

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Guests of the Guerrilla: Integrated Spectacle and Disintegrating Peace, an Ethnographic Analysis of the FARC's Tenth (and Final?) Guerrilla Conference

Alexander L. Fattal* 

Associate Professor, University of California, San Diego

*Corresponding author. Email: afattal@ucsd.edu

(Received 7 April 2021; revised 15 February 2022; accepted 11 March 2022;
first published online 11 August 2022)

Abstract

During a week in September of 2016, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) held its tenth guerrilla conference, the *Décima*, in the plains of Yarí in southern Colombia. The guerrilla group blew the event open to the media, orchestrating a festival cum eco-conflict-tourism extravaganza to mark its transition to legal politics. This photo/ethnographic analysis of the *Décima* illuminates the FARC's symbolic and discursive formation at a pivotal transitional moment and how the group imagined its political possibilities at the cusp of its demobilisation. By engaging with Guy Debord's concept of 'integrated spectacle', I argue that the FARC's vanguardist structure led it to brand itself as the leader of a broad political mobilisation, even as it struggled to retain the allegiance of its former combatants. The article considers the ongoing relevance of the integrated spectacle for scholars and activists and opens a path for further research into politics of spectacle in Latin America.

Keywords: Colombian peace process; FARC; media event; spectacle

Introduction

In August of 2016, I was thumbing through my Facebook feed on my phone when I saw Sergio's post:¹ 'See you at the *Décima*!'

My left thumb braked its upward motion. I clicked the link and craned my neck to read a press release that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army, FARC-EP)² had posted on its blog. The Marxist guerrilla group was blowing

¹In this article I will refer to guerrillas by their aliases because that is how they are known colloquially in Colombia. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

²The FARC tacked 'Ejército del Pueblo' (People's Army, EP) on to its name in the *Séptima* (its seventh conference) in 1982. When it transitioned to a political party in 2017 it kept the acronym FARC, Fuerza

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

open its tenth guerrilla conference (henceforth, the *Décima*) to the media, instructing journalists to apply for accreditation by filling out five columns on an Excel spreadsheet and sending the file to a Gmail address.

I had interviewed Sergio five months earlier in Havana, Cuba. There the FARC and the Colombian government were in the final stretch of negotiating a peace accord. He had been directing the FARC's commission on propaganda. Our conversation focused on transformations in the FARC's media strategy during the four-year negotiating period, 2012–16, as the group experimented with the full functionality of media technologies and platforms it could only use provisionally as a guerrilla army under military and political siege. But that was in Havana. The *Décima* would take place in the plains of Yari, deep in its own territory, along the northern edge of Colombia's Amazonian South. Unlike its nine previous conferences, internal conclaves convened in extreme secrecy, the FARC turned the *Décima* into a media extravaganza.³ The conference's formal purpose was to ratify the peace agreement internally with representatives from its many units spread throughout the country, but it also served as a laboratory to test political strategies and discourses on the cusp of a transition to unarmed politics and to celebrate its 50 years of armed resistance to the Colombian state and its allies.

As the FARC embraced the logics and practices of consumer marketing, it moved onto symbolic ground where it faced a sharp disadvantage. Over the first 16 years of the new millennium, the government had honed its media warfare capabilities.⁴ Of the FARC's numerous miscalculations throughout the negotiating period, its rash embrace of spectacle as a locus of political struggle has evaded systemic analysis. What I will argue is that the group's vanguardist structure – in which its two central leadership organs, the *Secretariado* and *Estado Mayor*, held a near monopoly on setting the strategic direction of the group – led it on a foolhardy exercise to brand itself as the leader of a counter-hegemonic coalition in the

Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force), ultimately changing that name to simply *Los Comunes* (The Commons) in 2021. For this article, I have chosen to use FARC–EP when referring to the guerrilla army and movement independent of its transition from 2012 to the present and simply FARC when referring to the group from the early 2010s to the name change of the political party (2021). My rationale for using the simpler acronym FARC in these instances is that since my concern is primarily about the strategic decisions of the organisation's leadership, which was largely the same across the FARC–EP/FARC transition (except for an important schism in 2018), it is better to use the name that straddles the transition. It is admittedly an imperfect solution for the prickly nomenclature issue.

³It is interesting to reflect on the shifting nature of the *'trabajo de masas'* (political work with 'the masses') over the FARC–EP's trajectory, especially following its *Séptima* and *Octava* (seventh and eighth conferences) in 1982 and 1993 as it planned its expansion. Throughout those years it redoubled its local cultural diplomacy, initiating mobile radio units to promote local programming of *Voz de la Resistencia*, distributing the communist press and circulating the works of rebel singer-songwriters, but still 'the masses' were primarily considered to be in regions where the group operated or was expanding into. The *Décima*, and the negotiating period more broadly, marks a shift to less localised publics and an understanding of the masses in more mediated terms. Although antecedents for this shift can be seen during the *Caguán* years (1999–2002), the *Décima*'s emphasis on mass mediation was at a scale that was entirely new for the organisation (bracketing out its proclivity to generate and capitalise on media attention from high-profile kidnappings, which operated by a very different logic – see footnote 24).

⁴See Alexander L. Fattal, *Guerrilla Marketing: Counterinsurgency and Capitalism in Colombia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

post-accord period. Although the group's high-ranking commanders envisioned the FARC spearheading a broad political mobilisation, the group struggled to maintain internal consensus and retain the allegiance of its former combatants.

Even before the peace accord was signed and approved by the Colombian Congress in November 2016, think-tank analysts and academics warned of an all too predictable remobilisation that would echo the failures of peace agreements and amnesties past.⁵ The pitfalls they foresaw included a lack of gainful opportunities for ex-combatants; thriving illegal economies that provide powerful incentive for former guerrillas to re-arm and for other armed factions to vie for the territory that the FARC-EP had held; a lack of government capacity to implement ambitious reforms in territories where it had a minimal imprint; the ongoing threat of ruthless right-wing groups; and the complex and highly sensitive legal quandaries posed by transitional justice. These are all important parts of the story and factor into my analysis; however, what I want to explore in this article is the often-overlooked element of the FARC's symbolic and discursive strategies throughout the transitional period. Its decision to host the *Décima* – which included nightly concerts on a stage fit for the Rolling Stones (see [Figure 1](#)) – and the event's unfolding at the threshold of its demobilisation illuminate how the group imagined the transitional moment and shed light on its internal divisions, both of which have marked the trajectory of post-accord Colombia.

The FARC's emphasis on media spectacle from the late negotiating period to the early implementation period, 2015–18, of which the *Décima* was paradigmatic, shifted its political struggle onto a lopsided terrain of spectacular competition. Engaging in such culture-industry tactics was at odds with its historical commitment to grassroots organising and its Marxist–Leninist theoretical orientation. The broader rebrand spurred internal division as factions struggled to define the contours of the border between spectacle and politics. Those divisions only grew as the FARC leadership hubristically believed in its ability to effectively wield spectacular power despite a series of disadvantages, not the least of which being a generational cum technological one.

This article combines a written and photographic ethnography of the *Décima*, theoretical engagement with Guy Debord's concept of 'integrated spectacle', and analysis of the still-unfolding post-accord period to highlight and understand how the FARC's symbolic and discursive strategies have contributed to its political faltering during the transitional period. The ethnography was carried out throughout the intensive one-week duration of the conference and consisted of participant observation, interviews and documentary photography (methods that blended, given the journalistic nature of the event). Photography allowed me to process the symbolic dimensions of the conference and explore its admixture of on- and off-stage elements. Interviews, semi-structured and unstructured, as well as less formal conversations with guerrillas at the *Décima*, at all levels of rank – from the Secretariat to the rank and file – illuminated the FARC's analysis of its then present

⁵Since then, scholars have offered analyses of the post-accord period and raised questions about how the failures of the peace process might fuel new assemblages of violence, including renewed guerrilla struggle. See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, *¿Un nuevo ciclo de la guerra en Colombia?* (Bogotá: Penguin Random House, 2020); and José A. Gutiérrez, 'Towards a New Phase of Guerrilla Warfare?', *Latin American Perspectives*, 47: 5 (2020), pp. 227–44.



Figure 1. Esteban, a Young Rapper and Member of the FARC, Performs Onstage with the Bogotá-Based Reggae Band Alerta-Kamarada
 Source: Photo by author.

and future. This mini-ethnography builds upon a decade of qualitative research on the propagandistic dimension of the Colombian armed conflict and a two-year-long ethnography with guerrillas who had deserted (demobilised in the government's parlance) from the FARC-EP in the 2000s and early 2010s, as well as research into the FARC's media practices in Havana, Cuba, throughout the negotiating period. This previous research provided insights into the state of spectacular political contestation and the organisational culture of the FARC in the period just before and during the peace negotiations.

