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Imaginaries of the Return to Post-Conflict Colombia

Discourses of Colombian Refugees in Ecuador*

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the imaginaries regarding the return of Colombian refugees residing in Ecuador by describing their migratory trajectories and the conditions under which these people –who left the country due to causes related to the armed conflict– would consider returning after the implementation of the peace deal. Empirical evidence was mainly collected through eleven focus groups in the city of Quito. The conclusion is that the end of the war is just the starting point for the return since refugees demand comprehensive and effective social support from the Colombian State in order to go back to the country.

Keywords

imaginaries, post-conflict, refugees, return, Colombia, Ecuador

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Imagineries of the Return to Post-Conflict Colombia

Imaginerios del retorno a Colombia posconflicto Discursos de colombianos refugiados en Ecuador

Resumen

Este artículo busca identificar los imaginarios del retorno de los colombianos refugiados en Ecuador, describiendo sus trayectorias migratorias y las condiciones bajo las cuales estas personas, que salieron del país por causas relacionadas con el conflicto armado, considerarían regresar tras la implementación de los acuerdos de paz. La evidencia empírica se recolectó, principalmente, a través de once grupos focales en la ciudad de Quito. Se concluye que la terminación de la guerra es apenas el punto de partida para el retorno, ya que los refugiados demandan del Estado colombiano un acompañamiento social integral y efectivo para regresar al país.

Palabras clave

imaginarios, posconflicto, refugiados, retorno, Colombia, Ecuador

Imagineris del retorn a la Colòmbia postconflicte Discursos de colombians refugiats a l'Ecuador

Resum

Aquest article es proposa d'identificar els imaginaris del retorn dels colombians refugiats a l'Ecuador i ho fa mitjançant descriure'n les trajectòries migratòries i les condicions sota les quals aquestes persones, que van deixar el país per causes relacionades amb el conflicte armat, es plantejarien de tornar un cop establerts els acords de pau. L'evidència empírica s'ha recollit, principalment, a través d'onze grups focals a la ciutat de Quito. Hom conclou que l'acabament de la guerra només és el punt de partida per a un eventual retorn, atès que els refugiats exigeixen a l'Estat colombià un acompanyament social integral i efectiu per retornar al país.

Paraules clau

imaginari, postconflicte, refugiats, retorn, Colòmbia, Ecuador

Introduction

The armed conflict in Colombia has a history of more than fifty years which, according to Gabriela García and David Proaño (2016), has created a deep state of fear and vulnerability in Colombian society, and thus triggering displacements and the search of refuge: "there is an estimate of 7,603,597 victims of the armed conflict and about 6.24 million victims of displacement (UARIV, 2016). Regarding the people in refuge conditions, a hopeless figure of 360,300 is considered until present (ACNUR, 2015)" (p. 13). The authors also indicate that Ecuador is the main destination for those who run away from violence in Colombia.

In the study *No se puede ser refugiado toda la vida* (One cannot be a refugee one's whole life), coordinated by Carlos Ortega and Oscar Ospina (2012), this situation was already verified: "the main cause of displacement in Colombia and the subsequent leaving to Ecuador is the armed conflict and violence" (p. 29). According to these authors, violence related to the armed conflict is expressed through armed groups, such as paramilitary, guerrilla, and other unidentified groups, even the army: "having family bonds with

a member, having business relationships, being considered an informer, performing the compulsory military service, keeping in touch –voluntarily or not–, any reason for suspicion can become a potential threat and a cause for displacement" (Ortega and Ospina, 2012, p. 31). Along with this is the violence in rural areas, violence and political persecution towards those who carry out community work and in defense of human rights. There are also aspects of economic migration; nevertheless, the common points are vulnerability, fear and violence.

Thereby, Ecuador is configured as one of the destination countries for the Colombian forced migrants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in the Fact Sheet April 2016, highlights the data published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility of Ecuador regarding that "the number of recognized Colombian refugees had reached 57,325 out of a total of 60,253 recognized refugees (95.2% of the total); therefore, 2,928 are refugees of other nationalities (4.8%) and 233,049 is the total number of asylum applications received in Ecuador by the end of 2015" (ACNUR, 2016, p. 2).

