

Hello Politics & Protesters:

This paper is an early draft of a dissertation chapter. It might be a little confusing to read because it does not stand alone. All of the context is elsewhere in the dissertation, but you should be able to make yourself through it. It is largely a methodology chapter, which follows a separate literature review chapter on high-risk activism—that discussion is mostly excluded from here. I also tried to weave in a narrative of “doing” high-risk research. The chapters that follow this one include two stand-alone chapters on two different locations within Colombia, and a comparative chapter. Thanks for taking the time to read and provide feedback. As usual, please do not cite yet—or at least wait until the Spring when I plan to defend and ask for the latest draft!

I could use the most help, I think, on how to tease out and develop the two different streams in this paper: the discussion of the methods and the experience of research in these environs. I would also love your substantive feedback on either or both parts!

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Best,
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Terrorist for a Day: Taking to the fields of Colombia

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I met Piedad Cordoba, the Colombian Senator who was passed over for the Nobel Peace Prize ultimately given to Barak Obama, just under a year ago. At the time, both figures were overcoming accusations of “prattling around with terrorists,” Obama being attacked by Sarah Palin and Cordoba being attacked by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. Indeed, the stewards of human rights are often called terrorists by their enemies. In Colombia, it is commonplace.

Cordoba was at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia, on a panel with the leadership of sugarcane workers during what turned out to be the tail-end of a 56-day strike. Just a few weeks prior, I was riding in a car through the sugar plantations of this forgotten area of Colombia with the staff of another prominent pro-Human Rights Colombian Senator. How I ended up there is still a mystery to me. Somehow the allure of a sugarcane workers strike called louder to me than the protests of my dissertation committee. I left my sanity in Bogota.

We had just been delivering food wares to workers at one of the plantations, particularly panela, a solid-form sugarcane concentrate popular as a base for drinks in South America, and rice. It was the middle of the strike and workers had been holding several plantations under constant siege for about a month, not letting supplies or scabs in or out. Not 10 minutes went by after we left the workers’ encampment when the car was pulled over. They held us for over an

hour, inspected and took down information from all of our documents. They inspected the car, including all of my belongings and interrogated me and everyone else. Inspecting my documents and seeing that I was from New York, one officer said in awe and with a smile, “You were born in Manhattan! What’s it like?” I eased up, though not too much, observing that they were not interested in interfering with my research, but knowing that they would rather me not be there.

“Realize this, Louis,” one of the Senator’s staff members said to me in the midst of the police search, “This is how they treat the senior staff of a Senator of the Republic--in the presence of an international observer, no less. Imagine how they treat the common worker in this struggle.” Indeed, they even had the Senator’s driver pop the hood so that the police could confirm the serial number on the vehicle’s chassis.

While in the field in Valle del Cauca, I experienced some of the same police and military surveillance that human rights activists went through day to day. I avoided some conflict situations at first, still fresh to the area and just having been introduced to the people with whom I was trusting my life. Early in the strike, there were severe clashes between workers and police resulting in dozens of injuries on both sides. Embedded with a group of human rights lawyers during this time, we received a cell phone call from a group of workers from a plantation that was not letting ambulances in to respond to reported injuries.

We arrived at the gates of the plantation within minutes. The security personnel demanded to inspect our documents, something that became a near daily routine during fieldwork. We complied, but were denied entry. Seeing several private security guards, police officers, and military personnel, all armed with automatic machine guns, I cowered in the car while several others strode out to meet the armed personnel. It was inspiring to witness them

walk right up to men with automatic weapons strapped to their backs with the kind of confidence that one would have if one were to scold children for playing kickball in the living room. It was also incredibly stressful.

