



Picaresque Tragedies: The "Abandoned" Children of Colombia

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Introduction

At noon I left my house in Cali, Colombia and greeted Pedro, the large black *vigilante* who guarded our building against intruders. I walked down the *Sexta* and took in the lush reds of bougainvillea. The store windows displayed the latest fashions from the United States and Europe. The patrons, driven by chauffeurs in Japanese cars, were being unloaded at the stores, while the pedestrians hurried about the busy street clutching their pocketbooks as if they were fighting New York's winter winds. In front of the Kentucky Fried Chicken, groups of adolescents milled about while waiting for their English lessons at the North American Binational Center.

I walked a few more blocks and arrived at the *Plaza de Caicedo*, Cali's main plaza. Book vendors had set up temporary stalls to sell used copies of paperbacks, a variety of used religious paraphernalia, and posters of modern rock stars. Shoeshine boys looked up in anticipation of a sale. The deranged began their performances. One regular, a man with a full beard, naked from the waist up and painfully skinny, walked on the broken glass of a liquor bottle he had just smashed. Those who watched crossed themselves and gave coins to the child who held the performer's cup.

On the corner of the plaza was *La Ermita*, the colonial church built by the Spaniards in 1747, an exact replica of its Romanesque counterpart. In front of it was a large metal box, wrapped and locked in an iron chain. A few pedestrians dropped coins in it—alms for the needy. As if in competition, an elderly and impoverished blind man sitting nearby held out his hand in the heavy air while his child companion guarded his alms.

Across the Rio Cali, which was no more than a trickle of sewage, I entered the business section, *El Centro*, where the street vendors were so numerous that they were packed against each other as if in a desperate need to conserve space. Here, the buses outnumbered the cars, while the pedestrians mingled with the fumes and heat. The noise emanating from the continuous

battle between vehicles and people was like the tumult following a tragedy. On the sidewalk one adolescent had partitioned off three square feet, setting up rosaries at the boundaries. In the middle of this space, displayed in neatly formed lines, were a hundred or more inexpensive bracelets, rings, necklaces, and foreign watches. Just in front of this street vendor an old truck, its age and make beyond recognition, was double parked. Two boys, flies surrounding their faces, were unloading its cargo of unmarked boxes and half a pig.

I crossed the few blocks of *El Centro* and arrived at the working class *barrio* of San Nicolás where the lack of street vendors and noise was a remarkable contrast to *El Centro*. Behind the open doors of the adobe homes, women were preparing food. The plaza was filled with their husbands. Crowded into small pockets of shade, they sat closely together talking about the work they didn't have and the government that wouldn't help them. In competition for those same mythical jobs, older children mingled with their fathers.

One block beyond San Nicolás was a two-storey, faded blue concrete building with a sign over a worn door painted in large letters: *Bosconia: El Futuro es Nuestro* (Bosconia: The Future is Ours). This was my first sight of the program which, with the aid of the Fulbright Commission, I would come to know over the next year. It was here that the alleged urchins of Colombia, the street children, came for an occasional meal or to receive medical aid. People warned me that I would face dangers and hardships and that I was foolish to try to meet the children on their own turf. But I knew that to understand them I would have to meet them in their world; I would have to spend time with them as they ate, played, worked, and slept.

Whether darting among the fashionable on the *Sexta*, working in the cramped corners of *El Centro*, begging in front of the sanctity of *La Ermita*, or trying to find work in the parks, these children filled the streets of Cali. Their presence was a constant reminder of the country's social and economic extremes.

They are not just a Colombian phenomenon. UNICEF estimated that the crowded and busy streets of Latin American cities are home to 40 million children. Apparently living without parental authority and surviving however they are able, these "street children" are most often portrayed as menaces or delinquents by the general population. One well-known Colombian journalist recently referred to them in the leading Bogotá daily as a "plague," a word that denotes an infection of an otherwise healthy tissue.