The 'Integrated Spectacle' in Latin America

June of 1968 saw a burst of protests in South America, from La Paz (Bolivia) to Guayaquil (Ecuador) to Caracas (Venezuela). It is beyond the scope of this article to determine who inspired whom in the global diffusion of uprisings in the spring and summer months of that tumultuous year. I will limit myself to affirming recent scholarship that argues against a unidirectional flow in which protests in Latin America followed the lead of student uprisings in Europe and the United States.⁶ While contemporary Marxist theory and avant-garde antics in Europe did circulate widely on Latin American campuses, student leaders were keenly aware of contextual differences and local determinants. A Uruguayan student, for example, quipped to a journalist from *Marcha*, 'The French students were inspired by Che Guevara

⁶Vania Markarian's history of 1968 from the perspective of the idiosyncrasies of Uruguay's experience is exemplary in this regard. See Vania Markarian, *Uruguay, 1968: Student Activism from Global Counterculture to Molotov Cocktails* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

and I don't know if you are aware that Che was a Latin American.'⁷ Historian Victoria Langland quotes a reflection by Brazilian activist Amir Haddad: 'Today, twenty years later, we remember '68 in Brazil and in the world. And naturally we associate the Brazilian agitation with what was going on in Europe at the same time. But in 1968 I only wanted to free myself from that nightmare of a regime that oppressed me and my country.'⁸

Although situationist-inspired graffiti scrawled on the walls of Paris, which played with language as an expression of ideology, did not translate fluidly across the Atlantic, playful bravado reverberated across contexts. As protests of the late 1960s in Latin America morphed into a second wave of insurgency in the early 1970s, which was more urban in orientation than the FARC-EP and its rural predecessors, or of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their peasant-based movement, the tactics of the new groups became, well, spectacular. The insurgencies of Ação Libertadora Nacional (National Liberation Action, ALN) and Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (8 October Revolutionary Movement, MR8) in Brazil, Tupamaros in Uruguay, Montoneros and Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP) in Argentina, Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR) in Chile, and the Movimiento 19 de Abril (19 April Movement, M-19) in Colombia engaged in symbolic banditry, stealing national symbols, dramatically seizing and redistributing the contents of food or milk trucks in working-class neighbourhoods, and perpetrating high-profile kidnappings and 'trials'.⁹ These groups stretched beyond the doctrine and discipline of local communist parties (often after formal breaks from them) to blend leftist critique with pranksterism and novel communication strategies that allowed them to make inroads with the urban working class and liberal bourgeoisie. The wave came crashing down by the mid-1970s under the weight of state security apparatuses that infiltrated and repressed the movements.¹⁰ The FARC-EP, by contrast, remained true to its rural origins for decades. Only after the Séptima and the Octava (its seventh and eighth conferences) in 1982 and 1993 did it cautiously begin to shift its attention to urban

⁷Quoted in Jeffrey Gould, 'Solidarity under Siege: The Latin American Left, 1968', *American Historical Review*, 114: 2 (2009), p. 352.

⁸Quoted in Victoria Langland, 'Transnational Connections of the Global Sixties as Seen by a Historian of Brazil', in Chen Jian, Martin Klimke, Masha Kirasirova, Mary Nolan, Marilyn Young and Joanna Waley-Cohen (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 15.

⁹This second wave should not be defined by such mediatic acts but should rather be seen within the slower unfurling of local processes such as the labour movement and build-up of pressures from mass urbanisation. Here urban histories are helpful. In *Uruguay, 1968*, Markarian shows how Montevideo proved to be an intellectual and cultural hub through the late 1960s – an outpost for exiles from dictatorships elsewhere in the Southern Cone – and how debate about the different paths to revolutionary victory happening in cafes, campuses and the scenes of youth counter-culture shaped its own iteration of 'global '68'.

¹⁰Some former leaders from this second wave got a second political life two to three decades later, after their passage through the respective criminal justice system of their country in the 1970s. Some of whom – Dilma Rousseff, José 'Pepe' Mujica and Gustavo Petro – rose to national prominence and ultimately political power, leading the region's leftward swing or 'Pink Tide'. It is reasonable to conclude that the earlier experiences of those leaders who had engaged in a more mediated, urban-oriented politics helped them navigate societies that had been transformed by the expansive influence of consumer marketing on politics amid the intervening neoliberal turn. For more on the marketisation of electoral politics in Colombia in that vein, see Maria L. Vidart-Delgado, 'Cyborg Political Machines: Political Brokering and Modern Political Campaigning in Colombia', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7: 2 (2017), pp. 255–77.

centres and try to adapt its political style accordingly. The *Décima* was the group's most dramatic experiment with urban communication strategies and techniques, even as it was situated deep in its rural territory.

Since the 1970s, spectacle has become both a prominent New Left critique and a defining feature of politics from Patagonia to Alaska. The critique literature has expanded exponentially but unevenly across the Americas with Latin American scholarship mostly avoiding it until recent years.¹¹ Silvio Waisbord writes that communication studies in Latin America 'evolved with one ear close to theoretical arguments in Western Europe and the other tuned to historical and contemporary developments in the region'.¹² The field emerged at the same time as it did in the West, in the 1960s and 1970s, pioneered by figures such as Nestor García Canclini and Jesús Martín-Barbero, who helped to consolidate a research agenda that centred on critiques of capitalism, cultural analysis and nuanced understandings of media imperialism.¹³ It had a uniquely Latin American trajectory but built on a hybrid constellation of referents, which, according to Waisbord, featured 'John Berger and Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Antonio Gramsci, Raúl Prebisch and Darcy Ribeiro, Herbert Marcuse and Régis Debray, Julia Kristeva and Theodore Adorno, Paulo Freire and José Carlos Mariátegui'. This article begs the contrapositive, what if Guy Debord and his situationist movement had been among the seminal references for the scholarly literature of Latin American communication studies? What new insights might blending this line of critique with historically rooted socio-political analysis in Latin America generate?

My own emphasis is not on spectacle as first articulated by Debord in his now-seminal text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) but rather focuses on its revision, 21 years later, in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988). In his own essay on *Comments* Giorgio Agamben said, 'Probably the most disquieting aspect of Debord's books is the fact that history seems to have committed itself to relentlessly confirm their analyses.'¹⁴ Debord's 1967 text and the Situationists International lent the students of Paris a playful language that they would mobilise in 1968. In 1988, Debord's prescience centred upon a new element of his understanding of spectacle – 'I only need add a single detail to my earlier formulations'. The 'single detail' emerged

¹¹Reference to Guy Debord, the Situationists International, and the society of the spectacle in Latin American scholarship only gains momentum in the late 2000s with regard to online platforms transforming the public sphere. See, for example, Jacob Bañuelos, 'YouTube como plataforma de la sociedad del espectáculo', *Razón y Palabra*, 14: 66 (2009), available at www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=199520908014, last access 13 June 2022; Guillermo Yáñez Tapia, 'La pantalla digital y el exceso representacional: Pliegue y espectáculo', *Aisthesis*, 45 (July 2009), pp. 13–24.

¹²Silvio Waisbord, 'United and Fragmented: Communication and Media Studies in Latin America', *Journal of Latin American Communication Research*, 4: 1 (2014), pp. 55–77, quotation p. 7 of article.

¹³For histories of the field of communication studies in Latin America, see Luis Romero Beltrán Salmón, *Investigación sobre comunicación en Latinoamérica: Inicio, transcendencia y proyección* (La Paz: Plural, 2000); Edison Otero, 'Sobre la condición fragmentaria y menesterosa de los estudios en comunicación', *Cuadernos de Información*, 27 (July–Dec. 2011), pp. 7–14; Héctor Schmucler, *Memoria de la comunicación*, vol. 5 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1997).

