

# **When the Peace Generation is a Hundred Years Away... Youth, Citizenship, and Democracy in Times of Transition to Peace in Colombia**

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**Abstract:** Efforts to consolidate a democratic citizenry are salient in societies transitioning to peace. These endeavors have spawned educational approaches to promote democratic skills, behaviors, and values in young citizens. Yet normative civic framings do not always align with students' lived experiences, nor with their everyday decisions and expectations. Drawing from in-depth interviews with students in Leticia, Colombia, this study discusses youth understandings about citizenship in relation to the current political process. Findings provide a textured view of how young citizens participate in their civic subjectification through negotiated meanings and values they grant to the peace process and the prospects for sustained peacebuilding. Students' perspectives prompt us to consider more comprehensive civic practices and frameworks that resonate with their everyday lives and the increasingly challenges of disrupting protracted violence and its legacies.

**Keywords:** Youth, citizenship, democracy, peacebuilding, Colombia

## **Introduction**

On the first day I visited *El Resguardo*<sup>1</sup> school, I noticed that the hallway board was almost empty. Yellow and red papers decorated this board, titled 'Democracy Committee 2018'. The remnants of duct tape on the blue background suggested something was there before. Now the left side was empty. On the right side, a section of torn poster paper lingered. In the middle, there were two black-and-white pictures of elected students for the student government. When I got closer to read their fading names, I saw the word *desaparecidos* [disappeared] below the pictures (see figure 1). I could barely make out a third name, and the picture was missing. I shivered. This scene reminded me of the many portrayals of disappeared people in Colombia that I have seen over the years. This yellow-blue-red patriotic board reminded me the likelihood of 'disappearing' in Colombia, an allegedly democratic country.

When I asked students about the *desaparecidos*, the majority laughed and told me it was a joke. To the same question, teacher Augusto smiled and said it was *just* a students' prank. After my inquiry, teacher Gloria shook her head in disapproval and said "*ahí están pintados*" –literally meaning that whoever wrote it was depicted in the 'prank'. Then, when I talked to one of the photographed students, she said: "I know students did it to fool around, but it feels ugly. What if I was actually disappeared?" More than a simple joke, the message and the different reactions revealed to me that certain understandings about forced disappearance —and about the conflict—circulated among students. Paradoxically, the message was conveyed in a hallway board dedicated to democracy.

Strengthening democratic institutions and practices have been recognized as crucial tasks to develop a civic culture that helps to reconstruct a conflict-affected society (Davies, 2004a; Jelin & Hershberg, 1996). Unlike other international cases, peace-making and peacebuilding endeavors in Colombia have developed alongside more than nine peace agreements signed with different left- and right- wing actors. In fact, constitutional and educational reforms explicitly seeking to consolidate peace and democracy started in the 1990s. Hence, educating young generations into democracy and peace (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004) has run parallel to several piecemeal peace negotiations over the last three decades. The most recent peace agreement with the left-wing armed group FARC3, and the transitional justice model it entails, brings about possibilities to discuss the role of education within such a challenging political process, and thus, the role of young citizens. More recent policies, such as '*Cátedra de paz*'<sup>4</sup> [Peace class], are built on the belief that educating young generations into the grammar of peace and democracy is fundamental to disrupt conflict and address its legacies.

To civically educate young citizens for peace is to shape their political subjectivity under certain democratic values, behaviors, and attitudes. But as Ong (1996) argues, citizenship taken in the Foucauldian sense, prompts us to consider two interrelated dimensions: 'being made' and 'self-making'. In this two-fold process, tensions and alignments emerge between the normative citizenship and one's own making as a citizen. As scholars have analyzed, youth understandings about citizenship, democracy, and conflict, draw from multiple and contrasting encounters in their daily lives. Hence, their civic ideas and political engagement are influenced by varied actors and experiences in diverse settings beyond classrooms (Barton & McCully, 2010; Bellino, 2017; Mayorga, 2020; Rubin, 2007, 2016).

Drawing from youth narratives and civic meaning-making, I address the questions: How do Colombian high school students understand citizenship in relation to the ongoing political transition? How do these understandings inform their civic identities, actions, and expectations? And how do their conceptions and decisions may or not contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia? Findings provide a textured view of how young people participate in their civic subjectification through negotiated meanings and values they grant to the peace process,

institutions, actors, and the prospects of peace. Youth encounter and interpret multiple social and political situations that influence their civic identity formation and decision-making, while challenging traditional conceptions on peace and peacebuilding. By unearthing youth's 'vernacular' understandings about citizenship (Rosaldo, 1999), this study suggests further analyses on students' civic subjectivity in efforts to better understand and theorize youth political contributions in conflict-affected contexts.

### **Citizenship as subjectification**

This paper is rooted in the idea that citizens are not born but made. The production of the citizenry is conceived here as a technology to govern populations and an opening for subjects to craft themselves. This means, as Friedrich (2014) suggests, that the citizen is both a project and an actor of the nation-state that emerges from authoritarianism or conflict. This analysis is undergirded in Ong's (1996) proposal to consider citizenship as a 'subjectification' process in the Foucauldian sense of 'being made' and 'self-making'. Therefore, I take the nation-state and its very sophisticated structure to integrate diverse people by shaping their individualities to new and specific forms and patterns related to the nation (the crafting of the citizen). Yet, I also consider youth's ability to modify, use, adopt, reject, the shaping is exerted on them (citizens' self-crafting) (Foucault, 1982).

