

# “Yesterday, Men... Today, Nature”:

## Remembering Anthropogenic and Natural Disasters in Colombia

---

**Catalina Vallejo Pedraza**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I trace the commemoration of two traumatic events over a period of 25 years, from 1985 to 2010, the Armero Tragedy and the Siege of the Palace of Justice in Colombia. I compare the creation, maintenance, and transformation of the collective memory of anthropogenic and natural disasters. Through an analysis of different commemorative narratives I demonstrate the similarities and differences that prevail in forgetting and remembering within a national context, over time, in the case of natural versus anthropogenic disasters, and outline the conditions for each. Scrutinizing articles produced after the tragedies in two national newspapers and one weekly magazine I cast a detailed explanation of how narratives of suffering related with natural and anthropogenic disasters change over time and what are the differences between them. Although not representative, the Colombian case is significant since it facilitates a theoretical explanation of the ways in which societies give meaning to both types of suffering.

## **“Yesterday, Men... Today, Nature”: Remembering Anthropogenic and Natural Disasters in Colombia**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 6 of November in 1985 a squad of 35 members of the leftist guerrilla group M-19 (April 19 Movement) took over the Palace of Justice in the downtown of Bogotá and held hostage 300 people including the members of the Colombian Supreme Court. They demanded to hold a trial to President Belisario Betancourt for what they consider were his neglect to the agreements of the ongoing peace process. The military forces took over the Palace after 28 hours of combats. As a result of the confrontation 35 members of the M-19, 11 soldiers and 43 civilians died. Also 11 people were reported missing. A week later, on November 13, the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano generated an avalanche of mud that destroyed the town of Armero killing 25,000 of its 29,000 residents. Due to the dimension of the tragedy the government proclaimed the area a cemetery and seven months later Pope John Paul II declared the ruins holy land. Colombian society had to respond to both disasters in a short period of time.

These two cases exemplify how societies not only experience periods of stability and social reproduction; they also face moments of upheaval and disruption. Thus, natural hazards and political violence are part of social life. Disasters are disruptive unexpected extreme events, concentrated in time, that are defined as moments of crisis by society (Xu 2012). Thus, “an event is not a disaster unless human beings and social systems are affected in negative ways” (Tierney 2007: 509). These disruptive events often carry suffering and generate trauma leaving a mark on the group that demands new explanations. Disasters are one type of traumatic collective experiences.

The literature on trauma indicates that disruptive occurrences will remain in the conscious memory of the collectivity (Alexander 2004, Shudson 1989). They are a past that cannot be ignored. However, the occurrence of the event does not determine exclusively the type of memory work the society will develop. Some might be forgotten, some will be remembered without conflict, while others will become difficult pasts that lack consensus (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991). The interpretation of past events has a central role in the mnemonic representations that a society will construct (Zerubavel 1996). As Alexander and Gao (2012)

argue one thing is the event and the other its interpretation (118). So the definition of an event as a natural disaster or as caused by other humans is part of the meaning making about the past. The process of interpretation of disasters that are traumatic is important because: a) it could determine the way victims are going to be treated and repaired (Alexander 2004); b) it can have an impact on the relationship between the state and the civil society (Xu 2013); and c) it might determine the formation of national narratives and identities (Olick 1999).

The Armero Avalanche and the Siege of the Palace took place in the same setting and one week apart from each other. It could be argued that the memory work about the two of them will be analogous since they are two tragedies taking place in Colombia in 1985. Yet they have been interpreted as different cases of disasters. Armero has been described as natural and the Siege as anthropogenic. For example, in November 17, 1985 the national newspaper *El Espectador* published an article entitled “Yesterday, Men... Today, Nature”. The general inquiry of this paper is how the interpretation of events as natural versus anthropogenic affects the recollections a society builds from them. In order to answer this question it is necessary to analyze how over time different interpretations of the events affect the way they are remembered. Commemorations are tightly connected with the initial representation of the event (Olick 1999), so the analysis of natural and anthropogenic disasters has to be done in a historical perspective that analyses their evolution over time. More specifically the question that this paper aims to answer is: *How are anthropogenic and natural disasters remembered and how do these mnemonic processes vary over time?*

This study contributes to the literature on commemoration and trauma by developing a path dependency analysis sensitive to different types of events. The paper examines the trajectory of commemoration of natural disasters, which has not called as much attention as anthropogenic disasters. These events are also traumatic experiences that called for memory work at the collective level. The sociology of disasters is the field where most of the work has been developed. Their emphasis, however, is on a constructivist view that states that natural disasters are the product of social circumstances and not the result of uncontrollable physical forces (Tierney, 2007). Hence, the question about the interpretation of the past has not been deeply addressed in this field. Therefore, by developing a comparison between the trajectory of commemoration of the Avalanche and the Siege we can analyze if the attribution of responsibility to humans or nature has an impact in the way memory is formed and transformed.

The changes commemorations go through are important since they help to explain why some events remained active in the collective memory while others experience progressive cycles routinization and normalization.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on the literature on collective memory as its conceptual framework. Specifically, it aims to integrate four topics address by this field: trauma, difficult past and commemoration, path dependence, and memory of natural disasters<sup>1</sup>. In what follows I touch on the main conceptual contributions of each one and connect them with the general topic of the paper.

### *Trauma and Difficult Past*

The literature on collective memory recognizes that societies not only remember their heroic events they also build memories from their traumatic and difficult pasts. These topics have been address by two body's of scholarly work that share an interest for how societies deal with disruption and the memory that is built around. To a certain point the trauma (Alexander 2004, Eyerman 2011, Saito 2009, Smelser 2004) and difficult past literature (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002, Olick 1999 2005, Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991, Steidl 2013) represent independent fields of work. However, I connect them to explain through a path dependence perspective how disasters as a type of trauma are remembered and commemorated. I will first address the trauma literature to then approach the scholars of difficult past.

There are two approaches to *trauma*: collective and cultural. The first type was developed by Erikson (1976, 1991, 1994) to explain the difference between the individual and social dimension of trauma after a disaster. Erikson rooted his definition in the Durkheimian tradition of community and solidarity to argue that disasters not only have a subjective dimension (Xu 2013). Thus, communities could also be traumatized as a result of “a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 1976: 153). After a natural disaster societies will go through a process of

---

<sup>1</sup> This topic could be considered incipient at least in the sociology of memory. There are a couple of sociological pieces that inquiry about the memory of natural disasters but most of the work has been developed in interdisciplinary fields. Nevertheless, I included it here since one of the contributions of this paper is to expand our knowledge on memory of natural disasters.

meaning making that will address two problems. First, communities will identify who is guilty for their suffering; this process will carry different consequences if nature of humankind is the perpetrator. As Erikson points “natural disasters are almost always experienced as acts of God or caprices of nature” however disasters who have “being of human manufacture, are at least in principle preventable, so there is always [...] a share of blame to be assigned” (142). Second, collectivities will evaluate the damages in the social organism. The destruction of the community can also carry the formation of a new one, conformed by inflicted individuals who share the ethos of survivors (Erikson 1994: 230).

However, Erikson’s work has two limits, it does not address the problem of memory of disasters, and it is rooted in the communal dimension of suffering. His analysis only pays attention to the affected community and does not connect this experience with larger audiences. In this sense the cultural trauma literature expands these two horizons stating that: “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 2004: 1). The emphasis here is not in the event itself but on how it is interpreted by society. Narratives have a key role since one of the conditions of possibility of cultural trauma is that society struggles to reconcile a disruptive event with existing narratives. Thus, societies subjected to traumatic experiences are affected in two ways. First, the event will remain in the conscious memory of the collectivity. Second, the identity of the collectivity will be reshaped. I consider a disaster one kind of horrendous event therefore they are a traumatic experience.

To understand the social process of cultural trauma is important to highlight that not every moment of social crisis will become one, since “trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander 2004: 10). Hence, it is necessary to go through a process of signification that creates a new master narrative. This process is accomplished through carrier groups that articulate the meaning of trauma in the public sphere (Eyerman 2011: 29). Master narratives of cultural trauma are shaped by four elements. First, the nature of the event has to be delimited. The narrative has to define clearly what happened. Second, the category of victimhood has to define who is the group victimized. Third, a

relationship between the traumatized group and the wider audience has to be recognized. A public sense of victimhood is possible when the victims represent values or qualities shared by the larger community. Fourth, perpetrators and the attribution of responsibility have to be clearly identified. So there is a polarity between victim and perpetrator. As Eyerman (2011) argues “perpetrators may be represented as evil and tainted and victims as good and innocent” (30).

*Difficult pasts* are episodes that raise dishonor and guilt. An event becomes a difficult past when is shameful and hard to connect with the triumphalist narratives of memory. Hence, episodes that represent a moral trauma for society bring conflict and tension because their memories do not carry consensus (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 399). So difficult past is a kind of trauma. One possible outcome of cultural traumas is that over time they turned into shameful pasts that do not carry consensus in terms of the event, the victims, the perpetrators and the audiences. In this sense the work of Simko (2012) and Olick (1999) exemplify the difference between an event that is traumatic, and one that is shameful and traumatic. In the case of 9/11, Simko (2012) shows how the terrorist attacks constitute a traumatic past but not a shameful one because American society has come to terms with it. There is not a debate about who did what to whom and what happened. On the contrary, Olick (1999) has showed how Germany’s remembrance of May 8 1945 is not only the commemoration of a traumatic event but also a shameful past. German leaders struggle during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to set narratives of commemoration that could address the guilt of the perpetrators.

The literature on difficult past has as one of its focus commemorations. According to Zerubabel (1995) commemorations are ideal spaces to study how memories change and are negotiated. So difficult past scholars have use historical analysis to understand how commemorations are formed and change over time in relation with a particular historical context. In this sense, they have approached history in a different way than trauma researchers, who have focused more on how over time an event becomes or not a cultural trauma (Eyerman 2011). This approach has two limits: first, it neglects the role of commemorations; second, it does not consider the changes that narratives of trauma got through time. Thus, on one side, they consider that once the cultural trauma consolidates and a new collective identity is formed the trauma disappears and becomes a lesson objectified in spaces of commemoration (i.e. museums, monuments, historical artifacts) (Alexander 2004: 23). On the other side, by seeing routinization as the only possible outcome of cultural trauma they are not considering that traumas not

necessarily disappear but get re-interpreted. By paying attention to historical contexts and the history of commemorations, difficult past scholars open the door for the analysis of traumas that do not get routinized and remained contested memories. As I mentioned before difficult pasts can be conceptualized as one type of trauma. The difference is that in these cases the narrative has not been normalized and the definitions of victim and perpetrator cannot be simplified in one dichotomy (good vs. evil). In this sense, it is important to connect both literatures to understand how trauma operates as a social phenomenon and how it remains a space of memory formation through commemorations.

