LANGUAGE AND POLITICS
On the Colombian "Establishment"

*Eduardo Posada-Carbó**
St Antony's College, Oxford

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Abstract: During the last decade, the term Establishment has gained currency among Colombian opinion makers—be they newspaper columnists, politicians, or even academics. After surveying the ambiguities of the concept in the United Kingdom and the United States—the countries where it was first popularized in the 1950s and 1960s—this paper focuses on the usages of the expression in the Colombian public debate. Based on a variety of sources—including op-eds and newspaper reports, interviews with leading public figures, and other political and academic documents—I show how generalized the term has become. I examine how the prevailing language gives the "Establishment" a central role in shaping political developments in the past decades. It blames the Establishment for the country's most fundamental problems while conferring on this same Establishment the power to solve them. However, any attempt to identify what is meant by the Establishment soon reveals an extremely confusing picture. In the final part of the paper, I highlight some of the implications of the general usage of such a vague and contradictory concept for the quality of democratic debate, the legitimacy of the political system, and the possible solution of the armed conflict in Colombia.

On April 2, 2000, Raul Reyes, one of the leaders of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) referred to the conditions that, according to his organization, were required to reach peace in Colombia:

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"Peace does not grow out of our wishes for peace, but peace comprises all elements, economic, social, political and cultural." And he questioned "the political will of the government and the Establishment" to pursue the agenda for peace that he outlined.[1]

It was not the first or the last time that a leader of the FARC included the "Establishment" as a party to the armed conflict. Nor is the FARC alone in such criticism. References to the Establishment have become relatively widespread among opinion makers, politicians, academics, even entrepreneurs.[2] Its usage seems to have intensified during the peace process between the government and the FARC, which lasted from 1999 to 2002, while being increasingly incorporated into the language of analysts when dealing with Colombia. As the term gains currency, there is a need to examine the ways it is defined in the public debate and to assess its conceptual validity.

The Establishment forms part of an array of concepts and phrases that are now commonplace and seem to me similarly questionable: the country's "civil war;" the "illegitimacy" of the state; or the claim that there is no democratic opposition in Colombia.[3] The very notion of "peace" tends to be defined in maximalist terms, equating "peace" with the solution of all problems.[4] The analysis of the uses of these terms, like the *Establishment*, therefore pertains to a wider topic, namely looking at how issues of language impinge on political processes. Quite apart from the political intricacies of language, the Establishment can also be of interest to those concerned with the study of elites.[5]

1. Interview with Rafael Reyes, *El Tiempo*, April 2, 2000.

2. More often than not the term is expressed in Spanish—*Establecimiento*, sometimes in quotation marks. Occasionally it is expressed in English. For purposes of standardization in this paper, I will be referring to the *Establishment*.

3. The Establishment is not in the same category of the"political keywords" studied by Hart et al., but this is a suggestive work on the subject of political language, though I follow a different approach from theirs. See Roderick P. Hart, Sharon E. Jarris, William P. Jennings, and Deborah Smith-Howell, *Political Keywords: Using Language that Uses Us* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 246.

4. See Eduardo Posada Carbó, "La crisis política como crisis intelectual," in Consuelo Ahumada, Antonio Caballero, Carlos Castillo, Ernesto Guhl, Alfredo Molano, and Eduardo Posada Carbó, *¿Qué está pasando en Colombia? Anatomía de un país en crisis* (Bogotá, El Ancora Editores, 2000); *¿Guerra civil? El lenguaje del conflicto en Colombia* (Bogotá: Alfaomega, 2001); and*"Ilegitimidad" del estado en Colombia. Sobre los abusos de un concepto* (Bogotá: Alfaomega, 2003).

5. Some of the most important classical studies on elites do not refer to the Establishment, as they were published before the term became fashionable. See, for example, C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, first published in 1956). For a good summary of the various approaches towards elites, see Geraint Parry, *Political Elites* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969), who does include a brief section to discuss the term "Establishment." See also Tom Bottomore, *Elites and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1993, first published in 1964), and Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Lanham, New York: University Press of America, 1980), chapter 5.

The aims of this paper are, however, more modest: by looking in some detail at the use of one word—*Establishment*—I intend to show how confused the public debate over the nature of the nation's political system and its decision-making process is. To this aim, I offer a portrait of the so-called Colombian Establishment as shown by those who more frequently use the expression—by-and-large opinion makers, who can also be classified as "public intellectuals."[6] Although my major focus is on the confusing uses of a word, I also highlight some of its implications for the quality of democratic debate, for the legitimacy of the political system, and for possible solutions to the armed conflict.

There is some awareness of the problems raised by political language nowadays in Colombia. The scholarship on this topic is nevertheless thin. A few recent works devote attention to the problem and give us some useful general insights, yet none explore in detail the meanings of one particular expression, as proposed here.[7] That *Establishment* be an ill-defined term perhaps should not be surprising. "Ambiguity is an innate characteristic of language, and . . . especially conspicuous in political language," Murray Edelman has observed.[8] However, there are degrees and degrees of ambiguities. And whatever the value of an ambiguous political vocabulary may be, if stretched beyond its limits, ambiguity can only lead to incommunicability, thus impeding the possibilities of intelligent debate. Faced with conceptual chaos, as Giovanni Sartori put it, "the concrete problem we confront is reducing ambiguity and dispelling equivocation."[9] Let me then start by exposing the original equivocations and ambiguities of the word under consideration.

6. I borrow the expression from Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals. A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). My use of the term "intellectual" is more inclusive than Posner's, who is mostly concerned with academic intellectuals. I have in mind opinion makers, or a variety of people who regularly write op-eds for the press, including academics. Though the range of sources used here is wide, a significant portion are from leading national newspapers. I have mostly consulted their online editions, though occasionally my material comes from their print editions. For reference purposes, I have given the name of the newspaper as it appears in the print edition, except when the article has only been published online. When citing op-eds I will give the name of the columnist, followed by the newspaper title and date.

7. Mauricio Rubio, *Crimen e impunidad. Precisiones sobre la violencia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores and Universidad de los Andes, 1999); Fernando Estrada, *Las metáforas de una guerra perpetua. Estudios sobre pragmática del discurso en el conflicto armado colombiano* (Medellín: Universidad Eafit, 2004); and Malcolm Deas, "La paz: Entre los principios y la práctica," in Francisco Leal, ed., *Los laberintos de la guerra. Utopías e incertidumbres sobre la paz* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo and Universidad de los Andes, 1999), 171–192.

8. Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 80. See also Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 9–13, and 132–33.

9. Giovanni Sartori, "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," in Sartori, ed., *Social Science Concepts. A Systematic Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 26.

AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Of course, the term *Establishment* is far from being of Colombian vintage. Nor has its use elsewhere been a model of clarity. It has entered the *New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* as "a term, usually pejorative, for an ill-defined amalgam of those institutions, social classes and forces which represent authority, legitimacy, tradition and the status quo."[10]

The word is derived from the "established" Church of England. It was first popularized there in the 1950s, to be adopted in the United States a few years later. At its most basic level, the expression generally referred to a "covert ruling elite." In both countries the concept since its inception remained elusive to definitions and therefore of doubtful analytical value. It has variously been identified with informal networks of powerful people who share a common social and educational background, and professional experience; or with the institutions they belong to; or with a particular frame of mind.[11] In more narrow terms, the American Establishment has been defined as a "small circle of men and women who have framed American foreign policy during at least the first two decades after World War II."[12] Indeed the nature of the Establishment in the United States seems to have differed from that of England: while the latter was often associated with tradition and conservatism, the former tended to be liberal. In as much as there emerged a conservative Establishment in the United States, then it was a "counter-Establishment."[13]

Yet in both countries, the expression usually refers to an elite, though "one of the most difficult of specialized elites to detect, describe and assess."[14] Moreover, the existence of such an elite and its effective power have been questioned in England and in the United States. Conceptually, Jean Blondel distinguished the Establishment from the ruling class

10. Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, eds., *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Fontana Press, 2000), 283–84.