After a few weeks of this, I became used to the perpetual tension between the various armed forces and the workers and human rights lawyers. At one particular rally, the families of the sugarcane workers gathered to march upon a plantation to meet their husbands and boyfriends, brothers, sons and fathers. At the gates were a dozen or so armed soldiers, among others situated elsewhere. I had a camera with me on that day, so, standing about 30 feet away at the front edge of the crowd, I snapped a picture of a few of them standing by the gate. One of the guards became immediately incensed, quickly conferred with one of his colleagues and then charged, full speed, directly at me. I ran into the crowd, weaving my way towards the opposite side of the crowd. Seeing what was happening and having spent several weeks with me, the crowd tightened around the soldier when he tried to give chase, preventing him from moving. I only caught a few seconds of this before some companions quickly ushered me into a car and drove me away from the scene.

Surely if my research subjects could endure sustained political tension for 5, 10, 15 years or longer, then I could bear witness to it for a few months. To me, this was a field site—a place for me to go, collect data, and then fly back to New York. To them, this is their home. They have to live with the consequences tomorrow for what they do today. I explained thoroughly the state of current research on high-risk activism in the previous chapter. Here I explain the structure and rationale for the methodology employed herein.

Methods

To find out the motivations that undergird this sustained high-risk activism, I have conducted a eight-month ethnographic study in Colombia, spending four months in Colombia's capital city of Bogota and two months around Cali, near the country's Pacific coast.

National and international human rights organizations in the Colombian capital of Bogota face death threats via mail, email, telephone, or even in person, though the threats are often not carried out. Many activists have gone into exile in other countries due to these types of threats. The routine has become somewhat normalized and complicates traditional categories of social movement risk. While participants often "opt in" to high-risk activism in Western democracies, risk is a thread that runs throughout all forms of human rights activism in Colombia.

Threats in Cali are of a different nature and are more commonly acted upon. Having much weaker ties to the international community, local human rights groups have developed a more refined strategy for lessening their chances of becoming a target for violence. The difference between Cali and Bogota is not simply "high" versus "low" risk, since human rights activism of any form is risky throughout Colombia. A typology of qualitatively discrete, yet categorically non-ordinal forms of high-risk activism would better describe this phenomenon in Colombia. Rather than thinking of high-risk behavior as a gradual process, we might think of high-risk behavior as a suddenly abrupt rupture of one's construction of the world. In high-risk societies, it is necessary to conceive of corruption and violence as normal. Repression precipitates and even defines high-risk activism itself. Utilizing data from ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with activists in Bogota and near Cali, Colombia, I explore the biographies of activists to investigate the social determinants predisposing activists

for risk-taking behavior. I also explore how people judge risk to find the reasons for persistence in the face of high risk.

Doug McAdam and the Rise of the Voluntaristic Model of High-Risk Activism

The most robust theoretical discussion of high-risk activism of this sort takes place in the United States, using the case of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. In 1964, over 1,000 white college students from the North traveled by bus to the Jim Crow South to register Black voters at the voting polls. The event was called Freedom Summer, and it resulted in four deaths, scores of injuries, hundreds of arrests, and dozens of bombings and arsons.

McAdam draws attention to the importance of having a comparison group when studying high-risk activism in Freedom Summer studies. (McAdam 1986; 1988) He argues that in order to determine the characteristics of high-risk activists, one need know how they differ from non-activists. Because the McAdam study focused on high-risk activism *ex post facto*, he was able to collect data on activists and non-activists using archival data. However, there are serious empirical impediments to implementing that methodology to study high risk activism in Colombia. Because the data collected in this study captures high risk activism *in utero*, there is no reliable way in which to determine when instances of high-risk will occur nor how subjects will respond to them when they do occur. As such, this kind of pre-sorting is not possible. However, there are two field sites, one in Bogota and the other near Cali with non-ordinal categorically distinct kinds of high-risk activism. This provides the ability to compare risk between the cases. I sampled strategically within each field site so as to allow for a variety of levels of commitment, subject positions, and orientations to activism until this variability appeared to have been exhausted.

One major difference of consequence between the US South in 1964 and Colombia in 2008 is that repression is much higher in Colombia and the level of overall (read: non-political) risk is already great. We can infer, therefore, that high-risk activism in high-risk societies is less voluntary than high-risk activism in most Western democracies. In the United States, participants left the relative safety of their homes in Boston and Seattle to travel to the unfriendly government buildings of Montgomery and Mobile. In Colombia, everyday life involves risk at the participants' homes, before they "choose" to engage in political behavior.

