singular focus on human rights. The first large *paros cívicos* organized in Barranca during the 1970s often coincided with rounds of collective bargaining by oil workers, addressed longstanding grievances about public services, and required weeks of preparation. By contrast, the *paro cívico por la vida* and other human rights protests were carried out in direct response to specific repressive actions, and entailed relatively little notice. An organizing committee was convened by social movement leaders the morning after Rondón's murder. However, several hours before the *comité de paro* could send its members to blockade the city center, groups of young people had already proceeded to the usual meeting places.¹² Francisco Campos, a lifelong activist born and raised in Barrancabermeja, recalls the first

paros cívicos for human rights in the late 1980s as exhilarating experiments in popular democracy. Campos, still a teenager at the time, was completely engrossed by the city's protest movement: "We all took risks. We were a bit irresponsible. We were still young, but totally convinced of what we were doing, nobody made us do anything, nobody manipulated us. We didn't sleep. We participated in the *paro cívico* from start to finish. We ended up exhausted, but it was happiness. This was the best training we had as young people. I was educated there, and afterward I went to university, and I got a degree in human rights. But my basic training took place in the street."¹³ The *paro cívico* in response to Sandra Rondón's murder lasted three days and involved tens of thousands of people. The lack of constraints described by Campos, the shedding of inhibitions, was part of the ethos of *paros cívicos*, generally. The outpouring of the *paro cívico por la vida* was a harbinger of the permanent state of unrest into which many activists in the city were about to plunge.

Sandra Rondón's murder galvanized a broad cross-section of society in Barranca, and beyond. Local civic groups, the oil workers' union, and elected officials were all present at the barricades set up at strategic entry points to the city. So too were the guerrillas. And so Barranca's human rights movement was born: rife with divergent interests and contested meanings. Peasant organizations, which were actually the first to sound the alarm that massive violations were being carried out by security forces and their paramilitary allies, were also among the first to question whether taking to the streets to demand basic human rights offered a way forward. Were human rights too politically narrow? As Communist Party intellectual and head of the Bogotá-based Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, Hernando Hurtado, observed at the time: "Unlike previous protests, this one did not make economic or social demands, only a call for the right to life."¹⁴ A historic mobilization of peasants, called the Paro del Nororiente, conceived as a mass exodus from rural areas around Barranca, was being planned at the time of Sandra Rondón's murder. Some peasant leaders were worried about exhausting their membership and testing the patience of the wider community, including the people living in towns and cities who would host thousands of peasants, in public parks, schools, and churches. In the end, both protests took place, and peasant groups were present at both. In the year following Sandra Rondón's murder, activists in Barranca would organize eight more *paros cívicos* in favor of human rights. In addition to peasant movements, which had been denouncing human rights violations for several years prior, the oil workers union, Catholic Church, Organización Femenina Popular women's organization, and others began organizing around human rights on their own terms, striking specialized human rights subcommittees and publishing urgent actions.

Human Rights as Social Protest

This book examines why, how, and with what impact people living in conflict areas organize collectively to assert human rights. Thousands of people have been killed in Barrancabermeja as a consequence of direct orders given and carried out by the Colombian armed forces and their paramilitary allies, on the one hand, and leftist rebels, on the other.¹⁵ Barrancabermeja-based social activists rallied around the cause of human rights in the midst of an armed conflict in which the majority of victims were civilians. Paramilitary units working in collaboration with state security forces had been undertaking repressive actions against popular movements in the southern Magdalena Medio region since the early 1980s. At the same time, guerrilla groups expanded their influence and control over strategic territories. In response to paramilitary attacks against peasants living in areas under guerrilla influence, tens of thousands of people abandoned the war-torn countryside, seeking refuge in shantytowns on the outskirts of Barrancabermeja. By the middle of the decade, homicides and forced disappearances were being carried out on the streets of the city, targeting social and political leaders and activists. In the late 1980s CREDHOS brought together popular movements from Barranca and the surrounding Magdalena Medio region to expose the perpetrators of violence, advocate on behalf of victims and their families, call upon the Colombian state to protect human rights, and denounce the deeper socioeconomic inequalities they saw as sources of conflict.