11. See chapters by Hugh Tomas, Heny Fairlie, and Christopher Hollis, in Thomas, ed., *The Establishment. A Symposium* (London: A Blond, 1959); Richard Rovere, "Notes on the Establishment in America," *The American Scholar*, vol. 30 (1961), reprinted in Richard Rovere, *The American Establishment and Other Reports, Opinions and Speculations* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1963); Samuel Huntington, "Power, Expertise and the Military Profession," *Daedalus* (Autumn, 1963), 785–807; Leonard Silk and Mark Silk, *The American Establishment* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 6–7; Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 115.

12. Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 164.

13. Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment. From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Silk and Silk, *The American Establishment*, 18–20. Anthony Sampson, however, has also suggested that the old "Establishment" in England was formed by "liberal-minded people" in Sampson, *Who Runs this Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century* (London: John Murray, 2005), 98, 354, and 357 .

14. Parry, *Political Elites*, 86.

and the power elite.[15] It was more flexible than the latter two in so far as it defined the ruling group in both socioeconomic and psychological terms—by which he meant the adoption of certain attitudes by all its members. All three notions implied that important social and economic policy decisions were taken by relatively small groups, isolated from the rest of society, in secrecy, and mindful of preserving tradition.

Blondel found major difficulties with these theories. If they were going to have any validity, they should at least comply, he argued, with three conditions. The Establishment must be "a group in the strong sense of the word . . . a community with an *esprit de corps*." Such a group "must not be seriously challenged by other groups outside the establishment." And the theories depended "to a large extent on how much power the ruling group can be allowed to have." Blondel found it hard to identify such a group with a fully developed set of the three defining conditions—unity of purpose, permanency, and power.[16]

If the definition and the validity of the term were in doubt already in the 1960s, it is even less certain that nowadays, following decades of change, references to the British and American Establishments might have any meaningful purpose.[17] We are then left with an elusive concept whose utility in understanding the structure of social power and the dynamics of political processes is indeed limited. When applied to Colombia, as I will try to show in the following section, the results are even more discouraging.

We have yet to identify when the term *Establishment*, as discussed here, entered the Colombian vocabulary. In the 1950s, the word *establecimiento* was used in its common meaning as a place of business, often providing some service, such as the hotel where Mr. B. K.—the protagonist in Alfonso López Michelsen's novel *Los elegidos*—stayed.[18] *Oligarchy* then was the expression most widely used to refer to the elites—the term had long been incorporated in Colombian political discourse but, during the 1920s–1940s, it was popularized by the Liberal leader Jorge

15. Jean Blondel, *Voters, Parties and Leaders: The Social Fabric of British Politics* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), 234. For the notion of the power elite, see Mills, *The Power Elite*. For a valuable collection of essays critically examining Mill's work, see G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard, eds., *C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). For the distinction between power elite and ruling class, see in particular the chapters by Paul M. Sweesy and Daniel Bell.

16. Blondel, *Voters, Parties and Leaders*, 235, 237, 243–45, and 249. In a classical Argentine study, José Luis de Imaz similarly argued that, because of the lack of cohesiveness of those with power in Argentina, it was not appropriate to refer to them as an "elite": in Imaz, *Los que mandan*, fifth edition (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1996), 236.

17. Sampson, *Who Runs this Place?*, 98, 357, and Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents*.

18. Alfonso López Michelsen, *Los elegidos* (México: Editorial Guaranía, 1953), 99, 167, 219.

Eliécer Gaitán.[19] The earliest references to the Establishment that I have been able to trace—with the connotations of this paper—date back to the 1970s. I have come across some other scattered mentions of the Colombian Establishment in 1980s,[20] but as far as I can tell, the term only became a catchword during the 1990s and early 2000. Although its usage may not be as socially diffused as *oligarchy*, its presence in the public debate is significant.

During the last decades, as the term took hold in the political discourse, Colombians have experienced a process of political reform amid the intimidating atmosphere of internal armed conflict, including that produced by the drugs cartels. This process took place against a background of wider transformation, what Daniel Pécaut has called a "social shock":[21] The country became by and large urbanized; the power of the Catholic Church was drastically diminished; the educational system was substantially expanded; the population became less amenable to social control; the illicit drugs trade severely disrupted social values while stimulating the emergence of powerful criminals, whose activities also affected the social landscape.

A detailed analysis of the power structure and composition of the country's elite is beyond the scope of this paper. Since the introduction of popular election of mayors in 1986 (hitherto appointed), there has been

19. Rafael Núñez, Colombia's most prominent statesman during the second half of the nineteenth century, used the term *oligarchy*, referring not to any economic elite but to those who controlled party politics. According to López Michelsen, that was also the meaning given to the term by Gaitán. See Eduardo Posada Carbó, "Elections and Civil Wars: The Presidential Campaign of 1875," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (Oct. 1994): 621–49 and Alfonso López Michelsen, *Esbozos y atisbos* (Bogotá: Plaza and Janés, 1984). "Oligarchy refers, above all, to the political class," notes Daniel Pécaut, in his *Guerra contra la sociedad* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2001), 64–65. On Gaitán and the word *oligarchy*, see also Herbert Braun, *Mataron a Gaitán. Vida pública y violencia urbana en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1987), 72–3.

20. Alberto Lleras Camargo used the term in his articles for *Visión*, September 9, 1972, and July 15, 1977, both reprinted in Alberto Lleras Camargo, *Obras selectas. El intelectual* (Bogotá: Biblioteca de la Presidencia de la República, 1987), vol V, 158–60, and 365. See also Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, "¿Por qué sobrevive la democracia colombiana?" *Estrategia Económica y Financiera* (April 1979) 42, and in his prologue to Mario Latorre, *Política y elecciones* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 1980); Estanislao Zuleta, "La violencia política en Colombia," *Violencia, democracia y derechos humanos* (Medellín: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2003), 128, 180, 186, 188; William Ramírez, "Violencia y democracia en Colombia," *Análisis Político* (January–April, 1988); and chapters by Jaime Castro and Rocío Vélez, in *¿Paz? ¡Paz! Testimonios y reflexiones sobre un proceso*, ed. Alvaro Leyva (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1987), 60, 72, and 88. For an early U.S. academic book that used the term for other Latin American countries, see Daniel Goldrich, *Sons of the Establishment: Elite Youth in Panama and Costa Rica* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1966).

21. *Crónica de dos décadas de política colombiana, 1968–1988* (Bogotá: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1988), 27; and his most recent book, *Guerra contra la sociedad* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2001), 30–33.

a substantial change in the dynamics of power, made even more complex after the adoption of the 1991 Constitution: the president lost power to Congress; there is a new autonomous central bank and a new independent Constitutional Court; departmental governors are now elected instead of being appointed; fiscal revenues were decentralized; and ethnic minorities gained representation through allocated quotas in Congress.

Arguably, there has always been more social mobility and therefore rotation among the Colombian political elites than critics are prepared to accept. In recent decades, however, those changes have been remarkable. The two-party system as we knew it ceased to exist, as Liberals and Conservatives became fragmented while their leaders lost control over their parties' direction. New political parties and movements joined the electoral competition, including those formed after the successful peace process of the early 1990s, when a handful of guerrilla groups were demobilized and incorporated into the political system.[22]

Given the lack of available systematic studies, it is not possible to state with precision the degree of change in the social composition of electoral bodies like Congress, departmental assemblies and city councils, but, as Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín has remarked, such "composition must have changed significantly." Most visible are the changes in major departments and capital cities. Since the 1980s, according to Miguel García, Bogotá has moved from the "politics of notables" to the "politics of plebeians."[23] The administration of the Colombian capital city passed to the hands of a new breed of leaders with a variety of backgrounds—Antanas Mockus, the son of Lithuanian immigrants, or former union activist Luis Garzón, of the newly formed party, Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA), the current mayor of Bogotá. Since 1994, neither of the two traditional parties have been able to win the elections for the *alcaldía* in Bogotá. What happens in the capital has national resonance, and the case of Bogotá, while having some extraordinary features, is not exceptional, as could be seen at least from the experiences of alcaldías in Barranquilla, Medellín, and Cali, or the *gobernaciones* in Cauca and Valle.