Another important difference is that the high-risk activism in Colombia is *non-ordinal*. Because baseline risk is higher, differentiating between different *types of risk* contributes more intellectual purchase than differentiating between risk and its absence. This shift, of course, has significant implications for the social movement literature, which, ever since the McAdam studies, has assumed that high-risk activism is both largely voluntary and measurably "higher" in risk than other forms of activism. While it is clear that some forms of activism within most Western democracies carry a higher level of risk than others, tolerance for human rights activism in Colombia is so low that the difference in risk between tactics performed in Colombia that carry "different levels" of risk do not carry much explanatory value.

Decoupling "Risk" from "Cost"

In McAdam's initial conception of high-risk activism, he couples risk with "cost." High cost activism is activism which requires high expenditures of "time, money, energy." High risk activism is activism which involves "anticipated danger, whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth, of participating in a particular activity." The coupling of these concepts have been carried through to even studies published in the present day. (Rutten 2000)

But risk and cost are, of course, different. Signing a petition is both low-risk and low-cost, in most contexts. It does not have repercussions and does not require a great deal of energy. Becoming involved in a consensus movement, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, may require a great deal of energy, but it is not particularly risky. (Schwartz and Paul 1992) Partaking in a strike can be extremely risky and time consuming, (Clawson 2003) but Anarchists fighting with the police at a globalization protest is risky, but not necessarily time consuming. This divides McAdam’s ideas into a two-by-two table with high and low risk and cost:

Table 1		
	High Risk	Low Risk
High Cost	Labor Strike	MADD organizing
Low Cost	Anarchist battle	Petitions

By coupling risk and cost, the literature on high-risk activism has exclusively looked at the upper left-hand cell. This means that long-term campaigns with sustained risk have been exclusively considered, while short-term risk as well as high cost without risk, have been excluded. This study primarily concerns itself with participants of high risk activism, of both high and low cost (the entirety of the left-hand column). A more through exploration of the different kinds of risks and costs will be left for a future study.

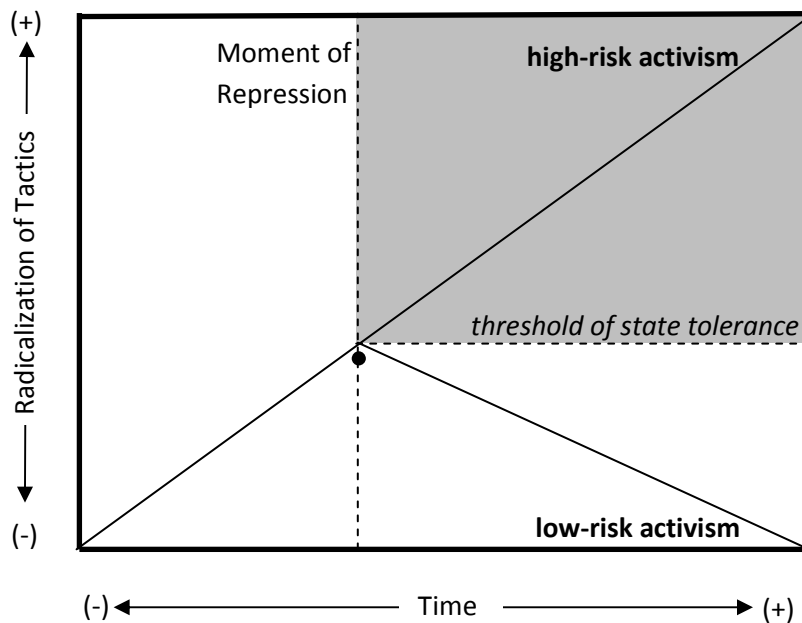
High-Risk and the “Moment of Repression”

How then, do I organize the data in this study to understand risk and how do I reconcile it with existing ways in which to explain such activism? The ambiguities in this literature can be grouped into two categories. Firstly, the literature conflates high-risk activism with those who participate in the activity. Secondly, and somewhat of a corollary, the radicalization of activist

tactics over time is conceived of as a gradual process. As a participant increases in radicalization of tactics over time, it becomes increasingly likely that the state will respond with repression.