¹⁴Giorgio Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle', in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 79.

out of his previous distinction between the ‘concentrated spectacle’ of dictatorial iconography and the ‘diffuse spectacle’ of commodity images.¹⁵ In his estimation, the two categories, concentrated and diffuse, had fused to become an ‘integrated spectacle’. This melding, he notes, entailed ‘the general victory of the form which had showed itself stronger: the diffuse’.¹⁶ Debord described the subsumption of the concentrated into the diffuse such that the strength of the integrated spectacle eclipsed the spectacle’s previous iterations. ‘When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.’¹⁷

The conclusion may be hyperbolic but, given the confluence of technological and ideological developments through the 1970s and 1980s (and since), it also appears prophetic. Although Debord slips into presenting the integrated spectacle as an omnipresent false-consciousness machine (for which he was severely criticised at the time),¹⁸ the fundamental insight – that the two forms of spectacle had fused – provides a productive prism to refract political phenomena in the early twenty-first century, from Trumpism and the authoritarian celebrity presidency,¹⁹ to the public–private symbolic system of contemporary China,²⁰ to the intensely mediated rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).²¹

McKenzie Wark interprets the integrated spectacle by highlighting the influence of the concentrated spectacle as it is absorbed into the integrated, specifically the concentrated’s hostility to transparency. The integrated spectacle therefore is a matter of not only mass distraction (diffuse) and dishonesty (both diffuse and concentrated), but also authoritarian secrecy (concentrated). She argues that ‘the integrated spectacle not only extended the spectacle outwards, but also inwards; the falsification of the world had reached by this point even those in charge of it’.²² The integrated spectacle’s alternative hypervisibility and opacity – even to those who wield it professionally – make it extremely productive as a tactic while vacuous as a strategy. This decline into spectacle for spectacle’s sake, the integrated spectacle’s capture of ideology, is what I witnessed at the Décima.

¹⁵Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1967), pp. 31–2.

¹⁶Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 8.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 9. Academic discussion of spectacle has tended to focus on to what extent it is used uncritically as an all-encompassing theoretical key and endowed with an explanatory force that it does not deserve. W. J. T. Mitchell, for example, in his contribution to a collection of review essays of the RETORT Collective’s *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age* (London: Verso, 2005), cautions against treating spectacle as a ‘totalizing closure’. In this essay, I see integrated spectacle as something that *aspires to* an all-encompassing framework but is always riddled with holes and human contingency, which I document in the ethnography. W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘The Spectacle Today: A Response to RETORT’, *Public Culture*, 20: 3 (2008), pp. 573–81.

¹⁸Tom McDonough, ‘Unrepresentable Enemies: On the Legacy of Guy Debord and the Situationist International’, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, 28 (Sept. 2011), pp. 42–55.

¹⁹Douglas Kellner, *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2016).

²⁰Anne-Marie Broudehoux, ‘Images of Power: Architectures of the Integrated Spectacle at the Beijing Olympics’, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 63: 2 (2010), pp. 52–62.

²¹Marwan M. Kraidy, ‘The Projectilic Image: Islamic State’s Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect’, *Media Culture & Society*, 39: 8 (2017), pp. 1194–209.

²²McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (London: Verso, 2013).

However, contra Wark, who views this as a universal phenomenon, I approach it as a situated one in which political contestation on the ground of integrated spectacle is inherently uneven. The unevenness has everything to do with the layered history of spectacular politics, the advantage of experience for certain actors, and the disparate resources available for waging spectacular struggle. When power differentials are accounted for, integrated spectacle offers insights into contemporary Latin American politics. As pendular swings between left and right roil the region, the *mode* of politics remains tethered to spectacular tactics that continually adapt to technological developments.²³ From this vantage, FARC leaders who are in their 50s and 60s and have spent long stretches of their lives ‘in the mountain’ and on the run are not exceptional, only less seasoned, given their relatively insular experience and ideological biases.²⁴

In what follows, I enter into the spectacular world that the FARC created in the *Décima* and identify two miscalculations the group made in its analysis of ‘the correlation of forces’ (a Gramscian term for a systemic analysis of power adopted by the FARC–EP). First, it overestimated how underdevelopment and inequality might lend it a social and moral advantage while underestimating its political isolation. Second, it failed to anticipate the impact of the drive of family reconnection on its rank and file. The FARC’s faulty projections into the post-accord period set the stage for the fragmentation of the group. Post-accord dynamics are too numerous to synthesise here, suffice to note that the fragmentation of the FARC has contributed to the uncertainty that permeates Colombia in the present moment (early 2022). A slow and ineffective implementation of the 2016 accord, the return of a right-wing administration to power in 2018 that has further undermined the implementation of the agreement, a resurgence of reactionary violence, and vibrant illegal economies have all contributed to remobilisation of the FARC’s former combatants as dissidents.²⁵ Most estimates (and it is important to emphasise that these are only estimates) tally approximately 3,000 armed dissidents, which is roughly a third of

²³Cuba has been more inured to such swings; its particular form of revolutionary spectacle has been decidedly concentrated. Though, since the Special Period the spectre of nation-branding and more diffuse spectacular forms have gained traction. For instance, the government has sought to establish itself as an island outpost in the global art world. See Dermis P. León, ‘Havana, Biennial, Tourism: The Spectacle of Utopia’, *Art Journal*, 60: 4 (2014), pp. 68–73.

²⁴The FARC, while a guerrilla insurgency, had a media operation of its own, mostly radio but also cultural activities, often musical, and an online presence. For an exploration of the latter, see Luis Fernando Trejos, ‘Uso de la internet por parte de las FARC–EP: Nuevo escenario de confrontación o último espacio de difusión política’, *Revista Encrucijada Americana*, 5: 1 (2012), pp. 25–50. Its most spectacular form of politics has been the videos it crafted of its kidnappings. See Alex Fattal, ‘Hostile Remixes on YouTube: A New Constraint on Pro-FARC Counterpublics in Colombia’, *American Ethnologist*, 14: 2 (2014), pp. 320–35.

²⁵One of the ghastliest failures of the post-accord period has been the inability to protect local leaders advocating for the rights of their communities and the implementation of the 2016 agreement. At least 904 social leaders and 276 ex-combatants of the FARC were assassinated between the signing of the peace accord through Colombia’s Congress and March of 2021. See ‘Al menos 904 líderes sociales y 276 ex-FARC han sido asesinados en Colombia desde 2016’, *Agencia Efe*, 19 April 2021, available at www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/al-menos-904-lideres-sociales-y-276-ex-farc-han-sido-asesinados-en-colombia-desde-2016/20000035-4515866, last access 25 May 2022. For an academic account of this phenomenon, see Juan Albarracín, Juan Pablo Milanese, Jonas Wolf, Inge Valencia and Margarita Navarro de Arco, ‘La lógica política de los asesinatos de líderes sociales: Autoritarismo competitivo local y violencia en el posacuerdo’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung en Colombia (FESCOL) document, 2020, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/la-seguridad/16811.pdf>, last access 26 May 2022. For an early account of these and other challenges

the total number of the FARC's armed fighters who demobilised as part of the 2016 accord.²⁶ Enzo Nussio and Rafael Camilo Quishpe describe this dynamic of small groups and individuals pulling away from the main FARC group as centrifugal and create a matrix of factors – rival opportunities, local support, and leadership (especially of mid-level commanders) – that accounts for this centrifugal dispersion.²⁷ The centrifugal tendency grew in 2019 when high-ranking commanders Iván Márquez, Jesús Santrich, El Paisa and Romaña absconded to an area bordering Venezuela to form their own guerrilla group, 'Segunda Marquetalia'.²⁸ Other prominent leaders, such as Joaquín Gómez, Victoria Sandino and Benkos Biohó, have remained faithful to the peace accord while openly critical of Timoleón Jiménez's leadership of the new political party, which had adopted the acronym FARC but with the name Fuerza Revolucionaria Alternativa del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force). In 2021 the group renamed itself simply 'Comunes', a party on the verge of irrelevance if not extinction.

Illegal economies of narco-trafficking and extortion are centrifugal forces in that they undermine the unity of the FARC political party by tempting its members to re-arm, either with dissident factions or other armed groups (including cartels). These active groups capitalise on the structural conditions of poverty and inequality to recruit former combatants and disaffected youth, a key demographic in the ongoing political violence.²⁹ In short, the recombinatory war machine of the layered armed conflicts in Colombia flows onward like a raging river that has only been momentarily slowed and moderately diverted by a fallen tree trunk, the historically rooted insurgency of the FARC–EP.

My ethnographic analysis of the *Décima* is as much about spectacle as it is about the spectacular buckling of a type of peace, which was built out of the hollow beams of marketing. The Colombian government used brand strategies to persuade guerrillas to abandon the armed struggle and inform on their former comrades, then trying to

in the post-accord period, see Angelika Rettberg Beil and Erin McFee (eds.), *Excombatientes y acuerdo de paz con las FARC–EP en Colombia: Balance de la etapa temprana* (Bogotá: Uniandes, 2019).

