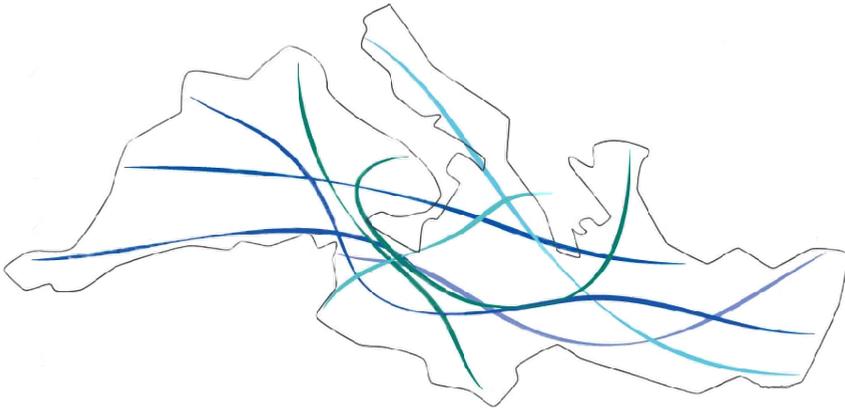


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*The Estallido Social as a source of  
creation of collective representativeness:  
the laboratory of the Mandato Ciudadano  
in Barranquilla (Colombia)*



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## The *Estallido Social* as a source of creation of collective representativeness: the laboratory of the *Mandato Ciudadano* in Barranquilla (Colombia)

### Abstract

In recent years, Latin America has been crossed by a new strong wave of social conflicts characterized by significant transversality and heterogeneity which, on the one hand, have highlighted the unsolved systemic debts in terms of social justice of evidently dysfunctional democracies, on the other hand they are leading the region towards a new cycle of political and institutional redefinitions. This article, being part of traditional socio-political studies relating to the problematization of the relationships and dynamics that arise between social movements and social conflict, analyses - with a qualitative methodology- the case of the *Estallido Social* (Social Outbreak) that was registered in Colombia over the last year and, in particular, focuses on the *Mandato Ciudadano* (Citizen Mandate) social movement experiment that materialized in the city of Barranquilla following the social revolts, where the demands for democracy, pluralism and bottom-up democratic participation, as well as social justice and respect for human rights, took shape. The objective of this article is to study the movement's possibilities for impact and pressure at the political-institutional level, a possibility that will be fundamental for a country that has just started an epochal change, with the victory of the forces of the left in the presidential elections, and which, therefore, will have to deal with the structuring of a new socio-economic and political-institutional model that is capable of realizing the voice that has come from the street.

Keywords: Social conflict, Social movement, *Mandato Ciudadano*, Barranquilla (Colombia)

## El *Estallido Social* como fuente de creación de representatividad colectiva: el laboratorio del *Mandato Ciudadano* en Barranquilla (Colombia)

### Resumen

En los últimos años, América Latina ha sido cruzada por una nueva y fuerte ola de conflictos sociales caracterizados por una relevante transversalidad y heterogeneidad que, por un lado, han evidenciado las irresueltas deudas sistémicas en materia de justicia social de democracias evidentemente disfuncionales, y, por otro, están guiando la región hacia un nuevo ciclo de redefiniciones políticas e institucionales. Este artículo, inscribiéndose en los estudios sociopolíticos tradicionales relativos a la problematización de las relaciones y dinámicas que surgen entre los movimientos sociales y el conflicto social, analiza -con una metodología cualitativa- el caso del *Estallido Social* que se registró en Colombia el año pasado y, en particular, centra la atención sobre la experiencia del movimiento social *Mandato Ciudadano* que se materializó en la ciudad de Barranquilla tras las

revueltas sociales, donde se concretaron las demandas de democracia, pluralismo y participación democrática desde abajo, así como de justicia social y respeto de los derechos humanos. El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar las posibilidades de impacto y de presión del movimiento en el ámbito político-institucional, una posibilidad que será fundamental para un País que ha apenas comenzado un cambio epocal, con la victoria de las fuerzas de izquierda en las elecciones presidenciales, y que, por lo tanto, deberá enfrentar el reto de la estructuración de un nuevo modelo socioeconómico y político-institucional que sea capaz de concretar la voz que ha llegado desde la calle.

Palabras clave

Conflicto social. Movimiento social, Mandato Ciudadano, Barranquilla (Colombia)

*L' Estallido Social come fonte di creazione di rappresentatività collettiva: il laboratorio del Mandato Ciudadano a Barranquilla (Colombia)*