There are three types of commemorations of difficult pasts: multivocal, fragmented and integrated. The first type, multivocal, is defined by a *shared* space, time, and text but diverse meanings for one single event. As Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz (1991) argue different constituencies interact and interpret the past in diverse ways making memorials multivocal (34). Multivocal commemorations enhance collective solidarity despite the different meanings that it entails. So commemorations without consensus are more likely to appear when: there are ambiguous symbolic forms; the past is no longer part of the present political agenda; agents of memory have limited power and resources; and the political culture is more consensual and homogenous. Second, fragmented commemorations are conformed by *multiple* times, spaces, audiences and discourses of the same event (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). This type of commemoration reinforces dissent. A society is more likely to have a fragmented commemoration when: it emerges in a controversial political culture; there is a strong link between the past and the present political context; and the agents of memory hold significant economic, social, political and/or cultural capital. Third, as Steidl (2013) argues integrated commemorations synthesize through the concept of field the previous two models. They are a “collection of spaces and narratives that accumulate in the commemoration of an event over time. [So the] commemorative field, as a whole, remains dynamic over time, shifting between fragmented, multivocal, and other potential forms as the contemporary context changes” (5).

These explanatory models developed different accounts of commemorations but they share three broad interests. First, they all aim to understand how commemoration enhances solidarity or fragmentation. Second, they recognize that collective memory is not a spontaneous event. On the contrary, different carrier groups actively participate in the elaboration of

narratives<sup>2</sup>. Third, in all cases the political and historical context in which the commemoration takes place is a key element to understand under which circumstances a society will pursue a particular narrative of commemoration.

### *Path Dependence and Memory*

There has been a debate in social memory studies about how malleable the past can be (Olick 1999, Schwartz 1991, Jansen 2007, Saito 2006, Savelsberg & King 2005). One of the main arguments about memory is that it responds to present necessities, meaning that memory is malleable. This position has been identified as presentist and is mainly sustained in Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) idea that memory is constructed in the present to fulfill current necessities. Presentists assumed that what we remember is a representation of past events framed in present meanings. Presentists care more about the representation than about the event itself. An example of this type of analysis is Eric Hobsbawm's work (1992) on the invention of tradition. Hobsbawm argues that modern nations created the idea of traditions as a set of practices and symbols that present themselves as old and sacred, when in fact they have been produced recently and with particular political goals. On the contrary, the second perspective asserts that memory is not completely malleable. These scholars claim that history has an important role in memory. Hence, what we remember has a strong connection with historical facts. For historians memory is more about durability and less about malleable representations (Klein 2000, Rosenfeld 2009).

The path dependence perspective emerges out of these two standpoints arguing that memory is a representation of the past that has a history itself (is a process), and that memory is not completely malleable. So they disagree with presentist in their malleable view of memory, but also distance themselves from historians arguing that memory can change over time. Olick (1999) for example argues, "commemorative images of the past not only reflect the commemorated event and the contemporary circumstances, but are path-dependent products of earlier commemorations as well" (481). Hence, previous memory work constrained or enabled future representations of the past (Jansen 2007). Since the interest of path dependency memory studies is to look for processes, initial interpretations are as important as the changes the narratives go through time. Hence path dependent studies view the process of memory as constituted by three analytical points: disruptive events, turning points, and present

---

<sup>2</sup> So as the trauma literature, they also acknowledge the importance of carrier groups in the interpretative process of suffering.



interpretations (Jansen 2007: 962). This paper follows the same analytical model to study how the memory of natural and anthropogenic disasters are formed and to establish the differences between them.

Path dependence offers an opportunity to understand how societies deal with trauma and difficult pasts from a historical analysis that tracks events over time. The value of this approach is that it shows that the social construction of memory is a complex process that can take multiple but limited forms (Schwartz 1991). Thus, commemorations of traumatic pasts follow a path dependence form. Earlier versions can constrain or enable later narratives. If a society first response to a traumatic event is to silenced, future intends to commemorate it will be inhibited by this first explanation. In the same vein if a society acknowledges from the beginning its trauma, future commemorations and efforts to silence it will be constrain by this first response. This framework enables me to answer the following questions: What difference it makes to the memory of the event that it was initially framed as a natural or anthropogenic disaster? How do initial definitions change over time? And how do initial definitions affect contemporary commemorations of natural and anthropogenic disasters?

#### *Memory and Natural Disasters*

One of the limits of the literature on memory (either from the trauma, difficult past or path dependence perspective) is its emphasis on anthropogenic disasters. This is related with the development in the global context of an interest in acknowledging suffering caused by humanity. Nations have been obligated to recognize their shameful pasts (Rivera 2008). This emphasis has left aside other forms of disasters. Communities build memories not only from suffering caused by humans but also from natural disasters (Robinson 2009). It is important to comprehend how societies come to terms with the memory of natural disasters to understand the unique conditions in which this interpretative process takes place.

Out of the small group of scholars who have included natural disasters in the analysis of memory we can identify three groups. First, there is research on the impact of natural disasters at the national and local level and how memories are built in each context (Robinson 2009, Su 2012, and Stow 2012, Ferron & Massa, 2012). The emphasis is on how the lack of direct contact with natural disasters gives room to a particular type of memory at the national level. Second, scholars have paid attention to the role of the political context in which natural disasters take

place and the political consequences of their occurrence and their memory (Xu 2013, Stow 2012, Simpson 2005). Third, we have researchers who focus on commemoration and identities (Kempe 2007, Su 2012). The difference of this group is that the emphasis is not on the political context or the differentiate impact of natural disasters at the local and/or national level, but on how the memory of disasters shape regional identities.

Research on memory and natural disasters has an interest in commemorations and meaning making. However, it has not pay attention to the process through which societies create master narratives about natural and anthropogenic disasters. Thus, the limit of this perspective is that it treats natural disasters as other case of disruption of the social tissue that demands memory work. There is not an effort to build the memory of natural disasters as a particular case that demands different interpretations. This study analyzes under which circumstances a society interprets and commemorates an event as a natural disaster and not as a human action.

## **METHODS**

This paper develops a historical analysis of two cases using textual sources and qualitative techniques of interpretation. It compares two cases to contrast how in each one the collective memory of disasters was constructed and how it varies over time. The paper aligns with interpretative historical sociology, which aims to compare contrasting cases to develop interpretations that highlight the particularity of each one. Unlike other research in comparative-historical analysis this paper seeks to find variation not to explain it.

### ***Data***

The comparison focuses of two cases that are remarkable events of recent Colombian history: the Armero Avalanche and the Siege of the Palace of Justice. Both took place in November 1985. They offer a unique opportunity to see how a society responds to both types of disasters. The empirical cases studied here shared time, setting<sup>3</sup> and the definition of disruptive events<sup>3</sup> but the outcome seems to be different. The anthropogenic disaster still active in the collective memory of Colombian society whereas the natural disaster has decreased in attention at the national level

---

<sup>3</sup> As it was mention in the introduction and the theoretical framework this paper understands disasters as disruptive unexpected extreme *events* that are defined as moments of crisis by society. In this sense the two cases analyze here align with this definition and represent “short time” disasters.

and has been normalized. One way to measure this decrease of interest is by recognizing that even when Armero called for more media attention in its aftermath, on the long term the Siege has had more media coverage (Leal, Gomez 2013). Clearly these two cases also share differences; for example they took place in different regions and they called for different attention from the state. However, since the interest of the paper is not in the material and factual conditions of each event but in their interpretation, the comparison focuses on how each one was construed and remembered over time by Colombian society.

In order to analyze the mnemonic interpretations of the disasters, I examined two newspapers and one magazine. *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* are the two major and only national newspapers in Colombia. They share audiences but *El Tiempo* is the most widely read. *Revista Semana* is a major weekly magazine that focuses on political analysis (Table 1)<sup>4</sup>. The three are culturally powerful institutions that participate actively in the social construction of the past. I focus on a sample of 57 articles (Table 2) drawn from the three publications. They are editorials, opinion editorials and commemorative articles that address directly the two events. The sample is divided in two groups. First, 20 pieces (10 from each case) were selected from the articles published by the three sources during the first week after the disasters. I called this phase the first period of initial interpretation. This period is important because from the universe of articles published in the three sources two months after the tragedies the pieces included in the first week represent 51% of the total. Second, 37 pieces (16 for the natural and 21 for the anthropogenic) were chosen from every fifth anniversary, from 1990 to 2010. I called this phase in which the events are commemorated the second period. The difference in the number of articles is related with the decrease of pieces concerning the Avalanche over time. The data was collected in the archives of the Luis Angel Arango Library in Bogotá and the Library of Congress in Washington. By gathering the articles this way I had access to the initial interpretations and to the commemorations, which facilitated the analysis of how their memory evolved.

The two newspapers and the magazine constitute secondary historical sources. This type of evidence offers multiple benefits for historical sociological analysis and for research in collective memory. First, newspapers are regular publications that gather information about events in a systematic way (Clemens 2002: 205). They are records of the past. When certain

---

<sup>4</sup> Table 1 has more information about the history of the sources, their political adscription and their sources of financing.

events are newsworthy for extended periods of time is an indicator of what events are important for a society and which ones are not. Therefore, newspapers are arguments about what is part of the collective memory and not objective representations of it. Second, Su (2012) argues that journalists manufacture memories, which means that they are agents of memory (283). Alexander (2004) points that agents of memory (carrier groups) have different levels of power to make public their interpretations of the past. Consequently, by analyzing major media sources we can understand how powerful carrier groups elaborate narratives of the past. As every historical source the evidence used in here cannot be treated as an objective supply of historical data; instead, they are dominant voices from a powerful elite that has the means to actively participate in the construction of narratives (Bogard 2011: 430). Third, media sources are varied and more extensive than official documentation. We can have multiple media records for one event. Earl et al. (2002) argued, “triangulation [can] ensure a broader range of coverage, which is likely both to capture more events (addressing selection bias) and to provide multiple accounts of each event (addressing description bias)” (74). For these reasons, I gathered evidence from three different media outlets.

### ***Data Analysis***

As it was mentioned before this historical analysis employs qualitative techniques of interpretation, more specifically textual analysis. This methodology focuses mainly on the content of the texts and not in the structure. The close reading was systematized through open and structured coding. The structured coding was used to look for four categories: victim, event, audiences and perpetrator, while open coding served to look for emerging categories (Charmaz 2004). I had a set of questions guiding the coding process (Table 3). Analytic memos were used to develop hypothesis, established patterns among the codes and to connect these categories with debates in the literature on memory, trauma and culture (Emerson et al. 1995).

