



Dispatch

The Atheists from Moscow: An Encounter with Colombian Former Combatants

ANGELO MIRAMONTI

Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle, Cali, Colombia

Julian is 32 years old.¹ He is a man with a mission. And a long beard, dishevelled hair, baritone voice and mischievous smile. He was once a librarian in a small town in southern Colombia. But no more. A few months before I met him, Julian left his stationary library job for a much more dynamic pursuit. His plan? To bring libraries to people instead of the other way around. Julian's "mobile library" vision was to get new books – and new ideas – to people living in the most remote areas of Colombia.

Books on his back, Julian criss-crosses the *veredas* (rural villages) and the *corregimientos* (indigenous areas) by motorbike or on foot. He visits small villages of just one or two thousand people, scattered across the mountains. Villages, where there are no libraries, and where there may be no books. Villages, where schools have only textbooks, nothing more, and where it takes long walks for children to go to school. Julian tours his mobile library through the mountains of Cauca, a region in southwest Colombia. The Nasa indigenous people live in this region, as do guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug traffickers.

Having travelled this route for a few months, Julian has befriended many traditional and community leaders and village teachers. Instead of arriving unannounced, he'll call these contacts in advance to let them know when he and his bounty of books will arrive. Once in a village, Julian invites the entire community to gather, introducing himself and his travelling library. "Anyone who wants to borrow a book is welcome to!" Julian tells them.

¹ This dispatch is the reformatted English translation of a piece previously published in Italian (Miramonti, 2018) and Spanish (Miramonti, 2020). The persons cited or portrayed in this dispatch consent to having their stories and images published for research dissemination purposes. The research presented in this article is part of the "Arts for Reconciliation" research programme (Miramonti, 2019) of Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle in Cali (Colombia) and conforms to the research ethics requirements of this institution.

Correspondence Address: Angelo Miramonti, Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle, Av. 2Nte #7N-66 Barrio Centenario Cali, Valle del Cauca, 760001, Colombia; email: amiramonti@bellasartes.edu.co

ISSN: 1911-4788





Figure 1. Nasa indigenous people, rural areas of Cauca Department, Colombia (photos: Angelo Miramonti).

Julian hopes that by reading, people can grow, connect and build peace. He hopes that by offering books people who are illiterate will learn to read, and those who already know how to read will become more avid readers. Julian also organizes readings and storytelling workshops for a wide range of people: indigenous children, elderly people, peasants. Some of these people have never read a book in their lives.

Julian's mobile library concept is simple, but it brings much needed complexity to these villages. Through the mobile library's books and workshops people in these remote hills learn ideas and views from "the outside world." The words that Julian brings them – both written and spoken – have broken through the sound barrier created by rural isolation. And now, I head off to meet these words and the man behind their diffusion.

My journey to the remote mountains of the Cauca starts with a rather urban motorcycle taxi ride in the large town of Santander de Quilichao. The small city is in the Colombian Pacific and has seen decades of violence. As we leave the town behind us and take the dirt road climbing up the mountain, I watch the urban landscape disappear, and they – the soldiers – appear.



Figure 2, Nasa indigenous people playing the traditional flute, rural areas of Cauca Department, Colombia (photos: Angelo Miramonti).

The soldiers walk single file along the road in small groups, dotted patches of camouflage moving against a dark, leafy green forest backdrop. “Why are there soldiers patrolling the roads?” I shout up to the driver, trying to make myself heard over the roar of the motorbike, my hands gripping the seat as he bumps over pot holes. “They are chasing the guerrillas,” he answers with some resignation and boredom, his eyes still glued to the road and his even voice

almost lost in the wind. “But... I thought the guerrillas gave up their weapons years ago, after the signing of the peace agreements between the Colombian army and the FARC?” I press him.² “*No todos, huevon!*” (Not all of them, you stupid!), the driver replies jokingly, revving straight into a pothole with such determination that I almost fall off under the weight of my backpack. “The soldiers hunt down the ‘dissidents’ of the FARC guerrillas,” the driver corrects himself.