I analyze the data contained herein through temporal *moments*. Once a threshold of state tolerance is defined within a particular context, high-risk activism occurs in the geography above this threshold. Important “moments” have been established as an important explanatory factor in other areas of Sociology¹ (Lareau and Horvat 1999) and also within social movements as “moral shocks.” (Jasper 1997) As I have discussed above, high-risk political activity is discrete from the identity of the activist. The repressive actor defines political activity that is taking place as high-risk or not through the use of its repressive apparatus. As Figure 1 illustrates, the relationship between repression and mobilization demarcates high-risk activist activity.

Figure 1: The Geography of High-Risk Activism



¹ I thank Paul Bugyi for this particular point.

Rather than thinking of high-risk behavior as a gradual process, we might think of high-risk behavior as a suddenly abrupt rupture of one’s construction of the world. In high-risk societies, it is necessary to conceive of corruption and violence as normal. Carlos came to accept the guerilla government as normal. He breaks with society when society violates this cognitive and emotional construction. Repression precipitates and even defines high-risk activism itself. Repression physically etches risk into the body, using direct trauma as its plume. The intimacy of this kind of repression is unmistakable, even seeking one at one’s own home. This relationship is central to the production of high-risk activists.

Interviewees & Fieldnotes

I interviewed 30 people in Bogota in total, coming from three different organizations, with some persons active in more than one of these organizations. There was some overlap between the human rights coalition (HRC) and the displaced people’s organization (DPO), but other groups, such as the Anarchist organization (AO), did not overlap with any of the other groups. From DPO, there were 9 people, AO, there were 5 people, and from HRC there were 12 people. I also interviewed one person from several other organizations, an Anthropological Excavation Group (AEG) that exhumes and identifies missing persons in mass graves, a Catholic peace organization, a social movements research organization (SMRO), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Organization	N	Area	Type
Human Rights Coalition	12	Human Rights	NGO
DPO	9	Displaced	Grassroots
Anarchist Org	5	Anarchist	Grassroots
Catholic Peace	1	Peace/Religious	NGO
AEG	1	Technical/HR	NGO
SMRO	1	Academic	NGO

ICRC	1	Human Rights	INGO
Total	30		Organizations: 4NGO; 2 Grsrts; 1INGO Persons: 15NGO;14Grsrts;1INGO

HRC was an NGO in a commercial area of town in the Northern area of Bogota, although not in the most affluent area, it was considered to be fairly affluent. They were housed by one of the major, most respected human rights organizations in Colombia. They had weekly organizational meetings and I became friendly with the Secretary General of the organization. She arranged for me to come to the weekly meetings and to be able to tape-record all meetings. There was also several workshops held. HRC is a coalition of several human rights organizations throughout Colombia, many of them grassroots. There are also affiliated international organizations, including US-based activist/academic NGOs. Staff members from international agencies would come to these meetings, sometimes on a regular basis. These groups were often based in Great Britain, the US, Germany, or other Western European nations. They never had government or private industry representation at these meetings, though some of the individuals at the meetings did go to government meetings and reported back their interactions with government officials.

DPO was much less organized and my entry there much less certain. This is the one group that I felt most confident in studying before my arrival, since I had been with this group during my preliminary visit to the field site in the summer of 2007. DPO is also a coalition, albeit much smaller—seven organizations. One of the organizations presented me to the rest of the coalition and proposed a motion to allow me access to their meetings. They had a several-hour long meeting to discuss whether or not I would be allowed to observe their coalition meetings.

They did allow me to observe and I formed close bonds with this group of people. There are seven organizations in this coalition, representing Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, Women, youth and others.

