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Colombia Cognitive Straits: No Way Out in a Maze of Words

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Abstract. This article describes the untenable cognitive position of many Colombian citizens without the material means to emigrate away from the current political upheaval.

International public discourse on Colombian politics continues to focus on Plan Colombia. The Plan--a combination of military, social, economic, and cultural aid--is being supported or attacked as a vehicle to help resolve conflict between, among, and within leftist guerrilla groups; narco-trafficking organizations; rightist paramilitary forces; and various government political, politico-military, and military entities.

One of the biggest difficulties in assessing the Plan is that some of the same individuals and groups may be accurately identified as fitting the category parameters of more than one of the political actors involved in the Colombian conflict. For example, some members of leftist guerrilla groups are in all probability members or acting like members of narco-trafficking organizations. Some members of rightist paramilitary forces are in all probability members or acting like members of governmental entities. There also appear to be huge degrees of heterogeneity between, among, and within individuals and groups within a political actor--e.g., leftist guerrillas or government entities.

However, the biggest difficulty--not only in assessing the Plan but in assessing the future of Colombia--involves the cognitive straits of a majority of Colombian citizens. These citizens usually have neither the means to navigate the many facets of the conflict or to emigrate away from the conflict. While lack of material efforts can clearly and significantly explain lack of the emigration option, cognitive straits apply much more to navigating within country. Specifically, these straits relate to a lack of behavioral options to be socially perceived as fitting a product of social cognition. One example is a citizen who wishes to be perceived as an ally of the guerrillas. Behaviors that the citizen may perceive as clearly demonstrating this alliance may be perceived by the guerrillas as fitting the product of social cognition suggesting an intelligence infiltrator or double agent. Behaviors that the citizen may perceive as clearly demonstrating an alliance with the government may be perceived by the government as being insufficiently supportive--perhaps because the citizen's demographic status induces strong first impressions and premature closure bearing on that citizen as a guerrilla sympathizer and/or agent. Perhaps most tragically, a citizen who merely wants to be left alone to experience the tough reversals and tender mercies of economic subsistence and family life cannot be left alone. Too often, not being with a political side to the conflict is perceived by that side as being against it. Not being with any political side perceived as being against any side.

A majority of Colombian citizens are then left with little control over what side they are identified with and which side they are not. At the same time, the citizen cannot escape the socially perceived status of social role. With no way out and no way in, the citizen appears to be in a learned helplessness situation. With no seeming control over political fate, the citizen might well succumb to a psychological depression largely induced by politics. And in so far as at least the labor of the citizenry is an asset to be fought over by sides to the conflict, the winners may succumb to a depression as well. (See Diekman, A. B., & Eagly, A. H. (2000). Stereotypes as dynamic constructs: Women and men of the past, present, and future. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1171-1188; Forero, J. (October 29, 2000). Behind

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