For the reasons discussed above concerning path-dependence and the changeable characteristic of narratives I refer to the case of the natural disaster as trajectory of commemoration of Armero and the case of the anthropogenic disaster as trajectory of commemoration of the Siege. These trajectories begin with the occurrence of the events in 1985 and finish with the 2010 commemorations. The interpretative comparative analysis includes two different moments inside the historical period studied here. The *first period (Initial*

*interpretation*) concerns the week after the occurrence of the events. This is particularly important because during this time symbolic conditions that will constraint and enable future commemorative narratives are set. In this moment the media is actively involved in a process of meaning making. The *second period* represents the set of *commemorations* in the trajectories of the natural and the anthropogenic disasters. I analyzed every fifth anniversary since they are characterized as key memorials. These commemorations are approach by a systematic reading to identify which (if any) interpretation changed.

Hence, I approached the data looking for four categories that are recognized in the literature on memory and trauma as important to understand the interpretation of the past and the meaning making of suffering. These categories are: (1) the event itself, how is the disruption defined as a disaster and what is the language employed to do it; (2) the victims, who are they and what do they symbolize; (3) the perpetrator, who is presented as guilty, and how is this issue address in terms of having or lacking control to prevent and cause the disaster (Alexander 2004); and (4) the imaginary audiences to which the articles are directed, how is society portrait and what is expected from it (Simko 2012, Alexander 2012).

## **FINDINGS**

To analyze and compare the way anthropogenic and natural disasters are commemorated I divide the historical analysis in three parts. First, I present the case of the Siege of the Palace of Justice showing how the media responded in the aftermath of its occurrence delimitating a narrative that aimed to address the event as a tragedy that concerned all Colombian society and not only the direct victims. I pay attention to the categories presented above: event, victims, perpetrators, and imaginary audiences. Then I move to the study of the commemorations of the event tracking how these elements changed. Second, I study the case of the Armero Avalanche to develop a similar inner case analysis by explaining how the narrative deployed in the media seek to build the disaster as a problem that demanded the response of the society. More than a share category of victimhood Armero called for a sense of unity based on solidarity with the direct victims. In this case I focus on the same elements applied to the human-made disaster. After establishing the initial interpretation I proceed to the study of the commemorations of the natural disaster. Third,

I developed a comparative analysis of the two cases establishing the differences between them in terms of the type of events they represent and their following commemorations.

### **Inner Case Analysis**

#### ***The Holocaust of Justice: The Siege of the Palace 1985-2010***

The Palace of Justice symbolized the judicial power and was located across the senate and the house of the president. The M-19 entered violently the building and held hostage more than 300 people including the justices, employees of the institution, and visitors. The intension of the M-19 was to hold a trial to President Betancur using the Supreme Court as the setting and the general population, who were going to be connected through radio, as the prosecutor. The distress of the M-19 came from what they perceived as the violation to the agreements of the ongoing peace process between the government and different guerrilla groups<sup>5</sup>. The initial response of the media was of shock and indignation and followed a dualistic narrative (dichotomous). The Siege called for a new set of meanings to give explanation to this unexpected encounter with human suffering. The media actively responded to this need trying to make sense of the death of 100 people, including the 11 Justices and the destruction of the Palace.

Despite the multiple confrontations that the M-19 had with the state in its 11 years of existence the Siege was perceived as an insufferable disruption that demanded an explanation. The articles that followed the attack made emphasis on how it was the worst tragedy of the history of the Republic. The media argued that the Siege was going to be remembered forever because everyone lost with the attack. The editorial of *El Espectador* three days after assured that it was: “The most horrendous chapter of depredation that our society has ever been subjected” and that “never in this twentieth century [...] our country has been hit with so much violence and so much impiety in the most sensitive part of the institutions” (November 10, 1985)<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore the definition of the event as a horrible and unexpected crime came not only from the novelty of having one of the state’s main building being siege, but from the way it was interpreted. In this initial process of meaning making the building and the 11 Justices started to symbolize the whole judicial system. So this was not an attack to a physical structure but to the

---

<sup>5</sup> The government of President Belisario Betancur developed a peace process with five guerrilla groups between 1982 and 1986. The groups that participated were: M-19 (April 19 Movement), FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People’s Army), EPL (The Popular Liberation Army), ELN (The National Liberation Army) and ADO (Self-Defense Workers).

<sup>6</sup> All translations from *El Espectador*, *El Tiempo* and *Revista Semana* are mine, except when otherwise noted.

judiciary branch, one of the foundations of democracy along with the executive and the legislative. Part of the anxiety and anger expressed by the media came from what was perceived as a direct attack to democracy and its institutions. Consequently, the assault went from the “Siege of the Palace” to the “Holocaust of the Justice”. The reference to the Holocaust was used to represent the burning of the building, its members and its archives after a rocket shot by the army started an uncontrollable fire. Once this shift is made in the interpretation, the tragedy expands to encompass the whole society. As the target is not anymore a group of civilians but the democratic system shared by every Colombian, the category of victimhood shifts from the direct victims to the society as a whole.

This definition of the Siege as a crime against society made the event more important in terms of how the collectivity was going to react. In one of the editorials of *El Tiempo* it is stated that the newspaper “feels sorry not only for the families of the people who died but more importantly for all the judicial system and the democratic state because the judicial system is one of the foundations of a democratic nation” (November 9, 1985). Thus, not only the Siege is interpreted as an unexpected event that demands for new meanings but it is also assumed to be something that concerns the entire imagined community. The imaginary audiences of the media sources are expected to support the president and the armed forces. There is a call to the citizens to publicly demonstrate their support; “citizens are called to leave aside amnesia and to go massively to the streets to demonstrate solidarity with the institutions” (Editorial *El Espectador*, November 10 1985).

However, this shared category of victimhood does not imply that the media did not focus on the direct victims in a particular way. We can see a hierarchy of victimhood determined by how close or not an individual was from “democracy”. So the main direct victims were the 11 justices murdered, because they were the symbol of the judicial power. Specifically the president of the Supreme Court Alfonso Reyes Echandía became the main character of this group. The rest of the people who died in the Siege are divided between “secondary victims”, members of the armed forces and the guerrillas. The first group also inspires sorrow and indignation but there is a clear definition of them as not being as important as the Justices. This implies that they are not going to call for the same attention and that their identities are not going to be addressed. They are portrayed as “not being that illustrious, which does not mean that their death is not painful” (Editorial, *El Tiempo* November 9, 1985). The second group conformed by the soldiers killed in

combat are represented from a heroic narrative that sees them as fulfilling their duty, which is to protect the institutions of the democratic system. President Betancur visited the families of the soldiers who died in the first day of the confrontation before the Siege was over (Revista Semana November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1985).

Nevertheless, in the same way that the three groups are separated by how much they can embody democracy or not, they are also united by a sense of sacrifice. Their death and suffering is interpreted in the aftermath of the tragedy as serving a bigger purpose. In the editorials of *El Tiempo* of November 9 and 10 it can be read: “The death of 11 personalities of the Judicial Power and tens and tens of anonymous citizens cannot be in vain” (November 10, 1985) and “we are convinced that after this terrible episode democracy and respect for the law emerged strengthened” (November 9, 1985). So in this initial narrative society (audience) is not only victimized but it has to be thankful for the sacrifice that the people murdered did without knowing. Their death served the bigger purpose to rescue the democratic system. This is suffering with a purpose from the standpoint of society.

The third group of “victims”, the guerrillas, did not merit sorrow because they were the perpetrators. Even when all the members that participated of the Siege died the media does not represent them as meriting compassion. The M-19 is by the initial moment clearly responsible for the death of the Justices, the officers and the rest of the victims. Their responsibility relays in their decision to siege the Palace and in what were considered ridiculous demands that made impossible to negotiate with them. As a perpetrator the M-19 was portrayed from a dualistic narrative occupying the evil side. Even when it was unclear what happened inside the building, there was a clear distinction between the good and evil and who deserve support and who deserve repudiation. The armed forces and the government were doing their best to save 300 people and to defend the state; they embodied goodness. To the question of one journalist of what was the role of the armed forces Colonel Plazas Vega (in charge of the retake) answered in the middle of the combat:

“To sustain democracy, buddy. They are not going to scare us or to attack any of the powers... In this moment this is an attack to the judicial branch and I want to make very clear that the army is capable of keeping all the branches of public power functioning because this is a democracy and we are here to enforce it” (*El Tiempo*, November 6, 1985).



In this dominant explanation the guerrilla is presented as irrational, purposeless but more importantly anti-democratic. They are not recognized as members of the Colombian imagined community neither as a valid interlocutor. This is interesting since this is not a case of an attack from a foreign force. On the contrary, it is a group of Colombians who are the perpetrators so to locate them in the evil side the master narrative portrayed them as not sharing the same values of the rest of society. Only the major leaders of the squad are named, but the rest of them are not granted identity or rationality. The initial interpretation of the Siege focuses on portraying the M-19 as a group “physically armed with guns but with their spirit full of uncontrollable anger [...] lacking the most basic patriotic values and eager to replace Bolivar and Santander<sup>7</sup> by Marx and Lenin” (El Tiempo, Ed. November 6, 1985). So once the guerrilla group is defined as guilty and senseless fanatics the dualistic narrative is consolidated. On one side we have democracy, personified by the justices and on the other side we have a group of men and women who lack political ideals and respect for the institutions.

Thus, in the master narrative created after the Siege of the Palace the M-19 is the guilty party and the government and the military forces are heroes. Many of the generals and colonels that participated in the recovery were honored and promoted to higher positions. The victims symbolized democracy, which makes extensive the category of victimhood to society. Their sacrifice is interpreted as meaningful. The media engage in a meaning making that made the tragedy a matter of national concern.

*From an “Attack on the State” to “State-Terrorism”: Narrative Shifting Through Commemoration*

So far I have presented the master narrative of the first period (initial interpretation). From this explanation the problem of responsibility in terms of having or lacking control is clearly distributed. The M-19 lost control and put on risk democracy and the government and the army were able to keep control and save the institutions. The problem is that these dominant narratives are hegemonic but not exclusive options for interpreting the disaster. They coexist with other interpretations that challenge them through alternate active explanations of the events. By the end of the first week it is possible to perceive the emergence of a subordinate uncertainty narrative that battles the morally dualistic in the media. This alternative explanation will have a key role in the path of changes that the future commemorations followed.

---

<sup>7</sup> Simon Bolivar and Francisco de Paula Santander are considered the founding fathers of Colombia.