Sinossi

Negli ultimi anni, l'America Latina è stata attraversata da una nuova e forte ondata di conflitti sociali caratterizzati da una rilevante trasversalità ed eterogeneità che, da un lato, hanno evidenziato gli irrisolti debiti sistemici in materia di giustizia sociale di democrazie evidentemente disfunzionali e, dall'altro, stanno guidando la regione verso un nuovo ciclo di ridefinizioni politiche e istituzionali. Questo articolo, che si inserisce nell'ambito degli studi socio-politici tradizionali relativi alla problematizzazione delle relazioni e delle dinamiche che si instaurano tra movimenti sociali e conflitto sociale, analizza - utilizzando una metodologia qualitativa - il caso del Estallido Social che ha avuto luogo in Colombia lo scorso anno e, in particolare, si concentra sull'esperienza del movimento sociale Mandato Ciudadano che è nato nella città di Barranquilla dopo le rivolte sociali, dove si sono concretizzate le richieste di democrazia, pluralismo e partecipazione democratica dal basso, oltre che di giustizia sociale e rispetto dei diritti umani. L'obiettivo di questo articolo è studiare le possibilità di impatto e di pressione del movimento nella sfera politico-istituzionale, possibilità che sarà fondamentale per un Paese che ha appena iniziato un cambiamento epocale, con la vittoria delle forze di sinistra alle elezioni presidenziali, e che dovrà quindi affrontare la sfida di strutturare un nuovo modello socio-economico e politico-istituzionale che sia in grado di dare espressione concreta alla voce che si è manifestata nelle strade.

Parole chiave: Conflitto sociale, Movimento sociale, Mandato Ciudadano, Barranquilla (Colombia)

# The *Estallido Social* as a source of creation of collective representativeness: the laboratory of the *Mandato Ciudadano* in Barranquilla (Colombia)

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## 1. *Social movements and collective action: introductory notes*

The transition to the stage of postmodernism characterizes contemporary societies by a high degree of fragmentation and an explosion of latent conflict. It is in fact a process identified by a strong pressure between two contrasting forces: on the one hand, massification, consumer culture, extreme relativism, spectacularization, and, on the other hand, the critical construction of the 'self' as an 'individual'. This pressure can be explained with reference to the common idea that integration can be achieved through uniformity of behaviour, which is evidently opposed by strong autonomy-seeking impulses. In this context, a reworking of the 'individual-collective' binomial is necessary, because the exacerbation of social issues by the dynamics of globalisation refocuses attention on the relationship between social movements and the broadening of democratic foundations. This reflection is today a crucial reference for understanding modern socio-political dynamics, through a focus on the area where collective action, conflict and politics overlap, i.e., the area of the 'politics of conflict'. The study of the historical-political and structural specificities of collective action cannot be separated from the observation of the impact that the capitalist process, urbanisation, globalisation, new digital and communication technologies have on the socio-cultural configuration of social movements, because these phenomena become a fundamental means for the purposes of collective action strategies. In this sense, the social movement identifies a particular

structured, enduring, and productive form of socio-political conflict, which is important for understanding parallels in the way different forms of conflict operate and showing how their differences are the result of various combinations of mechanisms in different contexts (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

The analytical perspective of this article is part of the theoretical framework of Social Movements Analysis. Without pretension of exhaustiveness, due to the multiple currents and visions that characterise such studies, we restrict the scope of observation to the essential features of the traditional theoretical orientations, focusing attention on the concept of social movement and collective action. The simultaneous transformation of the phenomenon of social movements and collective action with the transformations of society provides the tools to identify our dimensions of analysis: the construction of collective identity, the typology of internal participation, the horizon of demands in which they move. For this purpose, a basic clarification of the concept of civil society seems appropriate. There is no univocal definition, because this concept is not reduced to a specific institutionalised sphere of social life but represents “a form of social life with its own specificity (...) intermediate between the individual and the different institutionalised spheres, capable of self-regulation and of activating processes of organisation and reorganisation” (Magatti, 2003, 65). In this perspective, the reflections of Touraine and Melucci become a necessary starting point. Unlike previous analyses - almost always focused on the relationship between political system/movements - Touraine also explores ‘non-political’ levels, i.e., while not neglecting the importance of interaction with political systems, he inserts ‘conflict’ in a broader dimension, i.e., in a cultural dimension. Shifting the conflict from the economic to the cultural sphere, Touraine changes the ‘game’ of the movements by focusing on a different dimension, namely, the daily life. More specifically, the cultural model is an essential component of historicity and determines the categories of social praxis, i.e. it brings historicity to its real functioning through the “system of historical action”, i.e. “the system that expresses the anchoring capacity of historicity on social praxis” (Touraine, 1975, 96), and, along with class relations, defines

the ambit of historicity in which political systems are created. Although they are sociological concepts, the elements of the “system of historical action” corresponds to the elements of economic activity, namely “production, mobilisation and organisation, hierarchy, needs” (Touraine, 1975, 136-137). In this sense, a social movement is “the action, culturally oriented and at the same time socially conflictual, of a social class defined by its position of domination or dependence within the mode of appropriation of historicity, of cultural models, of knowledge and morality, towards which the movement is oriented” (Touraine, 1988, 127). A social movement is formed when the actor defines himself in relation to a general social conflict, channelling a struggle for the control of social development. A social movement is thus defined as the “combination of a principle of identity, a principle of opposition and a principle of totality” (Touraine, 1975, 413). Based on the complexity of contemporary societies, these definitions encourage the consideration of the role of civil society in the formation of collective action, where heterogeneous models of new forms of public protagonism are developing.

