

Interview – Cécile Mouly

Written by E-International Relations

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Cécile Mouly holds a PhD in International Studies from the University of Cambridge and currently is a Research Professor at the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO), Ecuador. There she coordinates the research group on peace and conflict, and teaches postgraduate courses on peace and conflict studies, and human rights. She conducts research on peacebuilding, civil resistance and the reintegration of former combatants to civilian life and has practical experience working as a consultant for the UN, the OAS, and The Carter Center, among others. She recently edited (with Esperanza Hernandez Delgado) *Civil Resistance and Violent Conflict in Latin America: mobilizing for rights* and published the articles *UNASUR in Venezuela: Mediation, Bias and Legitimacy* (with Pryanka Peñafiel) and *Social Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in two Peace Communities in Colombia* (with Esperanza Hernandez Delgado and Jaime Giménez).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see many interesting debates in the field of peace and conflict studies, including discussions on the complementarity between conflict transformation and civil resistance, on the role of civil society in peace implementation, on the role of social capital in the social reintegration of former combatants, on civilian peacekeeping, etc. The complementarity between conflict transformation and civil resistance, for instance, has drawn the increasing attention of scholars in recent years. Indeed, there is a growing understanding that civil resistance can assist in the peaceful transformation of asymmetric conflict.

Likewise, much has been said about the role of civil society in peace negotiations, but less so on its role in peace implementation, which is essential in my view. As for the role of social capital in the social reintegration of former combatants, this represents a shift from the traditional focus of the literature on the role of the actors who implement disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes and the characteristics of such programmes. Indeed, this forces us to think about the key role of recipient communities in the reintegration of former combatants. Recent articles on the subject include one by Walt Kilroy and Helen Basini, as well as an article I wrote in Spanish with Esperanza Hernández Delgado and Jaime Giménez. And, finally, the debate on civilian peacekeeping is an ongoing and fascinating one, with the work of NGOs such as the Nonviolent Peaceforce and the civilian components of peacekeeping operations compelling us to rethink whether the interposition of armed forces is a requisite to do peacekeeping.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My understanding of the world has gradually evolved mainly as a result of working in the field in different parts of the world and interacting with people on the ground. While I find various academic works enlightening and these works have influenced my thinking, I have gained many insights from spending time on the ground, observing the situation and listening to people.

Many scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies are also practitioners, which is a great asset since practical experience can inform academic scholarship and reciprocally. I have learnt a lot by working in the field as a practitioner, as a Civil Affairs Officer in the UN peacekeeping operation in Burundi, as a UN staffer in the Situation

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Centre of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, as an observer of the peace implementation process in Nepal with The Carter Center, as an interviewer for the Colombian truth commission, among other assignments that have provided me with crucial insights and have deepened my understanding of the field of peace and conflict studies. This work experience has enabled me to be better prepared for conducting research on different topics in the field, and to have a more in-depth understanding of situations on the ground and the perspectives of different actors, such as international and local civil society organizations. For instance, my practical experience in countries after the signing of a peace agreement (e.g. Burundi, Nepal, Guatemala) has informed my research in Colombia on the challenges faced by communities in the current post-agreement context.

What is civil resistance and how can nonviolent strategies assist in the resolution of violent conflicts?

Civil resistance is the use of nonviolent, unconventional (“extra-institutional”) means for achieving social change by ordinary citizens when they are faced with a situation of perceived injustice. Nonviolent strategies can be particularly useful for the peaceful transformation of asymmetric conflicts when the most powerful party or parties have few incentives for making concessions, and when institutional avenues are limited or even closed to ordinary citizens. In such situations, citizens can use civil resistance to put pressure on their opponent(s) to accept engaging in dialogue, undertaking reforms or addressing problems through institutional mechanisms. Even if citizens succeed in having their opponents making concessions, they may continue to engage in civil resistance to ensure that their opponents do comply with their commitments, for instance that they meaningfully engage in dialogue and that, if an agreement is reached, they do implement it. Reciprocally, nonviolent strategies usually require conflict transformation strategies to achieve and consolidate their objectives. Indeed, it is not enough to press your opponents to make concessions, you generally need to engage in dialogue with your opponents to materialize this gain. Further, the field of conflict transformation pays attention to the relationship between the conflict parties, which is key since the parties will often continue to live alongside. If the relationship between the parties strongly deteriorates, it may fuel the seed of further conflict. Growing awareness of the complementarity between civil resistance and conflict transformation has resulted in the publication of recent resources, such a USIP report by Anthony Wanis-St. John and Noah Rosen, and an ICNC report by Véronique Dudouet, that are available to the broad public.

In what ways does approaching peacebuilding and development from the perspective of civil resistance and nonviolence differ from traditional approaches?

Peacebuilding and civil resistance have generally evolved as separate areas of studies, although some early scholars such as Johan Galtung conceived them as part of the same field. Today, there is a growing awareness about the complementarity of these different approaches, especially in situations of asymmetric conflict. Academics have used the concept of “peacebuilding” in many different ways. However, if we go back to Johan Galtung’s definition of the term and we also take into account the more recent use of the term, including by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his 1992 Agenda for Peace and his 1995 supplement to this agenda, we can say that the term generally refers to a process that seeks to address the root causes of conflict and transform violent structures into peaceful ones. Peacebuilding then is a long-term endeavour to challenge the structural and cultural violence that is often at the root of violent conflict. If we use this conception of the term, we can see that civil resistance can be an avenue for peacebuilding because it is often used to address distinct forms of structural violence, such as political exclusion or socioeconomic exclusion. By undertaking civil resistance, grievance groups can shift power around and might contribute to a reduction of structural violence. This is particularly the case if such groups become empowered and build autonomous structures and processes (what Gandhi referred to as a “constructive programme”) that enable them to no longer depend on their oppressors.