The uncertainty comes mainly from a reframing of the event. The Siege remains a case of unexpected disruption but now it is divided in two. The first part is still focused on the takeover by the M-19. However, the second is the retake by the army. In this second dimension the role of the guerrilla as the main perpetrator starts to blurry because they were not on control of finishing the siege. The people responsible for this second part were the President and the Army. Due to this reframing of the narrative their actions started to be questioned in two realms. On one side, there is an inquiring to the avoidance by the government of a negotiated end. Since many people died during the conflagration and the crossed fired (not directly by the M-19), the media started to wonder who is responsible for these deaths. There is uncertainty about who is the identifiable perpetrator, which causes distress. The media wrote in relation to President Betancur's decision to do not negotiate that:

“But with the M-19 he could not negotiate to save the life of one hundred people and to safe the respect for the legality represented by the justices sacrificed. Mysteriously, [he] decided in that tragic 6 of November to follow the strategy of extermination by fire and sword” (Child, *El Espectador*, 1985).

Second, the action of the government was questioned for the deficiency of information during the 28 hours of combats and the conditions in which the Justices died. The Minister of Communication decided to shut down the broadcast of the events, which contributed to the lack of official information. As part of this anxiety and uncertainty about not knowing what happened the media expressed that: “Finally, the details of what happened inside the Palace during these 28 hours of terror will never be known, maybe history should have to be content with some loose episodes of a puzzle impossible to assemble” (*Revista Semana* 4<sup>th</sup> week of November, 1985). Hence, this redefinition of the event started to affect the perception of who were the perpetrators. Also as part of this narrative of uncertainty the role of the direct victims as being sacrifice for the welfare of democracy changed. Democracy has not being re-invigorated it has being harmed.

“But to say that democracy and the institutions have been strengthened after this probe, it is not more than an illusion [...] Political institutions do not get stronger because they won an armed battle; that is a test of strength but no of conviction. Institutions are respectable and respected when they identify with the country, when they reflect and orient their social behavior” (*El Espectador*, Editorial November 13, 1985).

So, even when the master narrative in the first period is the dualistic one where the M-19 is the evil side and the government and society the good, uncertainty is one of the subsidiary explanations. The uncertainty narrative is more open and gives room to multiple explanations

and redefinitions about the event. In the case of the commemorations of the Siege of the Palace of Justice it is possible to perceive how over time uncertainty becomes the master narrative in the media sources analyzed here. As I will show after 25 years the event went from an attack to the state to a case of state-terrorism.

### *Commemorations*

I analyze five anniversaries by grouping them in three interpretative moments. First, there is the fifth anniversary (1990) where the debate is lively because in this moment the M-19 is demobilized and the responsibility for the crisis starts to be redistributed. Second, there is the tenth and fifteenth commemoration (1995, 2000) in which there is a decline of interest for what happened. It is a moment in which the media accepts both the uncertainty and dualistic explanations as valid and meaningful. Third, there is the consolidation of some elements of the uncertainty narrative that positioned the M-19 as an instigator, the Military Forces as perpetrator, and the victims as civilians targeted by their own government. This final moment represents a shift in the narrative. The Siege went from cultural trauma to difficult past.

In the first fifth anniversary, people still make reference to the Siege as something dramatic that marks the history of the country. The event keeps generating sorrow, sadness and anxiety. These emotions are similar to the ones expressed during the initial interpretation. Yet, there are two changes. On one hand, and as part of the initial uncertainty, the responsibilities are redistributed among three parts: the guerrilla, the army, and President Betancur. The first commemorative period takes place in a different political context. In this moment the M-19 has left the arms and is now participating as a political party in the writing of the new constitution. Also for the first time General Arias Cabrales who led the recapture is sanctioned by the General Prosecutor for an excessive use of force. The importance of these events relies in that by 1990 the characterization of the guerrilla as a group of mad fanatics and the Army as heroes started to adjust. This redistribution does mean that the guerrilla is no longer the main perpetrator. But now the media does not know how to portray them as perpetrators and political actors. For example, in the editorial of *El Tiempo* it is argued that: “Yesterday and today we commemorate five years of the holocaust of the Palace of Justice one of the most frightening and most repulsive acts of

terrorism committed by a group that today is writing the new Constitution”<sup>8</sup> (November 6, 1990). The president is openly blamed for not considering negotiation and for letting the army make the final decisions. His responsibility is not for action but for omission: “President Betancur who was paying more attention to “voices from the heaven” than to the voice of the President of the Supreme Court [...] did not stop on time the dangerous military operation to save the life of innocent people” (Editorial, *El Tiempo* November 7 1985). Finally, the Armed Forces are questioned for their emphasis on defeating the enemy and not in saving the victims. They occupy a liminal space where they are not considered perpetrators but their actions are not exclusively a matter of heroism. Some authors argue that “they should not be blame for not saving 90 people but for rescuing 300” (Rueda, *Revista Semana* November week 4, 1990), and others think that “the military forces interpreted President Betancur's command of finishing the crisis [...] and to save the hostages in a way that put more emphasis in the first” (*El Espectador*, November 7 1990). So the question of who is the perpetrator is addressed in terms of who was in control and how much control each part had.

On the other hand, in the fifth anniversary there is a change in the category of victim. The Justices prevailed as the main victims and their death is a symbol of democracy being harmed. The importance of the Justices as the main victims is related with the re-distribution of guilt because the question now is who let the Justices died? Did they die because of the Siege, the recovery or the lack of negotiation? A secondary change in the category of victimhood is the explicit reference to the destiny of 11 people who left alive the Palace but disappeared. With the inclusion of the missing people the status of the army as heroes is challenge because the last time they were seemed was under the guard of the officers. However, in this commemoration the relationship between the missing people and the Army is not of victim-perpetrator. In an interview General Arias Cabrales argues that maybe the 11 people died as a consequence of the fire as they evacuated multiple bodies that were unrecognizable (*El Tiempo*, November 7, 1990). The newspaper does not question this explanation; it is presented as one possibility.

These two changes in the category of perpetrator and victimhood in the fifth anniversary show how the uncertainty narrative starts to have more power in explaining the events of 1985. There is an excess of information about the role of the possible perpetrators that does not give

---

<sup>8</sup> The M-19 demobilized in 1990 and its member received pardon. They became a political party called Democratic Alliance (*Alianza Democrática M-19*). In 1991 they actively participated in the reformulation of the Constitution.

room for a clear explanation of who did what to whom (Auyero 2009). In the second commemorative period (1995, 2000) it is possible to see more clearly how the uncertainty narrative where everyone shares responsibility but anyone is responsible coexists with the dualistic (good vs. evil) explanation. This is a moment where the event is remembered as a disaster but its intensity is low<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, the role of audiences is not clear since they have to face the ambiguity between the guerrilla as evil and the government as good but also responsible.

In this second period of commemoration the political context has changed and now some former members of the M-19 hold political positions. Thus, the evil force that was the clear perpetrator in 1985 does not exist anymore. In this moment we see the uncertainty narrative getting more consolidated but also the dualistic one working as a valid explanation. The commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary highlights on one side the heroic role of the armed forces and the terrorist behavior of the M-19, and on the other side the government is blamed for not negotiating and for the destiny of the 11 people missing. So in this second period of commemoration there is a clear split of the event. Each narrative fulfills different social needs. The dualistic explicates the Siege by the guerrilla, while the uncertainty narrative explains the holocaust (the recovery of the building). This is a moment of transition where the position of victim and perpetrator is unstable but has not shift completely. One example of how both narratives cohabited is:

“On November 6 and 7, 1985 life was besieged and Colombia dressed perpetual mourning. A siege by 35 members of the guerrilla, a military response with helicopters gunships, tanks, rockets, gases and dozens of rifles, and a conflagration and 27 hours brought uncertainty, fear and shame. The results were: 115 dead (11 judges), 11 missing people, two proven tortures and the courthouse burned to ashes” (Editorial, *El Espectador*, November 6, 1990).

However and due to this coexistence of narratives it is harder to identify the symbol of the tragedy. In the initial interpretation and in the fifth anniversary the Justices were the symbol. While, the inclusion of the 11 disappeared people, as part of the victims makes harder to sustain the idea that what happened in the Palace was an attack to the democratic state.

The 2005 and 2010 commemorations are moments of break of the dualistic narrative that divided the event between democratic (good) and antidemocratic practices (evil). It is the consolidation of some aspects of the uncertainty narrative that give birth to a new dominant interpretation, where the state is accused of two crimes. First, the death of the Justices is

---

<sup>9</sup> The number of articles decreases for these commemorations.

considered in part a consequence of the exaggerated military response. Concerning the death of the Justices the son of one of them states: “There was a double error, one committed by the guerrilla and the other by the military forces” and “the flames and the bullets from the M-19 and the armed forces joined to cause the death of 100 people” (Pastor & Bohorques, *El Espectador*, November 6, 2000). Second, the Colonels and the Generals that commanded the recovery are accused for the disappearance of the 11 people. In 2005 the case of the Siege was supposed to prescribe but the General Attorney re-opened as a case of a crime against humanity<sup>10</sup>. As part of this process a truth commission was created Colonel Plazas and General Arias Cabrales were convicted for the crime of forced disappearance. One of the commemorative articles of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary states: “Twenty years later the destiny of 11 people disappeared remains unclear and despite the insults, abuses and violations committed to them there is not a single person prosecuted” (Editorial, *El Tiempo*, November 7, 2005). In this period it is demanded from the former government and from the Armed Forces information about the conditions in which people died inside and outside the Palace<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, in the third period of commemoration (2005, 2010) the event remains split in two, Siege and Holocaust. There is a similar distribution of guilt that the one operating in the second commemorative period but in this case the role of the militaries as perpetrators is highlighted because of their relationship with the people missing. This new frame places the state as the victimizer and not the victim. Now the event has 22 protagonist, 11 Justices murdered and 11 civilians missing. Hence, under these circumstances the way the commemorations give meaning to suffering changes. In the initial interpretation the death of the Justices and the destruction of the Palace was described as necessary sacrifices to save the democratic system. Now, the approach is from the role of memory as a condition to prevent future atrocities. For example some of the questions addressed are: “Did Colombia learn something from such a tragedy? What did the army, the government and the guerrillas learn from this bloody and traumatic event?” (Editorial, *EL Tiempo*, November 6, 2005). The way audiences are engaged in this new narrative is by highlighting that this was an unnecessary sacrifice, which does not mean that the suffering of the victims is meaningless. On the contrary, Colombian society should learn from this event

---

<sup>10</sup> These types of crimes do not prescribe in the Colombian legal system.