Bénéï's (2005) notion of 'manufacturing citizenship' helps to explain how the subjectification process entails permanent tensions and negotiations between the normative framing of citizenship, how people arrive to understand what good citizenship is, and the active participation of individuals in their own civic construction—this is, a constitutive active practice that is both constraining and enabling (Marston & Mitchell, 2004). The use of *manufacturing* recognizes an intention to bring into form something (someone) and making it of suitable use (for democratic integration, participation, intelligibility, etc.). The 'manufacturing' materials of citizenship (Bénéï, 2005) can correspond to memories, imaginations, emotions, and practices of citizenship related to the various dimensions of the subject—the political, social, cultural, and historical. In this regard, people's civic formation, far from a one-way or pre-fixed process, holds a dynamic character in which individuals permanently face situations, actors, or institutions that prompt them to (re)negotiate, (re)define, and (re)shape their identities and roles as citizens that are constantly in-the-making. Approaching Colombian youth civic subjectification in this way considers the various instances in which students are demanded to civically perform, and they do so in alignment or in tension with the normative framings and expectations. In this process, they construct themselves as civic agents through the ways they come to understand the conflict, the peace process, and their role within these.

## **Citizenship, conflict, and youth**

Over the last decades, more comprehensive and critical conceptualizations of ‘citizenship’ have been salient. Attention has shifted towards other dimensions distinct from a status or a duty based participation (Holston & Appadurai, 1996; Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Isin & Turner, 2002). Critical accounts in the field of education have proposed an anthropological examination of citizenship as forms of action, practice, and subjectivity oriented to enforce young people’s identities and roles in relation to democratic communities (Levinson, 2011). But, as Levinson and Berumen (2007) argue, the question ‘what kind of citizen for what kind of democracy?’, disrupts a univocal understanding of democracy. Rather, the diverse ways of shaping the polity into different democratic publics, forms of participation, and interaction among members, including the contributions of other groups and cultures in the global south that expand and diversify the definition and praxis of democracy (de Sousa Santos, 2004), complicate democracy.

Citizenship construction has distinct challenges in conflict-affected contexts, where social cohesion and the civic contract are being reconstructed in parallel to institutions and the legitimacy of the state (Quaynor, 2012). Academics and practitioners claim that societies experiencing or emerging from conflict require more than political dispositions to transition to less violent stages or material conditions to recover—they also need to promote specific dispositions, skills, and conducts for peace (Davies, 2004b, 2004a; Paulson, 2011; Tawil & Harley, 2004; Vélez, 2017). Studies have analyzed the intricacies, contradictions, and historical inarticulateness of the civic construction of post-war generations. In Guatemala, Oglesby (2007a, 2007b) argues that under a post-war neoliberal governance, human rights discourses converge with the instrumentalization of the national historical memory. Therefore, youth are encouraged to support human rights and to develop a ‘culture of peace’, while overlooking the politics of the past and the present. Staeheli and Hammett (2010, 2013) contend that a strong civic emphasis on cosmopolitanism, responsibility, human rights advocacy, and self-sufficiency for South African youth, are at the expense of historical understandings of the apartheid that dismantle racism and oppression. In Northern Ireland, Barton & McCully (2010) found that students cherish a multiperspective history education approach, but they are unwilling to abandon the political commitments of their families and religious communities. Thus, in daily life, youth rarely move away from their entrenched identity-based perspectives and social practices.

Other studies also suggest that the continuity or increase of abuses, violence, and lowquality living conditions further complicate the possibilities of democratization, human rights fulfillment, and the consolidation of peace in post-conflict settings. In Guatemala, protracted violence and impunity blur the distinctions between vigilantism and delinquency, distorting the civic contract and the understandings on justice and violence, thus making social cleansing, for example, an acceptable civic practice (Bellino, 2015a). Likewise, under a “currency of fear”

(Gellman, 2015, p. 157) post-war Salvadorian youth opt to build a new kind of social contract and join gangs to survive. Similarly, black youth in a South African township have built their own moral codes and civic dynamics to cope with the hardship of their context and lives (Swartz, 2009). These cases shed light on intricate civic decisions youth face as they build the ‘common good’ in their own terms while engaging in ‘choiceless decisions’ (Begoña Aretxaga in Sommers, 2002) of remaking justice and crafting their own system—usually employing more violence—to fill the gap between the weak State, the failing promises of postwar, and the increasing crime.

After peace accords, the pressing ‘economies of survival’ (Macdonald, 2017) become predominant, and these are particularly detrimental to youth because they become a highly criminalized and stigmatized group. Amidst the legacies of the conflict, an ideal and normative post-war citizenship, and the everyday challenges, young people navigate their lives making meaning of the history of the conflict, negotiating differing definitions and praxis of justice, and building their own sense of agency and risk-calculus. They build their civic identities and roles from what is expected, demanded, and desired from them, but also, from their own accounts, interpretations, and hopes. Young adults draw on alternative political imaginaries, frames of meaning, and contentious local practices (Lazar, 2010; Mayorga, 2018; Taft, 2006, 2011). Analyzing their perspectives and civic development can help to reimagine and better conceptualize citizenship and peacebuilding, and to better inform policies, programs, and interventions that are meaningful to their post-conflict lives.