In the context of the armed conflict, it is evident the difficulty and impossibility of returning to the places of origin; "some families

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cherish hopes of a return, but, as critical conditions remain –such as the continued presence of irregular groups in the regions of origin and latent threats–, they go principally to Ecuador” (Ortega and Ospina, 2012, p. 43). Once they have moved to different places in Colombia, they decide to leave to the neighboring country, or they go directly there, for it offers protection given the need to abandon insecurity and violence, in addition to its proximity to Colombia.

However, the forced migration process has generated a series of conflicts for refugees at their destination. According to Ana Guglielmelli (2011), in many cases, refugees in Ecuador cannot find security, there are obstacles to their integration, and they face discrimination as well as the existence of negative stereotypes. Ángela Carreño (2012) points out that some Colombian asylum seekers undergo discrimination and stigmatization by linking them to drug trafficking and crime. Ortega and Ospina indicate that forced migrants in Ecuador are more vulnerable “not only because people who flee violence reach their destination in an ‘impoverishment’ condition, but also because they face situations of rejection due to the prejudices in relation to the flows of foreign immigrants” (Ortega and Ospina, 2012, p. 16). On the other hand, according to García and Proaño (2016), “it should be pointed out the association of the foreigner, specifically Colombian, with imaginaries related to criminality. This reaffirms the negative stereotypes that unfortunately surround the Colombian people” (p. 73).

In this context, refugees can see themselves in a series of contradictions because, on one hand, the situation of discrimination can make it difficult to be integrated into the destination society, but, on the other hand, returning is seen as a project difficult to achieve in a post-conflict scenario.¹

There are some mechanisms created by the Colombian Government in order to facilitate or ensure the return, for example Law 1565 of 2012 and the different actions of the program Colombia nos une (Colombia unites us); however, the aim of this work is not to analyze these mechanisms, but to know, from the victims –refugees or asylum seekers–, their imaginaries of the return regarding the post-conflict. Following Diana Ortiz and Sergio Kaminker’s ideas (2014), it is important to consider what refugees think and may say, “whose narrations can help to reconstruct –if not to reformulate– history, the one that has been written from the power that stifles other narratives. Their reality seems to be the one of those who do not have any voice in their places of origin, or to be precise, their voices are inaudible” (p. 49). In this sense, the purpose is to find and make visible

those voices, since Colombia, as Shirley Castaño and Santiago Morales (2015) indicate, “clearly an expelling country, requires to reflect on the migrants’ return which intention must be the rescue of the knowledge produced from experiences –what is felt and learned when living outside the native land– in order to construct intervention proposals that facilitate the integration processes” (p. 106).

The research from which this paper is produced was carried out right in the process prior to the signature of the peace deal between the National Government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), which could create an expectation regarding the return in a possible post-conflict scenario; nevertheless, narratives show a very different outlook.

1. Theoretical approach to the imaginary of the return

This study tackles the social imaginary from the phenomenological perspective of the Chilean Manuel Antonio Baeza,² who argues that social imaginaries are “a way shared by groups of people to mentally represent space and time” (Baeza, 2000, p. 9). Likewise, the social imaginaries share, symbolically, forms and contents in which groups recognize themselves, insofar as they are schemes of intelligibility that offer existential meaning. “Imaginaries act as singular matrices of meaning or, at least, as contributing elements in the elaboration of subjective meanings attributed to discourse, thought and, very importantly, social action” (Baeza, 2000, p. 14). The imaginary is an institutionalization of founding ideas of a group of human beings, as the “*least common ideational denominator* that unites social groups” (Baeza, 2000, p. 34) and that also temporarily connects the past, the present, and the future.

Imaginaries act as engines that give meaning to individual existence and, in turn, mobilize the existential sense of a community or society, for they become “homologators” of all ways of thinking, relating and performing certain social practices that we recognize as our own (Baeza, 2003). Therefore, imaginaries acquire meaning in coexistence and can be translated in the elaboration of projects in the future, in a form of understanding the past, or in an authentic reading of the present.

Consequently, the social imaginary plays a central role for the understanding of the social world since it is present in all

1. Prieto (2015) indicates, based on data by William Mejía, that 319,010 people would have returned between 2001 and 2008; she also points out that, based on reports from the Chancery (Registro Único de Retornados, -Single Register of Returning migrants- RUR), in 2013 and April 2015, 1,582 applications were approved, only 79 under the figure that harbors the victims.