²⁶Colombia Group, 'Ex-FARC Mafia', *InSight Crime*, 27 Oct. 2019, available at www.insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/ex-farc-mafia/, last access 26 May 2022.

²⁷Enzo Nussio and Rafael Camilo Quishpe, 'La fuerza centrífuga del posconflicto: Las FARC–EP, entre la unidad y la desintegración', in Rettberg Beil and McFee (eds.), *Excombatientes y acuerdo de paz con las FARC–EP en Colombia*, pp. 163–92.

²⁸Nicholas Casey, 'Iván Márquez, exlíder de las Farc, llama a volver a las armas en Colombia', *New York Times*, 29 Aug. 2019.

²⁹The dynamics among dissident factions and other armed groups as they have vied for influence after the FARC demobilised is a fascinating subject but one that can be prohibitively dangerous to study ethnographically. To get a sense of the complex dynamics, consider the case of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN), a Cuban-inspired insurgency that has gathered strength, especially in the Venezuelan border region of Catatumbo: see Juan Diego Posada, 'New Criminal Element Fending Off ELN at Colombia–Venezuela Border', *InSight Crime*, 19 Jan. 2021. Scholars have done excellent work to parse the nuances of criminality and insurgency: see José Antonio Gutiérrez D. and Frances Thomson, 'Rebels-Turned-Narcos? The FARC–EP's Political Involvement in Colombia's Cocaine Economy', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 44: 1 (2020), pp. 26–41, which urges analysts to see the FARC–EP's decision to get involved in the drug trade as an inherently political one and that builds on Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín's compelling pushback against those firmly on the greed side of the greed–grievance debate in political science, 'Criminal Rebels? A Discussion of Civil War and Criminality from the Colombian Experience', *Politics and Society*, 32: 2 (2004), pp. 257–85.

rehabilitate the ex-combatants as consumer citizens and entrepreneurial subjects. In this article we see how guerrillas engage in their own marketing in a bid to undo the story repeated about them as a less-than-human internal enemy and present themselves as a viable political movement. Analysing the way that the last bastion of armed Marxism in the Americas experimented with mass publicity offers an opportunity to hone our theoretical tools for understanding mediated spectacle in post-accord Colombia, a case with implications for Latin American politics more broadly.

Usted Está Aquí / You Are Here

'You want to solve the country's problems? Demobilise the FARC and sign them up to the Sisben [a Colombian public-private healthcare scheme].' The driver smirked, trying not to laugh at his own joke. The four of us passengers had met at the baggage carousel of the airport in Florencia, the provincial capital of Caquetá Department. We had all arrived on a plane packed with visitors to the Décima. We – a reporter-photographer duo for the *Los Angeles Times*, a blogger for the prominent Colombian web portal *Las2Orillas*, and myself, a media anthropologist – banded together to rent a long-distance taxi. The Colombian blogger and I smiled at the wry insinuation that the privatised health system is deadlier than the military. The punchline eluded the *Los Angeles Times* journalists, so I played my role as a researcher / cultural translator for my Western counterparts – and I translated the joke. The Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer riding shotgun did not react, folding open her copy of the *New York Times* to resume reading.

The next day we travelled onward in a pickup truck that we contracted. Orange-red dust kicked up behind us. Luckily it had not rained and the roads were passable. The driver, a local cattle rancher, transported us for the money but also to satisfy his curiosity. For the last two months he had watched trucks haul: event staging flown in from Medellín, scores of mini-mattresses, more than 100 cattle to be slaughtered and crates upon crates of beer, among other provisions.

When we finally arrived at the FARC camp, we stretched our legs and walked to a wooden structure marked with a sign: 'Accreditation'. Inside, a reception team smiled, welcomed us and registered our documents. They sat us down on plastic chairs to explain the procedure for soliciting interviews with guerrilla leaders. Leading the media team was Milena, who explained that all interviews must be formally requested, that we could speak to and photograph whoever we wanted, but if we wanted to use a recording device, video or audio, that required filling out a form and the FARC would respond to the request the next day.³⁰ The FARC had entered the public-relations logic of controlling the message; they would have no problem with discipline – *that* they were good at.

Alfonso, a tall guerrilla who had his hair tucked beneath a bandana, led us into the guerrilla encampment across the road to allocate our very own guerrilla living quarters. Makeshift huts built from cut branches and rolls of black plastic or olive-green nylon drawn taught with rope lined the path. Each hut provided shelter to individual guerrilla fighters or guerrilla couples, and often carried its own personal touch, such as a heart-shaped window in a wall (see [Figure 2](#)).

³⁰Two days later, the FARC lifted this restriction in response to journalists' complaints.



Figure 2. The Side Window of a Guerrilla's Living Quarters

Source: Photo by author.

When it came time to show me to my quarters, Alfonso guided me over a small footbridge and inside a hut, then pointed to my bed. On top of my mattress lay a sheet, a mosquito net and a thin blanket, all in unopened packaging. I pulled out the blanket, pausing to inspect its patterning. Winnie-the-Pooh! Though such Disney detritus can be found throughout the Colombian countryside – including FARC territories³¹ – and its placement in my bunk or *cambuche* was entirely coincidental, the honey-licking bear's cameo in the middle of the Décima resonated with my own interest in the FARC's efforts to project a gentler, more humane image of itself throughout the negotiating period.

My neighbour (see [Figure 3](#)) came over to welcome me. 'If you need anything, let me know', he said. I thanked him and then decided to take a self-guided tour of the camp. Not only were journalists living side by side with the rebels, but they would bath side by side as well. I walked down to the river where two journalists were documenting a group of rebels washing themselves and their clothes (see [Figure 4](#)). With varying levels of discretion, the unlikely neighbours would size up each other's bodies in the river, a scene that became decreasingly awkward with each day that passed.

Although familiarity with the other grew gradually, the artificiality of the conceit of inviting large numbers of journalists to cohabit with the guerrillas meant that the camera and notepad-wielding visitors hoping for an authentic experience would remain frustrated. Their coping strategy, by and large, was to cast for *their* guerrilla

³¹Photojournalist Federico Rios created a photo-series of stools guerrillas carry with them and personalise with idiosyncratic embroidery. Many of the stools feature cartoon characters and three of the 35 photos featured Winnie-the-Pooh. See Federico Rios, *Verde* (Manizales: Raya Editorial, 2021).



Figure 3. My Neighbour Reads and Listens to the Radio outside of His Hut
Source: Photo by author.



Figure 4. Photographer Álvaro Cardona Documents FARC Guerrillas Bathing in the River
Source: Photo by author.

and tell the story of the FARC's transition through that character. Writing in the Colombian blog *La Silla Vacía*, Catalina Lobo-Guerrero recalls how one of her colleagues complained that 'mine is talking with another journalist' and keenly observed



Figure 5. Journalists Work in the Press Tent

Source: Photo by author.

that ‘it’s as if he was being unfaithful’.³² Journalists had to not only find *their* insurgent, but also coax candid personal stories out from behind a wall of guerrilla talking points. During the week I spent in the FARC’s camp in the plains of Yari, I came to realise the scale of the experiential marketing operation that the group had engineered and appreciate the complexity of this public-relations extravaganza crossed with eco-conflict tourism.³³ (Some demobilised guerrillas have since tried to capitalise on such eco-political tourism, guiding tours through their former territory.)

After surveying the guerrilla encampment upon my arrival, I walked the half-mile up the road to the conference grounds where the guerrillas had erected a series of wooden buildings and white tents. The FARC had restricted access to the buildings where it caucused and its leaders lodged, but journalists could wander anywhere else. The sprawling grounds included a canteen for the troops equipped with a billiards table, television, bar and ice-cream corner; the guerrillas’ health post, a small house serving as an infirmary and dental service; a giant press tent separated into one area where press conferences were held at 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. daily and another where the swarm of journalists could craft and file their reports (see [Figure 5](#)); and a massive state-of-the-art stage built on

³²Catalina Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Bailando cumbia con las FARC’, *La Silla Vacía*, 25 Sept. 2016, available at <http://lasillavacia.com/historia/bailando-cumbia-con-las-farc-58080>, last access 26 May 2022.

³³A mirror dynamic is at play in the *Décima* in which the FARC appropriates government strategies. One such mirroring is that of experiential public-relations tours that the Colombian government put on for US government officials, especially members of the US Congress. Winifred Tate offers an extraordinary ethnography of those trips in which congressional delegations were invited to cosplay the Colombian military and police by climbing into helicopters. Winifred Tate, *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: US Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 183–90.