However, others perceive them as being abandoned by their families, an inevitable consequence of cruelty or poverty. As such, they are objects of pity. A decade ago a French journalist went to Colombia to write about the street children. When interviewed about his work he added another dimension to how the children were perceived. He said that he didn't cross the ocean to look into their misery, of which he said there was plenty at home in France, but to look at their "spirit of rebellion."

Still other people see the children as having a free way of life. It is commonly assumed that the street children make their bed where they want and sleep when they are tired. The perception is that the children live only for the moment, as if they are immersed in continual play.

These varied perceptions confuse the problem and contribute to several myths about the children. Each perception gives as much information about the perceivers as it does about the perceived. In a country with vast extremes of wealth and an ever-present possibility of a violent change in power, defining the boundaries of the appropriate amount of submission to authority (in this case of the children to adults) is a serious concern that affects everyone in the society.

Slowly I came to understand how these complex, if not ambivalent, feelings toward children's "place" were involved with everyday commerce between social classes. A few weeks after my initial visit to Bosconia, Antonio and Roberto, two children about 11 years old, allowed me to follow them as they left Bosconia for the night. They went to the *Sexta* where their disordered and disheveled dress produced menacing looks and rude comments from the middle-class shoppers with whom they mingled. Ignoring these comments they approached a young and rather affluent couple who were dining at an open-air restaurant. The couple tried to ignore them. The boys, hoping to be paid to leave the diners alone, stayed close by. Finally, the man who was dining told them in a loud voice to leave. When they didn't, he called the waiter for help. Half-heartedly the waiter told the boys to go. The waiter then took the opportunity to ascertain whether the customers were willing to pay an additional *propina* (tip) for the extra service of an undisturbed dinner. Not getting a definite response, the waiter disappeared inside the restaurant. The two boys, engaged in their normal style of work, were now in full charge. While Roberto approached the table from one side and distracted the couple's attention, Antonio came from the other direction and grabbed a piece of meat off the man's plate. Running and laughing, they appeared

like other 11-year-olds as they receded into the darkened street. Having had lunch at Bosconia only a few hours before, they were not hungry so they traded the meat to a *vigilante* for the safety of sleeping in the building he was protecting.

Many of these children were not submissive like other poor children in Colombia, or for that matter as poor people are supposed to be, but instead were haughty and cunning. In the year I spent with the children I saw them earn their livelihood in a variety of clever ways. They collected popsicle sticks left over from a vendor in *El Centro*, washed them, and sold them back to be reused. In the national cemetery several of them rented ladders to the bereaved so that they could get a closer look at their loved ones stored in coffins six feet above the ground. Two 12-year-old street children received a bag of left-over food each day from a concerned restaurant owner who thought they were starving. Regularly, they dumped the mess on the ground, and after eating the sweets, traded the rest to a street vendor for cigarettes. At a meeting with representatives from UNICEF I watched two eight-year-olds pick the pocket of a potential patron at the very moment she was telling the directors of the program how cute and adorable these children were. Routinely, whatever their family situations, they would sing tunes about their sick mothers and abusing fathers in public buses, seeking and obtaining alms. And I saw others dirty car windows while the owners were shopping; then when the owners returned, they would clean the windows and be paid for it.

As the children often simultaneously elicited pity, disdain, and envy, it was difficult to ascertain just what these children were truly like, and the confusion led to wild accusations about them. This confusion either exaggerated or underestimated their behavior. Making an appraisal of them even more difficult was the fact that the children participated in contributing to the formation of the myths about them. In part this was because it offered the children the opportunity to get back at those who devalued them. But there was also the fact that the children were adept at creating an image that would be profitable to them. Their livelihood depended on it. Lying about their ages, family backgrounds, reasons for being on the street, and their current circumstances was part of their well-rehearsed scripts. One boy told me he was in the state reform school because he was beaten by his father, while later the same day he told one of the female investigators that he was there because he was abandoned by his family and had no other place to go. Another boy was eight years old when it came to being admitted to a program that

served lunch only to children eight and younger, then later the same day he was admitted for dinner at another program for children over 12.