Reconnecting with Touraine’s reflections but emphasising more the relational aspect in the construction of collective action, according to Melucci the analytical definition of social movement is formed by the dimension of solidarity, conflict and the rupture of compatibility with the reference system. The social movement is thus “the mobilisation of a collective actor, defined by a specific solidarity, which struggles against an adversary for the acquisition and control of resources valued by both” (Melucci, 1982, 19). The reference systems of collective action consequently refer to the mode of production, the political system and the social organisation, and, in consideration of the system in which conflict and the rupture of compatibility are simultaneously registered, Melucci differentiates between three types of social movements: antagonistic, political, vindictive. From this reflection, a rather dynamic analytical model emerges, and, in consideration of the transformations of complex societies, the analysis moves towards processes of construction of individuality. Assuming that forms of collective action carry demands and needs that are placed on the borderline between the sphere of

personal identity and the level of social relations, Melucci considers a “multiple self” that constantly oscillates between the possibilities of self-realisation and the dynamics of massification typical of global societies. In this sense, on the one hand, there is a ‘subject in struggle’ against strong memberships, which is formed through the process that Touraine defines as ‘subjectivation’; on the other hand, there is a path of ‘individuation’ that allows for a ‘multiple self’. Therefore, faced with an identity, individual and collective, subject to the risk of fragmentation, there is the problem of understanding the elements that redefine the ‘I-we’ relationship.

The analysis, then, moves on to the concept of ‘organisation’. According to Tilly (1978), collective action is a group of people who act in a unitary way to pursue the same interest, connected to a social class that will be the basis of the organisation. It is precisely the organisation that favours mobilisation (repressed or favoured by the authorities). Collective action thus represents a coherent historical phenomenon, and the author identifies a spatial/temporal dimension, represented by the concept of ‘repertoire of collective action’ which consolidates the link between collective action, people, historical period. Basically, applying Tilly’s vision, with the transition to the capitalist model and from this to postmodernism, collective action moves from a ‘reactive’ repertoire to a ‘proactive’ repertoire, i.e. from competition to conflict, because citizens no longer simply react to the decisions of the authorities, but self-organise. Collective action develops that goes beyond simple local competition between different groups and becomes a real social conflict characterised by collective interests, moving from a spontaneous repertoire of protest to an organised repertoire of protest where citizens start to create social organisations.

As such, there is a transition in the form of collective action from the polity model - static and based on the analysis of a society’s political processes - to the mobilization model - more dynamic, characterised by the consideration of collective action as a process and more focused on the internal structure of the group-. This preliminary theoretical digression provides the basis for the analysis and the objective of this article.

The events that have characterised in recent years Latin America in general, and Colombia in particular, represent an interesting laboratory for practical observation in terms of the strong rapprochement of the notions of collective action and political conflict, as well as the strengthening of the notions of social critique and collective emancipation. Undoubtedly, Latin American critical thought contributed in the 1960s and 1970s to the strengthening of the Latin American perspective on social movement and conflict studies. Indeed, in the last decades, the action of social movements was key in the region in the opposition to dictatorships and in the visibility of structural social problems (*piqueteros*, *Sin Tierra*, indigenous, peasants, *pingüinos* and other organised student movements etc.), just as collective action has been strongly present (with the famous *cacerolazos*, roadblocks, marches etc.). In recent years, the intensification of social conflict in the confrontation with the societal model forged by neoliberal prescriptions has pushed towards a new emergence and consolidation of significant popular movements and collective actions (more or less organised). Using the definition of Della Porta and Diani (1997), if it is true that by social movement we refer to systems of actions characterised by four fundamental elements<sup>1</sup>, in the Latin American case, the most contemporary social movements and collective actions are involved in the production of an alternative conception of citizenship. Essentially, these social movements are involved in “the multiplication of public arenas in which socio-cultural, gender, ethnic and economic (and not only political) exclusion can be questioned and given new signification” (Escobar, Álvarez, Dagnino, 2001, 17). In this sense, in the region, movements and collective actions become much more than a means of making demands, because they provide spaces for the creation and re-signification of collective identities, self-affirmation and the practice of group solidarity. As will be analysed in the following paragraphs, the actions that have been observed over the last two years in Colombia confirm what has

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the presence of a network of informal relationships between individuals/groups/organisations; the construction of common values, collective identities, and solidarity among its members; the existence of conflict with counterparts; the use of protest and unconventional actions.

just been stated, since the collective actions registered do not fall within the framework of an 'alternative policy' action, but assert themselves as real 'politics' and, above all, as a real school of citizenship.

## *2. The critical and instituting force of collective action in Colombia: from the Estallido to Mandatos Populares*

Major changes in collective action depend on large fluctuations in interests, opportunities, and organisation. The deep process of redefinition of the pillars of the liberal-representative model, and its crisis crystallised in the growing disjunction between institutionality and civil society, has stimulated in the Latin American region a new *ola pasionaria* (passionary wave) characterised by strong collective action, by new forms of participation and bottom-up aggregation capable of putting pressure on constituted power and of generating, in accordance with the reading of the model of radical democracy, a transversal collective will. In Latin American political history, there are undoubtedly significant chapters of mass social mobilisations, capable of defining a true 'culture of mobilisation' that has achieved intense transformations in terms of the expansion of social rights and the constitutionalisation of the vision of the ideal of participatory democracy. Nevertheless, from 2019, collective effervescence is once again the undisputed protagonist, powered by a fatal mix of circumstantial decisions by national governments - in all cases based on ambitious tax revenues to pay off public debts and avoid the loss of international investment - and the explosion of structural social criticisms. In this sense, the conflict was triggered by prolonged economic stagnation, the sharp widening of social gaps, the delegitimization of traditional political channels, and the inability of governments to respond effectively to collective needs. This new 'Latin American spring' entailed a new cycle of collective action characterised by the above-mentioned key item which, however, was rooted in a complex and varied diversity of internal processes (Picarella, 2020).