## **Methods and Context**

This critical qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) draws from data collected through observations and in-depth interviews with ten students between 16 and 19 years old from Leticia, Amazonas. This area is in the southern region of Colombia, bordering Peru and Brazil. Demographically, around 55% of the population is white or mestizo, 43% indigenous, and 2% afrocolombian (SINC, n.d.) In July 2018, I attended 11th grade classes in *El Resguardo* indigenous school, and I focused on three courses that were the most related to citizenship education. I also observed and participated in out-of-school activities, including sporting events, social and cultural gatherings, and a local festivity happening in that time. I selected ten students for in-depth interviews that comprised a photo-elicitation exercise, including 27 images. The visuals depicted historical events (e.g. current and previous peace negotiations, Palace of Justice siege, the kidnapping of a group of policemen and soldiers); events related to the current peace process (e.g. peace accords signing in 2016, the peace plebiscite); images traditionally related to the armed conflict (e.g. child recruitment, forced displacement, forced disappearances); contemporary issues (e.g. elections, crime and murders, social movements and protests); openended photos (e.g. soccer and the world cup, a bill, Pope Francis’ visit).

Although I acknowledge that democratic systems and practices entail more than mere electoral participation, I intentionally focused on students' responses regarding voting when analyzing data for three main reasons. First, electoral processes in Colombia have historically been exclusionary, so one of the many layers of the armed conflict includes a gap between representative and participatory democracy, thus leading to popular convulsion and the creation of earlier guerrillas (de Sousa Santos, 2017). Second, my data collection occurred after two main electoral events that have been decisive for the current political situation: the peace plebiscite in October 2016<sup>5</sup>, and the post- peace accords presidential elections in June 2018. Third, Latin America's current right-wing turn urges attention be paid to the dissatisfied and the discouraged electorate.

The war experience in Colombia has been remarkably different across regions and socioeconomic groups (Ávila Martínez, et al., 2017; Geográficas, n.d.; Sánchez Merteens, 2017). Amazonas has traditionally been identified as one of the states with the lowest number of war actions and presence of illegal armed groups (Geográficas, n.d.). However, since the 1980s, this region experienced a '*cocalización*' of the agro economy, meaning that coca crops increased because they turned into a more profitable option for subsistence than traditional legal crops (Salgado Ruíz, 2004). Although this phenomenon has been more prominent in the bordering state of Putumayo, Amazonas has not been exempted from it. In fact, coca cultivation for the consumption of indigenous communities morphed into coca crops for the global market of drugs (Palacio Castañeda, 2007). This is significant because during and after the peace negotiations, practitioners and scholars have called the attention on 'borderland subsystems' that, as strategic sites for illegal markets from which armed groups are financed, represent a hindrance for peacebuilding (Ávila Martínez, et al., 2017).

## Findings and discussion

### *Civic positional identities*

**Claudio:** *Peace generation? I think it is a moment in the future. A generation like a hundred years from now, that may achieve peace. So, I imagine the peace generation as something far away*

**Researcher:** *Does it mean you would not be part of it?*

**Claudio:** *No, I wouldn't. No one who is alive right now (...) They [the peace generation] are not born yet*

Claudio's perception of a nonexistent 'peace generation' contrasts with the official peacebuilding efforts<sup>6</sup>. Further, it diverges from the national civic education goal to forge young citizens as peace actors, particularly, through "citizenship competencies" program (Ministerio de Educación

Nacional, 2004). Although Claudio considers himself a “good leader,” he thinks that “to achieve peace we have to wait many years, so new leaders can be born,” and doubts his actions will produce any significant changes in society. He not only claims that peace is remote from reality, but also identifies and positions himself against the peace process dominant discourse that sets youth as key actors. In a public speech in 2016, former president Santos said: “I will request a huge favor to young people of the country, to help me because this year is decisive for Colombia. We are signing peace with the FARC. So, you are all very important for all the Colombian population. We count with youth to legitimate peace” (Santos Calderón, J.M., 2016). Similarly, FARC also called upon youth to play a main role in the implementation process of the peace agreements (FARC-EP, n.d.). Various institutions, organizations, and influential actors have strongly emphasized the role of youth for peacebuilding. Yet, the peace generation is a hundred years away for Claudio.

These insights beg the question: how youth identify themselves and civically act amidst the ongoing peace process? Youth’s relational or positional identities are essential to understand their civic roles because these have an “indexical value” for social and political relations with others, telling people their social categories and positions, group affiliations, and influencing their behaviors (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner & Cain, 1998). Positioning rather than the mere content of the ‘I’ is what is relevant for youth’s civic development, given that “the self is a position from which subjects make meanings, a position that is ‘addressed’ by and ‘answers’ others and the ‘world’” (p.173). This is key to grasp how youth civic positioning relates to circumstances of answerability in which students elaborate their citizenship perceptions and continuous civic construction.

When discussing about the images, youth used one depicting kidnapping to offer their opinions and condemn this action. In fact, six participants identified this image as the one they disliked the most. Students used their knowledge regarding an action (kidnapping), to judge it (undesirable, bad), to identify actors involved (acts that produce subjects –perpetrators), and to distance themselves from those actors and actions. As Julia commented when holding the picture: “I would never, in my entire life, commit anything that attempts against the life of a human being, like kidnapping or making someone go through a bad situation like hunger, injury, or death.” Vicente also disapproved it and drew on a hypothetical situation to assess it: “let’s say I kidnap him [pointing to another student], but if I know that he is the same human being as I am, how could I even harm him?”

Youth responses are illustrative of how they construct and position themselves as civic subjects by means of differentiation. As Butler (2016) points, “no subject can emerge without being differentiated, and a subject becomes discrete when other possible subject formations are excluded; “a host of ‘not-me’s’” (p. 141). By discarding the dimensions of the self and the actions that fail to conform with the discrete figures of possible (desirable and good) civic

subject formations, students abide a normative frame of citizenship that establishes the features of subjects' possibilities and schemes of recognition. The moral values and traits that the good citizenship framing invokes surface when students communicate their insights about kidnapping, as they position themselves vis-à-vis this normative civic framing: what they would (not) do, or who they are (not) related to. For instance, Susana, who described *guerrilleros* as "bad people" and assumed that they were responsible of the depicted kidnapping, argued that "they [*guerrilleros*] have nothing to do with me." Citizenship formation is in itself a struggle about the very meanings of (good) citizenship particularly when political transition demands redefining the terms of possibility of the nation-state and its members (Staeheli & Hammett, 2010) and negotiation of the self in the terms of adjustment to such civic framing.

