



La Legión del Afecto: Colombias Powerful Network for Peace

Allison Hayes-Conroy, Alexis Saenz Montoya and Cesar Buitrago Arias

August 11 2017

The fate of Colombia's *Legión del Afecto* as a government-financed peacebuilding program is uncertain, but it looks to endure as an independent social movement. Its persistence is due both to its historical development and to its emphasis on affective relationships.

Authors Note: *This material is based upon work supported by the United States National Science Foundation under Grant #1452541. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.*

The *Legión del Afecto* – translated as the Legion of Affection – is a Colombian social network broadly mobilized around peace. It is arguably the most overlooked, yet broadest-based network, for peace in Colombia. Unlike other more-publicized movement networks like the *Congreso de los Pueblos* or the *Marcha Patriótica*, the *Legión del Afecto* was established as intentionally non-polarized with respect to the left/right politics that have long generated conflict in the country and across Latin America.

Instead, the politics of the *Legión del Afecto* might best be described as a politics of *sentir* – a politics of feeling. “*Ver, oír, sentir*” (to see, to hear, to feel) is one of a few familiar phrases of the *Legión del Afecto*, which has been echoed in all corners of the country.

The politics of “feeling”

Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

Most read

[The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

[Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug](#)

Image credit: Legión del Afecto.

While recognizing and valuing social difference – especially across lines of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation – the *Legión del Afecto* has emphasized the bodily capacity to sense and feel as a point of social and political convergence for the country’s youth in the face of seemingly insoluble conflicts at multiple scales; the fact that each individual *feels* differently (because of distinct biographies, identities, and physical experiences) should not matter as long as a politics could be build around respecting and valuing others’ bodily capacity for feeling.

In essence, this respect and valuing of the other is what “affection” has come to mean in the network. As a result, non-verbal means of communicating feelings have become highly valued in the *Legión del Afecto*. So-called ‘alternative languages’ of dance, music, theatre, clowning, acrobatics, fire-blowing and more, along with shared banquets, journeys, festivals and other shared sensorial events have been central to continued mobilization and motivation of *legionarios* (Legion participants), often youth between the ages of 15 and 25.

In a country where many have been killed for simply appearing to favor one side or the other, the focus on feeling rather than on political side-taking has been crucial to the survival and thriving of both the network and the leaders within it. Because of this intentional and conspicuous lack of side-taking, the *Legión del Afecto* has been able to enter and intervene in location and communities across the country where others – e.g., police, military, government – were once unable to go. Of course, it would not be accurate to portray *legionarios* as lacking political views or direction; the opposite is true.

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

However, as a network the *Legión del Afecto* has focused on creating space for dialogue and political learning rather than defining or persuading one single way of analyzing current national and global trends.

These spaces of learning and dialogue have been particularly important as the network grew to include ex-combatants from all sides of the Colombian conflict. Intentionally setting down the conflicts associated with polarized national politics meant that the *Legión del Afecto* could mobilize ex-guerrilla, ex-paramilitary, ex-soldiers, ex-gang members as well as many others affected by violence and by the pervasive lack of opportunity for marginalized youth. These participants enriched the *Legión del Afecto* through sharing their differences in lived experience, rather than swallowing or forgetting their pasts.

Origins and Evolution of the Legión

The *Legión del Afecto* began in 2003 (under another name) as a collaboration between different ‘base’ (i.e. grassroots) groups in the city of Medellín, which had many prior years of experience in peaceful social transformation at the community level. In particular, two groups – *Casa Mía*, a group focused on urban youth, and *La Colonia de San Luis*, a group serving once-rural families who experienced violent displacement – united their expertise in the formation of the *Legión del Afecto*. *Casa Mía* was especially important as many of the *Legión del Afecto*’s founding antecedents – for example, the focus on *afecto* or affection – came from its founding leaders’ own collaborative legacy of radically innovative and daring peacebuilding in the Santander neighborhood of Medellín. The earlier peacebuilding of *Casa Mía* involved building trust and affection among young men pertaining to dueling gangs as well as standing up for justice and non-violence in the face of direct threats from paramilitary groups. That such strategies were effective in the face of

conflict is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the *Legión del Afecto*, after first being funded by the UNDP (for methodological development), was scooped up as a government-sponsored program, housed under *Acción Social* (under president Uribe), and then the *Departamento para la Prosperidad Social* (DPS) (under Santos).