Figure 6. New Colombia Theme Park, Site Map
Source: Photo by author.

an expansive field. It took some orientation to learn the lie of the land. The guerrillas figured that visitors might be overwhelmed and designed a bilingual site map of what it called ‘New Colombia Theme Park’ (see Figure 6). They displayed the map in different parts of the premises, each with the appropriate ‘You Are Here’ stamp.

The first time I stumbled upon this map, I stood before it to take it in. ‘*Usted Está Aquí / You Are Here*’. But where is here? What does it mean for the FARC to have conceived of this site as *New Colombia Theme Park*? The *New Colombia* part is not coincidental: the group had named its news-production company *New Colombia News* and had been betting its political regeneration – going back to 1993 – on the generic idea of building a different Colombia, covering its socialist ideology beneath the less-controversial bid for change in the abstract. But what to make of the idea of a theme park? It evoked ‘Farlandia’, a term the Colombian military used to deride the decision of President Pastrana (1998–2002) to withdraw the Colombian military from four municipalities as a precondition for negotiating with the FARC. Back then, cocaine served as currency and journalists flocked to drink whisky and take photographs of the last of a type: the Latin American jungle revolutionary. A similar logic of salvage journalism returned in the *Décima*, as did many of the same journalists who had covered the Caguán negotiations. But now, in the *Décima*, the echoes between Farlandia and Disneylandia became more explicit: a theme park, a destination, an experience – an adventure!³⁴

³⁴Disneylandia is my own interpretation of what the Colombian military was referencing with the coinage of Farlandia, a bid to ridicule the negotiations taking place in San Vicente de Caguán between 1999 and 2002. Those talks failed miserably. Not only did the government cede a piece of territory approximately

Halfway through the *Décima*, FARC leaders began to wear white tee-shirts with the conference's aquamarine logo, a profile drawing of a triumvirate of the FARC–EP's historic guerrilla commanders. The three faces on the logo were of Manuel Marulanda, the group's co-founder and patriarch; Jacobo Arenas, its historic ideologue; and Alfonso Cano, the commander who had authorised the diplomatic contacts that would lead to the negotiations ending in the 2016 accord – who the military killed before news of the then-incipient negotiations became public in 2011.

The iconography smacked of the three heads of Marxism, with the stacked profiles of Marx, Engels and Lenin used by the Soviet Union, and later updated to include the jawline of Stalin. Such imagery, in Debordian terms, exemplifies the concentrated spectacle of bureaucratic, totalitarian systems. The FARC–EP had always aspired to state socialism of a Soviet variety (one FARC leader I spoke with defended Stalin's legacy).³⁵ To Colombian publics outside of the FARC's small counter-public, the logo celebrating guerrilla leadership would appear as a three-headed monster; and to those publics on the far-right, a monster to be slain or otherwise disappeared. Such predictable politics and their imagery, honed and repeated over decades, took on a new texture as the logo was applied to tee-shirts, tote bags, baseball caps, CDs, pens, ponchos, calendars, bandanas and mugs (see [Figure 7](#)). Such merchandising gestured toward the brand-based politics of contemporary capitalism and its 'diffuse spectacle' of commodity abundance, even as the content was decidedly 'concentrated' – a quintessential instantiation of Debord's integrated spectacle, in which the diffuse incorporates the concentrated.³⁶

I will return to an analysis of the logo and merchandise at the end of this article. What is important to note at this point is that, internally, not everyone in the FARC was on the same page about this rebranding project. As the prospect of legal politics approached, the FARC's vanguardist structure, so pithily expressed in the iconography of the *Décima*, would face challenges at different levels of the organisation.

Projecting Brand FARC

As a Marxist–Leninist organisation, the FARC–EP has always been unabashedly vanguardist, its leaders debating and determining the organisation's plans and policies. It became clear during the *Décima* that the FARC was plotting a post-accord mobilisation that would rely on its party structure, clandestine networks and a co-mobilisation with marginalised sectors. On each front it was making preparations. I learned from one commander that the group was selectively opening its door to those who had defected in the last decade. It had begun looking to broaden its political work with peasant, Indigenous, Afro-Colombian social movements in the regions where they had operated, pre-emptively trying to smooth over contentious histories. But exactly how this broader mobilisation might work after commanders lost their ability to coerce subordinates and strong-arm and bribe civil society was an open question.

the size of Maryland to the FARC–EP, but violence perpetrated by paramilitaries, guerrillas and the government raged intensely throughout the period.

³⁵Throughout the negotiating period the FARC tried to reposition itself as favouring a Scandinavian variety of socialism, which smacked of a disingenuous ploy, even to many on the democratic left.

³⁶Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 32.

government] made those *shows* as part of campaigns against the FARC. They organised concerts all over Colombia as part of an apology for their war against the people.

AF: You are picking up the same tools.

FM: Of course, it's like in the war. The adversary creates a 120 mortar, we also create a 120 mortar [...] It's about the correlation of forces, trying to achieve a balance.

AF: But the [government's] media campaigns have borne fruit.

FM: Yes, fruit based on lies, lies that will fall on account of their own weight. When you build a successful campaign based on the truth, we believe it'll last longer.

Montes made a distinction between their media strategy and their adversaries', saying:

They [presumably the government and its corporate allies] make a whole campaign to create a need. We are not going to have to create a need through the media; we only have to reflect what already exists in objective reality. That's not difficult in a country like Colombia with such high levels of inequality.

Montes is correct to identify spectacle as a site of struggle, but the nuances of that struggle evade him. His faith in the ability to align spectacle and reality is logical but illusory.³⁸ For Montes and other FARC leaders operating in the mimetic logic of guerrilla warfare, producing such an elaborate show was the beginning of not only neutralising hegemonic spectacles put on by the government but also setting their own frame with a message that is more closely aligned with social conditions. What they failed to realise is that spectacle had already been bending reality and it would take work and resources far beyond their means to unbend it. Montes and his colleagues did not appreciate the cumulative effect of seven decades of Cold War propaganda centred on a discourse of an internal enemy and the intensifying spectacularisation of Colombian society.

The FARC not only lagged far behind in this mode of politics, but it also had to contend with a fundamental ideological shift since its last major experiment with electoral politics after the Uribe Accords of 1984. Colombia's neoliberal turn in the early 1990s began to produce its cultural corollary by the turn of the millennium in the form of a spate of telenovelas and films that lionised aspirational narratives of individual enrichment that often glorified violence, a precursor to the current rush of narco-novelas. By the time the FARC had made its experimental turn toward brand politics, the entwinement of neoliberalism and spectacle had already transformed Colombian society. My own read is that tactics began to take the place of strategy for the FARC, and the group's faith in 'the combination of all of the forms of struggle', a catch-all justification for using any method at its

³⁸As Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity. Each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it.' Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 8.

disposal, led it to believe that it could appropriate twenty-first-century political marketing without realising that twenty-first-century marketing had already been honing its own better-funded and more all-encompassing version of ‘combining all of the forms of struggle’.³⁹ One of the things that this meant for the FARC was that its prior experience launching a legal political party in the mid-1980s, the Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union, UP), was inoperable.⁴⁰

This is not to say that the unsustainable ballooning of inequality did not offer an opportunity to exploit a political opening; it is just that the FARC’s leadership was not in the best position to do it. Hubris steeped in decades of a hierarchical structure, in which decisions could not be effectively challenged from below without fear of retribution, led its leaders to wrongly presume that it would *lead* a leftist coalition. What becomes apparent through the ethnographic analysis is that the FARC miscalculated its ability to capitalise on the discontents of inequality and underdevelopment in part because it was yet to emerge from its ideological bubble (which security measures for self-preservation helped to reinforce), and in part because it misunderstood how the intensification of spectacle in the digital age has increasingly permeated the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴¹

Bubbling beneath Brand FARC

On day four of the *Décima*, while I was observing the FARC’s media team interact with the press, Marta Ruiz arrived. She is one of Colombia’s premier journalists, respected for her even-handed coverage, and has gone on to become one of the 11 members of the Truth Commission set up by the peace accord. The FARC had invited her as one of its 40 VIPs. As she registered, Iván Ali, a politically gifted regional commander from the Eastern Bloc who was working with the media team, said, ‘Marta, tell me, what’s tomorrow’s headline?’ ‘The FARC’s brand is finished’, Ruiz responded. Ali, who normally listened quietly and exchanged friendly banter

³⁹Fattal, *Guerrilla Marketing*, pp. 27–30.