Human rights movements have tended to emerge in places where the state is strong. This is evident across Latin America in the concentration of human rights organizations in large urban centers, particularly in capital cities where interaction with government is most direct. Although Barrancabermeja is distant from Bogotá, located in what is generally thought of as a frontier region, there is a robust state presence owing to oil. For decades Barranca has been home to the most important trade union movement in Colombian history. Throughout the twentieth century, Colombia's ruling Liberal and Conservative parties guaranteed the flow of oil through repressive actions against trade unionists and regular interruptions of the constitutional order known as declarations of "state of siege."¹⁶ The entrenchment of two-party rule during the National Front governments of the 1960s and 1970s inspired the formation of new social movements, alongside armed insurgencies. For Barranca residents, national authorities represented a foil to popular radicalism. For Bogotá, Barranca represented a problem to be contained. Human rights activism in the 1980s was therefore a response to state-sponsored repression.

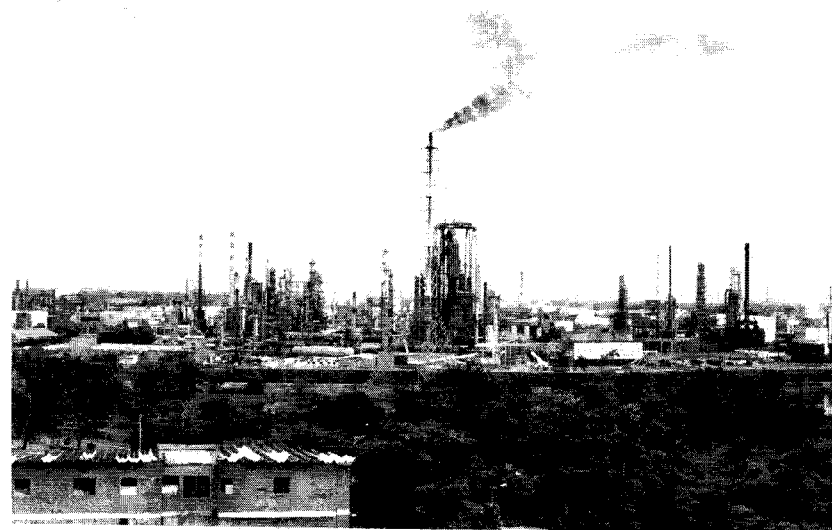


Figure 2. Barrancabermeja refinery. Photo by the author.

Barrancabermeja and the surrounding Magdalena Medio have long been associated with radical politics. The founders of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional initially took the name Brigada José Antonio Galán, after the *santandereano* leader of the late eighteenth-century Comuneros Revolt.¹⁷ During the first decade of the twentieth century, popular Liberals fleeing Conservative repression established colonies in the area. In the 1920s, socialist Raúl Mahecha organized the first oil workers' strikes. In 1927 a self-described Bolshevik movement based out of a railroad station just a few kilometers from Barranca participated in the first Communist uprising in Latin American history, five years before Agustín Farabundo Martí took up arms in El Salvador. In 1948 *barranqueños* loyal to populist presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán seized control of the city when their leader was assassinated. During the ensuing civil war, left-leaning Liberal guerrillas became a dominant force in the region. The midcentury conflagration known as La Violencia lasted from 1948 to 1958, during which 300,000 Colombians were killed. During this period, the oil workers' union was banned, and popular politics were driven underground. These events would directly inspire the guerrilla groups that formed in the region during the 1960s.