These changes do not deny degrees of continuity, nor do they suggest social harmony. My argument here is that the term *Establishment* gained

22. See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, ed., *Degradación o cambio. Evolución del sistema político colombiano* (Bogotá: Norma, 2001).

23. "¿Se ha abierto el sistema político colombiano? Una evaluación de los procesos de cambio (1970–1998)," *América Latina Hoy*, 27 (2001), 211; Miguel García, "La política bogotana, un espacio en composición, 1982–2001," in *Degradación o cambio*, 217. In the 1960s, James Payne noted the "remarkably high" turnover in the Colombian Congress, much higher than in the United States. Turnover in Congress continues to be high, but I do not know of any study that looks in detail at this phenomenon. See Payne, *Patterns of Conflict in Colombia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 239; see also the chapter by Elizabeth Ungar and Germán Ruiz in *Elecciones y democracia en Colombia, 1997–1998*, ed. Ana María Bejarano and Andrés Dávila (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 1998), 200.

favor in the political discourse at a time when the dynamic of power and thus power structure were becoming more complex and plural—a paradox to which I will return later. Indeed, some of the earlier references to the Colombian Establishment, much before the term became fashionable, showed concerns about its diminishing power. Back in 1980, Fernando Cepeda Ulloa observed that the Establishment had lost control of vital social sectors, like the bureaucracy, the unions, the universities, and even the intellectual debate.[24] Why such an elusive and ill-defined term gained, and continues to have, currency in the public debate is of course a question that merits attention. But it is important first to fully appreciate the nature and extent of its usage, as well as its confusing meanings among opinion makers.

THE COLOMBIAN ESTABLISHMENT: A PORTRAIT

I begin my description of the Colombian Establishment through the language of those who give credit to the expression by showing how the term is conceived. I then move on to outline the major criticisms of the Establishment, stressing how powerful many of its critics believe it to be. Of particular relevance to this paper is the power ascribed to the Establishment during the peace process (1999–2002), and the use of the term by the FARC, to which I also devote some attention in this section. Finally, I examine who, according to those in the public debate, constitutes the Establishment: the people or institutions that are supposedly its members.

A Living Creature

The first thing to note when observing the nature of the Colombian Establishment as described by its critics is that it is usually treated as a living creature, sharing some of the functions of the human body and mind. Some consider the Establishment intelligent. Others prefer to highlight its stupidity and frivolity.[25]

Its conduct seems to be similar to that of human beings as well, but more often than not because of its weaknesses and vices. Like many human beings, the Establishment would be capable of "*mamar gallo*"—the expression popularized by Gabriel García Márquez to refer to the tendency of Colombians from the Caribbean region to not take things too seriously.

24. See his prologue in Mario Latorre, *Política y elecciones* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 1980), 33. Alberto Lleras Camargo talked about a threatened Establishment in 1981: *Obras selectas*, vol. V, 266–67.

25. Sergio Otálora and Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, January 28, 2000, and March 3, 2002; Roberto Pombo, *Cambio*, May 10, 1999; Otty Patiño, Rudolf Hommes, and Oscar Collazos, *El Tiempo*, May 30 and October 14, 1999, and April 29, 2000.

The Establishment nevertheless takes serious political positions, which tend to be "right wing, such extreme right that [it] would embarrass people like Franco or Torquemada." The Establishment would have, therefore, traditionally despised the democratic left, against which it has acted treacherously. Not that the left is free from criticism by all the enemies of the Establishment. "Together with the right and the left," the poet Eduardo Escobar observes, "the Establishment forms part of the monster with three heads that has been mistreating the native population."[26]

Unlike human beings, however, the Establishment does not seem to age. Descriptions of it often denote a timeless being, without much change over the years. The most frequent references take its existence back to the mid-twentieth century, the period of La Violencia that preceded the emergence of the FARC in the 1960s. General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's coup in 1953 is said to have been "a first proof of political transaction within the Establishment."[27] There are occasional mentions of the "Establishment of the times," thus distinguishing it from that of today. More recurrent are the statements about an Establishment that for the last four decades or so has been a leading actor in national life, one that "has waited 40 years to negotiate with the guerrillas, now that the guerrillas are old."[28] Note in the latter that the guerrillas have grown older, an apparent advantage for an ever young, clever, and patient Establishment.

The Culprit for Colombia's Ills

Whether like a human being or part of a three-headed monster, the Establishment is often identified as having the greatest responsibility for the country's most fundamental problems. Accusations against the Establishment are made at a general level from failing to punish corruption to accepting foreign interventionism and having given

26. Juan Lozano, *El Tiempo*, March 4, 2002 (first quote); Antonio Caballero, *Semana*, July 12, 1999 and March 17, 2002 (second and third quote), and Eduardo Escobar, *El Tiempo*, June 12, 2001 (Last quote). See also Juan Carlos Iragorri, *Patadas de ahorcado. Caballero se desahoga. Una conversación con Juan Carlos Iragorri* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2002), 84; Daniel Samper and Armando Benedetti, *El Tiempo*, October 29, 2003 and March 19, 2002; Fabio López, "Problemas y retos de los procesos de reinserción: Reflexiones generales apoyadas en el estudio del caso del EPL," in Ricardo Peñaranda and Javier Guerrero, eds., *De las armas a la política* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo and IEPRI, Universidad Nacional, 1999), 154.

27. William Ramírez, "Violencia, guerra civil, contrato social," in *Colombia, cambio de siglo: Balances y perspectives*, ed. Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga (Bogotá: Planeta, 2000), 36. On the rise of Nadaísmo—an intellectual movement that came to light in 1958—in reaction to the "nauseating smell of the Establishment," see Juan Carlos Vélez, ed., *Gonzalo Arango. Pensamiento vivo* (Medellín: Fundación Gonzalo Arango, 2000).

28. Rudolf Hommes, *El Tiempo*, January 9, 1999 (first quote), and Roberto Pombo, *Cambio*, May 10, 1999 (second quote). See also, Armando Benedetti Jimeno, *El Tiempo*, March 6, 2000, Antonio Caballero, *Semana*, July 12, 1999; and interview with Alfonso Gómez Méndez, former attorney general, *El Tiempo*, August 12, 1998.

away the sovereignty of the country.[29] Critics also denounce its direct involvement in particular events.[30]

Criticisms tend to be all-embracing. The influential weekly magazine *Semana* summarized what seemed to have become the standard reasons to condemn the Establishment: "for its utter failure and lack of purpose, its weakness and lack of courage, the absence of any sense of its own responsibility in the construction of the nation, the narrowness of its ambitions."[31] Among all the accusations, one stands out: its responsibility for the emergence and resilience of guerrilla warfare, making the Establishment, therefore, the major cause of today's armed conflict.

The Establishment has been accused of blocking the political system during the National Front period (1958–1974) and encouraging polarization as a result. Colombian politics.[32] By "closing the public space and milking the state like a cow," it "engendered the guerrilla;" it "pushed the opposition to the jungle." Camilo Torres, the Catholic priest who joined the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), took up arms because he was not allowed to use the state's tools to "touch (or threaten) the Establishment's interests." The historical reasons for the FARC's existence are found in the behavior of an Establishment that "despised a bunch of peasant rebels," or that "did not offer opportunities" to those who took up arms. The Establishment would not only be responsible for the rise of the guerrilla but also for the latter's moral decay.[33]

The "Establishment" in the FARC's Discourse

Leading members of the FARC certainly seem to believe that there is such a thing as the Colombian Establishment, nowadays the

29. See, for example, "Muertos de la risa," *Semana*, June 19, 2000; William Ospina, *¿Dónde está la franja amarilla?* (Bogotá: Norma, 2003), 28; Rafael Pardo, *De primera mano. Colombia, 1986–1994: Entre conflictos y esperanzas* (Bogotá: Norma, 1996); and Oscar Collazos, *El Tiempo*, July 23, 1999.