With reference to the case study analysed in this article, Colombia is evidently inscribed in this dynamic, and, following the considerations mentioned in the previous paragraph, the repertoire of collective action that has materialised in this context in recent years was presented as a simultaneously structural and cultural process (Tarrow, 1997). The wave of mass protests that shook Colombia as of April 2021 picked up the impetus of the protests that took place at the end of 2019, which were only momentarily frozen by Covid-19. In the midst of the third pandemic peak, with the worst social indicators in the country's history, with a poverty level that reached 42%<sup>2</sup>, and with the harsh ravages produced by the hard restrictions and quarantines in a country with high levels of labour informality, made visible in the famous red rags on the windows and doors of the most difficult neighbourhoods - symbols of hunger, marginalisation and social inequality - unleashes the fury and resistance of collective action. With the *Paro Nacional* (National Strike) of 28 April 2021, called by the *Comité Nacional de Paro* (National Strike Committee), made up of trade unions and workers' centres and joined by other social sectors, many of them without ideological affiliation, the largest mass protest in Colombia's recent history began. The country was shaken for weeks on end: the general unrest simultaneously took to the streets all over the country, and, evidently, represented a blunt warning to the ruling elite. The multifactorial mix that fuelled the so-called *Estallido Social* (Social Outbreak) was triggered by the announcement of the tax reform bill "Sustainable Solidarity Law" proposed by the government of ex-President Iván Duque Márquez, and, more particularly, by controversial measures that hit the lower-middle class hard<sup>3</sup>. Four days of global protests across the country achieved a first strong result: the government retracted the reform and accepted the resignation of Carrasquilla (at that time, Minister of Finance and Public Credit). This is a result that, in contrast to the opinions of

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<sup>2</sup> According to data from Fedesarrollo, <https://www.fedesarrollo.org.co/>

<sup>3</sup> For example, income taxes on people earning more than 2.4 million pesos per month, increases in VAT on utilities and fuel taxes, and a freeze on public employees' salaries.

more liberal perspectives<sup>4</sup>, demonstrates the capacity of the critical force of collective action to become an important check and balance because, for the first time, it was not the Congress that defined the implementation of the tax reform, but the streets.

Despite this, the voices were not silenced, demonstrating the definitive divorce between the street and institutionality because of a long period of disconnection between the centres of power and the people. Repression and criminalisation of the protests were quickly clashed with peaceful mass mobilisations, and the colour and art that had characterised the protests were replaced by flaming cities. To blindness of a government that decided to respond to social malaise with repressive decrees that continued to extend the exceptional status of the health emergency to social protests<sup>5</sup>, closing any possibility of dialogue and negotiation, and which slipped dangerously with the centre-right party's request to establish a state of internal shock<sup>6</sup>, opposed the formation of collective action that defied the suspension decrees and curfews through the famous *cacerolazos*, until the space of social struggle was definitively taken over with the creation of the *Primera Línea* (First Line) action movement. It was particularly the young people from the urban areas who joined this movement, which resisted the harsh confrontations with the *ESMAD* (Mobile Anti-Riot Squad),

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<sup>4</sup> This is a rather broad and complex theoretical debate; among others, see Caniglia & Spreafico (2003); Ferrara (2000).

<sup>5</sup> According to the report of the Colombian commission of jurists, 164 extraordinary decrees were issued in the first 60 days after the state of emergency was proclaimed. This state of emergency was extended in cycles of three to six months, until the end of June 2022 (in the 29 years of the current Colombian constitution, a total of 270 decrees have been issued during periods of state of emergency). Of the 164 extraordinary decrees, none have been debated in Congress and, moreover, only 11 extraordinary decrees out of 164 refer specifically to the coronavirus emergency (Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos Democracia y Desarrollo, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Art. 213 and 241 of the Constitution. It is a mechanism that allows the unilateral suspension of legislation and the use of armed force to block demonstrations and roadblocks. Officially, the president did not implement the measure, although, and thus avoiding the control of constitutionality, through decree 003 / 2021 he declared that roadblocks do not fall under the legitimate exercise of protest, and that, therefore, they can be repressed by public force.

militarisation and unprecedented police abuses that prompted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to condemn the serious human rights violations in the context of the Colombian protests<sup>7</sup>. The split was irreparable, and the crisis of governance was evident. Society was calling for a new 'social pact', with forceful structural changes.