<sup>11</sup> This shift does not mean that the dualistic narrative were the government and the armed forces are heroes disappeared, there are certainly different groups that still supporting this explanation; however, in the commemorations analyzed here this narrative vanishes in 2005.

and promote its memory to strength the democratic system and prevent other people to die in similar circumstances:

“We invite the former president and his ministers to accept the political responsibility that belongs to them by the actions and omissions in the course of November 6 and 7 1985, as a way to overcome the pain of the victims and their families and to give a lesson of greatness to the country. Recognizing that the disproportionate use of force, the absence of dialogue and the denial of the evidence did not help to defend, but, on the contrary, to undermine the institutions and the rule of law” (Revista Semana, November 4, 2010).

Consequently in this case of anthropogenic disaster it is possible to see how the event remained important at the national level because from its initial interpretation it was addressed as an attack to democracy, which involves the whole collectivity. The category of victimhood was expanded to broader audiences. Even when it went from saving democracy through the sacrifice of the justices, to reinforcing democracy by avoiding other people been sacrificed in the future, the emphasis remains in the society as a whole. The lack of knowledge about what exactly happened during the event, which brought uncertainty and anxiety, determined the shift in the commemoration. Under this circumstances the Siege of the Palace of Justice went from a case of trauma were a dualist narrative explain and give meaning to suffering to become part of the difficult past of the state that carry controversy and lack consensus (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991: 378). The Colombian state had to face a shameful past in which it is responsible for the victimization of its own citizens.

### ***The Armero Avalanche: a Question of Solidarity and Reconstruction 1985-2010***

On November 13, 1985 the Volcano Nevado del Ruiz exploded, melting the glaciers of the top of the mountain and causing lahars that descended through the surrounding rivers producing an enormous avalanche of mud that at 11:30 pm destroyed the town of Armero. The media did not get the information until the next morning when a pilot reported: “the town is now a huge black beach, with the church and few houses standing and some people on top of threes, walls and hills [...] the rest is gone” (El Tiempo, November 14, 1985). The dimension of the catastrophe caused a profound impact in the media who found itself without resources to explain this type of suffering. The death of 25,000 people in the middle of the mud and the lack of supplies to rescue the survivors generated a sense of fatality. For example, El Tiempo on its editorial of November 16 included a picture of three women in pain, arguing that they incorporated the image because they lacked words to reflect the intensity of the sorrow of those who lost everything in one

moment. The avalanche became a disruption that called for meanings to explain the suffering of those who were directly affected.

Despite one label, multiple interpretations are attached to the understanding of a “natural disaster”. In the aftermath of Armero we can see three explanations: the scientific, the animistic, and the religious<sup>12</sup>. The media made meaning of the catastrophe by using these three different perspectives that together configure a narrative of nature as the cause of disasters. The problem is that each one has a particular definition of nature. So in what follows I present how three unique interpretations *united* to create a master narrative that I denominated multivocal drawing on the work of Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz (1991) on multivocal commemorations.

The role of science is important because this is one of the possible explanations of why physical forces act the way they do. The media presented scientific accounts to highlight that what happened had a rational explanation. So under this interpretation the avalanche is divided in multiple process (eruption of a volcano, defrost of snow, lahars, floods of rivers, and gravity) that once they bond can cause a horrible tragedy. What is interesting about the scientific explanation is that by putting emphasis on how the avalanche was the result of the union of multiple processes it contributed to a sense that nature is uncontrollable. The scientific explanation showed how complex and unpredictable natural hazards are. This knowledge provided information about what happened and why, but it reinforced the idea that nature is something greater than men. We can predict that a volcano might explode but even with the most developed scientific knowledge we cannot stop it. In relation to this sense of knowledge without control one of the articles reported that days before the disaster scientists stated that: “The four seismic stations set around the volcano established that it is going through a stage of abnormality. One in four cases end in volcanic eruption” (Revista Semana 2<sup>nd</sup> week of December, 1985).

The animistic (*animism*) explanation perceives natural formations as entities with agency and personality. Natural wonders are recognized as sources of national pride and their “misbehaviors”, as treason. Thus, under this interpretation the media highlighted the ambivalence between something that used to be a symbol of loftiness but suddenly decided to victimize those who admired it: “What used to be one of the most amazing natural wonders, the

---

<sup>12</sup> It is important to clarify that this is an analytical distinction and sometimes it is possible to see a combination of these three ideal types.



Nevado del Ruiz, has become the executioner of thousands of Colombians who used to admire it in the clear days of summer” (Editorial, *El Tiempo*, November 15, 1985). Hence, in this interpretation the volcano and the rivers are attributed agency and portrayed as evil entities that are the direct source of suffering; “the peaceful and beautiful Lagunilla river became [...] a raging torrent that swept everything that crossed its way” (Opinion Editorial, *El Tiempo*, November 19, 1985). Once this interpretation is incorporated as part of the explanation of the catastrophe the responsibility shifts to an entity that is not only uncontrollable, as in the scientific, but is also evil.

The third type is directly connected with a religious (catholic) explanation of how the universe operates. God is portrayed as responsible for the catastrophe. In this interpretation nature is created and commanded by god so events such as the avalanche are caused by his will. For example it is stated: “The rationalists say that the carnage caused by the Nevado has only scientific explanations, “it is a lash of nature”. However, for those of us who fear God, we know that in the world a leaf does not move [...] without God’s will” (Gossain, *Revista Semana* 2<sup>nd</sup> Week December 1985). The case of Armero is represented as a punishment for being an immoral society. Religion is brought to give meaning to the calamity and to redirect the behavior of the collectivity. So the suffering had a purpose, which was to warn that some things needed to be changed: “On the muddy bodies of twenty-five thousand innocents, on the men and women who paid with their lives our excesses [...] it is now the time to meditate with fear: how far have we got? Are we going to continue whipping the wrath of God?” (Gossain, *Revista Semana* 2<sup>nd</sup> Week December 1985).

Thus, we have three different explanations of why this is a case of a natural disaster. The difference between the religious, the scientific and the animistic is that the first does not aim to be rational or to give agency to nature. However, nature through god remains the source of suffering. Potentially we can make use of three different definitions of nature to reach the same conclusion, which is that the avalanche of Armero is a case of a natural disaster. By analyzing these three interpretations we are gaining a better sense of two narrative processes. First, it is clear that the definition of an event as natural does not rely in a unified explanation. Second, master narratives, as the one presented here, can be compelling to multiple audiences if they embody the potential for different meanings. This form of narrative is called multivocal because it is a “shared text where miscellaneous discourses are available to disparate audiences”

(Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 32). As Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz (1991) argue for the case of commemorations, different constituencies interact and interpret the past in different ways making memorials multivocal (34). Therefore different groups can make meaning of the disaster by using the multivocal natural disaster narrative as an explanation of the cause of human suffering.

The following analysis attempts to reflect how the multivocal narrative of “natural” disasters is used to distribute guilt among key actors. The question is: who can be held responsible given the framing of a disaster as natural? It is important to understand how responsibilities are distributed in terms of who had full or partial control to avoid the catastrophe. In the initial interpretation of the event we can distinguish two tendencies. On one side, the media represented the tragedy as scientific, animistic or religious to highlight that nature was culpable. In this explanation human beings lacked all power to control the avalanche. In the reconstruction that *Semana* magazine did, it is argued that humans cannot battle nature: “We knew that in the mud there were people who still alive, but again the phenomena of nature came [more lahars], making humans feel helpless in any situation” (December 1985). As nature is the responsible side and it is uncontrollable the disaster could not be avoided by any entity including the local or national government.

On the other side, the scientific explanation is adopted to blame the government responsible for not having a plan to evacuate the town. The national and local governments were accused of neglecting the alerts that many scientists presented to them. In his opinion editorial Samper argued that even when the US. Geological Service warned the government, this did not do much. So he concludes, “once the emergency finishes it would be unavoidable to hold a calm but severe trial to the authorities that had the chance to prevent the tragedy” (*El Tiempo*, November 18, 1985). Yet, this last attribution of control to the government was limited by the fact that the scientific interpretation can predict a natural hazard but not to impede. Risk management can only ameliorate and reduce the impact of catastrophes in collectivities. Hence, the government of president Betancur and human beings in general are perceived as having partial control but not as a perpetrator, so nature in this second discourse remains the main responsible. One of the interesting things that followed the tragedy is that President Betancur received not only material donations from different countries and their presidents but also condolences. He was treated as deserving moral support. Therefore, the way responsibilities are

distributed relays in two narratives that are in contrast by giving more or less agency to nature and to human beings, but where the interpretation of nature as unpredictable is the dominant.

The multivocality of the narrative of the natural disaster and the emphasis on nature as the perpetrator had an impact in the way victims, survivors and audiences were portrayed. Nature is uncontrollable but its impact has limits and is time bound (Ferron & Massa, 2012). The individuals that were directly affected by the disaster set the limits. In the case of Armero even when society is represented as feeling sadness and pain it is clear that the victims are the people who were in the town at the time of the catastrophe. Society feels hurt by the event but this is not a case of a generalizable category of victimhood. Victimhood is a local problem that concerns the ones who were hit by the lahars: “Thousands of our fellow citizens have been victimized by an outrageous nature [...] We do not have a different choice than to bury the dead and to acknowledge that the survivors need of our solidarity” (Editorial, *El Tiempo* November 15, 1985). The disappearance of the town meant for the victims the loss of the physical and symbolic space of community (Erikson 1976); the rest of Colombians were not facing the same disruption.

Concerning the timing, the catastrophe has a limited time of action, once everything has been destroyed the following path is to reconstruct and move on. The role of the government and insurance companies is to help survivors to rebuild their material life and compensate them for their economic and symbolic losses. In the aftermath of the Armero tragedy President Betancur and the Governor of Tolima<sup>13</sup> presented themselves as the leaders of the post-disaster process leading the rescuing of survivors and the race funding events. Through this leadership the political elites were able to present themselves as highly involve in helping the victims and as sensitive to their suffering, which distance them from the perpetrator position. So natural disasters have two phases the crisis and the rebuilding. The former becomes secondary once society and the state engage in the rescue of survivors and the material reconstruction.