2. Aliaga and Carretero (2016) identify different approaches to the social imaginary, emphasizing the French one with Cornelius Castoriadis, Gilbert Durand and Michel Maffesoli, and the Ibero-American one with authors such as Juan Luis Pintos, Josexto Beriain, Celso Sánchez, Luis Castro, Emmanuel Lizcano and José Ángel Bergua. From Latin America, Manuel Antonio Baeza has developed a very robust proposal regarding the social imaginaries; it offered the appropriate conceptual elements for this research.

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human spheres: “the social imaginaries, as a concept, claim such analytical centrality; omitting this perspective would seem to me, to say the least, problematic” (Baeza, 2003, p. 210). Under these premises, this study elaborates an analytical framework for approaching the social imaginaries; it is based on five axial categories in Baeza’s theoretical proposal (2003), namely: enigma, basic beliefs, intentionality, fractality, and symbolic structures of adjustment.

The concept of *enigma* is fundamental to identify imaginaries because “in every construction of solutions to the challenges (raised as particular, always-unprecedented enigmas of each situation, rather than problems) we have the presence of imagination” (Baeza, 2003, p. 53). By considering the return as a possible scenario, where the intention is to create an image of stability that offers a probable response as the main option of reality or assembling axis, Baeza points out that “social imaginaries are not mere representations of something real, but ‘peri-rational’ elaborations (i.e., situated on the periphery of rationality, although capable of influencing it)” (Baeza, 2003, p. 81). For the author, the social imaginaries “give us something like the security and reliability of their contents in sensible matters that, a priori, possess the character of enigmas for our conscience” (Baeza, 2003, p. 97). In this sense, the aim is to identify what are the central responses regarding the *challenge of the return*.

This is complemented with the identification of *basic beliefs* on how the return is constituted. These beliefs nourish the imaginaries –according to Baeza following Castoriadis’ idea– and set up what would be the radical imaginary or the imaginary core: “what we observe as a response implies a basic belief, a non-negotiable principle, a founding value, that arises in a given space-time (context) and to which are added similar elements that can be prolonged almost indefinitely” (Baeza, 2003, p. 57) as imaginary ramifications, in the form of secondary elements that nourish the imaginary and densify a given conception. Such beliefs can be anchored to the characteristics of any of the contexts involved in the migration process.

It will be inquired what the imaginary manifests as *intentionality*, insofar as it “includes in advance very elementary decisions that tend to organize it from very basic premises, from valoric universes –own or external internalized–, from multiple beliefs, from personal and collective backgrounds, etc.” (Baeza, 2000, p. 53). Refugees’ intentionality in the imaginary of the return, since Baeza states that there are some options that organize thinking and acting and that make up the imaginary as it contains mythical-ideational bases. In this regard, it is pertinent to reflect on the conditions that refugees envisage in order to return to their country of origin, from the options available in their environment, for intentionality would impel the will and desire to transform the life conditions of the subject and the community.

The *fractal itineraries* of refugees influence the conformation of the imaginary. According to Baeza, the phenomenological

characteristic of human beings is “their exploratory faculty in different directions from a cognitive potentiality that distinguishes them from other living beings” (Baeza, 2000, p. 17). He indicates that, because of this faculty, humans trace *fractal cognitive itineraries* which refer to “existential journeys that they have to go through when facing the unexpected, what never repeats purely and simply in the same circumstances –identical actors, similar reference frameworks– (despite the deceptive appearances), etc.” (Baeza, 2003, p. 53). Thus the fractal itinerary of refugees will consider the different directions of the migratory journey in the origin-transit-destination-“return as a possibility” logic, by giving value to the *transcendental life experiences* that have marked their transit as well as to the *unexpected* issues that come from forced migration itself as one of the determinants of the imaginary.