30. On the fate of Unión Patrótica, as victim of the Establishment, see interview with Felipe Santos, member of the UP, in *El Tiempo*, December 11, 1999; on the ways the Establishment treats social protests, see Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, May 23, 2004

31. "Muertos de la risa." See also Augusto Trujillo and Rafael Pardo, *El Espectador*, September 6, 2000, and March 15, 2001; Gonzalo Sánchez, "Los intelectuales y la política," in Sánchez, Daniel Pécaut, and Fernando Uricochea, *Los intelectuales y la política* (Bogotá: IEPRI, Universidad Nacional, 2003), 15; and Ricardo Sánchez, *Crítica y alternativa de las izquierdas en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial La Rosa Roja, 2001), 300–01.

32. Francisco Leal, "Las utopías de la paz," in *Los laberintos de la Guerra*, ed. Francisco Leal (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo and Universidad de los Andes, 1999), 156.

33. Luis Cañón, *El Espectador*, October 28, 1999 (first quote); Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, March 2, 2002 (second quote); William Broderick, "Prólogo," in Camilo Torres, *Escritos políticos* (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 2002), 14 (third quote); Otty Patiño, *El Tiempo*, January 7, 2001 (fourth quote); William Ospina, "Colombia en la encrucijada," unpublished paper given at the London School of Economics, May 2000 (fifth quote); and Francisco Santos, *El Tiempo*, June 20, 1999 (sixth quote).

apparent central target of their struggle. The FARC's leaders have used the expression since at least 1996, when guerrilla commander Alfonso Cano referred to the "responsibility for the management of the country by what has been labeled the Establishment."[34] A more thorough and systematic research of FARC's rhetoric could show exactly when they incorporated the word into their vocabulary, but it seems that its leaders adopted the term from the language in vogue in the public debate. Soon, "what has been labeled the Establishment" became simply "the Establishment," as in a 1998 letter to *El Tiempo*—when Cano complained about the "courtiers of the Establishment."[35] During the process of negotiations with the Andrés Pastrana government, the term repeatedly appeared in FARC's documents and in interviews with its leaders in the press.[36] For Cano, talking about the Establishment meant talking about "the most representative sectors of the Colombian state." Other commanders of the FARC, however, conveyed the idea that the state and the Establishment were two different things, although inextricably linked. When asked by a journalist if he believed that "the Establishment was going to cede in favor of peace," Simón Trinidad's answer did not name representatives of the state, but instead one of the top bankers of the country. To dismantle the paramilitaries, other leaders of the FARC suggested, "the state had to convince the Establishment."[37] Such lack of clarity in defining the Establishment is what characterizes the use of the expression among opinion makers.

Regardless of its precise identity, if the FARC was going to have peace talks, they had to be held with the Establishment. That was the view of the FARC's top commander, Manuel Marulanda, who, watching the TV debate between Horacio Serpa and Andrés Pastrana, the two leading candidates in the 1998 presidential campaign, said of Pastrana: "that

34. *Semana*, June 4, 1996. In earlier documents, leaders of the FARC seemed to have a preference for other terms, such as the *oligarchy* or the *system*. See Jacobo Arenas, *Cese al fuego. Una historia política de las FARC* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1985), 12, 100, 114, 135; and the interview with Manuel Marulanda in Carlos Arango, *FARC: Veinte años de marquetalia a la Uribe* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1984), 85–134. *Oligarchy* was also the word preferred by other guerrilla groups, such as the M-19. See Jaime Bateman Cayón, *Oiga hermano* (Bogotá: Ediciones Macondo, 1984), 33, 35, 40, 45, 85, 110, 115. Former members of the M-19, seem also to prefer now the word Establishment. See Antonio Navarro Wolf's chapter in *Haciendo paz: Reflexiones y perspectivas del proceso de paz en Colombia*, ed. Fernando Cepeda (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 2001), 74, and other works by Otty Patiño, and Vera Grabe.

35. *El Tiempo*, February 29, 1998.

36. *FARC: El país que proponemos construir* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 2001), 40, 51, 55. See also Federico Sarmiento, "La post-crisis del proceso de paz: El papel de la sociedad civil y la comunidad internacional," January 2002 (mimeo); and Anncol's news report, February 21, 2002; "No creemos en las encuestas: Raúl Reyes," *El Espectador*, February 17, 2002.

37. *El Tiempo*, October 27, 1999 (first quote); and *El País* (Madrid), March 2, 2000 (second quote).

man does represent whom we want to see at the other side of the table, he is a man of the Establishment and it is with the Establishment that we want to negotiate."[38]

On January 8, 2002, in an attempt to keep the negotiations rolling, Marulanda wrote to James Lemoyne, UN Secretary General's Special Representative on the Peace Process in Colombia, complaining about the presence of "strong sectors within the Establishment" opposed to the possibility of change, "clinging through violence to the current regime."[39] This continued to be the line after the definite breakdown of the peace process. In August 2002, when rejecting President Alvaro Uribe's proposal that the United Nations play a mediating role in the conflict, the FARC insisted that "without any will for change from the Colombian Establishment, the possibilities of bringing the armed struggle to an end are closed."[40]

The "Establishment" and the Search for Peace

Such language—and the diagnosis it suggested—was widely shared among political analysts who, throughout the Pastrana administration (1998–2002),[41] recurrently demanded that the so-called Establishment come to terms with the guerrillas, as if the key to the solution lay there. Above all, opinion makers demanded that the Establishment make "sacrifices" and "concessions." Talk of "peace costs" became common among political analysts, costs that the Establishment was apparently unwilling to meet. What was needed as a precondition for peace—the argument went—was an agreement within the Establishment around substantial reforms: Without such an agreement, "sacrificing" what the Establishment "should sacrifice, the war will not end."[42] Public dignitaries shared such views. Journalists popularized them even further. For some, like Antonio Caballero—the most widely read Colombian

38. See Mauricio Vargas, *Tristes tigres: Revelador perfil de tres mandatarios que no pudieron cambiar a Colombia* (Bogota: Planeta, 2001), 141; and León Valencia, *Adiós a la política, bienvenida la guerra: Secretos de un malogrado proceso de paz* (Bogotá: Intermedio Editores, 2002), 84, 90.

39. *ElTtiempo.com*, January 8, 2002.

40. *El Heraldo*, August 10, 2002.

41. Pastrana himself used the term in his memoirs, *La palabra bajo fuego* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2005), 29, 47, 328, 332. It was also used by the memoirs of the process by one of the government's negotiators, Luis Guillermo Giraldo, *Del proceso y de la paz* (Manizales: Edigráficas, 2001), 16.

42. Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, June 13, 1999; Hernando Gómez, *Semana*, November 30, 2000; Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "Acerca de la dimensión internacional de la guerra y de la paz en Colombia: Conjeturas sobre un futuro incierto," in Leal, *Los laberintos de la guerra*, 259; Cecilia Orozco's interview with Enrique Santos Calderón, in Cecilia Orozco *¿Y ahora qué? El futuro de la guerra y la paz en Colombia* (Bogotá, 2002), 86.

columnist—the answer was simple: "The Establishment pretends that everything works out for free, and in addition profitably. It does not want to spend a penny on peace. They are not going to fight the war, nor will their children interrupt their business studies in U.S. universities."[43] Whatever the answer, the assumption was that the Establishment's attitude would determine the guerrillas' decision to give up the armed struggle.