However, the locality of the victims and the time frame of the crisis did not prevent the audiences from participating in the disaster. They did not do it as victims but as helpers. The avalanche remained a moment of disruption and the question of how could a society make sense of the disappearance of an entire town was important. Part of the answer relays in the general call the media and the government did of help for the survivors; “is time for sacrifice, solidarity and

---

<sup>13</sup> Tolima is the state where Armero was located.

help” (El Espectador, November 17, 1985). Making emphasis in the bounds and pain of the survivors the media point to how much help was needed. During this first week the descriptions of the suffering of the victims were very graphic and detailed; yet one image started to be more salient over others. Omayra Sanchez a 13-year-old girl who was trapped in the debris and mud in a way that made impossible to rescue her, became the main image for national and international audiences. Her agony and death was broadcast making emphasis on how brave and patient she was while waiting to be rescue; “it was through the mass-mediated spectacle of Omayra’s heart-wrenching story that the enormous loss of life was personified” (Zeiderman 2009: 11). So among the articles reviewed here there is a general call to engage society by showing their support to the victims. This help came in the way of all type of donations (clothes, medicine, food, blood etc.) and events to raise funds to help the reconstruction of Armero. Under the idea that tragedies do not teach us to suffer but to overcome, the audiences took part in the disaster and made sense of it by developing a feeling of solidarity with the victims. Hence the catastrophe became a national crisis not in terms of the society being under siege, but as a moment to demonstrate how “good” Colombians could be: “The collective tragedy that we have suffered for having volcanoes has shown the great human virtue of compassion. The sentiment of solidarity arouses spontaneously in everyone” (Opinion Editorial, El Espectador, November 20, 1985).

Thus, in the initial interpretation the natural disaster narrative consolidated because it contained three different types of explanations that allowed varied audiences to engage with it. In the multivocal narrative of the natural disaster there is an emphasis that the main perpetrator was nature because it is uncontrollable. So human beings, including the government, lack the control of natural disasters even if they are the product of a chain of physic reactions, the evil decision of nature, or god’s will. In the first interpretation of the avalanche the event and the victims are represented as a local problem. The dimension of the victim’s suffering, which is directly related with losing their family, property, and friends made hard to expand the category of victimhood. Audiences became part of the tragedy through solidarity with the victims. Compassion is one way in which audiences make meaning of the disaster.

### *Commemorations*

The characteristics of the initial interpretation (first period) of the disaster set the conditions for the development of a commemoration where the distinction between the national and local

context prevailed. From the beginning society engaged with the disaster through the ideas of compassion and solidarity. However, Armero became over time a problem of the victims. The emphasis on reconstruction that followed the calamity set a deadline for the solidarity narrative. Once the victims have been repaired and relocated the solidarity ends, as it is perceived as no longer required. The national audiences retreat to a new role as viewers leaving survivors and the government uncharged of the commemoration. Every year the survivors offer a catholic mass and look for the places where they think their relatives died or where their houses were located and place a cross. Victims believe in the idea that the disaster was preventable, whether the government uses the multivocal narrative of nature to justify its lack of control. For example President Samper in the 1995 commemoration started his speech saying: “God always forgives, men sometimes do, but nature would never do it” (El Tiempo, November 14). Thus, society’s retreat emphasizes that the catastrophe consolidated as a collective trauma. As Erikson pointed a collective trauma is “a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (1976: 153).

It is possible to identify three interpretative moments in the trajectory of commemoration of Armero. First, the fifth anniversary (1990) represented a moment where the emphasis remained in the material reconstruction of the town and in the hope that recovery was possible. Second, the 1995, 2000, 2005 anniversaries depicted a more negative view of the material reconstruction aiming for a symbolic one that seemed impossible to fulfill. Third, the 2010 commemoration carries similar elements of the previous one but the tension between the multivocal narrative of nature as a perpetrator and the government as incompetent gets stronger. More than three different moments they can be perceived as a continuous disengagement with the catastrophe at a national level materialized in media commemorations.

Five years after the event multiple reconstructions were made. However, in the media outlets this commemoration (1990) starts by highlighting the importance of the material rebuilding of the town and economic investment in general. In this period nature is recognized as the source of suffering and the lack of control of the government is not discussed since the victims’ expectations are more oriented towards compensation. Additionally, the government is being receptive to their distress so it is not perceived as indifferent or in denial. Even when this is a moment of sorrow and sadness this seems to be a more positive and hopeful approach in comparison with the sense of fatality that followed the disaster. This emotional response is based

in two processes. On one side, the government and victims remained engaged in the process of reconstruction. The crisis has passed but five years after the town remains in the post-tragedy process that sustains that recovery and rehabilitation are possible. On the other side, the victims as a new community see the loss of their physical space and their material belongings as the source of trauma. There is an emphasis on how after the tragedy people were concerned and sad about the disappearance of their house and neighborhood, as well as the physical spaces of socialization (park, Main Square, church). As part of the memorials the victims expressed that: “We need to elaborate a new concept of survivor, we need a definition that captures the condition of men who lost their own work by the action of nature” (Gutierrez, *El Espectador*, November 13, 1990). So in the fifth anniversary there is a sense of hope that the reconstruction of the survivor’s lives in material terms is possible, which assures a better future.

In contrast with this first commemoration we see an increase of articles about the event in the following three fifth commemorations (1995, 2000, 2010). This is a more complex moment of meaning making where the rebuilding ended but is considered a failure. In this period people faced that material reconstruction does not equate symbolic. To a certain level it is a resurfacing of the fatality narrative of the first interpretation. The difference is that in this case society is not the one experiencing this sense of deep sorrow and hopelessness but the survivors. The media follow a path of commemoration that reinforces the distancing between the society and the survivors, by only reporting the pain and distress of those directly affected. The survivors recognized that the economic and material reconstruction was important but they have acknowledged that the community they lost will not be recovered through this path. This is a clear expression of coming to terms with collective trauma. The community that they belong disappeared and it cannot be rebuilt after more than 70% of the residents died:

“Armeritas do not only want to forget their past but also their future. Many of them believe they will never rebuild their town and that they will always be survivors of the tragedy trying to rebuild their lives [...] So says Ruben D. Guevara: ‘We must understand once and for all that Armero is over and that today, even when now we have a better home, we remained in the same position as we were few hours after the avalanche of mud. We only own pain and anguish’” (Revista *Semana*, 1<sup>st</sup> week of December 1995).

This sense of hopelessness is connected with the reinforcement of the idea that this was a natural disaster. The multivocal narrative of nature is used to assure that the catastrophe was not preventable. In the same way that some of the articles did in the initial interpretation the catastrophe is defined as the union of two elements: an uncontrollable natural force, and a

government that underestimated that force but could not control it. One example of this narrative is the following: “Colombians remembered yesterday with flowers the 24,000 victims of the Armero tragedy *caused* 15 years ago by the mud avalanche” (El Espectador November 13, 2000). So government’s incompetence is since day one an alternative explanation. But in the articles reviewed here the government is not presented as a full perpetrator because it is constantly highlighted that the volcano was uncontrollable and unpredictable. Also, the narrative of the lack of control of the institutions is contrasted with the reconstruction and solidarity narrative, where the main conclusion is that the government did what it could to help survivors:

“Many things were done, more infrastructure was developed, schools and houses were built, and utilities widened [...] Fortunately man has the strength to overcome the toughest tests and recognize that life continues. Living life even for the fortunate is a daily struggle that ends in death. For these reasons those who did not fall that bitter day went back to normality in a life that alternates joys and sorrows” (El Tiempo November 14, 1995).

Audiences in this second commemorative period (1995-2005) reject the solidarity narrative, but they connect through the image of Omayra with the disaster. This girl became a constant element of the commemoration. Zeiderman (2009) argues that Omayra became the symbol of state inefficiency since it was impossible to bring on time the equipment to save her. However, she is also the individualization of a disaster that killed 25,000 people who are relegated from the official narrative once all the focus goes into one character. The problem of this type of commemoration that focuses exclusively on one actor is that it leaves aside the context (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002). Omayra as a symbol has been progressively detached from the context of her death to the point that in the 2005 memorial is presented as a saint that fulfills miracles. In this case by focusing on the image of Omayra, imaginary audiences are not invited to reflect on the dimension of the tragedy or the life of survivors.

Finally, the third commemorative moment (2010) is a continuation of the narrative strategies and representations of the previous period but there is an emphasis on the problem of guilt. The difference is that in this period we see a greater tension between the natural disaster narrative and the risk management narrative. Even when the media have had both narratives since the moment of disaster, the dominant was the former. Now the victims are not the only ones invoking this explanation but there are multiple reports that argue that scientists’ warnings needed to be used to prevent the tragedy and not only to ameliorate its effect:

“Despite all the scientific evidence the government did not do anything to try to evacuate the town. Also it has been acquitted from any legal responsibility in different trials. The judges’ argument was that: natural events are impossible to avoid and control, therefore government officials are not responsible for the events” (Revista Semana, 1<sup>st</sup> week November 2010).

The two narratives are presented as valid and true. However, this tension is used to call for more planning and prevention in *future* cases of natural disasters. What happened in Armero is part of the past, it is not anymore an active debate that will bring real consequences to survivors and former state officers. On the contrary, Armero became a reference case to explain the multiple natural disasters that happen in Colombia every year.

Hence, the trajectory of commemoration of the Armero Avalanche does not present radical changes in terms of new explanations of the events. Nevertheless, we can see how the commemoration shifts by making some aspects of the post-catastrophe life more salient. In the 1995 commemorations there was more emphasis on the reconstruction of the physical space. But after the period of rebuilding passes the emphasis goes on the dimension of collective trauma as the loss of a symbolic community. At the national level and despite the co-presence of the multivocal and the government incompetence narratives this tragedy does not call for conflict. The victims and survivors report a sense of loneliness but the government is presented as doing everything it could. The reconstruction of the social tissue is not considered its responsibility. The initial interpretation of the event as an uncontrollable natural disaster and a local problem that had a fixed time frame (dateline) determines future commemorations. Suffering is approach through the different commemorations as an overcome problem at least for society.

## **COMPARING ANTHROPOGENIC VS. NATURAL DISASTERS**

The inner case descriptions of Armero and the Siege have already pointed to the aspects that differentiate how societies give meaning to suffering brought by humanity and natural forces, and the memories built around them. Thus, here I provide a synthetize comparison to show how the anthropogenic disaster remains more active in the collective memory because of the existence of competing narratives, whether the natural disaster has lost importance since it developed a more consensual multivocal narrative. Also, I argue that the study of traumatic events demands a historic analysis to understand the path dependency of their recollections (Olick 1999). It is through an analysis of the genre of memory that we can understand how some



events that are traumatic become difficult pasts when others get normalize. The following table synthetizes the comparative analysis. This section will compare and contrast: the differences in narrative work to define the events; the problem of distribution of guilt among possible perpetrators; the construction of categories of victimhood; and the role of imaginary audiences<sup>14</sup>.