The management of the social space of struggle by a (re)empowered citizenship organised in collectives, assemblies, cabildos, revived the stagnant Colombian democracy and the organisational and decision-making methodology considered, i.e. totally horizontal, collegiate, transversal, without any party or institutional mediation/representation, identified the true essence on the social movement built its identity. This premise, moreover, allows us to focus on the cultural and structural characteristics of the collective action that took place during the outbreak, because the 'collectivity' definitely symbolised the social bond that grounded the mobilisation and self-representation especially of unorganised activists. The collectivity, the community, then became 'totality', because mass participation was the expression of a generalised need and not of a specific interest. In this sense, the elements of immediacy - urgency of direct action, of pragmatism and fracture between concrete and abstract, of organic relationship with the 'common people', of belonging to 'those from below' were intertwined with this communitarian peculiarity. These were all sources of legitimisation of collective action in the space of Colombian social struggle<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Temblores, a prominent human rights organisation, reported that in the first four days of protests alone, human rights violations by the police exceeded those committed in Chile during several months of protests in 2019. In December 2021, UN documents reported 63 deaths during the protests, 28 deaths were attributable to law enforcement, while according to the Fiscalía (Public Prosecutor's Office) there were 29 murders during the protests, a data significantly lower than the Indepaz (Instituto de estudio para el desarrollo y la paz) number of 80 deaths and not counting sexual violence, eye injuries, arbitrary arrests, *desaparecidos* (some 627 people reported as missing) (ONU, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the characteristics of contemporary social movements, see among others Mosca (2007); Della Porta, Piazza (2008).

The modality of development and action of this phenomenon provides the basis for a subsequent consideration because, synthesising Gramscian conceptualisation of collective action<sup>9</sup>, the Colombian *estallido* has demonstrated the capacity to become a social movement from a moment of effervescence, and also the capacity to achieve an institutional impact at the political-institutional level. In this perspective, the collective action that took place during the outbreak has opened a new space of legitimisation and representation, in continuity with the ideals of the protest. Its transformative charge has led to the election of a government of ‘rupture’, because for the first time in Colombia’s history left-wing forces have won the presidential elections. Since the election campaign, current President Gustavo Petro, leader of the *Pacto Histórico* (Historic Pact, a political coalition of progressive and centre-left forces), underlined the intention to echo the popular will for ‘another democracy’ that emerged from the outbreak, anchoring this intention in the repeated need for a harmonisation and encounter between the ‘social’ and the ‘political’. The President and his government undoubtedly face great challenges to achieve the structural transformation of the Colombian political system, condensed in the government programme 2022-2026 *Colombia potencia mundial de la vida*<sup>10</sup> (Colombia a world power for life), but the steps that have been taken in the last few months underline the firmness of these attempts, as well as of the ideals of equity and

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<sup>9</sup> Gramsci (1975) analyses collective action through two fundamental concepts. The first is that of “apoliticism” (Q9 and Q14) understood as the absence of state spirit. According to Gramsci, state spirit is registered in political actions that presuppose a continuity with the past and with the future; the presence of state spirit is a condition for the stability of a collective will to overcome the initial fragmented and subversive character. The second concept is that of “economic-corporate action” (Q 4; Q 6; Q 13), it is the basic level of political action, because collective action is possible only as the action of a “class consciousness” that allows the establishment of bonds of solidarity within a group. According to Gramsci, economic-corporate action can be considered as the initial stage of a hegemonic force-action.

<sup>10</sup> The programme is based on three main pillars that aim to “turn Colombia into a power of life” (p. 7). More specifically: 1. Change is with women; 2. Economy for life to move from an extractivist economy to a productive economy; 3. Multicoloured democracy and security for life and peace.

social justice for which Petro fought since the *M-19* guerrilla movement. The resonance of the effervescence and the strength of the collective action promoting change is based, among many others, on powerful symbolic actions coming from the social as well as the political-institutional level, which reiterates the convergence between these two dimensions. In this perspective, among others, we cite the methodological exercise of the document *Tenemos que hablar Colombia*<sup>11</sup> (Colombia we need to talk), or the President's proposal to forge a *Gran Acuerdo Nacional* (Grand National Agreement) between all government and opposition actors for the purposes of reconciliation and dialogue, as well as the experiment of *Diálogos Regionales Vinculantes*<sup>12</sup> (Regional Binding Dialogues) that, if it is able to focus and institutionalise a methodology capable of truly guaranteeing citizen participation in all stages of the decision-making process, could become an interesting response to the failures regarding the practical implementation of the vision of participatory democracy (Picarella, 2022). Likewise, the development - the day before the Institutional Presidential Possession - of the historic and unprecedented Popular Possession, organised by the social movements, social leaders, ethnic and popular groups and communities that make up the multifaceted and heterogeneous social movement that emerged after the outbreak, has had a great symbolic impact. This social movement gave the President and his Vice-presidential candidate a *Mandato Popular*

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<sup>11</sup> In 2021, six universities from all over the country joined forces to carry out a national conversation with citizens. The dialogue that moved the 1453 conversations with 5519 Colombians from all regions (carried out in the period August-December) was based on three main questions: 1. What would they change? 2. What would they improve? 3. What would they keep in the country? Cfr. *Tenemos que hablar Colombia. 6 mandatos ciudadanos para pensar el futuro de Colombia* (2022).

<sup>12</sup> The *Diálogos Regionales Vinculantes* are an initiative of the new progressist government led by Gustavo Petro, based on the vision that public planning should listen to the needs of citizens. This initiative consists of the creation of 50 sub-regional panels in which different high-level government officials will guide the identification of citizens' needs so that they can establish prioritisation criteria and define a roadmap for each sub-region in the framework of the construction of the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo y la Paz Total 2022-2026* (National Development Plan and Total Peace 2022-2026).