As the crisis unfolded, leading to the collapse of negotiations on February 20, 2002, the use of the term and the pressure upon the so-called Establishment from opinion makers seem to have intensified. In what appeared to be an attempt to compel one of the parties at the negotiating table to come to its senses, influential columnists like Daniel Samper begged "the Establishment to understand that problems of public order to a large extent . . . had their origins in the inequality and conditions of misery, oppression and backwardness of the Colombian people." Leading members of the private sector also criticized the Establishment for opting "for short-term gains and middle-of-the-road stability instead of the required sacrifices for a definite solution."[44]

There were words of condemnation for the FARC, but equal or even more responsibility was assigned to President Pastrana for his failure "to lead a negotiation inside the Establishment to clarify what it is prepared to give in exchange for [the end of] war." The idea was reiterated again and again, be it by former ministers or prominent intellectuals—who signed an open letter calling for the rectification of the peace process.[45]

One of the harshest criticisms of the Establishment during those days of January and February 2002 came from *El Tiempo*, the leading Colombian daily newspaper. *El Tiempo* made it clear that it had supported a negotiated settlement throughout the forty months of the peace process, "in spite of the official strategy, the pachyderms of the Establishment and the increasing arrogance of the FARC." In its view, the Colombian Establishment was as responsible for the war as the guerrillas and paramilitaries were, but, unlike the others, the Establishment had "in its hands the legal means to make the country more just and democratic." However, the Establishment had been incapable of stopping the spread of violence, from both left and right wing quarters; it had "preferred to look the other way when issues of misery and landless peasants were

43. Antonio Caballero, *Semana*, October 22, 2001; and D'Artagnan [Roberto Posada García Peña], *El Tiempo*, July 25, 2001.

44. Daniel Samper, *El Tiempo*, January 16, 2002, and Gabriel Silva, *El Tiempo*, January 15, 2002. See also Javier Fernández, "Después de la prórroga," *Prospectiva económica y financiera*, January 21, 2002.

45. The quote criticizing Pastrana comes from "Castillo de naipes," *Semana*, January 13, 2002. For the opinion of a former minister, see Armando Benedetti, *El Tiempo*, January 28, 2002. The letter of the intellectuals was published in *El Tiempo.com*, January 12, 2002.

raised." It is hard to find a stronger language of condemnation: "The Colombian Establishment," *El Tiempo* concluded, "that for so many years has not seen beyond its belly button ought to put its hand inside its pocket. Inside, it will find not only money. It will also find the origins of the legitimacy it lacks."[46]

The Establishment continued to figure prominently in the language of opinion makers during the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the peace process. "We have to support the institutions," columnist and former head of the Security Service of Colombia (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, or DAS) Ramiro Bejarano pointed out, "because what is at stake is the survival of the Establishment." Others took the occasion to reiterate their long-standing recriminations. "We have all been involved in a prolonged act of foolishness" was the final verdict of Rudolf Hommes: "all" meant "the government, the Establishment, the majority of public opinion, the Nuncio, the United States."[47]

Who is "In" and Who is "Out"?

Given the features that apparently characterize the Colombian Establishment, in particular its responsibility for the country's most serious problems, its mighty powers, and its role as a protagonist, it could be assumed that its identity has been clearly and unanimously defined. However, any serious attempt at trying to identify the Colombian Establishment in the discourse of political analysts would have to overcome, first, the difficulty of a messy language that describes its nature as diverse and heterogeneous. Those who use the term sometimes add a qualifying adjective, suggestive of not one but of various Establishments: we can come across "urban," "intellectual," "political," or "capitalist" Establishments.[48] Critics sometimes explicitly acknowledge that the Establishment is far from homogeneous. There are at least "reactionary" and "enlightened" sectors within the Establishment. Yet the Establishment is often

46. See the lead editorials in *El Tiempo* on February 22, 2002 (first quote); January 4, 2002 (second quote); February 5, 2002 (third and fourth quote). See further lead editorials in *El Tiempo* on January 5, 8, 11, and 17, 2002, and on February 25, 2002.

47. Rudolf Hommes, *El Tiempo*, February 22, 2002, and Ramiro Bejarano, *El Espectador*, February 24, 2002. See also Juan Lozano, *El Tiempo*, February 25, 2002; Felipe Zuleta, *El Espectador*, February 24, 2002.

48. Luis Alberto Restrepo, "The Crisis of the Current Political Regime and its Possible Outcomes," in *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, ed. Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez (Wilmington: SR Books, 1992); leading editorial articles in *El Tiempo*, April 2 and 29, 2002; Bruce Bagley and Gabrial Silva, "De cómo se ha formado la nación colombiana: Una lectura política," *Estudios Sociales* 4 (March 1989), 10, 14, 32, and 33; Gary Hoskin, Rodolfo Masías, and Miguel García, "La decisión de voto en las elecciones presidenciales de 2002," in *Colombia 2002: Elecciones, comportamiento electoral y democracia*, edited by Hoskin et al. (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2003), 57.

criticized precisely because of its fragmentation, and subsequent failure to produce a unified vision for the country.[49]

Either fragmented or unified, the Establishment also seems to have produced its own rebels. Antonio Caballero claims to have been born "*en su propio seno*" (in its very heart), where he has always lived. He helped to set up and produce *Alternativa*, a weekly socialist-leaning magazine published during the 1970s and 1980s, edited by "member rebels of the Establishment."[50] Ingrid Betancourt, the presidential candidate kidnapped by the FARC in 2002, has also been described as "a rebel woman who broke with the Establishment."[51] Whether or not Betancourt belongs to the same Establishment that Caballero has in mind remains an open question.

What becomes increasingly clear as we move on to the examination of the term is how vague and ill-defined *the Colombian Establishment* is. "The Establishment is not monolithic," Hernando Gómez Buendía recognizes, but only to further confuse an already confused picture, "it includes a wide range of perceptions, theories, prejudices and interests, from Enrique Gómez [a conservative senator, son of former president Laureano Gómez, brother of the assassinated conservative leader Alvaro Gómez Hurtado] to Argelino Garzón [a former union leader, now governor of Valle del Cauca], to the army generals or the NGOs."[52]

This sort of confusion can be further illustrated by looking at various other ways the expression is used or at the explicit attempts to define it. The latter are not frequent, and when we learn what those who use the term mean by it, we are often left with a broadly defined word that is by and large equated with political power. In his recent examination of the territorial debate, former minister of the interior, Jaime Castro made references to the Establishment—"that is to say," he went on to explain, "the Government, Congress, the traditional political parties, and the new political organizations." Similarly, for Vera Grabe, senator and a former

49. Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, January 16, 2000, and April 22, 2001. A close advisor to President Alvaro Uribe has also referred to "progressive" members of the Establishment: José Obdulio Gaviria, *Sofismas del terrorismo en Colombia* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2005), 176. See also Roberto Pombo, *Cambio*, November 15, 1999; María Isabel Rueda, *Semana*, June 21, 2002; Jesús Antonio Bejarano, "¿Avanza Colombia hacia la paz?" in *1999: Un año de turbulencia. Ensayos económicos de la Contraloría*, ed. Carlos Ossa (Bogotá: Contraloría General, 2000), 355; lead editorial in *El Espectador*, May 27, 1999; Alejandro Reyes, *El Tiempo*, September 22, 1999.

50. Antonio Caballero's speech at his acceptance of the Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar, published in *Semana.com*, n.d. (article in possession of author).

51. Otty Patiño, *El Tiempo*, May 31, 2002. See also Oscar Collazos, *El poder para quién. Serpa, Santín, Uribe, Garzón y Betancourt responden* (Bogotá: Aguilar, 2001), 16; Ingrid Betancourt, *La rabia en el corazón* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 2001), 302, and Eduardo Sáenz Rovner's review of Betancourt's book in *Análisis Político* 43 (May–August 2001), 127.