	<b>Anthropogenic Disaster</b>	<b>Natural Disaster</b>
Event (Narrative)	Dualistic vs. Uncertainty	Multivocal
Perpetrator (Guilt)	Humans have control to prevent and cause disasters	Lack of control of humans
Victimhood	Society	Residents of the area affected
Audiences	Core values are in danger	Short time increase of solidarity

The Siege and the Armero Avalanche occurred one week apart generating a deep sense of sorrow and hopelessness. To a certain point the two events were interpreted as one big tragedy making the media wonder: what did Colombians do wrong to deserve such amount of suffering? And how should society react to this “prove”? So in the initial interpretation it is possible to see how one event affect the other my generating a concern with what type of society was Colombia in which these tragedies could happen. Interestingly, the way society responded to this general sense of catastrophe was by differentiating the kind of events they were. Suffering is not one cohesive concept but a social experience whose representations and meanings are context depended (Kleiman et.al 1997: xii). Thus, from the beginning the media interpreted the suffering brought by the Siege as an anthropogenic disaster, were the “concept” of democracy was in danger, and the Avalanche was understood as a natural disaster were suffering was caused by the lost of a town. This distinction between the events became more salient over time when the commemorations became more independent<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, it can be argue that there is a difference between how societies mourn the lost of core values and the lost of specific physical

<sup>14</sup> These are the same analytical categories described in the methodology and used through the rest of the text to analyze the inner case changes.

<sup>15</sup> During the commemorations each event separately is the focus of attention. There are not united commemorations that try to address the “tragic week of November 1985”. On the contrary each one entails its own spaces, actors, narratives and rituals.

and symbolic communities<sup>16</sup>. In this sense the first difference between the two disasters has to do with how they are delimited as traumatic and what narratives explain them.

Comparing the two cases we can perceive how the Siege generated more conflictive narratives that on the long term moved the event from trauma to difficult past. The Palace of Justice was explained through a dualistic narrative that divided the world between good democratic practices and evil antidemocratic behaviors. Alexander and Smith (1993) argue, “Symbols, [...] are located in sets of binary relations. When meaningful action is considered as a text, the cultural life of society can be visualized as a web of intertwining sets of binary relations” (157). So under this explanation at the core of American civic culture there are codes where: “Democratically minded persons are symbolically constructed as rational [and] anti-democratically minded persons are motivated by pathological greed” (162). But, unlike Alexander and Smith’s approach to narratives and discourses the cases researched here show that dualistic narratives can have a master role, but this does not prevent other non binary narratives to emerge. As Auyero and Swistun (2009) address uncertainty narratives also give meaning to suffering. In this case uncertainty comes from an excess of information, which leaves collectivities with multiple and sometimes contradictory explanations of who is responsible for their suffering. So in the case of the Siege historical analysis allow us to see how dualistic narratives go through processes of change where one actor can occupy the good and evil position. In the case of the Armero Avalanche we see a similar narrative process since the event could not be synthetize as a binary opposition between nature and men. On the contrary, what is interesting about the natural disaster narrative is that it is “appealing” to various audiences because it embodies multiple explanations of how nature works. So the emergence of a multivocal narrative where science, animism, and religious are parallel and equally valid interpretations of a natural hazard, explains why this narrative was stable and did not generate much questioning over time. Even when there was a competing narrative that argued that the tragedy could have been prevented, the scientific dimension of the multivocal narrative shadowed this explanation because it has proved that nature is uncontrollable.

---

<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the lost of values and the lost of a town does not aim to diminish the suffering of the victims of the disasters or to argue that the lost of their lives did not bring pain and sorrow. What this distinction aims is to point how the narratives that the media built from individual experiences of suffering highlighted different aspects that society should mourn.

So the Siege called for a set of narratives that contradict each other and cause a shift of the initial interpretation over the trajectory of commemorations, whether the Avalanche established from the beginning a multivocal narrative that called for consensus (in terms of blaming nature for the disaster). Therefore, the comparison between the initial interpretation and the trajectory of commemoration of each event points to how the anthropogenic and the natural disaster remained active in the collective memory. The difference in the “dynamism” of each narrative is related with the path dependency of memory. In the case of the Siege the dualistic narrative had to coexist with the uncertainty from the beginning. So the change in the position of victims and perpetrators is not the result of new presentist explanations of the past, but it started with the initial interpretation (Schwartz 1991: 234). The multivocality of the nature narrative had been able to dominate over time because its existence does not depend in a strict division of the world in binary set of meanings. It gives room to different explanations of how nature operates<sup>17</sup>. Multivocal narratives congregate “heterogeneous groups [that] do not necessarily share the same meaning and interpretations of the past” (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 32).

The problem of the perpetrator (guilt) across cases can be compare by understanding it as an issue of having or lacking control. So guilt is not only concern with the identification of a perpetrator (Alexander 2004: 15), but also with addressing who has *control to prevent* a tragedy and who has *control to cause* it. These are two different dimensions of guilt that are evident in the Siege and the Avalanche. Yet, who will carry most of the blame and will be invest with the category of perpetrator is the part that *caused* the suffering. Thus, the M-19 has being from moment one responsible for holding hostage the Palace. However, the armed forces and the government have moved in the spectrum of lacking control and causing the disaster. On one hand, the Army moved between opposing corners to become in the 2010 commemoration a perpetrator. On the other hand, Betancur’s government has being accused of losing control (not been able to prevent the tragedy) by not negotiating and not restraining the army. Losing control when society has the expectation for it can generate stress and contentious behaviors (Ferron & Massa 2012); which explains why over time the Siege called for new explanations of who let the event happened.

---

<sup>17</sup> New discoveries about how much the government knew about the volcano can be included in the multivocal narrative that contemplates science as one explanation of why natural hazards are powerful and unpreventable.

The Armero Avalanche shares a similar guilt distribution with the Siege in terms that the government<sup>18</sup> is also perceived as losing control for not having a risk management plan. Yet, there is one aspect in which the cases differ. As it was addressed before, the Avalanche as a “natural phenomena [is] not interpreted as the direct result of human action” (Eyerman 2011: 11). Societies can build levees, but hurricanes will take place with or without them. Thus, under this interpretation the problem of the government losing control is not as important as in the Siege because humans can potentially control other humans, but humanity cannot control nature. As Erikson (1994) points “natural disasters are almost always experienced as acts of God or caprices of nature. [...] They visit us, as if from afar” [however disasters who have] “being of human manufacture, are at least in principle preventable, so there is always a story to be told about them, always a share of blame to be assigned” (142). Therefore, Armero presents a more passive and helplessness attitude concerning guilt in the media, because the main responsible is a natural entity that cannot be battled, people are not expected to have control over the avalanche (Ferron & Massa 2012: 6).

The discussion of narratives and perpetrators takes us to the problem of victimhood. I explained in the inner case descriptions who were the victims and what they symbolized. In this section I focus on the contrast between the “collective” and “local” dimension of victimhood, and how they are connected with what society considers lost after the disasters. Alexander (2004) and Eyerman (2011) have argued that cultural traumas have two characteristics concerning victims: the first is that there is a shared sense of victimhood that goes beyond the person traumatized, the second is that there is polarity between victim and perpetrator. So in the Siege, it is clear from the first interpretation that the victims are not only the people held hostage but society as a whole because what was under attack was democracy. However, over time even when the sense of society being attacked continues the dichotomy victim-perpetrator blurry. The Siege became after 20 years a case of shameful past that carry controversy (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991). It is difficult past that highlights how the state targeted its own citizens. In contrast, even when in the Avalanche there was a polarity between nature and humanity (victim-perpetrator), the victims were considered those who lost their property and family. The avalanche has a local dimension of victimhood because the “extent of effects for natural disasters

---

<sup>18</sup> In this discussion is very important to differentiate the Armed Forces from the Government. Each one fulfills different roles; this indicates how the state is not a monolithic and coherent institution.

is usually bounded to the people directly involved and to a limited area around the accident” (Ferron & Massa 2012: 6). Additionally, the symbol of Armero, Omayra the girl who died in front of the cameras, simplifies the notion of victimhood shadowing the other 25,000 victims and the survivors. Through historical analysis we can see how the importance of survivors as a new community that emerges from trauma (Erikson 1991) disappears over time. In the first five years after the event they are considered part of the narrative as a collectivity, but in the following commemorations the emphasis goes on mourning the deaths and the disappeared town. As Alexander (2004) points once the trauma is consolidated it will become routine and the narrative loses its emotional connotation (23).

Finally, imaginary audiences fulfilled different roles in the disasters. This is a key dimension to understand that in even when we hold constant the context, natural and anthropogenic disasters are interpreted and remembered differently. In the cases analyzed here it is possible to perceive how in the Siege audiences respond with anger because they felt in danger of losing democracy. In this case democracy is understood not only as a political system but also as a set of values that are shared among the collectivity. This interpretation made the event more salient over time since audiences want to know what happened in the Palace and who put in danger the stability of their social system. The avalanche quite the reverse connects imaginary audiences through the idea of solidarity and compassion with the survivors. These ideals were fulfilled in the aftermath but they did not last because the post-disaster period has limited timing. Therefore, this research indicates that anthropogenic disasters of political violence compromise values that sustain trust in society, so they will have bigger resonance in the collective memory. Natural disasters, interpreted as uncontrollable, call for an increase of solidarity for short periods, making its commemoration a problem that concerns mainly the direct victims. At the level of society they are routine and normalized.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has shown how natural and anthropogenic disasters present different processes of interpretation as well as of commemoration. Both events are traumatic experiences but the memory that is built from them is different which sets the conditions for diverse outcomes. The natural disaster of Armero went through a normalization process and lost the connotation of a

national crisis whether the anthropogenic disaster of the Siege went from a cultural trauma to a difficult past. The Colombian case is not “representative” but significant, because it reveals the conditions that make natural disasters to have memories with short time impact at the national level, in comparison with cases of anthropogenic disasters connected with political violence. This type of traumatic experience is more likely to remain an active part of the collective memory of society because it questions core values related with trust. On the contrary, natural disasters are more unlikely to become difficult past unless human involvement is proved. To become a difficult past implies that the memory of the event has not being routinized and settled, it remains an open field of meaning making. One of the theoretical contributions of this paper is that it demonstrates that natural disasters are explained through multivocal master narratives that combine multiple and sometimes contradictory explanations to assign guilt to nature. The value of this finding is that it goes beyond stating that collectivities have different ways to understand natural hazards. These interpretations are powerful and appealing because they are integrated in the multivocal definition of natural disaster.