What role has civil resistance played in Colombia? What strategies are being applied in the post-conflict context?

Many communities in Colombia have used civil resistance to resist armed violence and oppression by armed actors. A case in point are the so-called “peace communities” on which much has been written (see, for instance, my forthcoming entry on the subject in the Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace, as well as the work of Colombian scholars such as Esperanza Hernández Delgado, Pedro Valenzuela or Juan Masullo).

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These communities have adapted their strategies depending on their evolving context, doing their most to curb direct violence when armed violence was severely affecting them but also trying to reduce structural and cultural violence, especially when the level of armed violence had reduced and enabled them to work on more structural issues. In the current context of Colombia, we can observe significant differences between peace communities. Given that the 2016 agreement was only a partial agreement, that is one between one non-state armed group and the government while other non-state armed groups remain active, some territories continue to be affected by armed violence, which is why peace communities in these areas still employ the same civil resistance strategies to limit direct violence as they did before the signing of the 2016 agreement, even though they may simultaneously take advantage of the signing of the peace accord to work on issues such as transitional justice, the reduction of socio-economic inequalities, etc.

As in many other societies around the world, civil resistance has also been used by a variety of actors in Colombia to protest against certain government policies, the exploitation of natural resources, corruption, etc. In the current post-agreement context, some of these issues have gained prominence, and various actors have also used civil resistance to press for the implementation of the 2016 peace accord between the government and the FARC guerrillas, and for peace negotiations between the government and the ELN guerrillas.

What are the main challenges of re-integrating ex-combatants in Colombia?

Former combatants face at least three main challenges. First, they face a security challenge. The Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the main insurgent group, FARC, in 2016, but various non-state armed groups continue to operate in the Colombian territory, and some have targeted former combatants. Security is a challenge for the reintegration of former combatants in any society, but it is especially so if only a partial agreement has been signed, since other non-state armed groups continue to be active. The number of former FARC combatants who have been assassinated in Colombia to date is worrying and constitutes a significant challenge for the reintegration of former combatants.

A second challenge relates to the stigmatization of former combatants, which makes it more difficult for them to reintegrate into society. Much more needs to be done to enhance the relationships between former combatants and the rest of society, particularly at the community level. Third, former combatants need to be able to make a living in order not to be tempted to rearm again or be involved in illicit activities. This is particularly challenging in places which have been traditionally abandoned by the state. Despite the support of the UN mission in Colombia and a variety of actors, the state response has been slow and often insufficient to ensure an adequate economic reintegration of former combatants. In particular, various former FARC combatants left the areas where they were supposed to receive training and assistance for their reintegration because of the delays in receiving assistance, the lack of economic opportunities and/or allocation of land titles.

Latin America is undergoing a period of political instability, social unrest and democratic deficit. Has this mobilized society? What potential is there for further mobilization?

This phenomenon is not only a Latin American one. In 2019 various societies across the world mobilized for a variety of reasons (see Hardy Merriman's blogpost on the subject). According to Hardy Merriman, a backdrop for these mobilizations "is the very troubling global trend of backsliding democracy and rising authoritarianism around the world". In Latin America, there is also a growing mobilization against corruption and the exploitation of natural resources in many parts of the region. In my view and on the basis of the testimonies of activists from many different countries who have taken part in our regional programme on strategic nonviolent action (jointly organized by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), FLACSO Ecuador, the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador and the NGO CEMPROC), there is clearly potential for further mobilization because of the number of issues which outrage citizens in various countries in Latin America and their perception of the lack of institutional avenues to address these issues.

You recently published an article with Pryanka Peñafiel discussing how biased mediators can still be successful in facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties. Can you outline your main findings from

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analyzing UNASUR's involvement in Venezuela?

In this article we distinguish two types of legitimacy: ideological and pragmatic legitimacy. Ideological legitimacy is “the identification of a person or group A with a person or Group B and its objectives (for example, because of political or cultural affinity)”, while pragmatic legitimacy is “the perception that a person or group A has of the results that can be achieved through a person or group B” (Peñafiel and Mouly 2019, p. 580). We contend that, while much of the academic discussion has focused on bias in mediation (see, for example, the excellent review of the literature by Peter Wallensteen and Isaak Svensson), the pragmatic legitimacy of a mediator matters more than bias, as we can observe in the case of UNASUR in Venezuela. Indeed, while UNASUR was perceived to be biased towards the government headed by Nicolás Maduro, many in the opposition accepted the organization as a mediator, as long as they considered UNASUR's facilitation work to be useful, in particular after UNASUR succeeded in having the government address some of the demands of the opposition. However, after some time, when the government failed to comply with its obligations under the agreements reached with the opposition during the dialogue facilitated by UNASUR, the perception of the usefulness of UNASUR as a mediator declined, making it difficult for the organization to continue its facilitation role, in addition to the internal problems that it faced and which have led to its collapse. All in all, the perception of the organization as a potential channel to obtain beneficial outcomes in a dialogue between the parties to the conflict (pragmatic legitimacy) was more important than its perceived bias in explaining UNASUR's mediating role. This suggests that shifting our attention to the pragmatic legitimacy of mediators can help us better understand the role played by biased mediators in various situations of conflict.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I would advise them to do research on a subject that they are passionate about, present their findings in a public setting to obtain feedback and try to publish something about it. Even if publishing is not easy, they can find useful advice in books about academic writing and, if they persevere and take into account feedback, they will surely end up succeeding, which will boost their morale and motivate them to continue doing research and publishing.