52. Hernando Gómez, *Semana*, April 29, 2001.

member of the M-19, the Establishment was the name for the state and the parties but also for the media."[53]

The state—almost inevitably an illegitimate state—is sometimes described as representing the Establishment. Not all state institutions, however, are included in such a notion. The armed forces, for example, are said to differ from the Establishment, whose interests and those of the military would not coincide. It could be inferred from other texts that the *Establishment* was just an alternative term to refer to the government. But some comments distinguish the two entities, as when the Pastrana administration was criticized for negotiating with the guerrillas "before negotiating with the Establishment."[54]

Names of presidents and former presidents are among the most recurrent in the language of the Establishment. They are variably described as leaders of the Establishment, or merely as its "representatives or spokesmen." They are also included in what Roberto Pombo called "the politicians of the Establishment."[55] This is, however, of little help. Not all politicians, even some with highly influential positions, seem to qualify for membership in the club, in spite of claims that "the traditional (political) parties have embodied the Establishment." On the contrary. When *Semana* gave examples of the "best representatives of the Establishment," the magazine singled out the names of an apparent new breed of politicians distinguishable from "discredited traditional politicians."[56]

Facing such contradictions, one way to get closer to a definition of the Establishment may be by way of exclusion. Antanas Mockus, for example, is said to have won the 2000 Bogotá mayoral election without Establishment antecedents: in Bogotá a vote for him was a vote against the Establishment. Similarly, the election of an indigenous leader, Floro Tumbalá, as governor of Cauca was considered another vote against the

53. Jaime Castro, *La cuestión territorial* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 2002), 177 ; Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2000), 226. For a wider definition, see "Darse o no la pela es la cuestión," *El Tiempo*, February 5, 2002.

54. Alfredo Molano, *El Espectador*, December 12, 1999. See also Ramiro Bejarano, *El Espectador*, June 11, 1999 and Alejandro Santos, *Semana*, July 12, 1999. Similar comments are made about President Betancur's government and his inability to unify the Establishment around his peace proposals. See Alfredo Rangel, *Guerra insurgente: Conflictos en Malasia, Perú, Filipinas, El Salvador y Colombia* (Bogotá: Intermedio Editores, 2001), 363; Cecilia Orozco's interview with Nicanor Restrepo, Orozco, *¿Y ahora qué?*, 116; Hernando Gómez, *El lío de Colombia. ¿Por qué no logramos salir de la crisis?* (Bogotá: TM Editories, 2000), 89; Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida*, 226; Antonio Navarro Wolf and Juan Carlos Iragorri, *Mi guerra es la paz: Navarro se confiesa con Juan Carlos Iragorri* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2004), 66; Edgar Téllez, Oscar Montes, and Jorge Lesmes, *Diario íntimo de un fracaso: Historia no contada del proceso de paz con las FARC* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2002), 233.

55. Armando Benedetti, *El Tiempo*, June 12, 2000; Luis Cañón and Sergio Otálora, *El Espectador*, December 12 and November 19, 1999.

56. *Semana*, November 2, 2003; Collazos, "Más sobre terceras vías," op. cit.

Establishment. Luis Garzón, the mayor of Bogotá, has been described as a man of the people, as opposed to an Establishment man, and a possible mediator between the guerrillas and the Establishment.[57] There are also examples of self-exclusion, like former presidential candidate Horacio Serpa, or Senator Piedad Córdoba.

Such exercises may be of some help but not much. For a start, some of the examples are troublesome, if the definition of the Establishment includes those who occupy command and leadership positions in the government, in one of the state branches of power or in the political parties. More significantly, some of the examples given above suggest that government and Establishment are not the same, while contradicting the picture of an ever-powerful Establishment. If such an Establishment exists, it has not controlled the capital city of Colombia since 1994, as already noted.

Perhaps no other case serves to illustrate better the confusion created by the use of the term than that of Horacio Serpa. His successful and ascending public career has made him general prosecutor, senator, co-president of the National Constituent Assembly, minister of the interior, leader of the liberal party and ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), among other leading positions in power. Such a collection of notable posts is despised by some of his political enemies, who accuse him of being one of the "faces of the decadent Establishment." Yet Serpa does not consider himself to be a member of that exclusive institution. "The Establishment . . . has always rejected me," he said following his defeat as a presidential candidate in 2002.[58] "Blame it on yourself," was the reply of the director of *Cambio*, Mauricio Vargas, who claimed that Serpa did count on the support of the political and economic Establishments, by which he meant some of the "discredited traditional politicians" mentioned above, plus a former top executive from the private sector.[59] Surely Serpa and Vargas had different Establishments in mind.

Although there are a few references to the "economic Establishment," names of representatives of the private sector do not figure prominently when the term is used. Some of the explicit attempts at defining it do include the *gremios* (business associations), or indeed specific individuals. Occasionally, the so-called *grupo de los Cacaos*—the name given in recent

57. *El Espectador*, November 1, 2000; *El Tiempo*, May 27, 2002; *Semana*, November 2, 2003; León Valencia, *El Tiempo*, March 31, 2000.

58. *El Tiempo*, June 1, 2002. See also his "Discurso de Horacio Serpa en la Convención Bancaria," Cartagena, June 2001, unpublished mimeo; 2002. The quote regarding Serpa as member of the Establishment comes from Ingrid Betancourt interviewed in Collazos, *El poder para quién*, 55. See also Carlos Murcia, *El Heraldo*, June 2, and *Semana*, January 26, 1998.

59. Mauricio Vargas, *Cambio*, June 10, 2002.

years to the heads of the most powerful economic conglomerates—has been equated with "the capitalist Establishment."[60] And some private sector leaders have themselves made use of the expression but it is not clear what they mean by it. It may well be that those who distinguish the government and the state from the Establishment mean by the latter the most powerful members of the economic elite, but this is hardly made clear in the documentation consulted here. Other definitions and examples of representatives of the Establishment would add more complications. The drug mafia is also said to be either in alliance with or "part of the Establishment," while there are references to the "para-Establishment" of guerrillas and paramilitaries. Definitions of the Establishment even include the middle classes.[61]

One of the few things that emerge with some clarity from this confusing scenario is the absence of self-consciousness and esprit de corps within the so-called Colombian Establishment. With the notable exception of rebels like Antonio Caballero and a few other individuals no one seems to acknowledge membership in an institution whose existence very few appear to doubt. Far from it; some of the figures identified in the public discourse with the Establishment either try to distance themselves from it or join its critics.[62]

IMPLICATIONS

Exposing the flaws of the term *Establishment* may be at times an amusing exercise, but the term's common acceptance in Colombia has serious implications. Above all, the word *Establishment* simplifies and even distorts the nature of power in Colombia. For all its vagueness and

60. "Julio Mario Santodomingo, por él mismo," *El Tiempo: Lecturas Dominicales*, September 7, 2003.

61. On these other various definitions, see Javier Guerrero, "La sobrepolitización del narcotráfico en Colombia en los años ochenta y sus interferencias en los procesos de paz," in *De las armas a la política*, 225; and Restrepo, "The Crisis of the Current Political Regime," 289; Alfonso López Michelsen, *Palabras pendientes: Conversaciones con Enrique Santos Calderón* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2001); Ana María Bejarano and Eduardo Pizarro, "From 'Restricted' to 'Besieged': The Changing Nature of the Limits to Democracy in Colombia," mimeo, n.d., 22; and Ramírez, "Violencia, guerra civil, contrato social," 62.

62. Consider the various descriptions of Noemí Sanín, current Ambassador in Spain, in Luis Eduardo Garzón interviewed by *Cambio*, April 10, 2000; Ingrid Betancourt interviewed in Collazos, *El poder para quién*, 55; and "Sí, creo que voy a ser presidente," interview in *El Tiempo*, 30 May 1999. For other similar contradictory descriptions of leading politicians and entrepreneurs: Grabe, *Razones de vida*, 330; letter from Alvaro Gómez to the secretary of the Movimiento de Salvación Nacional, in *Lecturas Dominicales, El Tiempo*, September 29, 1996; Valencia, *Adiós a la política*, 29; Téllez et al., *Diario íntimo*, 250; Ricardo Correa Robledo, "Empresarios, conflicto armado y procesos de paz en Colombia," in Luis Alberto Restrepo, ed., *Síntesis 2002–2003. Colombia* (Bogotá, 2004), 36; and "Empresarios, la paz es el mejor negocio," *El Heraldo*, November 1, 1999.

different definitions, the expression does convey the idea of its Anglo Saxon genealogy: a hidden elite knit together by common bonds and purposes, who control the country's destiny. As used in the Colombian discourse, it also conveys the idea of statism and social immobility, that the same elite has supposedly been in charge since the mid-twentieth century—or since time immemorial in its extreme version. Such ideas overlook the fragmented nature of power that has traditionally characterized Colombia.[63] Moreover, they ignore the significant changes that the country has experienced in past decades.