The final element to be observed, considering the dialog process to a post-conflict, implies that what Baeza (2015) names *symbolic structure of adjustment* can play a role. A structure of adjustment is a provisional adaptation from social imaginaries; “a historical positioning of a society is then the concrete result of the consolidation of a structure of adjustment” (Baeza, 2000, p. 146). It is necessary to systematically note the state of partial equilibrium in a fragile social order. It allows a provisional stabilization of meaning because “these plausibilities, inspired from the profoundness of the social imaginaries, grant elementary assurances, although they must always be considered as provisional structures” (Baeza, 2008, pp. 156-157).

In accordance with Baeza (2015), the structure of adjustment contains a reference core that supports the symbolic totality and this structure is based on a historical-social process of the intersubjective activity of a population, through “significations that characterize the forms of social plausibility that society legitimates in thinking, saying, acting, and judging” (p. 111). It would be a type of symbolic order that can be formed from previous social imaginaries or from significations product of social creativity.

Authors such as Fernando Lozano or Cristian Orrego and Jorge Martínez (2015) argue that there is no general theory on the return. Lozano and Martínez (2015) point out that “the key is to define, in each work, what return means and the many facets that are to be described or analyzed” (p. 14). In this paper, the position is a step before the process of return itself since the possibilities of return migration will be seen through the theory of social imaginaries, i.e., the generation of a projection before the process itself.

In this sense, the imaginary will connect with the idea of “expectation”, being a key element in order to consider or not the possibility of return. “The intention to returning implies a permanent expectation although its materialization is usually subject to continuous postponements and reconfigurations of the life project, not to mention that, in normative terms, the return

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does not depend exclusively on the will of the migrant" (Mejía and Castro, 2012, p. 18). The return can even be constructed in an imaginary projection that would be established as a mythologization, for "the myth of the return will accompany the emigrants and, often, this hope will sustain them, especially in the first phase of their stay abroad" (De la Fuente, 2003, p. 154). According to Durand (2004), for some emigrants, "the mythology of the return has to do with politics, due to the change of regime in the country of origin and the change of the conditions that forced them to leave" (p. 107).

It is important to observe the aspects that constitute the social imaginary of the return in order to corroborate the extent to which this process is related to the expectations and to see if it is in the migrant's plans. "The wish to return to the country of origin is inherent to the migration phenomenon. Many of those who emigrate have the return within their plans, in some cases as their constant dream, but often postponed and sometimes not achieved" (Mejía, 2011, pp. 20-21, as quoted in Mejía and Castro, 2012, p. 18). In this case, it must be considered the variable that involves forced migration as a possible condition inhibiting the return; however, post-conflict, as a change in the social and political order in Colombia, can propitiate the favorable conditions for the return.

2. Methodology

The research had a qualitative approach. Fieldwork was carried out in June 2016 in the city of Quito (Ecuador), where information was collected through eleven focus groups which had the participation of more than seventy Colombian refugees, victims of the armed conflict; this allowed to reach the theoretical saturation point for the conformation of the sample. The identification of the sample was supported by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Ombudsman's Office of Ecuador, HIAS, and Fundación Esperanza (Hope Foundation). The analysis was of a hermeneutical type, and the systematization and interpretation of the data was carried out with the qualitative software MAXQDA.

3. Towards the construction of the imaginary of the return to post-conflict Colombia

This section of the paper presents a series of elements that conform the imaginary of the return. In order to approach its structure, it intertwines Manuel Antonio Baeza's theory of imaginaries with relevant aspects identified and shared by refugees in their migratory trajectories; this portrays and gives clues about the possibility or not of a return to post-conflict Colombia.

Forced migration to Ecuador as the initial phase of the imaginary

Although Colombian refugees arrived in Ecuador at different moments and under different circumstances, it is possible to identify some common elements in the midst of the diversity of their existential journeys. The first of them refers to the reasons why they left the country. Their discourses denote suffering and traumas caused by the war in their territories of origin. Many of them belong to Afro-descendant communities that inhabit southwest Colombia, particularly the departments of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño, and they state that they were displaced between the years 2000 and 2011, a period that coincides with the escalation of violence because of the armed conflict in Colombia.

According to the Observatory of the Presidential Program for Human Rights and IHL (2009), in the late 1990s there was an increase in coca crops and the installation of infrastructure for its processing in this part of the country. This was accompanied by the expansion and strengthening of irregular armed actors such as the FARC and the ELN, on one hand, and the Libertadores del Sur block of the self-defense groups and the Bacrim (criminal gangs), on the other. This led the previously mentioned departments to be configured as one of the main scenarios of the war for the strategic control of drug trafficking routes, since corridors converge between the Amazon Region and the Pacific Ocean, the Valle del Cauca and Ecuador.