⁴⁰The UP is a party that the FARC–EP created during peace negotiations with the Betancur administration (1982–6). It helped to bring together a range of left-oriented political movements and gained momentum through the late 1980s, winning footholds in local and regional governments. The group has been systematically persecuted since those early successes in 1986. A 2017 report by the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, CIDH) found the state responsible for the pattern of grave human-rights abuses against the UP. In that report the petitioners claimed more than 6,528 victims while the state only found 1,371 of those in its system for attending to victims of the conflict (which does not acknowledge state responsibility). For more, see CIDH, ‘Informe de fondo: Integrantes y militantes de la Unión Patriótica’, Informe No. 170/17, Caso 11.227, 6 Dec. 2017. For the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory, CNMH) report on the systematic political persecution of the UP, see CNMH, ‘Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos: Genocidio de la Unión Patriótica 1984–2002’, available at <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/todo-paso-frente-a-nuestros-ojos-genocidio-de-la-union-patriotica-1984-2002/>, last access 26 May 2022.

⁴¹Here I am thinking about the politics of virality, micro-celebrity, the emergent means of disinformation, which in Latin America have coalesced under the term ‘media coups’ or ‘*golpes mediáticos*’ that provoke political upheaval. (In Colombia, the Centro Democrático (Democratic Centre) party, while in the opposition, often spoke of the need for ‘*un golpe publicitario*’, which is essentially the same thing.) For a list of such strikes in the 2010s, see Francisco Sierra Caballero and Salomé Sola-Morales, ‘Golpes mediáticos y desinformación en la era digital: La guerra irregular en América Latina’, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 17 (July 2020), p. 8, available at <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2020.7604>, last access 26 May 2022.



Figure 8. Iván Ali during an interview at the *Décima*
Source: Photo by author.

with the visitors, sizing up their ideological tendencies, could not suppress his own objection. ‘Why does it have to end if we will be doing politics, building our movement?’ he said sharply. Ruiz acknowledged his point and did not press the matter.

For the media, the story of the conference was that of the FARC’s last dance. For the FARC, the conference represented a celebration of its resistance and an opportunity to perform its transformation into a political movement. I interviewed Ali two days before his exchange with Ruiz (see [Figure 8](#)). He reflected on the question being debated by the guerrilla delegates at the *Décima* (i.e. what the FARC should call its political party):

Personally, I think we shouldn’t give up on the name FARC. Why? Because that is what we’ve defended and fought for. FARC is more than a name. FARC is sacrifice. FARC is resistance. FARC is dreams. If you renounce that, you renounce who you are, part of yourself, part of the Colombian people. FARC isn’t finished. The people are with us. It’s true that they have made us into Satan, the devil. But, man, look, when you’re small they tell you the devil is evil. Then you get to Barranquilla Carnival [and someone says] ‘there’s the devil’, and everyone goes running. We are going to see if the people come running to see who the devil they call FARC is.

People did come running in the 1980s when the FARC–EP launched the UP, curious and interested in what legal guerrilla politics looked like. Assassins hired by shadowy right-wing forces, however, popped the bubble of political effervescence by targeting the UP’s leaders and cadres. So much had changed since the 1980s. The FARC’s involvement in drug trafficking brought the group much-needed financing but cost it even more valuable legitimacy – a discursive weakness relentlessly exploited by its enemies. The paramilitary and military offensives of the 1990s and 2000s led the group to seek ficker recruits. Military pressure also thrust



Figure 9. Sergio Poses for Photographs in the Guerrillas' Canteen at the Décima
 Source: Photo by author.

communities that had historically benefited from the FARC's ability to carry out state functions – such as mediating disputes and sponsoring development works – into the cross hairs of competing armed groups. Those communities then often turned on the guerrillas for attracting problems. Even at the carefully staged Décima conference, signs abounded that Ali's assertion 'the people are with us' was overstated.

The crisis spawned by the FARC's vanguardism is perhaps best viewed through the lens of internal command and control as the transition to civilian life approached. At times, the degree of allegiance the group would command from its own troops after the accord was not clear. My first indication that the FARC's pivot to culture-industry-like politics was tinged with an admixture of naivete and bravado came during the first night of the conference. I stopped by the guerrillas' canteen and spotted Sergio, who had written the Facebook post from which I had learned that the FARC was treating the Décima as a media event. He wore olive military pants tucked into black boots and a green bandana around his neck. After he finished posing for photographs (see [Figure 9](#)), he greeted me warmly.

After a bit of small talk while sipping Poker beers, he asked, 'Are you going to the concert?' 'Yes', I said. 'Vamos!' he said, as he slapped me on the shoulder. We walked behind the wooden bathroom stalls and onto a giant field. The concert staging glowed in the distance, colourful lighting beaming diagonally onto the stage. Music made further conversation impossible.

After the concert ended, I found myself milling around with Sergio in the pit area. A woman approached him to ask if he knew about her son's whereabouts. He dismissed her, suggesting that perhaps he was last seen in the FARC's 1st Front, the only front at the time openly in defiance of the peace accord. The implication



Figure 10. Aries Vigoth, a Musician of Traditional Music from the Eastern Plains, Performs at the *Décima*
 Source: Photo by author.

being that her son was not under the FARC's control (and may still be in danger) and therefore the group was not responsible for his wellbeing. Certainly not the answer that she came looking for. She was not the only family member who had taken loans from neighbours to travel to the *Décima* in the hope of finding a loved one. The magnetic drive of familial reconnection pulsed along the edges of the conference and has proven to be a weak link in the guerrillas' post-accord plans, which depended on a united cadre of party members who could then mobilise other sectors.

One evening in the middle of the conference, Aries Vigoth, a regional star of folkloric music from the eastern plains (see [Figure 10](#)), read notes that audience members passed him from below the stage. Most of these were song requests and dedications. One of the notes, however, read: 'Carrillo, from the Yari Front, your family hasn't seen you for 20 years and it needs you urgently. If you are here, please come toward the stage and let yourself be seen. Your family is here, waiting, hoping to see you.' The crowd let out a collective gasp.

After a moment of silent staring toward the stage, applause erupted and journalists swarmed the young man as he embraced his mother. Among the journalists in attendance, rumours circulated that a reporter from Caracol, a leading TV network and part of an economic group controlled by the powerful Santo Domingo family, had engineered the dramatic moment.⁴² The spectacle had spun out of the FARC's control.

⁴²For an analysis of Radio Cadena Nacional (National Radio Network, RCN) and Caracol's coverage of the peace process and role in agenda setting and framing, see Lorena del Rocío Núñez, 'El Proceso de Paz firmado entre el Gobierno de Colombia y las FARC visto desde los noticieros colombianos RCN y Caracol', MA thesis, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (Quito: Creative Commons, 2018).



Figure 11. Boris and Tanja, Two Key Figures in the FARC's Western Bloc and Media Team, Caucus between Interviews

Source: Photo by author.

FARC leadership was not blind to the threat of its former fighters abandoning the movement after the peace accord. When I spoke with Boris, the group's lead videographer and a key member of its Havana-based news team, and Tanja, the FARC's Dutch foreign-fighter-celeb (see Figure 11), they were focused on the economic re-integration on the horizon. 'We have to offer them something. If they want to leave, that's fine, but it shouldn't be because we didn't have anything to offer', Tanja said. 'Something that works in the long term, that's worthwhile. That's what we're betting on [...] Money, work, that's what we need to provide for the guerrilla once he leaves', Boris said. They articulated positions both for and against keeping the name FARC as the acronym for the political party the group would become.

It is not surprising that FARC leaders were still toying with their post-accord identity and messaging. So much was new. The *Décima* marked the end of the negotiating period, which served as a time to experiment with and adapt to twenty-first-century media politics. With more than 15 members at its height, the FARC's commission of communication and propaganda was the largest of its commissions in Cuba. Within it, debates raged about their New Colombia News YouTube channel, such as how much to mimic the style of corporate news broadcasts in Colombia versus how much to adapt Telesur's model of television journalism, or to what degree they should forge a more grassroots aesthetic.⁴³ FARC cadres were still adapting to online platforms, hardware and software.

⁴³For a more extended discussion on this dynamic, see Alexander L. Fattal, 'Uploading the News after Coming Down from the Mountain: The FARC's Experiment with Online Television in Cuba, 2012–2016', *International Journal of Communication*, 11: 1 (2017), pp. 3832–56.



Figure 12. People Queue to Connect their Phones to an Unstable Wi-Fi Signal. The Vendor, Conexión Amazon, Struggled to Provide Internet Coverage at the Décima
 Source: Photo by author.