The factors which influenced the varied perceptions about the children not only included the ambivalent reactions to the children and the manner in which the children participated in manipulating the emotions of the populace, but there was also a political dimension that strongly contributed to how the children were perceived. It is only by understanding the interplay between the political world and the psychological and sociological realities that the children lived that the reader can get a full understanding of street children. As I began to make this connection I was able to go beyond seeing the children as just a case study, and I started to understand that childhood is not a fixed phenomenon but a culturally relative reaction that is defined by a variety of societal demands which children must respond to in a particular society. This will become apparent as we turn to two factors which contribute to how the street children are perceived.

The Changing Civic Identity

On April 9, 1948, Colombians experienced what they refer to as *La Violencia*. On that day the dictatorial government of Ospina Pérez was overthrown and the populist president elect Gaitán was assassinated. Gaitán was the first man of the masses to have won the hearts of the people as well as the support of the political system, thus instilling a renaissance of possibility in the populace. On hearing of his death, hordes of people flocked to the streets and burned the city of Bogotá. Two hundred thousand people were eventually killed.

Before Gaitán, access into political life, as well as into prominent society, depended on one's family name. Civic life was dictated by family connections. Different families not only belonged to different social groups and to different political parties, but the very identity of those parties was inexorably intermingled with certain family names. And social status was demarcated by the single moniker that made claim to a family's identity: their father's name.

Many scholars have traced the origins of street children to the epoch of *La Violencia*. Although they have claimed that the street children were the result of widespread rural to urban migration that followed *La Violencia*, I have put more emphasis on the changing civic politic. As the country became more equalitarian and meritocratic it increased many people's opportunity to participate in civic, social, and political life. This put a great

deal of strain on the heretofore unquestioned power of the dominant group.

Although children had been part of the Colombian landscape for a long time, after *La Violencia* the perceptions of them changed. In the late 1800s they were called *chinos de las calles* (*chino* is an affectionate word for child in Quechua, the language of the Incas, and *calle* is a public street). Later they were called *pil-luelos* (little rascals or scamps). They are now collectively referred to as *gamines* or urchins. The origin of the word *gamin* dates to 1874. At that time many children working in the Zipaquirá salt mine protested against inhumane working conditions. The viceroy, Manuel de Guirar, ordered the state to round the children up and put them in custody. Despite the children's audacious protest, there was no mention of improper childrearing or remiss families. It wasn't until the aftermath of *La Violencia* that they were labeled "abandoned." With this change, the children and their families could be judged and moral values applied.

At the same time as the children were first being labeled abandoned, a new expression emerged. "Losing the children to the street" became a metaphoric flag that identified the nature of the deeper struggle. The term *street children* is, after all, a paradoxical one. The streets represent a place that is outside family control. The public nature of the streets makes people anonymous citizens, as opposed to being known members of a family group. The identity of the traditional family and its control over the civic politic was, after *La Violencia*, like a child in a public thoroughfare, exposed and precarious. In this weakness, the anonymity of the streets loomed as an oncoming truck, capable of flattening the vestiges of a world where one was known to everyone by one's family name.

In great part the use of the word *abandonment* and its moral ramifications were a diversion from the turmoil of opening up the society to different social and racial groups, as well as from a different set of rules that would change participation in civic life. Vying over the degree that this change would eventually encompass, those who had the power and those who sought it found, in the presence of the street children, a symbol over which claims for their side's position could be made. Thus the children found themselves inheriting a particular social class and cultural struggle that would determine how their childhood would be defined.

Patrifocal Spaniards and Matrifocal Africans

The second factor that explains how the street children are bound to an historical and cultural circumstance is the two Colombian family structures: the Spanish patrifocal and the African matrifocal. These two family structures represent not only different family and cultural traditions, but also different sources of power in the society. The dominant social class is composed of patriarchal families. The typical patriarchal family begins with marriage in the Catholic church and is sanctioned by kinship ties. At this time the man takes charge of the family's economic affairs. When children come he is also in charge of directing the childrearing. His wife and children are considered his assets. The conjugal relationship is important in defining the family (and hence the man) publicly, and placing itself (himself) within the strata of the civic order, hence the overweighted value Colombians placed on the *apellido*, the father's family name.