AO was a space for youth and students to gather and have planning meetings, parties, educational and cultural events. The staff there welcomed me with open arms, answered all of my questions and allowed me to photograph the artwork on the walls. They were anarchist in ideology, most of them. They were an all volunteer staff and the main person in charge was the father of a kid who was killed by Bogota police at an action. He was an anarchist and his anarchist friends rallied around his cause and continue to honor him as a martyr. (Cultural martyrism). Because it was a mixed-use space, depending on the day of the week or time of day, you would find very different people there. The rent was paid from fundraisers that happened constantly, through selling beers, merchandise, and food at events, particularly on weekend when a band would usually come in.

The religious group was distinctly a peace organization and was very deliberate about defining itself that way. Other organizations said that they were for peace, but against justice. The religious group worked on integrating former combatants in the civil war into civilians by getting them jobs and counseling them. They would have group sessions and trainings where the priest and lay people would train you into thinking in peaceful ways. There were young men who were former paramilitary combatants mixed with women who wanted to become certified to work with processing youth through the counseling process. They had a direct contract with the government to do this work. Other groups often complained that the state was pouring all of their resources into re-integrating people who were enemies of the state, but that they had no

resources for the legitimately poor people of the country and the victims of the violence perpetrated by these actors.

The anthropological excavation group (AEG) also was deliberate about establishing these boundaries. They described themselves as a technical organization and intentionally refrained from taking policy positions and just doing the excavation work asked of them. They were often asked to identify bodies that had been exhumed, sometimes from mass graves in the countryside of Colombia. They were often accused of being political because of this, because the very nature of their work—identifying victims of violence for the families of the victims was seen as political by people whose interest it is to not have these bodies identified. In fact, this organization's representative often told me of her frustration with the government agencies who would exhume these bodies, oftentimes in improper ways where they damage or destroy the evidence. She said, sometimes they just send us bones in shoeboxes and tell us to sort it out. There are several persons' bodies mixed up in these shoeboxes—it is very disorganized. She attributed this problem to a lack of training. There are no graduate programs in physical anthropology or archeology in Colombia. Those who are in charge of excavating large, important digs in Colombia are often fresh out of college with sometimes only three semesters of archeology under their belt.

Because AEG does not take stances and does not really work with other organizations, they benefit from the international respect they have attained as an agency that is neutral. Sometimes the government applies for funds for technology that they say they need and the international agency will send the application to AEG for review. AEG advises that the needs are much more basic and suggest a better way to use the money. As a result, many of the government's applications of this sort are rejected. The government is aware of this relationship

between AEG and funding agencies and as a result, “does not like us,” as I was told. Neither do the NGOs, however, because AEG does not take political stances. “We are intimately familiar with the death and suffering that the families go through,” I was told, “but doing so [taking political stances] would compromise our neutrality.”

SMRO is an institute. They are a databank for all kinds of statistics, books, and articles on social movements and social problems in Latin America, but with a particular emphasis on Colombia. They have academic talks, house faculty offices, and have a modest library with staff. Many of the faculty members there serve on the boards of organizations of NGOs, in HRC or other groups.

The Red Cross is a well known INGO with offices throughout the world and enshrined in the Geneva Conventions. They have a controversial role in Colombia because during Operation Jaque in 2008, when the Colombian government rescued former Colombian Presidential candidate and dual French-Colombian citizen Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian government dressed up in ICRC symbols and pretended to be dressed as sympathetic media as well. This undermines the neutrality of the Red Cross and is a violation of the Geneva Conventions. (Penhaul 2008)

Valle del Cauca

In Valle del Cauca, I have interviews with 48 people in total, 7 from The Doves, a human rights group providing legal support, 4 from Polo Democrático, a political party, all members of which were in The Doves, 4 from a national labor union organization, 20 from sugarcane workers from 8 different plantations, and 3 wives of sugarcane workers.