Additionally, the economy of war in southwestern Colombia was not limited to the cultivation and trafficking of illicit drugs, but it was also complemented by the application of two other sources of financing: extortion and kidnapping (Echandía, 2004). These dynamics of the conflict had a strong social, cultural, and economic impact on the communities: abandonment of the traditional economy, increase in consumption of alcohol, domestic violence, homicide rates, forced displacement, etc. (Presidential Program for Human Rights and IHL, 2009). In turn, this socio-political context constitutes the origin of the fractal itineraries of Colombian refugees in Ecuador.

My father was threatened with death because he saw when his nephew was murdered. He reported his nephew's killer, was threatened and we had to leave the neighborhood. From the neighborhood of Caldas I was displaced by the Urabeños because they wanted me in their ranks. (Man, focus group #1, June 17, 2016).

One is taken out of home, then dismembered, disappeared, and they go and tell mother or wife that if she reports, she will also be disappeared. (Woman, focus group #1, June 17, 2016).

At that moment my mother called me and said: "Son, can you believe your cousin was killed? The guerrilla doesn't allow the families to go out, do you understand? If you go out to the village, you are a military target". I thank God and the Virgin because I could get my family out, my son is 22 and

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I could get him out, if not, he would have been murdered. (Man, focus group #1, June 17, 2016).

In this way, the fractality is configured from the existential uncertainty that distances the subject from a horizon of hope or from a promising future that provides welfare, quality of life and tranquility. Caught in the desolation produced by the fear of the irregular armed actors and the lack of state protection, refugees' discourse contains narratives of death, threats and violence that only the barbarity of the Colombian war can explain. They are discourses that, although they refer to a past, resonate in the individual and collective memory of subjects who saw their will subjugated when their lives were in imminent danger, and for which they fear even abroad.

A second element that accompanies the fractal itineraries of Colombian refugees in Ecuador is their interaction with government institutions. The tragic path that accompanies forced displacement involves a high quota of state responsibility since the participants in this research argue that they feel unprotected by the National Government, which does not have clear and effective assistance routes to meet their demands. Although Colombian legislation establishes regulations in terms of return and assistance to victims of conflict, this legal apparatus is disarticulated and operates poorly outside the Colombian territory, which is exacerbated by the lack of information that consulates have on this respect.

In this way, refugees' discourses reveal certain mistrust towards the State; many of them agree that the Colombian Government has not provided them any assistance to overcome their refugee condition, and others criticize that the incentives offered by the return law are addressed exclusively to the "socially desirable" migrants, that is, those who have the economic resources to return to the country; this does not respond to the reality of the "failed migrants", those who are abroad in situations of exclusion, violence, job insecurity, etc.

The Colombian government does not watch over us. They never say: "the displaced people who are in Ecuador, let's go for them!" The government does not do that. (Man, focus group #1, June 17, 2016).

All of us who have been victims are condemned, some to be banished from the country and others to be submissive within the country. The government has never been able to give us protection. (Man, focus group #1, June 17, 2016).

The return law does serve, who does it serve? For those who come here to work, who do not have any economic difficulty and want to return, it is for them, but not for the Colombians who have lived the war as we have. (Woman, focus group #2, June 18, 2016).

I have been here for eight months and I have not received any help from the Colombian government. (Man, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

As Baeza (2000) has pointed out, a phenomenological feature of human beings is their exploratory faculty which allows us to trace dissimilar fractal itineraries. Such faculty has guided the existential journeys of the Colombian refugees who shared a set of basic beliefs regarding their destination. Although not all the interviewees knew where to go at the moment when they had to leave their territory, since even many of them sought protection in different cities before leaving the country, it was possible to identify that all of them shared the imaginary that Ecuador was a peaceful country. This idea of peacefulness was the main basic belief that motivated the refugees' voyage to the neighboring country, what, in turn, may explain the large number of Colombian citizens who seek protection from the Ecuadorian State.