There were guerrillas who accepted the peace agreements, handed their weapons over to the UN and returned to civilian life. But there were also guerrillas who – after the peace agreement – rejected the treaty and have kept fighting. They are the dissidents, along with drug traffickers and other criminal groups who joined forces with them. All these dissidents are the products of a peace process that is achingly slow, barely plodding along with small, heavy steps. These dissidents fill a void – the one left by FARC’s withdrawal and never filled by the state. That is, never filled by the state beyond its militarization of the area: army bases and soldiers, displaying their weapons while they guard sleepy plantations of yucca and banana.

I am still thinking about the dissidents as the motorcycle comes to a stop. We’ve arrived at the meeting point, the primary school in a rural town. I find Julian among the crowd at a local arts and culture event. Hosted by a local NGO, the event uses theatre, puppetry, and circus arts to encourage peacebuilding. Julian, also being an actor, looks right at home.



Figure 3. Gathering of Nasa indigenous communities, rural areas of Cauca Department, Colombia (photo: Angelo Miramonti).

² The FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army) is the largest guerrilla group in Colombia, which handed over its weapons in 2017.

Julian and I have lunch together, crouched over a gigantic pan of indigenous fare prepared for all the event goers. I then start the conversation with him. With images playing in my mind of those soldiers on the road, moving like patches of camouflage across the forest backdrop, they are the first thing I ask Julian about: “Are the soldiers interested in your books?” Julian, who says he meets soldiers often out on the dirt roads, continues:

Here in Colombia almost all soldiers completed high school before joining the army, so most of them know how to read and they understand almost everything. They patrol the territory, sometimes they stay 10 hours on guard in front of a banana grove, they have nothing to do. Many of them read cheap serial novels that they buy in the city, at a low price.

Julian says when he sees a soldier reading one of these books, he’ll scold him with ferocious irony: “*Hermano* [brother], don’t read that mierda *sentimental*, read this, it’s much better!” He then hands the soldier a novel of great Latin American literature. As he gets on his bike to head off, he’ll tell the soldier: “Read it. Give it back to me when I come back. But, if you lose it, I won’t give you any more.” Then he’ll disappear on his motorcycle, its loud motor skirting a field of silent yucca.

Julian tells me about one of his follow-up visits with a soldier to whom he had loaned a book. Several weeks after his first book loan to the soldier, they had this exchange: “So, what about my book? Did you just carry it as ballast in your backpack or did you also read it?” The soldier replied in an intimidated voice, “*no profe! yo lo leí, muy chévere ..., ¿no tiene otro?*” (No teacher! I read it, very nice ... don’t you have another one?). Julian took the book back and handed the soldier an essay on twentieth century Colombia’s history. “With the book you just finished,” Julian informs the soldier, “you have just read more than the average Colombian reads in one year.” He continues satirically, poking at the state’s militarization, “So then, isn’t it good for you... to stay here all-day guarding plantations of yucca and banana?” Julian wraps up his story by matter-of-factly telling me: “The soldiers stay 10 hours guarding the streets, it is normal for them to get bored and look for a way to pass the time by reading.”

Sometimes Julian also meets army officers. They are more educated and less shy with their “teacher.” Some of them tell Julian, “Professor, we are here looking for the guerrillas, we must understand the enemy, know what he reads, understand how he thinks. Give us the texts on which the guerrillas are trained.” Julian gives the army officers *Guerrilla Warfare* by Che Guevara (2006), the political essays of Camilo Torres (2003) or the memoirs of Manuel Marulanda Vélez (2015), one of the founders of the FARC. This means the army officers can read what the enemy is reading. They can understand not so much about how the enemy fights, but *why* they fight.

Reading Che or Torres or Vélez, army officers think they will have an advantage over the enemy and be able to defeat them. But, by reading these

texts, army officers sometimes find out they are not so different from the enemy. They have a common background with these present dissidents and the former guerrillas: the oppressive social milieu in which they all grew up.

Colombia's oppressive social conditions are founded both in its history of colonization and in the present-day inequalities. An old story, colonizers came and enslaved or marginalized indigenous and black people. An old, new story: after independence was won and the foreigners left, the local elite stepped easily into their footsteps. The local elite perpetuated an unequal society, they grabbed land from a population living from subsistence agriculture. Violence broke out. All of this leads to most Colombians being unable to afford the most basic needs and most basic human rights. For decades.