Students' civic positional identities regarding kidnapping align with the civic expectations established in the standards of citizenship competencies. Their open rejection to depriving someone from his/her freedom proves that youth have developed certain values, attitudes, and beliefs, that line up with the normative framing of the good citizen (Pykett et al., 2010). Citizenship education as a technology by which the government exercises the conduct of conduct, operates as a regulating device for people's lives and actions as it communicates what behaviors are allowed or forbidden, and with this, what 'kind' of citizen relates the (good/bad) civic actions; this is, the making of discrete civic subjects and identities through means of exclusion, as expressed by Susana. In this, it is important to highlight how specific actions come to produce subjects, and how this institutionalized framing shapes moral principles that serve youth to identify and assess themselves and others. Such organization of experience (Goffman in Pykett, Savard & Schaefer, 2010) influences citizens' self-positioning, identity- and decisionmaking within the society under transition.

### **Whose peace? Participation, institutions, and political estrangement**

*"There might be peace one day for some [people] like  
the president who has money [...] for the rest of us, too bad, no peace for us"*

Vicente, student

Macdonald (2017) argues that liberal peacebuilding interventions fail to engage with the everyday needs and interests of citizens who are not within the political elites. Youth in Leticia experienced a similar estrangement. César defined the peace accords as "two assholes like Santos and the other one [FARC leader] that travel to Cuba, and they talk about peace in Colombia, supposedly, but results have not been seen yet, or at least in the rural areas where conflict actually affects people." Julio described that "the president wanted to finish the conflict and the existing insecurity in Colombia, so he signed the peace accords with the FARC commander. But there are still kidnappings, and there have been murders, and bombs, so that pact is not being accomplished." Cosme's response was also very revealing: "I have not heard anything [about the



peace process]”, and then, he burst in laughter. Although later in the interview it was evidenced that he actually knew about it, his humorous allusion to a lack of awareness aligns with his peers’ conveyed distance between politics and themselves.

In addition to students’ negative impressions on the current state of the peace process, a narrative of ordinary citizens as actors of the process were remarkably absent in our conversations. Rather, they described the peace process as a political event involving the president and some FARC members. In reference to peace, Vicente said “it is a project that is on the way. There might be peace one day for some [people] like the president who has money.” He perceived peace in relation to socioeconomics and a group of citizens within the country that he does not belong to. For people without money like him, “too bad, no peace for us,” he said. Drawing from students’ understandings, the peace process belongs to specific and distant actors, as well as the potential outcomes of it. Such reasoning relates to a “neoliberal peace” (de Sousa Santos, 2017, p. 274), which under a supposedly de-politicized façade continues exacerbating disparities between those who hold the political and socioeconomic power and the ones who do not. Since these are the main roots of the armed conflict, peacebuilding is and will continue to be jeopardized as long as it remains under the grammar of neoliberalism.

Julia, for instance, expressed her opinion about the unlikeness of achieving peace: “differences and inequality are very big in Colombia. We are divided into different worlds: rich people and poor people. So, since some [people] have more than others, and not all people have the same dignifying living conditions that everyone should have, peace will not happen.” Her sophisticated understanding of the conflict, of people’s dignity, and socioeconomic groups of citizens informs her perception on the current transition and future outlooks. Students’ recurring opinion that violence and war will always exist in the country do not derive from a ‘failed’ citizenship formation or a flawed performativity as ‘good’ citizens. Rather, these stem from the conflicting encounters between civic ideals and their direct and indirect civic experiences.

The image that Josefina selected as the one that she disliked the most was the one portraying the peace signing in 2016. “They are all corrupt. They don’t know what else to do with the country but to continue cheating on us.” Such feeling of everlasting civic deceit was shared by all participants. Most named corruption<sup>7</sup> as the main problem of the country. But, interestingly, the armed conflict itself was not specifically identified as a social or politic issue. “Corruption is what has destroyed Colombia,” Gabriel remarked. While students identified armed groups as the ones committing ‘unlawful’ or ‘wrong’ acts, they also held the government and politicians accountable for the national problems and the armed conflict. “These dudes”, Gabriel said as he pointed an image of kidnapped people “are suffering because of all politicians.” Josefina talked about an image portraying a national manifestation against FARC in 2008, and claimed: “they are against FARC, but they should be against the government too. Because deaths in this country are also because of the government. And FARC exist because of

the government.” Claudio, using visuals of the current and previous peace processes, also explained that the armed conflict exists in Colombia “because of corruption, so citizens rebelled against the state and formed armed groups.”