When I left, I arrived in Cali, and that day I met a lady at the terminal. She started telling me her story and I told her mine. She said: "look, my darling, going to Bogotá or staying here in Cali is worse because they can come here to look for you. Go anywhere else". I didn't have the money nor the plan to come here. I thought and said to myself: where am I going now? So I decided Ecuador. Not because I had that plan. I was planning to go to Bogotá to see if they could solve my problem there, but I didn't really see any guarantees and I feared for my life, because those groups outside the law arrive anywhere. That's why I decided to come to Ecuador. (Woman, focus group #6, June 22, 2016).

In addition, there are certain characteristics that nourish the basic beliefs of asylum seekers in Ecuador. The first one is the ease of access, since Colombians can enter this country without a visa and can travel to the city of Quito by land at very low cost. The second characteristic is that Ecuador has a legal framework that recognizes the right of asylum and refuge, which is backed by the Constitution of the Republic and the Presidential Decree No. 1182 of May 30, 2012.

Vulnerability and social exclusion in the destination

A large part of the Colombian refugees in the city of Quito states that they have been victims of mistreatment, discrimination, and xenophobia. As the refuge application is a long process and they do not receive any economic support from the Colombian or Ecuadorian governments, many of them are forced to work in informality –the construction sector, housekeeping service, or street vending. As a consequence, the interviewees report they have suffered work exploitation and, in some cases, they have had problems with the police:

Everywhere I go, they make you work but they don't pay you, they discriminate because you're black or Colombian, they say

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that we come to steal and that we're guerrillas. (Man, focus group #5, June 21, 2016).

A Colombian boy got a cart to sell pizzas. He started selling his pizzas and in four days he sold \$ 140 dollars. What a delicious pizza! On Mondays he begins work at two in the afternoon; when he was arranging his stuff, two scoundrels of the Metropolitan Police arrived. Listen, two! And he said he felt so powerless because they took the cart and the cheeses from him. And then they say: "get in the van". When he gets into the van, one of them takes him by the neck, as if he were a delinquent. Then they kicked him and threw him to the ground [...]. So, look what is happening. The authorities, instead of giving protection, support, what they do is to mistreat us. (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

In addition, some refugees have been victims of discrimination and xenophobia when requiring health or education services for them or their children:

Thank God one is here, but one isn't in paradise. You don't have a job, social insurance, study, the help given is limited; eat and try to defend yourself, but we don't have access to anything. (Man, focus group #6, June 22, 2016).

There is a tremendous discrimination in hospitals. When I went to give birth to my child, the youngest, a doctor that was making the round approached. He was taking my data, he was going to do the touch and to examine me, anyway... When I spoke to him, he asked my name and then he said: "Where are you from?" Then, I said: "Colombian". And he says: "Yes, I already said...". And I say: "What's going on? What's wrong with it?" And he says: "No, it's just that you come here to give birth, to make us take your children out, for free, to make us do the favor and you stay well-served". (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

It is observed, then, that Colombian refugees find at the destination a type of violence different from that which motivated them to leave the country, because the fear caused by the presence of illegal armed actors in their territories of origin is now aroused by discrimination and xenophobia that many of them have had to face in Ecuadorian territory. Given the uncertainty that characterizes the fractal itineraries of refugees, who fail to obtain peacefulness and security in the destination country, their discourses reveal new intentionalities that organize their ways of feeling, thinking and acting, and that give meaning—as noted by Baeza (2000)—to their social imaginaries. In this way, some informants expressed their intention to emigrate to a third country such as Brazil, Canada, Mexico or Venezuela, but not to return to Colombia. In

other words, the situation of vulnerability and social exclusion of refugees is giving way to processes of re-emigration.

I really wouldn't stay here because here I don't have opportunities to study or to enroll my children. I have already presented the application for a third country [...]. We are already in that, the truth is that I'd like a third country, I long for it, I want it because I think that in another country one's life is more valued than in Colombia, despite one was born there. (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

We're not very sure here either. This has become the backyard of Colombia's armed groups. We've already seen people here. Then we have to leave to another place. (Man, focus group #6, June 22, 2016).

I won't return to Colombia. If I don't get the card here, I'll go elsewhere to take refuge, maybe in Pompeii, but I wouldn't return to Colombia. (Woman, focus group #3, June 19, 2016).