Before the accord, Boris used quotable phrases such as ‘We will put down our rifles and pick up cameras’, which he said to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to describe their post-accord plans. At the Décima, guerrillas toted brand-new Canon SLR digital cameras and carried state-of-the-art MacBook Pro laptops more visibly than their rifles. I watched sympathisers who had completed master’s degrees in media and communication programmes in other Latin American countries train young guerrillas on how to frame a tripod-based video shot and how to take and then repost screenshots to the web. The FARC had just begun to spread such training to youths throughout its fronts. Even journalists who frequented FARC camps found themselves describing the features of their equipment and demonstrating how to use it. The FARC set out to give itself a crash course on the diffuse spectacle, recruiting help where it could.

For all its efforts to make up for lost time and opportunities, the FARC’s public-relations offensive was an uphill battle. The firm that it contracted to supply an internet connection to the conference only managed to provide an intermittent signal to a ten-metre radius from one antenna (see [Figure 12](#)). The late Santrich, the member of the FARC–EP’s secretariat most consistently committed to the group’s media and cultural production, acknowledged in our interview that they were up against a ‘voracious monster’ in transnational media corporations. In outlining a strategy for a counter-hegemonic media project, he said: ‘Now that we’re legal we’ll have to multiply communities’ participation in the communication decisions that we take. Before we couldn’t because we were in the mountain or some secret



Figure 13. A FARC Delegate Hands Out Décima Tee-Shirts to Members of the Alternative Press
 Source: Photo by author.

area. Today whichever media we use, whether it is traditional radio and television or the new technologies online, we need to involve the community, initiatives of the working class [*sectores populares*].⁷

What I would emphasise in that quote is ‘*we take*’. What became clear throughout the conference was that the FARC envisioned itself leading a working-class coalition and a dispersed array of critical media projects. But rather than partnering with community-based media and alternative media, which were well represented at the Décima, the FARC sought to bring them under its wing.

The graphic instantiation of this vanguardism was on display throughout the conference, but especially in the final two days as the FARC propagated its new, professionally crafted, modern set of logos (see Figures 13–15). Those icons of guerrilla leaders (quintessential concentrated spectacle) increasingly saturated the grounds, appearing on banners, screens and the merchandise bursting out of black plastic bags in the main tents. The medium of concert-style merchandise (quintessential diffuse spectacle) gave currency to the joking monikers journalists gave the Décima, such as ‘FARC in the Park’, a riff on Bogotá’s yearly Rock in the Park blowout, or ‘FARC Woodstock’. The FARC was performing a modern public-relations potlatch in the key of the integrated spectacle without being fully aware of its nuances and inherent contradictions.

As the conference approached its conclusion, FARC fighters and citizens from the surrounding region wore the white tee-shirt that the FARC was distributing, the one with the aquamarine logo of its three historic leaders: Marulanda, Arenas and Cano. It became impossible to tell who was a member of the FARC and who was just attending the show (see Figure 16). The guerrilla tactic of



Figure 14. A Journalist Interviews a FARC Delegate
Source: Photo by author.



Figure 15. Juana, One of the Leaders of the FARC's Media Team, Presenting the Next Act in front of One of the FARC's New Logos Unveiled at the Décima
Source: Photo by author.



Figure 16. Revellers Dance at the Last Night of the Décima

Source: Photo by author.

blending into the civilian population was being remediated but this time not to hide a guerrilla affiliation but to multiply the appearance of one. It was not clear to what extent people were ‘putting on the jersey’, in the sense of the colloquial expression that connotes commitment to a cause or team, or simply putting on the shirt to participate in the event. The objective of branding the guerrilla group, conference and soon-to-be political party, however, was unmistakable.⁴⁴

The formal *raison d’être* of the Décima was to allow representatives from all the FARC’s fronts to debate and ultimately accept or reject the peace accord. The rank and file falling in line was a *fait accompli*.⁴⁵ The political party to be branded FARC soon after (Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común) would inherit the vanguardist model of the guerrilla insurgency of the same acronym. Whereas the exigencies of war could justify the leadership’s secrecy in determining military and political strategies and tactics, the transition to peace entailed increasingly open debate within the FARC and among affine groups on the left. Matters of message and communication style were the first points of friction. Predictably the emphasis on branding, not only what to call the new political party but how to use limited and increasingly well-monitored resources, would prove divisive. The deliberations

⁴⁴At the same time, the guerrillas began shopping for more than one set of civilian clothes among the Ecuadorean traders hawking garments manufactured in China in a row of wooden stalls behind the concert grounds. The simultaneity of guerrillas purchasing civilian clothes and civilians donning FARC tee-shirts anticipated the then-imminent political and social reintegration.

⁴⁵The more substantial internal political debate had happened before the Décima in guerrilla subunits where commanders fielded questions from their troops about the accord. The delegates at the Décima from the various fronts arrived with the mandate to approve the accord, which by the time of the conference was a foregone conclusion.



Figure 17. FARC Members at the Décima Watch a National Newscast about the Décima
 Source: Photo by author.

at the Décima about the name of the political party were just the beginning of an increasingly boisterous internal debate.⁴⁶ While the leadership envisioned leading a counter-hegemonic coalition to power, it was not clear that they could count on the loyalty of their own combatants who might no longer be in the thrall of the FARC–EP’s origin story and mythology (in so far as guerrilla indoctrination successfully achieved and maintained such a thrall). Combatants on the verge of demobilising at the Décima were already increasingly surrounded by counter-messaging (see [Figures 17 and 18](#)).⁴⁷

To what extent, if any, could an aquamarine logo shore up internal and external allegiances? The group’s concentrated spectacle was transforming into an integrated one in which the logic of diffusion began to spread, from the increased presence of corporate media to the looming family unifications. One harbinger of such diffusion at the Décima was the lists of names the media team kept of family members who had come searching for a relative in the guerrillas. The subject came out repeatedly in journalists’ interviews with guerrillas. After the talking points about

⁴⁶In one of my interviews with Henry Acosta Patiño, the businessman who served as the government emissary who brought the FARC and the government together in what would become the Havana negotiations, he described this debate as one that divided not only the rank and file but also the top commanders, a split that would later become public. Author interview with Henry Acosta Patiño, 8 Aug. 2016. For more details on Acosta Patiño’s role in the peace process, see Henry Acosta Patiño, *El hombre clave: El secreto mejor guardado del proceso de paz de Colombia* (Madrid: Editorial Aguilar, 2017).

⁴⁷Though FARC–EP commanders would allow mass media into camps, it was controlled, shared in ideological sessions where the commanders could give counter-readings of the news as part of the political formation of the ranks. The Décima began a shift toward a more freewheeling form of media consumption for FARC members.



Figure 18. A FARC Member Reads about the Dissident Faction of the 1st Front at the Décima
 Source: Photo by author.

the ongoing struggle dulled, most conversations with individual rebels about post-accord plans veered toward family, with many guerrillas showing more enthusiasm for seeing their parents, sisters and brothers than for promoting the political movement. Many had already downloaded images of their family from social networks and onto their phones with every megabyte of bandwidth they could muster.

Possibilities after Tragic Realism

In the final press conference, the FARC leadership announced the Décima's foregone conclusion: the delegates had unanimously approved the peace accord. Márquez, the FARC's principal negotiator and second in command, added a poetic flourish to the announcement: 'Tell Mauricio Babilonia that they can now release the yellow butterflies.' In invoking yellow butterflies, Márquez sought to depict the then-imminent signing of the peace accord as one filled with beautiful possibilities, romanticism in a Colombian key.

The reference to a paradigmatic scene of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Gabriel García Márquez's signature style, magic realism, however, is a curious one. In García Márquez's masterpiece, Babilonia, whose presence is announced with a swarm of yellow butterflies, is ultimately paralysed by a bullet on account of confusion emerging from a prohibited love affair. Babilonia dies a lonely invalid, banished from Macondo. Following literary theorist Jeffrey Browitt's explication of the term, I would argue that Babilonia's yellow butterflies exemplify the 'tragic realism' of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which a community is enchanted by nationalist modernisation but condemned to an amnesia that precludes it from navigating its torments and ultimately ends in tragedy of biblical proportions.⁴⁸ Perhaps this was not the best reference for a moment that hoped to

⁴⁸Jeff Browitt builds on the term 'tragic realism' coined by John Orr in *Tragic Realism and Modern Society* (London: Macmillan, 1989) in a fascinating piece of literary criticism about García Márquez's

challenge the cyclical history of amnesty/peace accord followed by rancorous accusations of betrayal followed by rearmament/remobilisation.⁴⁹ Within one year of Márquez's wistful evocation of García Márquez's fiction, the demobilisation/remobilisation cycle would be churning once more.