The feeling of unceasing ‘fraud’ to citizens is rooted in the prevailing corruption across the country. Youth’s understandings of the functioning of the government and democracy in Colombia are developed in relation to their most immediate experiences with the flawed institutional engineering and poor provision of basic services. This was prominent when they shared their negative experiences with the police and local government. Different students reported that the police partake in drug trafficking and bribery. Moreover, they criticized their deficient response to crime: “police are like ‘*el cojo*’ [the cripple]; they arrive late, but arrive...Well, not really. Many times they don’t even show up”, Vicente said. Julio was visibly angry when he narrated how abusive and violent police officers have been with him and his friends, and how those experiences have influenced his current decisions: “I no longer carry things with me when I go out. So, if they frisk me they have nothing to steal from me.” Josefina explained that beyond peace agreements, conflict will always exist. According to her, “what rules the country is the money, and they [politicians] are all seeking for more money. They are all ambitious, nothing is enough. Just look at our school. Where are all the resources that we supposedly get? Look at the classrooms, look at the bathrooms. Nothing.” A perceived political elite’s greed was shared among youth and repetitively mentioned in the interviews.

While some students claimed that corruption has increased because some citizens trade their votes for “*a plato de sopa*” [a soup, or a meal], others asserted that purchasing votes suggested citizens’ electoral ‘ignorance’: “the problem is that we don’t know how to choose who is going to govern us, who will lead us. We don’t know how to choose correctly”, Josefina pointed. Julia agreed with this and related it to citizens’ democratic responsibility: “according to law, citizens have to participate and choose representatives (...) but the problem is that we choose badly, and then, we are blaming the one we have chosen, when it is our fault in the first place; the responsibility is ours.” Both students identify an issue of governance and a flawed process of collective decision-making, but they temper their criticism on corruption and politician’s accountability by turning it into a matter of citizens’ responsibility within democracy. According to Julia and Josefina, if citizens in their electoral exercise opted for bad political representatives, then, responsibility lies on them.

At the crux of this debate are the problematic relations between a liberal democracy and neoliberal imaginaries and practices (de Sousa Santos, 2017). Students described intricate entanglements between corruption, electoral behavior, governance, and responsibility. Inequality, self-interest (citizens’ seeking a ‘*plato de sopa*’ or greedy politicians), and individual advancement shape citizens’ social and political decisions as the collective loses value.

Moreover, the sense of ‘being cheated’ is reinforced, even when youth partake in democratic politics outside formal institutions. For example, Claudio recalled when he participated in a protest concerning water provision and sewerage: “we were protesting in front of the office of the governor, but he did not want ‘to face us.’ We blocked the main road and camped there. It [the protest] was partially effective because out of five communities, three got water. But where I live, we still don’t have pipelines [...] The governor changed, but the new one was even worse. He made huge promises to people, and once elected, he disappeared. He completely disappeared!”

Youth’s remarks appeared contradictory at times. Their seeming inconsistency between valuing democracy, yet supporting ‘undemocratic’ acts like not voting, is precisely part of the dynamic character of citizenship formation and of the multiple tensions that emerge within the continuous meaning-making and re-negotiations of an uncritical acceptance of (good) citizenship. But also, the conflicting civic ideas and behaviors are implicated in the entanglements between neoliberalism and de-democratization. Josefina, for instance, argued that she, as the only student of voting age, did not participate in the presidential elections because “they are all the same, and at the end, the president does not feed me.” Similarly, Julia validated her mom’s disinterest for whoever gets appointed as president, because “as my mom says, no president feeds her.” Gabriel expanded this vision to the whole country: “I don’t care about Colombia. Colombia, what for? If Colombia doesn’t help me, doesn’t feed me, why would I care?”

Their use of the popular expression ‘to feed someone’ in explaining their perceptions on electoral choices, conveys a political rationality tied to a neoliberal rationality. In one hand, they stress an everyday strife to make one’s living despite of—or because of—political elitism and alienation. In the other hand, they implicitly demand for immediate and tangible outcomes within a democratic system. This suggests that the acclaimed active participation in collective decisionmaking required for peacebuilding is undermined by individual interests and desires. In this case, the nature of the political community seems more aligned with liberalism. Youth narratives and civic reasoning reveal the flaws of a liberal approach to democracy that assumes all citizens to be free and equal. Thus, a ‘rational’ pursuit of common good/goal (national peacebuilding) becomes unattainable as democratic institutions are considerably damaged, individuals’ freedoms are more figurative than real, and inequality is rampant.

Unlike official discourses on peacebuilding, all students rather prioritized finishing their studies, getting a job, and helping their families ‘out,’ than partaking in the collective efforts for peace. For them, neither voting nor other forms of political participation represent important civic actions. Julia and Roberto said they knew the plebiscite happened, but neither recalled whether most votes had been to support or reject the peace accords. Roberto argued that “the results don’t really matter because they [politicians] will end up doing whatever they want,

right?” At first glance, it could be argued that these electoral insights reflect a ‘disengaged’ young citizenry in Leticia, similar to what has been claimed about the Colombian electorate in general (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2013). But a closer attention to their meaning and decision-making suggests that youth are guiding their democratic civic attitudes and choices on their political imaginaries of the state, that run counter to formal institutions and normative framings of ‘good’ democratic citizenship.

Students’ narratives demonstrate that youth position themselves in opposition to hegemonic politics as a deliberate decision and not as a random action rooted in ignorance or simple disengagement. Youth stances are informed by their direct and indirect experiences with corruption, injustice, lack of accountability, political estrangement to their daily realities, and their own perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and security. As I was informally talking with Pilar about the presidential elections that had happened three weeks before that day, Josefina interrupted us:

**Josefina:** Psss, hey, Pilar, who was it that won the election?

**Pilar:** Duque won. Duque is the president now

**Josefina:** I don’t care who the president is. They are all the same. They steal everything...they there, us here

[drawing an imaginary dividing line on the desk]

**Pilar:** Yeah, that’s true

Pilar was not surprised by the fact that her classmate did not know which candidate has won the elections. In fact, she supported Josefina’s apathy about the results because “they are all the same.” Although it could be said that Josefina’s ‘lack’ of civic knowledge indicates some extent of disengagement, she is making a disruptive civic choice based on her sense of political estrangement. Her comments point to a ‘selective ignorance’ (Sánchez Meertens, 2017), a political reason for opting not to know a specific content due to political corruption, elitism, and alienation. Josefina’s senses of an inept politics and us/them binary influence her engagement with democracy and the current national political process. In fact, she explained she did not vote because “I dislike politics and all of that.” Her recurring manifestations of disaffection to traditional politics were explained by her as “things do not change,” “they [politicians] are all the same,” and “with or without peace accords violence and conflict will continue.”