How does one deal with such oppressive social conditions? Well, violence and armed groups offer ways out or ways up. And this can be with the guerrillas, the dissidents, the drug traffickers, the organized criminal gangs or the state's military. All of them holding weapons and deep grudges.

The army officers read the memoirs of an "enemy" guerrilla leader who retells having to watch the murder of his family. This was during the period of rural violence that led to the founding of the FARC. Poring over these words, the army officer returns to that same dark period in his own history: the same lawless reality that his parents lived. But, by a twisted fate, this reader has ended up shooting at the guerrilla instead of with the guerrilla. Without really knowing why.

Reading about that shared lawless reality, that shared feeling of life not offering any opportunities (except to pick up a weapon), stirs a feeling of common humanity within the army officer. He starts to connect to the book's author, and to those who read it, on a human level. Julian comments:

Maybe one of those soldiers will recognize himself a little in the prisoners he captures, maybe he will kill one less, maybe he will understand that the book is about all of them (soldiers and guerrillas). Maybe they will understand where all this came from.

Sometimes Julian meets the guerrillas too. He tells me of the day when as he climbed the dirt roads into the hills, coming under the cover of the lush and dark forest, there they were at the top of the path: the guerrillas. Or rather, *former* guerrillas. Former guerrillas are those enemies who have just recently dropped their weapons. They have chosen the difficult return to civilian life. They often live in temporary housing in the mountains, built by the government whose support they wait for to help them rebuild their lives: trout fish and cattle farming, and sowing yucca and banana.

I ask Julian, "But... what about these former guerrillas? Can they read?" Julian replies, "Many of them have learned to read while part of the FARC, they were illiterate farmers before. And now, they want to read everything." Julian goes on to explain his process:

With them I start with the simplest books, sometimes even children's stories. Even these are difficult for them to read – they spell out every single word. But, every time I pass, they hand me back the books and ask for increasingly more complex texts. Unlike the soldiers, the guerrillas always ask me, “What do people say about us? What do the people of the cities think of us here, in the mountains, who have laid down our weapons?” Then, I start giving them more and more complex texts.

Julian’s mischievous smile spreads across face, “Then I give them one of my favourite books on the guerrillas, a text called, *Against the Atheists from Moscow*.” The irony is palpable in Julian’s voice. He explains that it is a pocket pamphlet, the size of a breviary (a small book of prayers and texts used in worship). It is published by some Pentecostal churches of Bogotá and given out for free in front of the churches. The booklet claims that the guerrillas are puppets of Russia and other communist nations looking to bring down Christianity (see Beltrán & Creely, 2018).

Julian hands the booklet to the former guerrillas and tells them, “*Hermano*, read here what they say about you, over there, in the city, on Sunday morning!” They devour this text, and when he goes back to pick it up, the former guerrillas ask him, “But... you must be making fun of us ... *al profe le gustan las bromas* [the teacher likes to joke]. Do these people really see us, the former guerrillas, like this? As atheists? From Moscow?” Each time, the *profe*, breaks the news to the former guerrilla, who is aghast at how they are thought of: “Yes, they really see you like this.”

Those people who crowd the churches on Sunday mornings and have never climbed the mountains to meet them – not even now that they have laid down their weapons – believe these former guerrillas are atheists supported by communist countries that are using war to destroy Christian values. Where do these urban Pentecostals get this idea? It stems from something the FARC did back in 2016. When the first peace agreement was drafted, the FARC insisted that the rights of gender minorities be protected in it. And this is the basis for this Pentecostal church to declare that guerrillas are just puppets of a bigger, international political attempt to bring down Christianity and the traditional family system. Hence, the atheists from Moscow. And, like a soldier reading the memoir of a guerrilla fighter, the former guerrilla now reads a text from one of their enemies and begins to understand their blind hatred. A hatred from people who are likely too scared to get to know these former guerrillas for fear they may have to admit that these former guerrillas are just like them: people who are products of an oppressive society that denies to the majority of its population the opportunity to live a decent life. A social reality that forced – and forces – people to choose sides.