Regarding the serious situation of vulnerability and exclusion that refugees live in Ecuador, it is also important to highlight the role played by non-governmental organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Jesuit Refugee Service, Fundación Esperanza, HIAS, Scalabrinian Mission, among others, with the aim of protecting and promoting the rights of refugees or asylum seekers. Through the testimonies obtained in the fieldwork, it was possible to evidence that these organizations distribute goods of basic necessities and develop programs, workshops and campaigns that contribute to the management and social inclusion of this population.

On the other hand, refugees who have spent more time in the neighboring country have organized themselves in order to guarantee a better quality of life for themselves and their families. The fieldwork allowed to know some experiences, in the neighborhood Solanda and in Mitad del Mundo (Middle of the world), of Colombian citizens who meet periodically to manage social, productive or house construction projects; this, in turn, has favored their social integration since many of these projects are aimed at resignifying the negative image of them in some sectors of the Ecuadorian society.

We made a "minga"³ to contribute to the Ecuadorian people. So it was how we could be joined up to the people. We cleaned the entire Equinoccial Street, the main one, we painted it all. We summoned three thousand people. There were Nigerians, Haitians, a group from Venezuela... People passed by and saw us working and then they came up with lots of water to help us [...]. It was a way of making visible the people who were here. Because it was hard. You got on the bus and saw

3. A "minga" is a word that indicates an indigenous tradition of cooperative work.

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the fear of the people, how they squeezed their bags, do you understand? But that has changed a lot. (Man, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

The formal and informal organizational processes carried out by Colombian refugees or refuge seekers in Ecuador have allowed this population to access basic resources that are often denied due to their legal status, such as legal advice, access to social security, job training, among others.

From the social imaginaries approach adopted in this research, the organizational processes of refugees or refuge seekers function as structures of adjustment, as they allow a provisional adaptation to the life conditions that the Ecuadorian society offers them. One of the basic beliefs that this “partial equilibrium state” allows is that refugees are subjects of rights and, therefore, they must have the same language and work collectively for a common good.

Peace and comprehensive support as *sine qua non* conditions of the return

The imaginaries of the return to post-conflict Colombia are composed, among other elements, by enigmas and basic beliefs that allow to explain the refugees’ intentionality regarding the possibility of returning to the country. Enigmas and basic beliefs are two categories that are closely related since both constitute peri-rational elaborations socially constructed (Baeza, 2000). In this sense, through the focus groups it was possible to identify that the Colombian refugees in Ecuadorian territory are convinced that the peace process between the government and the FARC will not have the expected results. There are several assumptions underlying this basic belief. Firstly, some people are suspicious of the process of demobilization of all guerrilla fronts, or they warn that even if this process succeeds, violence will be perpetuated by other illegal armed actors who are not at the negotiation table.

I don’t really believe in the peace process. God with his power can send peace to Colombia and to the whole world, but at the moment it’s very complicated. (Woman, focus group #5, June 21, 2016).

That peace process will never happen because –let’s not tell lies– the guerrilla will never end. The guerrilla has many fronts, has more power than the state itself, it is complicated. (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016). The Government has already spoken. He said that in Colombia there is no more war, and that is false, a lie, the war is being lived in intact way, as from the beginning in Colombia. In Buenaventura there are still dismemberments, disappearances, invisible borders that cannot be crossed or you are a dead man [...]. And so, successively, in other cities. (Man, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

Secondly, there is mistrust of the guarantees that will be offered to the victims, as it is believed that the Government could be involved in war-related businesses as well as in possible murders, which is a result of the corruption that is related to the ambition of power. Thus, in the imaginary of the refugees, peace would be restricted by the fact that the government is offering impunity to the guerrillas who have committed crimes in exchange for their demobilization.

I think Colombia will end up like Venezuela. Santos gives priority to guerrillas. A guerrilla extorts, one sees children carrying weapons and how, in front of the house, they turned into guerrillas and assassins. And now the guerrillas have the best. It’s not really fair. (Man, focus group #5, June 21, 2016).