Similarly, César picked an image of Jaime Garzón, a murdered journalist and activist, and said he disliked the image because “that guy talked a lot about politics.” He explained he disliked “that *kind* of people” because “they talk, and talk, and talk, but never end up doing things.” Although he was using an image of an activist who sought to mobilize citizens against inequality and political elitism, his reasoning about politics and his self-distance from that *kind* of people were aligned with Josefina’s points. Along these lines, students detach from ‘politics’ because

they conceptualize it in relation to alienating practices and actors, so their de-identification is not a political disengagement but an active and conscious rejection towards hegemonic politics (Taft, 2006).

This takes us to two considerations. First, normative reasoning on youth political should be challenged. Rather than claiming youths' lack of political interest, knowledge, commitment, mental state, or concern for the common good, it could be that institutions are severely damaged that they do not even deserve to be engaged (Levine & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2010). Second, the altered conception of democracy promoted by global financial organizations (World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) in the 1980's changed the democratic equation from social, economic, and institutional conditions as the *sine qua non* for democracy, to the establishment of democratic regimes that will enable such conditions to develop. This change, as de Sousa Santos (2017) highlights, facilitated the expansion of low-intensity democracies like the Colombian example, where economic, social, and political rights are fragile or absent, and democracy –as the most legitimate form of government– easily adapts to neoliberal logics. This, at the same time, expands citizens' disparities and increasing obstacles for democratic participation of those who are at the base of the hierarchy.

These points are further seen in examples of youth in Leticia developing their democratic imaginaries and civic practices from their distinctive understandings of citizenship. Claudio narrated that no one in his family voted in the peace plebiscite, and if he have had the age to vote he would have not done it anyways: “it was not like they [his family] were uninterested [in the peace process], it was just that they didn't want to. They didn't agree with them [the accords].” Then, when I asked him about voting ‘no’ as in rejection to the accords he replied: “no, because it was an invitation to change to a new war. Nothing will be solved. So it's better not to vote.” Later, he added:

**Claudio:** I think the plebiscite was a lie

**Researcher:** What kind of lie?

**Claudio:** Voting in favor or against it [peace accords] was a lie. It was just to distract citizens

**Researcher:** Distract citizens from what?

**Claudio:** About the *guerrilla*, the conflict between the *guerrilla* and the State. That was a way to distract people, and a way to say that there won't be more conflict or corruption. But there is and there will always be. It's just that it is different now. It is more like administrative; not as in wars, but more the administration of the country

**Researcher:** And what do you mean when you mention corruption?

**Claudio:** It has to do with the management of the country. So, they negotiated (...) but it is like changing from one war in which they shoot, to a war in which things are more like judiciary and related to the management of the county

The damaged democratic institutionalality in Colombia drives Claudio to believe that conflict will not end through a national consensual decision on a peace agreement because it represents a change from one type of war to another. His stance, in fact, contradicts the normative framing of a good democratic citizen that partakes in collective motions. However, Claudio did not consider himself as a ‘bad’ or undemocratic citizen. Rather, his resolution came in reaction to what he perceived as another political ‘trickery’.

### **Blurred boundaries: drug-trafficking, normalized crime, and legitimized violence**

On July 6th, 2018, a national protest took place against the alarming number of social leaders murdered since the peace accords endorsement<sup>9</sup>. Civil society summoned a national candle lighting to demand the government’s action. Unlike other capital cities, in Leticia no more than 30 people gathered in the main square that evening. The remarkable absence of locals caught my attention, so I asked students about the candle lighting, and some responded that they did not know about it, while others seemed uninterested. Gabriel said he would have attended *only* if one of his relatives has been killed: “if not, why would I go? Here [in Colombia] no one cares when someone is murdered.” His perspective is not an individualistic posture, but a response to a lack of accountability that induces to the ‘normalization’ of violence and deaths and in many cases, as Gabriel suggests, to collective indifference.

Josefina imagined her ideal country as a place in which there are no murders, and where justice operates effectively. She specifically discussed the ex-president’s involvement in systematic killings of civilians and the official unresponsiveness about forced disappearances.

“The other day I watched a video of a man demanding Uribe’s accountability for his son’s death. First, he was disappeared, and then, they found him death. Uribe said he had nothing to do with it. But how can he say that if he was the one who ordered his killing? They [the government] disappear people and give a shit about it. If they really cared, they would be looking for disappeared people, but no, nothing”

As Josefina’s words reveal, the state’s complicity and a failing judicial system nurture youth’s social and political perceptions on arbitrary deaths and prevalent injustice. The effort to shape young citizens into peacebuilders becomes hollow as youth encounter multiple instances where consensus and peaceful resolution seem futile. These are the civic ‘disjunctures’ (Rubin, 2007) that students confront when civic ideals are disarticulated from their daily experiences with discrimination, injustice, and unaddressed violence. Youth come to characterize the state as a protector and perpetrator, powerful and ineffective, and everlastingly corrupt and still needed to demand the provision of services and to claim the existence of a democratic country. Students interact with such inconsistencies daily and navigate their lives within the multiple contradictory civic messages and the meanings that they grant to them. Josefina, a visible class leader among her peers, stated she would never aim for a leadership role outside the school, nor a political role

“because I don’t want to get shot.” Similarly, Gabriel said he would not work with local political leaders, not even from his indigenous community, because “I get killed,” and then mentioned an Indigenous leader assassinated in the bordering department, Putumayo, a few weeks before our conversation.