A kind of blind hatred. And with this, a former guerrilla, a peasant-cum-guerrilla-cum-peasant – recently able to read – starts looking at their own social conditions with new eyes. Starts seeing a shared predicament and shared blind, perpetuated hate. They may see that they, too, carry grudges if no longer weapons. That they, too, have to make an effort to get to know these

Pentecostals. And they realize that they could have been one of these hateful Pentecostals. And, if the Pentecostals got to know them, they may realize they could have been one of these former guerrillas, or current dissidents, or state military. It is by reading texts from enemies that one may realize how drastically different another person's perception can be. And how media, both organized and informal, can perpetuate hate.

Seeing something like *Against the Atheists from Moscow* written down and formally published and distributed, this former guerrilla can also now better see the difference between reality and media portrayal. Better see the danger of propaganda. Better see how speeches re-create the world they live in – especially in Colombia, a country besieged by a few hegemonic narratives, held hostage by an ignorance of the social conditions that fuel the conflict. Rhetoric from all sides that stifle conversation, reparation and reconciliation.

Julian wants at least to open up that conversation. He does this by walking the dirt roads of Cauca and putting books into the hands of all who will take them: soldiers, indigenous people, dissidents, former guerrillas, criminals, children, teens, adults and elderly.

Julian puts some books into gun-wielding hands – hands on all sides of the conflict. And sometimes, when someone puts down their gun to pick up the book, they find themselves in the words and stories of the other. And the book becomes a mirror. A paper mirror. People may see themselves in the enemy author. An author they may have shot at or been shot by. An author under the same spell, cast upon everyone by the oppressive social conditions. An author, who is just like them, a human.

So, what separates the soldier from the former guerrilla? And what separates former guerrillas from the urban Pentecostals? And what separates the army officer and the dissidents? Everyone has the chance to find out with the right book in their hand – a paper mirror to replace the weapon they use against the other: guns, hatred, blame. And fear. And if a reader can look in this paper mirror and find a shared story and a shared humanity? They may see they have also judged, degraded, harmed, hurt or killed others.

But looking into this mirror is a risk. It is a risk to the army officer to read Julian's guerrilla texts. A risk to the guerrilla to read the soldier's stories. Because they may see themselves in the enemy and see the enemy in themselves. They may have to admit to not being the only ones to be right or justified in this war. They may have to give up their fight against the other and instead look at their own role in perpetuating the violence, the hate and the social exclusion. They may have to admit they, too, were and are sometimes at fault. They may need to lay down their fighting words and weapons, and work with the enemy towards an inconceivable path of coexistence. They risk letting go of their pretension of exclusive righteousness. And isn't it easier to keep blaming someone else for being a disgrace, a menace, for poisoning a society, for standing in the way of a better life?

If the reader braves the book, the stories and the mirror they offer, they use the shimmering reflection to light a path deeper inward. Inward towards a place of understanding themselves and the enemy, shifting perspective and making themselves accountable. The shimmering reflection of the paper mirror also lights the reader's path outward, outward towards a shared humanity that crosses the invisible enemy line they have helped create. This reflection can help a soldier guarding sleeping yuccas or a former guerrilla waiting for his plot of land to read the enemy's texts and be brave enough to think, "I could have been him. He could have been me. Why am I not him? Why is he not me?"

A reader who can risk thinking like this, is ready for the books, words, stories and a paper mirror, is ready to let their stories and faces get blurred with the enemy author's. They can allow their role to be confused with another's in this cast of characters acting out a play set against the backdrop of Colombia's violent legacy. Some characters are scripted to shoot in one direction, some in the other. Fate casting them in their roles. While really, each is interchangeable with the other. And some of these characters are able to play another role. Or at least see themselves in another role. Imagine themselves there. All thanks to Julian's mobile library.

One character, a peasant-cum-guerrilla-cum-peasant, who knows nothing of atheism or Moscow, reads fairy tales for children and the pamphlet of the Pentecostals. He wonders which of the two is the product of the wildest imagination, which is the farthest from his reality. The former guerrilla re-reads the sentences in the pamphlet again and again. He is amazed that he is an atheist from Moscow. An unlikely Bolshevik who emerged from the banana leaves. He laughs with his incredulous comrades in arms who – like him – just wanted land. Who like him, cannot get over how some city people think of them. All he and his comrades wanted was to plant coffee and *platanos*. But this life has been denied to them. And this is how they picked up arms.