Armed insurgent movements, particularly the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

(FARC), played critical roles in the recent history of Barrancabermeja. Urban guerrilla militia were established in the city during the 1980s. This was a major strategic shift for what had hitherto been rural-based movements. As we shall see, the guerrillas' early military actions in the city were mostly limited to attacks on security forces and oil infrastructure, as well as occasional political kidnappings. More disconcerting to the city's social movements were the guerrillas' attempts to opportunistically capture popular protest. The guerrillas were never as brutal as the military and paramilitaries, and local social movements were able to maintain a high degree of autonomy. Guerrilla members were mainly local, and they enjoyed broad sympathy. But the guerrillas' efforts to build mass movements entailed serious risks. When state repression came, the members of legal political movements associated with the FARC (Patriotic Union) and the ELN (¡A Luchar!) were among the first to be targeted. As counterinsurgency operations escalated through the 1990s, the guerrillas multiplied their armed actions within the city. During this decisive period of time, as paramilitary groups closed a circle around Barrancabermeja, the guerrillas unwittingly compromised the political gains being made by Colombia's oldest social movements.

Popular movements in Barrancabermeja had for decades been focused on interlaced questions of labor and social justice, as manifest in the refinery, the oilfields, and the city's poorest neighborhoods. As such, the turn to human rights as a form of resistance to political violence on the part of Barrancabermeja's popular movements entailed a significant discursive shift. The vocabulary of human rights was new to many veteran activists, even though their traditional concerns could have been construed as issues of social and economic rights. The concepts of torture, extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and displacement would progressively become part of the language of protest in the city. As anthropologist Winifred Tate writes, "human rights violation" is itself a category for making violence socially legible and establishing accountability, and locating specific acts within broader histories.¹⁸ For the embattled social movement activists in Barranca, the question of basic human rights was indivisible from the issues of social and economic justice, regional development, political recognition, and nationalism. It was not the fact of violence that united human rights activists in Barranca. It was the fact that violence had been directed against popular movements, as well as against ordinary citizens such as Sandra Rondón. The very legitimacy of human rights activists in Barranca was determined by the experiences they shared with the people for whom they spoke.

Barranca has been described as the "heart of activism" in Colombia.¹⁹ While Colombia has long been dominated by the Liberal and Conservative

parties, and extensive clientelist networks associated with each, Barranca developed a unique brand of nonconformism. The remarkable longevity and combativeness of the city's social movements is due to its history as an oil-refining enclave, and widespread identification among *barranqueños* with nationalist, working-class and anti-establishment politics.²⁰ Interviews conducted with popular leaders who experienced the shift to human rights in Barranca during the late 1980s demonstrate a direct relationship between social upheaval, political violence, and the renewal of popular protest. In the words of Irene Villamizar, who has worked for decades as a teacher and community activist in the city's poor southeastern *barrios*, "This town does not belong to the rich."²¹

Understanding Paramilitary Repression

My research examines the intersection of human rights activism, paramilitarism, and processes of state formation. The advent of human rights in the 1980s altered the political landscape of violence in the Magdalena Medio. Protests carried out by peasant movements in the region shed light on the abusive behavior of the Colombian armed forces. As activists' efforts to document and expose extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and torture multiplied, so too did threats against them. This backlash was part of a larger wave of counterinsurgency violence that swept through the countryside, reaching the city by the middle of the decade. In Barrancabermeja, the use of unmarked cars and motorcycles by assassins wearing civilian clothes substantiated activist claims that covert operations were being carried out by state security forces. The establishment of third party paramilitary death squads during this period further obfuscated state responsibility for human rights violations. Paramilitarism was a continuation of the politics of state of siege by other means, whereby the national government justified the suppression of civil liberties in the name of national security, as had been the case during the great oil workers' and civil strikes of the 1970s. The military remained concerned with public order in Barrancabermeja and the surrounding area, but through the end of the twentieth century the main business of killing was either concealed or devolved to paramilitaries. Human rights activists denounced these contradictions, and thus shed light on the everyday corruption of state sovereignty.

Paramilitarism refers to a multivariate set of phenomena, ranging from legally constituted organizations such as Hitlerjugend to illegal organizations such as the Serbian White Eagles. Scholars of Latin America have written extensively about paramilitary groups dedicated to counterinsurgency, from