Roberto described how he feared that something would happen to him or his family and gave the example of one of his friends who disappeared some weeks ago, and later, was found hanged to death: “until today, we don’t know what happened, or who did it, nothing. I can tell you he was not in ‘bad steps.’ He was a good person, an athlete, and he dreamed about helping his family ‘out.’” Cosme, who I later learned was the author of the *desaparecidos* note on the hallway board, also reported “I am afraid of death. I am afraid of someone in my family disappearing.” Their narratives point at concerns for security and life-preservation within a country where death and murders are more prevalent. But also, their responses point to a broader issue: the troubling sociopolitical situation after the endorsement of the peace agreement complicates the distinction between activities related to the armed conflict, and activities that arise as a subsequent mutation of it. This is evidenced in the disquieting growth of illicit crops and drug trafficking (ONDCP, 2018); the strengthening of gangs, armed bands, paramilitary groups, and emerging guerrillas fighting for territorial control; the systematic murder of social leaders; and an increasing number of FARC dissident groups (Kroc Institute, 2018, 2020).

Students are instructed in school and through media to respect laws and rights, to abstain from drugs, to peacefully coexist with others amidst differences, and to avoid the use of violence—a ‘post-conflict’ citizenry in line with the existing normative citizenship framing. Yet they live under conditions that prompt them to fear for their lives. They live between the hopelessness of failing justice and unavoidable corruption, and the parallel hopefulness of working hard to make their ways ‘out’ and improving their lives and aiding their families. Although in my observations I identified that teachers’ concerns were about students’ drug consumption, early pregnancy, and on ‘trouble-avoidance’, students’ concerns were working hard, and deciding between life alternatives that would distance them from ‘farce’ roles and institutions, like police and politicians.

Julio’s father sought to familiarize him and his 10-year-old brother into the business of cockfighting. The ‘fatty Brazilian’, as it was called a friend of Julio’s father, insists on persuading Julio to work with him. He has made tempting monetary offers to ‘take care of cocks’ and to take 20 kilograms of cocaine to Peru. “I have considered it, yes. It is a lot of money [...] with that, I would start my own hair salon”, he said. But he has rejected the offer because he wants to finish school first, and because he recalls his dad’s friend who disappeared and then was found dead: “once you are in the business you either succeed or fail. And if you fail, you end up in jail or death, but most likely dead.” César and Vicente’s elder relatives have also been involved in drug trafficking, but they abandoned it because of security concerns. Despite danger,

César also contemplates the idea of getting involved one day because “one gets excited with all that money [...] and that make you think a lot because one is poor [...] with all that money I would do so many things. But first, I would build my own house.” Socioeconomic concerns lead Julio and César to look at alternative proscribed civic paths, that they do not regarded as such.

Vicente discarded the option of drug-trafficking because the first thing that comes into his mind is ‘death’. Instead, he has tried, and will continue trying, to join the Federal Police of Brazil, despite the rejection due to his short height. His choice draws from a distinctive understanding of rights, rules, and respect: “police are respected there [in Brazil] [...] If they see something like underage guys in the street in the evening, they go and chase them. Meanwhile, here [in Colombia], you can be smoking or doing whatever, and the police don’t care, they don’t do a thing.” Vicente disapproves and rejects Colombian police’s lack of responsiveness, while endorsing the reactive and violent operability of Brazilian police. But the legitimate use of the force that this institution holds turns abusive and condemning under democratic systems, when it is targeted against civilians in the name of their protection. When I asked him to further explain what he meant with ‘being respected’, he said:

**Vicente:** I prefer Brazilian police because they are respected. If they see someone robbing, they go and kill the person. In Brazil, there are no human rights, there is no law, nothing

**Researcher:** So, do you prefer that?

**Vicente:** Yes, because one sees so many things here... So, I prefer there because police understand. Because if a guy steals, they kill him immediately. Because why would you want to have a thief out there?

**Researcher:** And what happens here in Colombia if someone steals?

**Vicente:** The capture him for a little while, and then release him. That’s all.

The lines between what is accepted and what is not, get blurred as Vicente validates the means for the end: to impose order and to be ‘respected’ by using violence. Further, he consciously opts for human rights’ abuse and rule violations, if that is what it takes to reduce criminality. The killing of a subject who is committing unlawful actions also turns into desirable and validated reaction. Therefore, in the absence of institutional responsiveness and justice, multiple risks endangering peacebuilding surface, including fuzzy distinctions between civic and criminal actions (Bellino, 2015a), as mirrored in Vicente’s words. Claudio, for instance, claimed that justice in Colombia works only up to 5%: “the ones who should be in jail are governing the country, while innocent people are imprisoned.” Later, he compared different actors, revealing that coherence between discourse and practice is what creates credibility in them: “The *guerrilla* are ‘serious’ people because if they demand something and threat with an attack if it’s not fulfilled, they commit it. Or if they get along with a community and promise to take care of them, they do so”, while *paramilitares* “are ‘serious’ too, but in a bad way, because they are too violent and aggressive.” And finally, he described politicians as a joke, “they are not even a little



bit ‘serious’ [laughs].” Although Claudio narrated that his uncle was threatened to death by the FARC when he was a political candidate, and they forced him to displacement, Claudio did not condemn these intimidations, but regarded them as ways to take FARC seriously. Hence, violence is a way to legitimize an actors’/institutions’ authority upon civilians, similar to what Vicente thought.