The armed groups protect the corridors of narco-trafficking. Across these routes transits the marijuana that is grown on the hillsides in this region where grow lamps glow over the mountains all night long. And the War on Drugs in Europe and North America has made marijuana production illegal, clandestine and extremely violent.

And after all the land grabs, which land has Julian turned to? The land in between the sides. A land Julian can crisscross, weaving along windy dirt roads, supporting people on their paths of recognition, of seeing oneself in another, of empathy. This former librarian, with a vision to expand people's minds and lives by expanding the concept of a library, handing out paper mirrors, not just books. And these paper mirrors are held by many. On the edge of a field, a bored, 22-year-old soldier devours a novel while defending a yucca field from the atheists from Moscow. A month before, that same book was in the hands of a 20-year-old guerrilla just down the road, reading pages between preparing his weapons to hand over. Those book pages absorb the sweat of enemy fingers, enemy's eyes poring over the words. That book

arouses thoughts, emotions and memories that intersect and intertwine across invisible, liquid and elusive enemy lines. Lines that define a war front, only existing in the minds of the other. Everyone on one side or another, nestled in the mountains of southwest Colombia. And for the exhausted warriors on all sides of the elusive war front, holding these paper mirrors can be the first step to recognize that invisible enemy line.

On his travels, Julian gets to follow the sinuous path of a reader's gaze that decodes those black marks of the enemy spread across a page. Sometimes lips moving to sound out each mark which becomes a letter, and those letters become words, which become feelings and ideas. And those feelings and ideas which become mirrors. Readers holding books whose pages are soaked in the sweat of the readers before them, enemy or not. A reader, who you may one day shoot or who one day may shoot you. And Julian gets to meet them all.

The last I see of Julian is him driving off on his motorcycle back down the road. His backpack full of books, full of doubts, passions and thoughts, born on all sides of that invisible, elusive trench. A trench created by people unwilling to look at themselves, unwilling to know their enemy, unaware of the media propaganda that frames the peasants and indigenous people as Colombia's problems. A media story woven and cast over the airwaves by private groups to get the public's support. To turn them against this fabricated enemy, convincing most of the public that militarization is needed. To protect them from these peasants, these guerrillas, these dissidents. And then there is Julian, who helps see through the noise, offering another kind of media.

Julian spreads media through his books and storytelling. He gives people a much more personal recounting of life and the country's social condition. Words and ideas which may shine light on the actual enemy for all readers: the structural and historical inequalities, and the propaganda fuelling the violence against the wrong target. Once we understand the extent of Julian's offer, it is no longer about the mobile library's books and storytelling workshops, it is about offering paper mirrors to exhausted warriors on all sides.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Julian for sharing his story, to my university (Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle, in Cali, Colombia) for supporting this research as part of the "Arts for Reconciliation" research programme (Miramonti, 2019), and to Kathryn Marie Werntz for her inputs that significantly improved the English version of this text.

References

- Beltrán, W. M. & Creely, S. (2018). Pentecostals, gender ideology and the peace plebiscite: Colombia 2016. *Religions*, 9(12), 418. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9120418>
- Guevara, E. (2006). *Guerrilla warfare*. Ocean Books.
- Marulanda Vélez, M. (2015). *Resistencia de un pueblo en armas*. Ocean Sur.
- Miramonti, A. (2018, June 26). *Gli atei di Mosca. Un racconto dalle montagne dell'occidente colombiano*. Press Dinamo. <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/gli-atei-mosca-un-racconto-dalle-montagne-delloriente-colombiano/>
- Miramonti, A. (2019). Healing and transformation through arts: Theatre for reconciliation. *Educazione Aperta: Rivista di Pedagogia Critica*, 6, 40-60. https://www.educazioneaperta.it/media/files/EA_6_2019.pdf
- Miramonti, A. (2020). Los ateos de Moscú. Un cuento del suroccidente colombiano. *Educazione Aperta: Rivista di Pedagogia Critica*, 8, 197-201. https://zenodo.org/record/4394811/files/EA_8_Blog_Miramonti.pdf
- Torres Restrepo, C. (2003). *Escritos Políticos*. Panamericana Editorial.