Some referred to the fact that the peace process may affect their interests because of the fear of a forced return:

The peace process is not convenient to us who live abroad because if they make peace there, we’re going to have nothing. (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

We are doing a process to not be here, to go somewhere else where we are safer; but the president comes with the peace story and ruins our process, and one has to return [...]. Of course, not only he doesn’t help, but he wants to serve us on a silver platter to be killed all of us. (Woman, focus group #4, June 20, 2016).

As Baeza (2000) points out, beliefs arise in a specific context and subjects add new related elements that can be extended indefinitely. This explains why the return is not part of the expectations of the Colombian refugees, since many of them left the country under traumatic circumstances and, therefore, they find it difficult to imagine that the peace process might change this situation. On the contrary, the image of violence that accompanies their existential journeys is reinforced by the devastating experiences and anecdotes that other refugees transmit to them, which, in turn, dilutes their intention of returning to the country. In spite of that, some participants referred to the need for security conditions and guarantees necessary to return to post-conflict Colombia:

I would return, why am I not going to return? But let’s see the conditions; there must be the security conditions to return to Colombia. If things were quiet, everyone would leave, Colombia would become an Ecuador. (Man, focus group #10, June 23, 2016).

I would like to return as long as there are some guarantees that I know will be fulfilled, so that my children can be what I wasn’t: professionals, with the possibility of having scholarships, a decent job, a house, a roof and food [...], that is, total conditions for a living. (Man, focus group #7, June 22, 2016).

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Social imaginaries are dynamic, provisional and reconfigure when a new structure of adjustment is established, i.e., a new social order (Baeza, 2000). Indeed, the discourses of the Colombian refugees in Quito account for this socio-imaginary dynamism insofar as they reveal certain tensions that influence their particular way of perceiving the return; some of these tensions can be highlighted: past-future, war-peace, fear-peacefulness, insecurity-security. Interviewees argue that an adjustment to their living conditions would be an enabler of the return; nevertheless, such adjustment implies not only the end of the armed conflict, but also a solution to the social conflict that has led to the armed action of different actors –besides the FARC–, and the comprehensive social support by the Colombian State, thus making possible the access to social rights that have been denied to them inside and outside the country.

4. Conclusion

By following the migratory trajectories and the itineraries of this population, it was possible to identify that, after having experienced a traumatic situation related to the escalation of the internal armed conflict (e. g. death threats, assassinations, forced recruitment, human rights violations, etc.), the victims undertook a process of migration and social uprooting that led them to Ecuadorian territory.

This process was generally marked by mistreatment, the indifference of civil society and the lack of protection by the state, both in the places of origin and destination where, in addition, many of the refugees faced acts of discrimination, xenophobia and insecurity. Consequently, the physical violence towards the victims of war is intertwined with the symbolic violence, what exacerbates the vulnerability situation of refugees. In this context, a part of the population seeks refuge in a third country; another part insists on adapting to the conditions offered by the Ecuadorian society; a third part considers the possibility of returning to Colombia, but with the exigency of security conditions and the restitution of the rights that the armed conflict snatched them.

It is observed, then, that the social imaginaries of the return are fractal and are nourished by images that the refugees were recording in their memories and recreating collectively along their existential journeys: traumatic images from the past, images of the current living conditions and images of the desired future. From an analytical perspective, these images can be conceived as an element that allow the social imaginaries to be constituted as the least common denominator of social life, capable of guaranteeing the connection among all the recognizable dimensions of time (past, present, and future) and, therefore, they have the capacity to influence and guide practices and discourses of Colombian refugees in Ecuador.

The social imaginary can determine the return insofar as its expectations of returning to the country are loaded with tensions that have not been solved by the current regulations

in terms of migration and return, and that is, maybe, one of the aspects to be reformulated within the package of reforms for the implementation of the peace deal. In this sense, the issue of the comprehensive social support is relevant since, beyond the end of the war, the victims of the armed conflict who are refugees in Ecuador demand from the Colombian State health, education, work, housing, psychological support and, in general, a decent life for them and their families.

Finally, it is necessary to continue the research, considering other factors that allow to deepen the understanding of this social phenomenon: gender differences, the role of the family nuclei in the migratory processes of return, the configuration of new imaginaries from the implementation of the peace deal, the imminent loss of the refugee status or its denial, among others.

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