Table 2			
Subject	N	Area	Type
The Doves	7	Human Rights	NGO
Polo Democratico	4	Political Party	Political Party
Labor	4	Labor Union	Labor Union
Wives	3	Worker Family	Family
Workers	20	Worker	Activists
MTIC	10	Worker Coalition	Grassroots
Total	48		

The Doves was a small organization with professional staff. They did have staff, many of whom overlapped with the Polo Democratico. They were all well trained and did media work, were lawyers, or otherwise capable, literate, articulate, and well-connected. They were long-time activists. Some of them are based in Bogota and others of them are based in Cali. It is a thin network of people, the core of which are two people who have known each other since college and were involved in radical activism in college.

The Doves made working in Valle del Cauca an exhilarating experience. I had to sleep on mattresses on the floor of an office every night. A few nights, I stayed on a mattress on the floor of an extra room of one of my subjects in Polo/The Doves. On a few nights, I stayed on the floor of the labor union. I spent one night with the workers at one of the plantations (and was stung by dozens of mosquitoes in the process). I made a lot of friends.

It was also stressful because I had to navigate this political world without allowing myself to be used as a chess piece. For instance, in exchange for access, I agreed to share any photographs I took with the Doves. Without my knowledge, the Doves sent one of my photographs along with a press release that they had put together to the media. My photograph appeared in the city newspaper in Cali. They also used my photographs on an online blog that they had developed for this particular campaign. After the story broke in the Cali newspaper, the

labor organization asked me to begin sharing photographs with them. The Doves staff explicitly asked me to not share my photographs with the labor organization, placing me right in the middle of a factional dispute. What I communicated to both groups after that was that I was going to document the process with photographs and that any organization can have them, but that they would have to come to me and work with me to distribute the photographs—I would not go out of my way for anyone, so as not to appear to be taking sides. This was sometimes a cumbersome process, since these groups often did not have the technology to process those large RAW format picture files.

Data security was a concern at this field location. Due to the degree of risk that the subjects were already taking, all of my interviews are anonymous. We were pulled over by police or military personnel several times over the course of my fieldwork there while I travelled with the Doves. The police and military had full knowledge that the Doves were escorting me around the plantations and they were able to easily identify me and those travelling with me.

This became tricky later. On October 6, 2008 six of my subjects were arrested, including two members of The Doves and four members of MTIC. All but one of the members of MTIC are subjects in this study and were so before the time of the arrest. They were charged with six counts, including terrorism, intent to start a riot, and sabotage. The terrorism charge was dropped at arraignment. It was a media circus because both members of the Doves who were arrested were also staff members of a prominent Senator of the Republic in the Polo Democratico. The charges were bogus, and I knew this moreover because I was witness to some of the scenes that were described in the documents in which they were charged. The defense lawyers and my subjects asked me to provide them with audio files, which I could not do. This was difficult to

enforce the boundary between researcher and ally and I still to this day do not know if I did the right thing.

Conclusion

In the chapters to follow, I measure commitment levels among activists will be determined by the frequency that they participate in public performances, the length of time that they have been a member of such organizations, and the amount of responsibility and leadership that they undertake as well as the amount of risk that they are exposed to. Taking the two areas of Colombia studied, interviews with different types of leaders as well as non-leaders at both sites, various levels of commitment and four different groups of hypotheses, I have amassed 78 interviews over the eight-month period. Added to this are nearly daily recordings of organizational meetings, rallies, speeches and marches, summing to over 200 hours of audio in total.

I protected the anonymity and confidentiality of subjects by using pseudonyms for all members of the community and organizations in field notes and transcriptions of interviews. (Wood 2006) I did not record personal identifiers on tape and all digital interview files were kept double-encrypted during fieldwork and are presently encrypted and password protected. I am the only person with access to this information. All subjects spoke Spanish and interviews were conducted in Spanish.

I have observed areas in the community where activists gather to ascertain a complete understanding of the communities which they inhabit. This allows me to observe how activists interact with non-activists, how they interact with each other outside of a mobilization context, and how the police interact with activists.

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