(Popular Mandate), that is, a popular legitimisation of the incoming government<sup>13</sup>, received by the President with his extraordinary call to the people: the bottom-up organization, from the citizenship to accompany the government. The concept of the popular mandate conforms to the vision expressed during the election campaign by Vice-President Francia Márquez (environmental and human rights activist, the first Afro-descendant to achieve this position) to drive her action and struggle for the government of *los nadie* (the nobodies), but the results of the outbreak had already germinated in the city of Barranquilla, where the social movement *Mandato Ciudadano* (Citizen Mandate) had been created in an attempt to rebuild the social tissue and re-signify the social struggle for collective welfare.

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<sup>13</sup> On a celebratory day, under the protection of the *Guardias* (indigenas, campesinas and cimarronas) and preceded by ancestral rituals, communities, movements and sectors from all over the country legitimised the incoming government by handing Gustavo Petro and his vice-president Francia Márquez a document with 8 commitments to social transformations (1. The vindication of the conditions of women and the Lgbtiq+ community in favour of their fundamental, social and political rights. 2. Work for the territory and nature through policies to care for the national environmental heritage. 3. The solution to the drug problem through the agreement with the communities of processes of gradual and voluntary substitution of illicitly used crops. 4. The transformation of the extractivist production model, the dismantling of free trade treaties and agreements that harm the national economy, and the promotion and protection of territorial production through the strengthening of popular economies. 5. Recognition of the rights enshrined in the Constitution to make equality a reality, which must provide access to education, health, housing, public services, work, food, and other fundamental rights. 6. The establishment of mechanisms for community participation now and in the future to ensure the inclusion of communities historically excluded for gender, age, skin colour, disability, and territoriality. 7. Defend the lives of communities, their leaders and autonomous dynamics, strengthening self-protection mechanisms to guarantee their fundamental rights. 8. The construction of total peace with social justice, continuing with the implementation of the Havana Peace Agreement, and the resumption of the negotiation process with the ELN guerrilla).

### *3. The social movement Mandato Ciudadano: an interesting laboratory of social praxis*

According to sociological literature, the phenomenon of citizen activism is a praxis characterised by different forms of organisation and collective action with the aim of guaranteeing rights, favouring the inclusion of the weakest and most marginalised, and protecting the collective welfare by influencing the policy making process. The pluralism that generally follows collective action finds its lowest common denominator in some essential elements of unity regarding the role played, the organisation and the operational strategies for advocacy (Moro, 2013). By establishing a correlation between these three elements, in reference to the role played, the role relating to the commitment to collective action for the recognition and legal implementation of rights by the political elite is intertwined with the role relating to the cure and fight against the exploitation of material and immaterial resources, and, finally, with the role of favouring empowerment and socio-political awareness of the citizenship. At this point, organisation becomes particularly relevant both in terms of the accumulation and transmission of memory and know-how, as well as in terms of the mobilisation of resources and social capital, i.e., of the strategies used to influence the decision-making and institutional process. In this sense, by observing the experiences of collective activism, it is possible to highlight a capacity for direct influence related to the power to generate knowledge and information on specific problems, the power to represent and defend the rights of citizens, the power to improve the living conditions of some segments of the population through the creation of services that respond to their needs, and the power to create alternative public spheres through dialogue and collaboration with interlocutors. Particularly in the Latin American context, citizenship is a broad area of conflict and transformation, where new forms of counter-hegemonic action are being registered. These forms of collective action elaborate new instances and discourses, interweave solidarity and visions of future paths, open shared alternative spaces. The case study analysed in this article is evidently part of this perspective, and although it is still a work in progress experiment, it

undoubtedly allows us to observe some interesting features that could turn this citizen laboratory into a significant exercise in socio-political praxis in the medium term.

The echo of the *Estallido* took shape in the effervescent Caribbean city of Barranquilla with the creation of *Mandato Ciudadano*, a movement of organised citizens that, as the official statement of September 2022 reads, believes deeply in the vision of participatory democracy, and proposes itself in the socio-political space as an alternative to the traditional political class, to generate a change focused on guaranteeing social justice. A new subjectivity emerges that, starting from bottom-up, proposes an exercise in dialogue and a different collective praxis, focusing on a transformation capable of cutting through the neoliberal and clientelist patterns that have characterised the management of the city and its metropolitan area in recent years. An alternative subjectivity that simultaneously identifies a collective voice of resistance and involves certain identity, economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political instances, and is a product of power, but is also a producer of power.

According to Cristóbal Padilla Tejeda, the movement's leader<sup>14</sup>

The *Mandato Ciudadano* has several facets. Firstly, after 2018, those of us who had participated in political movements noted a strong participation of citizens in the idea of building new governments, of making a political turnaround. Diversity was expressed there from the political point of view, but also from the point of view of citizens, organised and unorganised in different sectors and causes. My reflection was how to give back to the territories forms of identity organisation, so that people could organise themselves as they wished in the territories in line with this expression of change that had been generated. Thinking about a party was not convenient for me because we were going to fall into the same routine of traditional politics; we decided then to route a citizen task, to go back to the social base to think about something different from the territories. The crisis scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic was crossed, where the second facet of the movement

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<sup>14</sup> Many acknowledgements to Cristóbal Padilla Tejeda for his participation and collaboration in this study. The interview was carried out virtually through the Google Meet platform in September 2022.

developed with the emergence of the social initiative *Primero la vida, primero la gente* (First life, first people), that brought together a vision of strong solidarity with the aim of influencing the design of a district policy in accordance with the pandemic situation. We failed; the governments kept their old logics. The last facet corresponds to 2021, when the country explodes with the *Estallido* and fills with reasons the idea of a different organic initiative and the idea of the *Mandato* becomes stronger in its questioning and pressuring - alongside and together with the citizens - against the prevailing model in the country and open the possibilities of a necessary change in Colombia. This is where the *Mandato Ciudadano* comes into being, starting in 2018, but with greater strength between 2020-2021.