As a government program, the *Legión del Afecto* grew a centralized administration, and new rules and regulations to follow, but it was never “just” a government program. As the *Legión del Afecto* spread from its origins in the city of Medellín to over 40 other cities, towns, and rural municipalities across the country, the network tapped into and drew from existing base community groups in each location. In each place, new leaders were nurtured alongside already-established community leaders who grew and gained new ideas. Existing effective ties were used to strengthen the network and bring in new participants. And in each place, the particularities and challenges of the location brought new strategies for peacebuilding that were focused on the traditions, as well as the problems, of each region: for example, a focus on traditional music (*gaitas*) in San Jacinto, or a focus on memory and ritual in many rural places where violent acts had occurred.

The Legión Today

It is often stated that there are currently “over 2000” young *legionarios* across the country, but the actual effect of the *Legión del Afecto* is much larger. Behind any official count of participants, there are thousands of families and tens of thousands of friends and community members who have been affected by the peacebuilding efforts of the network. These friends, families, and community members are the ones who came to grand events – like the *Carnival del Pan* (2009, Cali), or *Hip Hop Sin Fronteras* (2010, Medellín),

which mobilized massive numbers of participants. And these friends, families and community members are *also* the individuals who know and trust the participants in the *Legión del Afecto* through their small daily actions, and who therefore have been willing to work together with them in their efforts to build an ‘everyday’ peace in communities across the country.

Today, this expanded and enduring capacity of the network is more important than ever; despite recent funding uncertainty for the *Legión del Afecto* as a government program, the *Legión del Afecto* persists as a grassroots network – a potentially powerful, motivated, and emotionally interconnected movement of young and old, who hold some very significant lessons for the development of a truly post-conflict society.

Further Information on the Legión

More information about the *Legión del Afecto*, its history, activities, and methodologies, is being made available through the grassroots website still-in-progress: www.legiondelafecto.org.

The *Legión del Afecto* network is present in the following cities and regions in Colombia: La Macarena, Playa Rica (la Y), San Juan de Lozada, San Vicente del Cagüan, La Catalina, Montañita, Puerto y Florencia, Medellín, San Luis, San Francisco y Sonsón, Samaná Florencia y Pensilvania, Soacha, Bogotá y Viota, Barrancabermeja, San Pablo y Puerto Wilches, Chiquinquirá y San Miguel de Sema, Cartago, San José del Palmar, Bojayá, Quibdó, Buchadó, Pamplona, Cúcuta, Tibú, La Gabarra, Cali, Buenaventura, Armenia, La Tebaida, Manizales, Cartagena, Montes de María, Magangué y Plato, Puerto Tejada, y Villavicencio, Copey, San Juan del Cesar y Villanueva Guajira, Chibolo, Carepa, Turbo, Acandí, Ungía y Carmen del Darién y Mistrató, Tumaco, Líbano y Natagaima, Ovejas,

Santa Rosa del Sur y Simití, Puerto López, El Retorno , San José del Guaviare y Mocoa.

Allison Hayes-Conroy is an assistant professor of Geography and Urban Studies at Temple University. She has studied the Legion del Afecto as a peacebuilding initiative alongside the other two authors – both participants in the Legión – since 2011. Hayes-Conroy's has published widely on role of the body in social movements and initiatives. Her work on peace-based social initiatives in Colombia and her work on bio-social pedagogical innovation have both been funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation.

Cesar Buitrago Arias, is a community leader and law student. He has worked for 20 years to support the needs of displaced families like his own, who come to the city of Medellin, Colombia from rural areas due to violence.

Alexis Saenz Montoya, is a Ph.D. Student in the Department of Geography and Urban Studies at Temple University. His research interests lie in the intersection of community-based organizations and popular education in Latin America.

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

Useful links

- [Login](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Sitemap](#)
- [Accessibility](#)
- [Terms & Conditions](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)