Daniel Pécaut has acutely suggested the need to revise the stereotype, widespread during the National Front (1958–1978), that the same "oligarchy" had perpetuated itself in power. If in 1958 it was possible to talk of a "sort of political aristocracy," some of their members had either disappeared or taken second stage by 1978.[64] Since then, successive waves of newcomers, of many different profiles, reached positions of power at a pace of change that seems to have accelerated after the reforms of 1986 and 1991. In reviewing the changes of the last fifty years, Jorge Orlando Melo observes that Colombian democracy is now more "fluid," where there are not "guaranteed powers or leading groups or elites capable of sustaining with certainty their rule for long periods."[65] The extent of these changes is of course debatable. However, the point to stress here is that the term Establishment fails to capture those changes, including the complex composition of power in Colombia.

The perceived simplification of the power structure has direct implications for the search for a solution to the country's armed conflict. As shown in this paper, the use of the word was relatively widespread among opinion makers, including political leaders, during the peace process that took place under the Pastrana administration: The Establishment was not only identified as the major cause of the conflict, but also as the key agent to its solution. Members of the FARC embraced the word as part and parcel of their discourse. A corollary of such views—not sufficiently reflected upon—is that the armed conflict is interpreted as a dispute limited to just two groups: the Establishment and the guerrillas.[66] Even the state and the government here would become of secondary importance, never mind

63. Santiago Montenegro, *Sociedad abierta, geografía y desarrollo* (Bogota: Norma, 2006), particularly chapters 5–6.

64. *Crónica de dos décadas*, 15.

65. "Cincuenta años de Cambio en Colombia," in *De Sol a Sol, 50 años de trabajo en Colombia*, ed. Aída Martínez Carreño, Jorge Orlando Melo, and Ricardo Santamaría (Bogotá: Royal and Sunalliance Seguros, 2004).

66. Interview with the entrepreneur Nicanor Restrepo by Patricia Lara, "La guerra se agota," *Lecturas Dominicales, El Tiempo*, October 31, 1999; Francisco Manrique, *El Espectador*, September 1, 2001; Héctor Rincón, *Cambio*, February 24, 2002; Jotamario Arbeláez, *El Tiempo*, October 29, 2003; interview with Senator Carlos Gaviria, "Debemos ensayar la democracia," *Cambio*, March 17, 2002; Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga, *El Espectador*, August 9, 1999.

society at large. If the conflict is essentially confined to those two parties, the route to peace, first and foremost, cannot be anything different from an agreement between them. Thus the aim of peace would be, according to former Minister of Defense Rafael Pardo, "an agreement between the Establishment and those who have taken arms against the system." [67]

The emerging fashionable expression fit in well with the guerrilla's anti-capitalist and anti-regime rhetoric: The existence of an Establishment serves as a justification for their insurrection. Whether or not the guerrillas believe in its existence—a part of their political myths[68]—is a matter that should deserve more serious attention. For if belief about the Establishment prevails among the guerrillas, they would also assume that any possible negotiation to end the conflict would only require a simple agreement with a clique of powerful individuals. By repeatedly using the term *Establishment*, political analysts and even central power holders may be reinforcing—unwittingly—false conceptions among guerrilla leaders, detrimental to any attempt to find a solution to the armed conflict.

Beyond its implications for the search of peace, the notion of an Establishment has a wider impact on perceptions of Colombian democratic system: it encourages the idea—at home and abroad—that democracy in Colombia is a pure sham. The term is not on its own and, together with other expressions they contribute to delegitimizing the state and the government, feeding notions of mistrust towards democratic institutions and decision-makers. The problem is more acute since people in government or from power circles, including those elected by the popular vote, appear to have given full credit to the term: the democratic credentials of the state are thus significantly undermined by those occupying leading positions in society. As Rodney Barker has warned, "the most serious legitimacy crisis for any group of rulers will be that which occurs, not amongst its subjects, but amongst its own ranks. Regimes can survive an absence, failure or collapse of legitimation amongst their subjects. They cannot survive a collapse of legitimation within the personnel of government."[69]

At least two further particular aspects of democracy are also subsequently affected: the possibilities of accountability and reformism. Blaming the Establishment for all Colombian problems tends to free those in power from their responsibilities, and their policies from detailed examination. I am not suggesting an absence of debate placing responsibility where it matters—on particular ministries or governors, on individual members of

67. Rafael Pardo, *El Espectador*, May 12, 1999; "Exposición de motivos al proyecto de ley de acuerdo humanitario," in *Hechos de paz* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1999), vol. X, 44–45.

68. See Christopher Flood, *Political Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

69. Rodney Barker, *Legitimating Identities. The Self-representation of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

Congress, or on the various policies pursued by different administrations. Indeed it may well be that the public opinion debate is more open today than in the past. However, in as much the discussion focuses attention on a mysterious, ever-existing entity on whose identity there is no consensus, power holders can hide from public scrutiny. As some of those who often use the term are themselves powerful and privileged people, these are self-exculpatory critics. Additionally, instead of encouraging awareness of the complexities of social and political processes, the word Establishment suits that way of reasoning exposed by Albert O. Hirschman, which, in focusing on the reproduction of a supposedly closed social structure, leaves little room for a better informed debate.[70] A "rush to judgement"—indiscriminately—replaces the need for close scrutiny of policy-making, a precondition for a reformist path to succeed.

Finally, the extended use of the word Establishment also has implications for the quality of political analysis. My focus here has been the language of opinion makers, including not just newspaper columnists but also political leaders and insurgents. However, the slippage of the word into academic language should be a cause for concern.[71] A term whose meaning is not only imprecise but contradictory should be received with skepticism by those who should know better. Furthermore, if an ill defined and confusing expression such as Establishment permeates the public discourse, it is the task of scholarship to expose its flaws. For as Sartori warned, "bad language generates bad thinking; and bad thinking is bad for whatever the knowledge-seeker does next."[72]

These serious implications underline the need to tackle the question raised earlier: Why such an elusive and ill-defined term gained, and continues to have currency. That critics of the political system make use of the word is, of course, understandable. It is, however, puzzling that so many leading members of the upper social and political circles have also adopted the term, using it often in the same critical sense as its opponents. Motivations for the use of language, of course, vary according to its users, and in any case they can be mixed. Only further research could provide a more precise answer than the reasons outlined below.

70. *The Rhetoric of Reaction. Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78–79, and 168.

71. Some of the references to the term cited in this paper come from academic texts, as can bee seen in previous footnotes. And some of the columnists cited are also academics. For additional occasional uses of the word by academics, see also Gonzalo Sánchez, *Guerras, memoria e historia* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2003), and the chapter by M. Rubio in Jaime Arocha et al. Mauricio Rubio, "Rebeldes y criminales," in Jaime Arocha, Fernando Cubides, and Myriam Jimeno, eds., *Las violencias: Inclusión creciente* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1998), 124, and by academics in newspaper articles, Pedro Medellín, *El Tiempo*, June 6, 2006, and Javier Sanín, *Credencial*, June 6, 2006.

72. "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," 15.

One explanation may lie in the long-rooted tradition of an anti-oligarchical discourse in Colombia, where the word Establishment might have just replaced, or been used in tandem with "oligarchy" and other similar expressions—"*los mismos con las mismas*," the "system," "*clase dirigente*," "political class," or "elite." Regardless of its origins, once adopted its usage became "ritualistic," while its diffusion took place free of challenges. Moreover, unlike in the United States, where the study of political language is an established practice—even more, an academic discipline—very little attention has hitherto been paid to the subject in Colombia. Thus the vulgarization of the word Establishment is part of a wider picture of intellectual neglect.