The subjectivisation of this collective voice makes it possible to frame more precisely the socio-political dimension of the movement's action in the desire to contribute to the construction of new democratic perspectives that make it possible to realise the demand that exploded in the street, i.e., a counter-narrative that takes over the 'space of conflict'. In her most recent work, Emiliana Mangone (2022) highlights the tight correlation between narratives and socio-cultural phenomena, and observes the role played by narratives in the (re)modelling and (re)signification of social reality. In this sense, it becomes a relevant analytical tool for understanding the 'space of conflict' as a strategic place of resistance, where an alternative narrative can influence the production of a change in socio-cultural and socio-political perspective. It is evidently a space in transformation, where power and dissent are combined, and it is precisely in this dimension that other possibilities for action can germinate, for the construction of an alternative and counter-hegemonic discourse, and, of course, for influencing the institutional framework. The ideological vision and the actions implemented to unite citizens around the movement make it clear that *Mandato Ciudadano* is trying to influence in a preliminary way a change in the political culture of citizens, to strengthen a socio-political alternative in the city and its metropolitan area, exerting pressure simultaneously and on different fronts to influence at the political and institutional level. Postponing here the analysis of the multiplicity of theoretical and conceptual issues related to the notion of interest and pressure (among others cf. Bentley, 1908; Truman, 1951; La Palombara, 1964; Wilson, 1990), the operational strategy of the *Mandato Ciudadano* seems to reflect Meynaud's approach

(1960). According to this perspective, pressure evokes struggles to shape political-institutional decisions to the interests and needs of different social categories, and therefore, now the common will to influence these decisions is manifested, then the organism that expresses this will is exerting pressure. In this sense, to quote Cristóbal Padilla's words

The ideological basis is centred on the empowerment of citizens so that they can actively and decisively participate in the fundamental issues of Barranquilla society, and that this participation is reflected and respected in political and institutional decisions. The actions we have implemented for this purpose have been initiatives for social causes. For example, on the environmental issue, following a technical study, we have identified some errors and possible acts of corruption on a project that has been done in terms of tree planting in Barranquilla, this is a 'city debate' that we are putting on the agenda for discussion about the city. Similarly, in the field of culture, we have promoted the issue of *veeduría* cultural to support and accompany cultural managers, but also to aim for the development of a 'right to culture' in the design of plans, programmes, and public policies. A very important issue on the Mandate has focused has been the problem of public services, a situation that has impacted the population because of the privatisation of public services and the abuses committed by the companies providing the service, especially electricity. On this issue, the movement has been advising the communities and looking for mechanisms of resistance and opposition, as well as proposals to find a solution to this problem. Another issue is all the educational activities that the movement has promoted with the support of ICAEPS (Caribbean Institute for Higher Political and Social Studies), training on civic culture, on the health reform that the new government is proposing, and on the possible development of energy communities in terms of alternatives and clean energy.

Applying what was briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph to the case of the *Mandato Ciudadano*, the driver of collective action is a type of internal organisation that arises to the typical form of a grassroots movement (Van Til, Hegyesi, Eschweiler 2008), anchored to a totally horizontal, collegiate, bottom-up, decentralised structure. The grassroots movement's open organisational model favours the implementation of ideological visions that focus on empowering communities to bring about progressive change. In this perspective, in fact, the organisation joins as a motivating and driving agent of collective power, as an inspiration until collective action takes place. The internal organisational functioning of a grassroots-type structure is based

not only on the agglutination of members around social causes, but mainly on the acquisition by the members of their own leadership positions. By relying on a horizontal and collegial structure - in this case study of assemblies- the role of the leader is to create the conditions for communities to have the tools to come together, organise and defend themselves. When these conditions are created, collective pressure action starts, and leadership begins to be diluted and shared with the rank and file.

The *Mandato Ciudadano* doesn't have a formal structure, it is a very flexible dynamic, more assembly-based, and with a horizontal logic in the construction of decisions, with a kind of rotation and qualification in the task that the members take on. In the future, we believe that the organisation of the *Mandato* should be developed since the challenge in the territories: it is possible for it to be configured not only with individuals who join the movement, but also with collectives or other forms of collective organisation that arise from social causes that are generated in the different territories. A sectoral presence, but above all a territorial presence, because for us it is important to gain positioning in the different territories of the country.

Obviously, this form of organisation relies on the strength of collective power, from the struggle get to it, and in addition it is strongly committed to territorial networking and dissemination, to climb from the local to the regional / infra-regional level, and from there to the national sphere. It is precisely these networks that can allow the grassroots movement to strongly express its advocacy potential in terms of social struggles, but also in terms of influence in the political-institutional sphere with reference to the second order elections, first by supporting lists and candidates, and then by positioning its candidates in the various elective positions.