Thus, in addition to the analysis of commemoration of the Armero Avalanche and the Siege of the Palace of Justice this paper provides more general implications for the study of collective memory and trauma. First, the introduction of path dependence to analyze cultural traumas enhances our understanding of the history of collective memory and the transformations cultural traumas go through time. Normalization is not the only possible outcome. The history and genre of commemorations are one way to study how cultural traumas change over time. Second, the analytical comparison of four categories (event, victim, perpetrator and audiences) across cases defined as natural and anthropogenic disasters allow us to move forward the disaster literature. The differences described above concerning these categories highlight that a deep analysis of the interpretative dimension of disasters can explain why natural catastrophes are only remember at a local level and carry solidarity for short periods of time. The case studied here raises and illustrates three general patterns of how natural disasters are interpreted: they are perceived as local; time constrained; and isolated problems. Finally, I suggest that it could be important to reflect on the implications that responsibility has for anthropogenic and natural disasters. If blame is assigned to a an uncontrollable entity as nature, or to a state that has the means to control contestation we need to reflect on the implications that this has on victims, survivors and their families. Further research, can analyze how at the individual level the

distribution of responsibility impacts the live of groups that were directly subjected to traumas related with nature or political violence.

**References:**

- Alexander, Jeffrey; Gao, Rui. (2012). Mass Murder and Trauma: Nanjing and the Silence of Maosim. In *Trauma a Social Theory*. Malden: Polity Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Auyero, Javier; Swistum, Debora. (2009). *Flammable. Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bogard, Cynthia J. (2001). Claims-makers and Contexts in Early Constructions of Homelessness: A Comparison of New York City and Washington, D.C. *Symbolic Interaction*, Volume 24, Number 4, pages 425–454.
- Charmaz, Kathy. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Oaks Thousand: Sage.
- Chiaoning Su. (2012). One earthquake, two tales: narrative analysis of the tenth anniversary coverage of the 921 Earthquake in Taiwan. *Media Culture Society* 34: 280.
- Clemens, Elizabeth; Hughes, Martin. (2002). *Recovering Past Protest: Historical Research in Social Movements*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Earl, Jennifer; Martin, Andrew; McCarthy, John D.; Soule, Sarah A. (2004). The Use of Newspaper Data in the Study of Collective Action. *Annual Review of Sociology*: 30, 65–80.
- Emerson, Robert M.; Fretz, Rachel I.; Shaw, Linda L. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Erikson, Kai. (1976). *Everything in its path: destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Erikson, Kai. (1994). *A new species of trouble: explorations in disaster, trauma, and community*. New York: Norton.
- Ferron, Michaela; Massa, Paolo. (2012). Psychological processes underlying Wikipedia representations of natural and manmade disasters. *WikiSym*, Austria.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. (1983). *Introduction to The Invention of Tradition*. Eric Hobsbawm and
- Jansen, Robert. (2007). Resurrection and Appropriation: Reputational Trajectories, Memory Work, and the Political Use of Historical Figures. *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 112 Number 4: 953–1007.
- Kempe, Michael. (2007). Mind the Next Flood! Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present. *The Medieval History Journal* 10: 327.



- King, Ryan D.; Savelsberg, Joachim J. (2005). Institutionalizing Collective Memories of Hate: Law and Law Enforcement in Germany and the United States. *AJS* Volume 111 Number 2: 579–616.
- Klein, Kerwin Lee. (2000). On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse Representations, No. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering, pp. 127-150.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Das, Veena. Lock, Margaret M. (1997). *Social Suffering*. London: University of California Press.
- Mahoney, James. (2000). Path Dependence in Historical Sociology. *Theory and Society* 29: 507–48.
- Mahoney, James. (2004). Comparative-Historical Methodology. *Annual Review Sociology* 30: 81–101.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. (1999). Genre Memories and Memory Genres: A Dialogical Analysis of May 8, 1945 Commemorations in the Federal Republic of Germany. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3, pp. 381-402.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. (2005). In the House of the Hangman. *The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Olick, Jeffrey; Robbins, Joyce. (1998). Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:105–40.
- Rivera, Lauren. (2008). Managing “Spoiled” National Identity: War, Tourism, and Memory in Croatia. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 73: 613-634.
- Robinson, Sue. (2009). ‘We were all there’: Remembering America in the anniversary coverage of Hurricane Katrina. *Memory Studies* 2: 235
- Rosenfeld, Gavriel D. (2009). Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective. A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory “Industry”. *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (March 2009): 122–158.
- Saito, Hiro. (2006), Reiterated Commemoration: Hiroshima as National Trauma. *Sociological Theory*, 24: 353–376.
- Savelsberg, Joachim; King, Ryan. (2005). Institutionalizing Collective Memories of Hate: Law and Law Enforcement in Germany and the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.111 (2), p.579-616.
- Schwartz, Barry. (1991). Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 221-236
- Shudson, Michael. (1989). The Present in the Past Versus the Past in the Present. *Communication*: 11, 105112.
- Simko, Christina. (2012). Rhetorics of Suffering: September 11 Commemorations as Theodicy. *American Sociological Review* XX(X) 1–23.
- Simpson, Edward. (2005). The 'Gujarat' earthquake and the political economy of nostalgia. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 39: 219.

- Skocpol, Theda. (1984). Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology. In *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Smelser, Neil. (2004). Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Steidl, Christina R. (2013). Remembering May 4, 1970: Integrating the Commemorative Field at Kent State. *American Sociological Review* XX (X) 1–24.
- Stein, Arlene. (2009). “As Far as They Knew I Came from France”: Stigma, Passing, and Not Speaking about the Holocaust. *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, pp. 44–60.
- Stow, Simon. (2012). From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss. *Perspectives of Politics* Vol. 10, No 3.
- Tierney, Kathleen J. (2007). From the Margins to the Mainstream? Disaster Research at the Crossroads. *Annual Review of Sociology* no. 33:503-525.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered (a). (2002). Commemorating a Difficult past: Yitzhak Rabin's Memorials. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered (b). (2002). Commemorating Narratives of Violence: The Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day in Israeli Schools. *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 24, No. 2.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered and Chana Teeger. (2010). Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting. *Social Forces* 88:1103– 1122.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered; Teeger, Chana. (2007). Controlling for Consensus: Commemorating Apartheid in South Africa. *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 30, Issue 1, pp. 57–78.
- Wagner-Pacifici, Robin; Schwartz, Barry. (1991). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 97, No. 2, pp. 376-420.
- Xu, Bin. (2013). For Whom the Bell Tolls: State-society Relations and the Sichuan Earthquake Mourning in China. *Theory and Society* 42: 509–542.
- Zelizer, Barbie. (2008). Why Memory’s Work on Journalism Does Not Reflect Journalism’s Work on Memory, *Memory Studies* 1(1), 75-83.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. (1996). Social memories: Steps to a sociology of the past. *Qualitative Sociology* 19.3: 283-29.
- Zerubavel, Yael. (1995). *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Annexes:**

Table 1: General information about the sources

<b>Newspapers</b>
<p><b>El Espectador</b> founded in Medellin in 1887 by a family ascribed to the liberal political party and then published in Bogotá since 1915 is a national distributed newspaper. Currently it has a weekly distribution of 1.850.400 volumes. In 1997 the newspaper was sold to Julio Mario Santo Domingo one of the richest men in Colombia. From 2001 to 2008 the newspaper became a weekly publication due to a financial crisis. Its editorial and political perspective can be identified as liberal. Currently El Espectador has a print and online edition. The sources of financing come from private investors, subscription and advertisement.</p>
<p><b>A family ascribed to the liberal political party in 1911 founded El Tiempo.</b> It is a national distributed newspaper with an average daily weekday circulation of 1,137,483; this number rises for the Sunday edition to 1,921,571. El Tiempo belonged to the Santos family until 2007. This family has been very important in Colombian political and economic history, for example two of its members have been presidents of the country. In 2007 the newspaper was sold to the Spanish Grupo Planeta who in 2012 sold the 86% of the stock to Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo one of the richest men of Colombia. Currently El Tiempo has a print and online versions were it archives part of the oldest editions. Its editorial position and political adscription has varied in its more than 100 years of existence. The sources of financing come from private investors, subscription and advertisement.</p>
<b>Magazine</b>
<p><b>Revista Semana</b> founded in 1982 is the most popular weekly printed opinion magazine in Colombia. In the editorial of the first issue it was stated that the magazine was neither a conservative nor a liberal publication. However, the magazine has gained notoriety by performing opposition to different governments over the last 31 years. Currently Semana is not only the name of the magazine but an editorial group that has other publications and holds a foundation that supports the creation of memory and the reconstruction of areas affected by paramilitary violence. Since 2008 they opened a virtual version of the magazine that publishes recent news and archives all their editions. Semana is a private corporation that has private funds as its source of financing.</p>

Table 2: Sample of articles

TOTAL N= 57	<b>The Siege of the Palace of Justice (Anthropogenic Disaster)</b>	<b>The Armero Tragedy (Natural Disaster)</b>
<b>Initial interpretation – First Period</b>	10	10
<b>Commemorations – Second Period</b>	21	16
<b>Total</b>	31	26

Table 3: Coding questions

<b>1<sup>st</sup> period, one week after</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How tragic is the event? What language is used to describe the event?</li> <li>2. What is the event? Is it a natural disaster? An anthropogenic disaster? A lack of planning disaster?</li> <li>3. Who is the victim? Who or which groups are represented as victims? Are the victims only the people directly affected by the events or also others who were not directly victimized?</li> <li>4. How are the victims represented? How are they described? By their names, by some quality?</li> <li>5. Who is responsible for what happened? How is this part responsible? What did they do wrong?</li> <li>6. Emotions regarding the event: How are the articles connecting the events with particular emotions? Is society anger, sad, anxious?</li> <li>7. How did the society respond to it? Is society united or divided?</li> <li>8. What should society do?</li> <li>9. What about the context? Is the context described, does it matter to give the reader a context to understand the events?</li> <li>10. Who or which group is the main character or/and the symbol of the narrative? (Thinking that not every victim can fulfill this role) Why are they important?</li> </ol>
<b>Anniversaries, every fifth year 1990 to 2010 – I used the same questions presented above but I also asked the following questions</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How is the event commemorated in every fifth anniversary? What is the emphasis of each commemoration?</li> <li>2. Does the commemoration make reference to the context in which the events took place?</li> <li>3. Do the victims remain the same?</li> <li>4. Who is commemorated and who is not?</li> <li>5. Do the perpetrators remain the same?</li> <li>6. If they change what were the conditions for that change?</li> <li>7. Who is the symbol or personification of the tragedy over time? Is that different from the first period? What were the conditions for that change?</li> </ol>