Although these students refer to opposing armed groups, their insights stem from related understandings that emerge in the civic disjuncture they experience within weakened security conditions and legitimate authority, menacing at the same time the consolidation of an enduring peace. First, notions of security, justice, and order become distorted and the civic contract is inverted, such as the validation of rights violations to reduce criminality. Second, under such fragile conditions, civilians can also craft their parallel justice system, thus, transgressing the normative citizenship and creating a ‘grey zone’ between enacting justice to protect one’s life and illegitimate civic actions (Bellino, 2015a). Third, an authoritarian rule can become desired by citizens. This is translated into zero-tolerance security practices that create an apparently ‘order’ through counter crime violence and intimidation (Bellino, 2015b). Moreover, youth in these instances turn into a highly criminalized social group, hence, stigmatizing their public presence or interaction with fellow citizens (Cruz, 2011).

### **Conclusions**

Over the last decades, citizenship education has been one of the core approaches to consolidate a democratic citizenry contributing to peacebuilding in Colombia. While educational efforts to shape young citizens for peacebuilding are not to be dismissed, it is relevant to further examine youth civic subjectification beyond formal education. This article brings forth local experiences and vernacular understandings of youth in Leticia, demonstrating that the civic endeavor for peace becomes void of meaning, as students face daily situations of injustice, violence, low accountability, and increasing criminality, that run counter to the normative democratic civic ideas, expectations, and demands. Within these instances of civic ‘disjuncture’, youth come to civically identify and position themselves against hegemonic politics; they resist to participate or identify with traditional political practices, actors, or institutions that they associate with corruption, inequality, elitism, and estranged from their realities.

Under these conditions, youth civic subjectification also entails perceptions and actions that sometimes contradict traditional democratic practices, such as disaffection and nonparticipation in popular elections, or anti-democratic notions like the validation of rights’ abuses and violent acts to reduce criminality and impose order. Through students’ narratives, this study challenges pre-defined democratic civic characteristics, identities and conducts assumed to contribute to the normative aspiration for peacebuilding. Such a narrow approach fails to capture youth understandings, ways of participating and engaging, and the forms of questioning and

defying the terms to conceive citizenship under times of political transition. This study acknowledges the relevance of civic formation through schooling, but it also prompts to consider young citizens' subjectification beyond school. This framing of citizenship matters because it recognizes that youth develop as civic actors not only in formal settings, but also as they encounter diverse experiences and civic content outside classrooms. The ways in which students articulate these varied sources and encounters shed light on the complex and nuanced consolidation of the civic subject for peacebuilding.

With these conclusions, I would also like to underscore three interrelated points that can shed light for future studies and upcoming educational programs. First, echoing de Sousa Santos' (2017) call, it is imperative to be attentive to the *type* of peace being built today in Colombia. A 'neoliberal peace,' as already discussed in this paper, not only makes 'conflict' and 'peace' rigid, apolitical, ahistorical, and meaningless notions (and not processes), but also perpetuates the existing low-intensity and exclusionary Colombian democracy. A 'democratic peace', on the other hand, demands addressing the conditions that lead to political violence in Colombia. Youth narratives pointed at this matter, and this is significant if we consider they come from a historically marginalized cultural and socioeconomic group. As de Sousa Santos claims, processes of reconciliation will never reach to reconciled societies if social injustice is left unaddressed.

Second, and related to consolidating a democratic peace, it is imperative to strength the participatory character of democracy, not in 'aggregating' terms, but articulating the political agenda and discourse with localized needs, dynamics, and actors that resonate with young citizens' lives. This entails the active participation of civil society into the peace process, making it meaningful to local lived experiences. In this sense, conflict transformation processes could become more comprehensive because these turn into matters that concern, not only the president, armed actors, or victims, but society largely. Moreover, civic notions can veer from abstract and universal moral principles that appear detached from students' everyday realities. Citizenship, as experienced in 'disjuncture' in Leticia (and the us/them distinction highlighted by students) can become of another nature; of a radical democratic citizenship for which 'agonism' rather than antagonism (Mouffe, 2013) opens possibilities for a more participatory polity.

Third, citizenship education policies and programs need to be sensitive to youth realities and to their vernacular understandings about citizenship. To engineer an effective political transition that transcends the realm of political formality, it is imperative to reconsider conventional liberal peacebuilding frameworks that have little bearing with students' realities. The school should not turn into another setting of civic disjuncture, but a site to work on them. A normatively driven educational policy overturns the democratic spirit of it when it becomes a matter limited to skill-acquisition and assessment, thus, overlooking the local nuances, alternative practices and notions, and the everyday civic challenges of students. Now that

Colombia has undertaken a transitional justice model, the interaction and articulation of it with citizenship education holds multiple opportunities to strengthen peacebuilding.

Looking at the civic practices, perceptions, and experiences of students from Leticia helps to understand how from their perspectives –from their imaginaries and their contextual realities and struggles– the country could move into less violent and more democratic conditions. A next step should examine their insights on how to achieve social and political reconstruction from their resistance to hegemonic politics. In this sense, citizenship can turn into a form of political identity (Mouffe, 1992) that transcends the status or conventional practices, to become a form of identification that is constructed and not given –and that it gets constructed in appreciation of diversity and constructive conflict.

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