Some could argue that the term is so frequently used to avoid "the risks associated with open political critique and expression in Colombia." This would imply, however, that there is an Establishment—a premise that this paper has precisely questioned. It would also imply that there is an absence of open political critique in the country. The threats against journalists and the media are serious enough. However they do not come from any Establishment but mostly from criminal organizations whose activities, in spite of their threatening power, continue to be denounced by the press. There has undoubtedly prevailed an intimidating atmosphere, impinging on the use of language but in different ways. The extraordinary degree of terror in the past decades has seriously affected public opinion, inducing feelings among which is one Daniel Pécaut calls "desasosiego" that impedes even making sense of society. I would not go as far as denying the very existence of "public opinion," as Pécaut does; but violence has diminished the levels of intelligibly in the public debate.[73] Terms such as Establishment reflect such a confused and confusing atmosphere.

Any country at war soon gets immersed in a parallel war of words, in a confrontation of opposing narratives. It is often assumed—as Sandra Silberstein does in her study of language after 9/11—that, when nations are at war, governments are capable of controlling the public agenda through a carefully designed strategy of political rhetoric.[74] However, the experience of Colombia during the past decades offers a puzzling reversed case, where the dominant language came to reflect a diagnosis of the conflict that is more in tune with the discourse of grievances of the guerrillas.[75] Yet regarding the Establishment, it would seem that the FARC adopted the word after it became fashionable among opinion makers, as it served well to justify FARC's cause. Nevertheless, its difussion in the public debate

73. Pécaut, *Guerra contra la sociedad*, 135–39; see also Estrada, *Las metáforas de una guerra*, 76.

74. *War of Words. Language, Politics and 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2–15.

75. Rubio, *Crimen e impunidad*, 225–26.

could also be interpreted as part of the self-delegitimizing attitudes that accompanied, perhaps inevitably, the processes of negotiations with the insurgents since the 1980s: language, as Malcolm Deas and Jorge Orlando Melo have noted, has been one area where governments ceded.[76]

CONCLUSION

Nowadays it is not infrequent to come across the term "Establishment," casually used elsewhere. In England and the United States, where the word originally took off in the 1950s, it was given some consideration as a sub-category of "elites" in academic circles, but in a limited way, and it was soon left as a colloquial and almost meaningless expression used by some journalists. What seems striking in the Colombian case, as amply demonstrated in this essay, is its recurrent and increasingly generalized use during the last decade.

Academics and journalists, politicians and entrepreneurs, all sorts of leaders in the public opinion debate have incorporated the term "Establishment" in their views and analysis of Colombia. Even President Uribe has referred at least once to the Establishment.[77] It is important to note the wide spectrum—political and professional—of those who repeatedly use the word: the Establishment seems to be present in the language of the FARC, leaders of the various parties (Conservative, Liberal, or PDA), former presidents and cabinet ministers, entrepreneurs, newspaper columnists, university teachers, in sum, opinion makers from all ideological persuasions. It should not be surprising therefore to discover that outside Colombia—among journalists, diplomats and academics—the word has also slipped into the vocabulary.[78]

76. Deas, "La paz," and Melo, ¿Los procesos de negociación: una estrategia contra la paz? (unpublished manuscript, Medellín, 2001).

77. See interview with Uribe in "Desayunos de Votebien.com," eltiempo.com, n.d., José Obdulio Gaviria, a close advisor of President Uribe, uses the expression several times in his recent book, *Sofismas del terrorismo*, 153, 176, and 219. The term is also used by the government's Alto Comisionado Para la Paz, Luis Alberto Restrepo, in his book *Más allá del terror* (Bogotá: Aguilar, 2002), 94.

78. See Ana Carrigan, *The New York Times*, March 10, 2002, and her book *The Palace of Justice. A Colombian Tragedy* (New York: Four Walls and Eight Windows, 1993), 17, 52, 188 and 261; "A symbol—but of what?" *The Economist*, March 20, 2004; Miguel Angel Bastenier (from the Spanish daily *El País*), in *Cambio*, January 27, 2002. For the use of the expression by the Italian diplomat Francesco Vincenti, see *La Revista, El Espectador*, June 3, 2001; by a German historian, see Tomas Fischer, "La constante guerra civil en Colombia," in *Sociedades en guerra civil: Conflictos violentos de Europa y América Latina*, ed. Waldmann and F. Reinares (Barcelona: Paidós, 1995), 274; by a U.S. researcher, Forrest Hylton, "An Evil Hour: Uribe's Colombia in Historical Perspective," *New Left Review* 23 (Sept./Dec. 2003), 85; by British academics Alan Angell, Pamela Lowden, and Rosemary Thorp, *Decentralizing Development. The Political Economy of Institutional Change in Colombia and Chile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

Such relatively generalized acceptance of the term would imply that the Colombian Establishment is an easily identifiable being. Far from it. As when it was in vogue in England and in the United States, the word tends to mean different things to different people. Yet in both England and the United States, the concept, for all its vagueness and equivocal nature, often referred rightly or wrongly to some concrete institutions or social groups—be it the BBC or the selected circle of U.S. foreign policymakers. Definitions of the Colombian Establishment are extreme in their vagueness and even contradictory.

Some commentators, in desperation, do recognize the difficulties they encounter in conveying what they mean by the word, as when Roberto Pombo singled out "the Establishment, the state, the ruling class (*clase dirigente*) or whatever you may want to call power in the last half century."[79] Equating the Establishment with power does not tell us much. The state and the *clase dirigente* are really two different concepts: identifying the Establishment with both of them is not helpful either to locate power with some degree of precision or to demand accountability from those who exercise it.

For the term to have some analytical value, we should be able to identify a "well-defined group," which fulfills the conditions that Jean Blondel found wanting in the so-called British Establishment: "unity of purpose," "permanency," and "power." As I have shown here, no "well-defined group" emerges in the use of the expression in Colombia. Those who do use it even recognize that such an Establishment lacks cohesiveness. The "self-conscious elitism" and proud sense of belonging that Alan Brinkley saw in the behavior of the likes of Henry Stimson in the "American Establishment" are absent from the Colombian landscape. The "permanency" of the Colombian Establishment is taken for granted among those who use the term, sometimes dating back to independence but more frequently since the mid-twentieth-century. This claim is never supported by any empirical evidence.

It seems curious that the term gained currency at a time when the power structure of Colombia has been undergoing significant transformation—acquiring more complexity. It seems even more curious that the usage of the word intensified during the negotiations with the FARC, when important sectors of public opinion felt that those who ruled were losing control of the country. There is a paradox here that is hard to understand: in the face of an apparent power vacuum, perhaps feeling the need for the exercise of authority, political analysts, while criticizing it, were in fact demanding the presence of an Establishment.

79. Roberto Pombo, *Cambio*, n.d. (from author's notes on article; publication date unavailable but estimated to be between January 1999 and January 2002).

The "poor quality of public discussion in contemporary democracies" has been the subject of some academic concern—what Jeffrey C. Goldfarb refers to as "a *deliberation deficit*."[80] If such is the case elsewhere, we could perhaps interpret the vulgarization of words like the Establishment in Colombia as just another example of the poverty of democratic debate. Nonetheless, the problem here is deeper, as the country has been immersed in a long and serious crisis, in an extraordinary atmosphere of terror. Terror, it is well known, creates confusion.[81] In such times of crisis, as Malcolm Deas has observed, "people seek orientation. If they do not find it, they start to believe in ghosts of threats or ghosts of solutions. This requires a minimum of lucidity among opinion makers."[82] Certainly no lucid picture emerges from the portraits we are given of the Colombian Establishment.

80. J. Goldfarb, *Civility and Subversion. The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

81. See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Columbia University Press, 1999), chap. 5; and Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), chap. 9.

82. Deas, "Una isla rodeada de consejos."