On the other hand, we are looking at the horizon of the new moment of the conjuncture for the configuration of local power, and we believe that *Mandato* must influence forms of organisation and citizen empowerment, reporting the condensation of a great movement that can play in the construction of local power, that is, mayors, governors, councils of departmental assemblies. We are building forms of articulation in this sense, which will allow us to guarantee soon the possibility of influencing the shaping of local power. Our method of financing is self-management, mainly voluntary contributions from all its members, and, in reference to the execution of the strategy, social networks are the central channel used by

the *Mandato* internally, but also externally to express its point of view and ideas that allow it to have an impact.

Evidently, what the leader of the movement expressed fully reflects the organisational peculiarities typical of grassroots movements, by adding the mechanism of internal rotation of positions to guarantee participation, democracy, and internal transparency. It also confirms the methodology of action strongly linked to the use of social networks as a core support for the dissemination of the visions and causes of the movement, but also to continue to encourage collective participation and deliberation, as well as the possibilities of creating strategic territorial links. Another element of particular relevance refers to the construction of the movement's agenda, since in this case it was also decided to use a collegiate and horizontal methodology, that is, not to provide *a priori* a formal programme or statute, but to invite citizens to participate in the collective construction of the Mandato's agenda, through a call to participate in a meeting that allowed the collective construction of the decision on the forms of organisation and lines of action to materialise the movement's purposes, and the strategies of presence in the territories that would make it possible to strengthen the organisation. In the same way, the aims of the movement, disseminated through a flyer and a short video<sup>15</sup>, are based on some core points, moving from the fight against corruption, to the right to an eco-sustainable city, from inclusion to social justice, from cultural identity as the key to development to the exercise of politics for the collective welfare. Clearly, the pillar of the Barranquilla social praxis laboratory focuses on the consolidation of a new democracy anchored to a more humanist vision, capable of turning politics to be synthesis again, that is, to be able to oppose any sort of asymmetries and involutions with an internal structural dynamic profoundly based on human dignity and social justice. In this sense, in terms of advocacy, since its genesis the movement has made inroads into the social tissue through the construction of open virtual forums, with the participation of prominent personalities

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<sup>15</sup> Many acknowledgements to *Mandato Ciudadano* for allowing access to official documents of the movement

(among others, the current Minister of Health), of academic sectors that launched proposals from these forums to the ex- government to solve the economic crisis, of social sectors and NGOs that laid the foundations for dialogue and consultation with the local and district levels of government for the construction of a joint strategic plan, which unfortunately was not achieved. Alongside these first actions, which confirm what we have already said about the movement's priority in terms of raising citizens' awareness and influencing changes in their political culture, there are more recent actions and results. These include, for example, the start of a tense legal action following the refusal of local institutions to hand over information on the city's tree planting programme, a dynamic that will lead to the development of a public audience on a district council agreement called *siembra Barranquilla* (plant Barranquilla). Likewise, the accompaniment of the departmental cultural veeduría *La Lira* has led to the filing of some complaints about irregularities in the management of resources for the culture<sup>16</sup>.

In addition, it is interesting to note the significant role that the *Mandato Ciudadano* playing as a bottom-up connector between the social level and the national institutional level, after the breakdown and total detachment recorded with the previous political class. The movement's leader points up that

The *Mandato* was an important factor in the historical and electoral conjuncture that took place in this country in the last elections. On the one hand, by contributing to the cohesion of the different political and social sectors, and, on the other, in the pedagogy and forms of citizen organisation that were developed in the localities and territories to contribute to a historic decision such as the configuration of an alternative national government, which is now a reality. With our own way, forms and self-financing, and fundamentally with our independence.

This is a key function in the difficult and overly polarised socio-political context of Colombia, where an alternative and independent movement, which maintains its total autonomy without searching refuge in the traditional leaderships or parties, can form an important action of socialisation and democratisation, contrasting

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<sup>16</sup> The information was provided by Cristóbal Padilla Tejada during the virtual interview.

the inadequacies of the economics models and the shortcomings of the state through an incessant action of recreation and multiplication of social links and needs. A possibility of articulating and canalising these links, claims and resistances, that is, of empowering citizen activism and driving collective action towards the creation of real alternative public spheres, more anchored to the satisfaction of collective welfare and democracy, that can only be realised if the movement continues to maintain collegiality and total autonomy and independence of thought and action as a fixed point of its strategy. In this perspective, Cristóbal Padilla Tejada closes the interview by presenting the movement's medium-term plans

In the medium term, the *Mandato* aims to influence how citizens can take advantage of the promises of the new national government to bring about change in the country. The movement will participate in the *Diálogos Regionales Vinculantes*, which are a scenario of participation, we are working on the configuration of proposals to be presented on the dates set for the development of these dialogues in the city of Barranquilla.

The Barranquilla laboratory thus confirms its strong commitment and firm action for the construction of a real vision of participatory democracy, based on a strategy of constant popular and citizen pedagogy, to achieve an institutional discontinuity that promotes greater equity, inclusion, social justice, and dignity. In this sense, the *Mandato Ciudadano* is an interesting example of collective and neighbourhood activism, of a spirit of participation that transcends party colours to strengthen democratic values and institutions.

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