

Feel the Grass Grow (An Ecology of Slow Peace in Colombia)

By Ángela Jill Lederach, PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2023, in which she analyses local peacebuilding processes in rural communities in María de Montes, Colombia. She dedicates the book to Sembrandopaz, a local social organisation that supported her in her research.

Laudatio: Prof. Úrsula Oswald Spring, CRIM-UNAM, Mexico

First of all, I would like to thank Dr Hans Günter Brauch and the organisers of the Wissenschaftspreis for the honour of presenting the Laudatio for the book by the prize winner, Dr Ángela Jill Lederach.

In her introduction, the author refers to the initial peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, which was announced by the then President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, in Havana on 24 August 2016. She shows that subsequent governments with different interests have tried to boycott this Peace Agreement. Her ethnographic work in a rural community explores another path, where it is not international agreements, but the daily weaving of peacebuilding in difficult conditions that is necessary to achieve a permanent peace that is in the process of change due to the daily conditions that have arisen.

Sowing peace in the High Mountains, where there are 52 communities, thesis writer Ángela Jill Lederach, in collaboration with the National Centre for Historical Memory, explored through fieldwork a process of healing the wounds of civil war and the transformation of 6,000 hectares of avocado plantations that had taken away the population's livelihood and daily sustenance. Jorge, a local leader, had preserved and organised the community's historical memory, which reflects a testimony to the rich peasant struggle, resistance and agroforestry in an environmentally fragile area. The paramilitaries had maintained power in the region, and when the peasant movement grew in response to the arbitrariness, the government increased repression and many people fled to the cities. Few families remained in the communities of Montes de María. They did not prioritise loss and violence, but instead built community through song, coexistence and collective methods of healing wounds. They used multiple creative avenues in the post-conflict era.

In the ethnographic study, time was central to the anthropological study: slow peace in everyday life and in the territory. In Montes de María, the current director of Sembrandopaz found refuge with the Mennonites when he and his family were threatened. Educating others and caring for the environment has

become a life project, where he has rediscovered meaning in his daily work. From childhood, he learned about state violence and understood that international solidarity and peace theories were not enough to transform oppression and create a just world.

In 2014, the author Ángela began her ethnographic work and obtained nonviolent protection from grassroots community associations. For her thesis, she was able to take advantage of broader networks to start working in the community, where she met Jóvenes Provocadores de Paz (Young Peace Provocateurs). From the beginning, she understood that it was not through a peace initiative from the state, but in the affected communities, where creative activities could be developed, that subjectivities had been created to change the environment of violence. She saw how peasants negotiated, rejected and reconfigured their threatened local reality and how they were able to build peace from the territory.

The seasons of sowing, harvesting, rain and drought established this relationship with nature and time, where territorial peace transcended the community and became part of a multiregional context. Afro-Colombians, young people, feminists, farmers, educators, believers, and LGBTy+ people interacted to build local, regional, and international peace, anchored in their bodies, their land, and their community, where there were no rural-urban divisions or social strata, but rather common collaboration. The consolidation of peace from the local level inspired the title of her thesis (Feel the Grass Grow), where the territory has become a living and dynamic body. The local meant the relational in a context of tropical deciduous forest, where peace is territorial and this peace is not signed by agreement, but built daily in everyday life. The tension between the peace agreement and peacebuilding has led to mass mobilisation, which, in turn, has become a process of protection for leaders against neo-paramilitarism and the voracious rural bourgeoisie.

The uncertainty in the thesis was permanent and reflected this situation of a policy of not knowing how to act in the face of destructive and daily violence. The new president, Iván Duque, opposed to this peace, further polarised the situation of uncertainty in Colombia and its regions. A peace as a trend and a peace as a danger emerged, revealing the inequality in Colombia and the danger to many communities. Throughout the book, the author has asked herself: Why do local leaders risk their lives for peacebuilding linked to their territory and their people in Montes de María? She has worked against the concepts that focused the study on the damage caused, the massacres and the violence, and proposed, instead, the construction of peace. Recent studies have shown that community and world building, care and love have become

acts of sacrifice and courage, but have consolidated over time and generated stability. Practices of solidarity, resistance, and social memory have found acceptance in place of the violence that has occurred and continues to be analysed.

Slow peace defines the contexts in communities. It is a time beyond the settler, reflecting the colonial violence of domination that continues to use quick peace to occupy territory and water. Slow peace disintegrates these processes of the local and national bourgeoisie and establishes an alternative to this linear peace. By building slow peace, networks of solidarity and community ties are consolidated and connected, and in the event of displacement, support is established in shelters that keep the collective memory of their community alive. In times of repression, peasants develop a bond with the territory, which is not rebellion, but rather positions the displaced in their territory and teaches by doing, forcing a rewriting of history, e.g. in Montes de María. One technique was to tell the story and retell it; others wove their sadness into works of art; others painted their walls; and finally, others developed theatre, where all the participants became actors expressing their anguish and pain.

The book describes the brutal violence unleashed by paramilitaries, guerrillas, the local bourgeoisie and other enemies, analysing rapid peace for the dominant class and contrasting it with slow peace, where the entire community participates with a voice, collaborating in daily life and in productive processes.

This slow peace shows the achievements made and generates an awakening to the processes of destruction and violence. Sembrandopaz has become a space for experimentation and an alternative to violence, where working the land involves touching the soil, Mother Earth, the historical identity of the processes and alternatives for confronting violence and destruction. They challenge the bureaucracy imposed by the government, the mechanisms of what ought to be and a creative response to violent events, thus opening up hope for alternatives within their own territory.

In Sembranopaz, there are not only leaders, but also companions who watch over the community's surroundings, warn their companions of dangers, and often prevent surprise attacks and massacres, allowing people to flee to save their lives. They promote and consolidate understanding and change the rules of the game and multiple behaviours from within. They include the seeds that sprout again with each rainy season and create new processes of understanding, where justice becomes the engine of change. In the face of regional violence, they help to overcome differences of race, class and social structures and turn the entire community into an entity anchored in the

territory of Montes de María. The basic principles are to maintain vigilance and memory not only in photos, but also in everyday life.

People are aware that there were no mass massacres in the communities, but there were murders of more than 40 people. The weight of these deaths is shared by the entire community, and a profound criticism of the media is established, as well as of the international and national community that would like to make peace through decrees rather than slowly building peace in the territory. With their collective memory, they have also been able to avoid the false negatives that have occurred in other parts of Colombia. They have learned that cultivating the land is a blessing for life, survival, and the connection to the earth and the community. They also reflect the peasant struggles they have undertaken for years to reconquer and recover this territory as a collective effort to build peace, anchored in daily life and the community. For this reason, these collective activities have also become processes of healing from the wounds of war, paramilitary attacks, and an abusive bourgeoisie. Their Creole memories are linked to the grass, the land, and the territory as a permanent process of managing and building their peace on a daily basis.

Dr. Angela Jill Lederach's book is not just an anthropological study for a doctoral degree. Her insight into daily life, her understanding of pain and healing, and the seeds that have allowed for the consolidation of peacebuilding beyond the Montes de María community, understanding that any peacebuilding process must start from the territory and the organisation of the community. It is a well-deserved award and, as a Latin American in a country beset by violence, we have worked on peace-building processes rooted in the territory, where women have been pioneers in experimenting with alternatives for living well and creating an environment of peace and reconciliation of community conflicts. I wholeheartedly congratulate Dr. Angela Jill Lederach for this work and the well-deserved award, which inspires reflection beyond Colombia and Latin America and, in these times of violence and rapid peace, becomes an alternative of slow peace for the affected peoples and communities.

Thank you very much for your attention.