The details will be familiar to Colombianists, but they are worth noting here. Three days after the *Décima* concluded, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leader Jiménez signed the agreement with a pen made from a bullet casing in an event featuring 15 heads of state and the UN Secretary General, all dressed in white. The prematurity of the pomp was jarring. One week later, with the ink barely dry, the Colombian people narrowly rejected the accord in a plebiscite.⁵⁰ Government and FARC negotiating teams tweaked the accord and passed it through the Colombian Congress, lending it a weak stamp of popular approval. The results from the plebiscite left the peace accord hobbled, an effect redoubled by the re-election of the Far Right to the presidency in 2018, a national election in which the FARC political party received a paltry 84,000 votes. According to a 2019 report by the UN's Verification Mission to Colombia, economic integration of former guerrillas has been lacking, with only about 30 per cent of the accredited ex-combatants receiving the seed money for either individual or collective re-integration projects.⁵¹ The FARC's political party in early 2021 was down to below 1,500 members, from over 13,000 at its founding in 2017. Violence fuelled by illegal economies continues to engulf the regions, including the systematic assassination of social leaders and more-than-occasional murders of demobilised combatants.

Another blow to the pact came when the government brought drug-trafficking charges and extradition proceedings against Santrich, its lead propagandist cited earlier. The charges were ultimately dropped amid an intrigue-filled prosecutorial effort, but the distrust sown by the affair helped drive a wedge through the FARC leadership, sending Márquez, Santrich and other military and political commanders to return to clandestine guerrilla life. When the re-armed commanders

magnum opus. See Jeff Browitt, 'Tropics of Tragedy: The Caribbean in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*', *Shibboleths: A Journal of Comparative Theory*, 2: 1 (2007), pp. 16–33.

⁴⁹Historian Gonzalo Sánchez looks back on the cycle of amnesties in Colombia (the precursor to the category of peace accords) in which bandits and guerrillas would be forgiven and invited back into communities without punishment as part of a political pact. He suggests that they have been temporal landmarks that have given Colombian history its default periodisation. Gonzalo Sánchez, 'Raíces históricas de la amnistía o las etapas de la guerra en Colombia', in *Ensayos de historia social y política del siglo XX* (Bogotá: El Áncora Editores, 1984), pp. 215–75. On the recycling of combatants, particularly paramilitaries, see María Teresa Ronderos, *Guerras recicladas* (Bogotá: Penguin Random House, 2014).

⁵⁰It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the communication breakdowns that led to the 'No' vote's victory. I would just note that the 'No' campaign took better advantage of micro-targeting and misinformation online and conservative wedge issues like 'gender ideology', code for permissive policies toward the LGBTQ community, while the 'Yes' campaign bet more heavily on a mass-media campaign around the general idea of peace, for which Colombians have good reasons to be sceptical. For a deeper dive into the plebiscite, especially the gendered and religious dimensions, see William Mauricio Beltrán and Sian Creely, 'Pentecostals, Gender Ideology and the Peace Plebiscite: Colombia 2016', *Religions*, 9: 12 (2018), pp. 1–19.

⁵¹'United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report to the Secretary General', UN Doc. S/2019/7801, Oct. 2019, pp. 5–6. The tone of the Mission's report from 2020 was of greater alarm, noting how security concerns grew more urgent as guerrillas left the transitory camps.

appeared in a YouTube video, they were decked out in military fatigues and toting heavy weaponry. The iconography was familiar. Portraits of Marulanda, Simon Bolívar and fallen rebel leaders hung in a non-descript camp in a forest. This was a return to the FARC–EP’s well-worn style of spectacle – concentrated and spectral. Concentrated for its one-party iconography, spectral because it derives its force not from omnipresence but from the fact that it *could* emerge out of the shadows, anywhere.

Ironically, the dissipation of the FARC as a unified group may be what makes way for the type of coalition politics necessary for systematic change in Colombia.⁵² In late 2019–early 2020 and then again in the spring–summer of 2021, a general strike that did not rely on visible leadership mobilised across sectors. The strike, an expression of social desperation, signalled prospects of mass social awakening and also a renewed guerrilla conflict as it was violently suppressed (or some combination thereof). At such a crossroads, it is worth pausing to think about what spectacular or anti-spectacular politics might help peasant, Indigenous, Afro-Colombian students and labour movements co-mobilise. This is a subject for a new generation of scholars and Left organisers in Colombia and across the region who might benefit from (re-)reading Debord from a Latin American perspective and engaging in a sustained inquiry into integrated spectacle and how it might be productively *disintegrated*. For the lesson of the *Décima* is that integrated spectacle (a counter-revolutionary concept) is antithetical to a politics of coalition, which is so urgently lacking across Colombia’s left–centre divide and grates against the Far Left’s disposition toward vanguardism. Understanding integrated spectacle in its situated manifestation is a first step toward crafting a counter-hegemonic media/organising strategy that can help facilitate and steward a movement of movements.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Anthony Olorunnisola at Penn State for his flexibility, which allowed me to carry out this research. I am grateful to colleagues in the Anthropology Department at the University of Connecticut for their feedback as well as three anonymous reviewers who helped to strengthen the manuscript substantially. Thanks are due to everyone who sat for a formal interview or took time at the *Décima* to speak with me and share their story. For their camaraderie, friendship and keen insights into the surreal experience in the plains of Yarí, I want to acknowledge many of the journalists who attended the *Décima*. Back in Bogotá, long discussions with Darío Villamizar about the urban wave of guerrilla insurgency in Latin America have informed this article. Finally, a note of appreciation for my colleagues and students in the Communication Department at the University of California, San Diego, who have welcomed me into their vibrant and supportive intellectual community.

Spanish abstract

Durante una semana en septiembre de 2016, las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) tuvieron su décima conferencia guerrillera, conocida como la *Décima*, en las planicies de Yarí en el sur de Colombia. El grupo guerrillero abrió el evento a los medios de comunicación, convirtiéndolo en un festival extravagante de turismo de eco-conflicto para marcar su transición a la política legal. Este análisis foto/etnográfico

⁵²Gutiérrez Sanín considers many factors in this broader horizon in *¿Un nuevo ciclo de la guerra en Colombia?*, suggesting that national guerrilla movements as we have known them are unlikely to continue their ‘war of the flea’ style of insurgency but that new, regionalised forms of violence are likely to incubate. See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, ‘Lo que se nos viene pierna arriba’, in *¿Un nuevo ciclo de la guerra en Colombia?*, pp. 178–217.

de la Décima da luzes sobre la formación simbólica y discursiva de las FARC en un momento de transición clave y cómo el grupo imaginó sus posibilidades políticas en la cúspide de su desmovilización. Al utilizar el concepto de ‘espectáculo integrado’ de Guy Debord, señalo que la estructura vanguardista de las FARC condujo a mostrarse a sí misma como líder de una movilización política más amplia, incluso cuando luchó por retener la lealtad de sus antiguos combatientes. Este artículo considera la relevancia para académicos y activistas del espectáculo integrado y abre un camino para futuras investigaciones de la política del espectáculo en Latinoamérica.

Spanish keywords: proceso de paz colombiano; FARC; evento mediático; espectáculo

Portuguese abstract

Durante uma semana em setembro de 2016, as Forças Armadas Revolucionárias da Colômbia (FARC) realizaram sua décima conferência de guerrilha, a Décima, nas planícies de Yará, no sul da Colômbia. O grupo guerrilheiro abriu o evento para a mídia, orquestrando um festival com extravagância de turismo de eco-conflito para marcar sua transição para a política legal. Esta análise foto/etnográfica da Décima ilumina a formação simbólica e discursiva das FARC em um momento de transição crucial, e mostra como o grupo imaginou suas possibilidades políticas à beira de sua desmobilização. Ao me engajar com o conceito de ‘espetáculo integrado’ de Guy Debord, argumento que a estrutura vanguardista das FARC a levou a se autodenominar líder de uma ampla mobilização política, mesmo enquanto lutava para manter a fidelidade de seus ex-combatentes. O artigo considera a relevância contínua do espetáculo integrado para acadêmicos e ativistas e abre caminho para novas pesquisas sobre a política do espetáculo na América Latina.

Portuguese keywords: processo de paz colombiano; FARC; evento midiático; espetáculo

Cite this article: Fattal AL (2022). Guests of the Guerrilla: Integrated Spectacle and Disintegrating Peace, an Ethnographic Analysis of the FARC’s Tenth (and Final?) Guerrilla Conference. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 54, 647–677. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000487>