This is the opposite of what I found in the matrifocal family, where the unions are consummated without legal, church, or even kinship sanctions. The nucleus of the family is the mother and her children. Even the man in the matrifocal family who fathers a child is not necessarily considered a part of the family. In fact, the father is given the status of family member only if the mother decides to give it to him.

In the matrifocal family the woman's role as mother, instead of wife, is of primary if not sole importance. On the other hand, in the patrifocal family the woman is both mother and wife. These differences are represented in the roles of the mother-child dyad which is extremely important because this dyad often mirrors the roles the children will have as adult men and women, both separately and in relationship with each other. Inasmuch as the matrifocal family puts less emphasis on the conjugal unit, they rear children to expect that the relationship between husband and wife is less necessary and less important. This threatens the integrity of the patrifocal family where the conjugal relationship is the basis of the family's ties and the backbone which instills and maintains authority and obedience within the families. It also threatens the male's role in the patrifocal society.

The matrifocal family structure also threatens the patrifocal family by its method of child rearing. As I examined the methods of child rearing in the matrifocal family I was able to reject the allegations that the children were neglected or abandoned. From my observations, matrifocal families in Colombia raised their children in a deliberate and helpful manner and trained

them for independence and self-assurance, attributes needed to gain a functional place in the existing subculture of urban poverty. What alerted me to the discrepancy between these perceptions was the nomadic nature of the children. As they moved between parked cars, through crowded buses, or among the seated restaurant patrons, they appeared like gypsies swarming among a stationary community of onlookers who viewed them with awe, envy, and disdain—the same ambivalent reactions which they ascribed to the children.

It was sensible that in the urban environment of poverty the children would be raised to fill any possible niche that might help their economic condition. Rather than being neglected, the children were taught to be independent and to perform at an early age in a manner that was strikingly similar to children of nomads. Like the children of gypsies, the street children were obliged to learn how to be extremely sensitive to understanding and influencing the reactions of their audiences. Rather than seeing the anecdotes that opened this article as evidence of psychopathology, or even as acts of heroism, it would be more appropriate to see these behaviors as a result of the financial potential the children had as performers. What made this potential so valuable was the very fact that the children, by flaunting their early independence, demonstrated to the public what the public did not have. In a culture where the vast majority of people, in order to make ends meet, had more than one job and thus more than one boss, the children's antics were indeed enviable and worthy of a few coins. At the same time, for a minority of onlookers who were more financially privileged and less beholden to others for survival, the children were seen as a threat to their privileged position—a position which was already jeopardized by the changing roles in the civic politic and the tensions caused by differences between the two family structures.

Given this political and social context of childhood, I now examine one of the pejorative qualities prescribed to the street children and their families.

Are the Children Abandoned?

Because the use of the word *abandonment* implies a morally repugnant act on the part of the children's caretakers, its use can be seen to have a political focus which carries with it a reason for action. Likewise, a child who is considered abandoned will automatically have a history, one of being with an immoral or otherwise pitiful parent(s). Therefore, "abandoned children" are in need of assistance which, given their assumed

history of abandonment and neglect, must include moral training, or more appropriately, a moral reeducation.

The erroneous focus on abandonment came to my attention when I often saw boys or girls of 10 or so begging while simultaneously taking care of one of their younger siblings. On one occasion I observed a girl who was holding an infant in her lap and begging for alms. On closer examination I found the infant was her sister and not her daughter, and her mother was selling fruit a block away. As I talked with her and other girls like her, I began to realize that when these child caretakers grew older and left home at 12 or 13, their own emotional reactions to being independent from their families was something different from what being abandoned implied. In fact, given what I learned about this situation, the well-rehearsed scenario seemed to me like a careful arrangement of theater designed for financial remuneration.

On the several occasions that our research team was asked to visit institutions for street children, we noted that the smaller children were invariably given as examples by our guides to illustrate the severity of the problem we were investigating. On one occasion we were only allowed to see the living quarters of the youngest children. On another occasion, when the institution was readying itself for a visit from a dignitary of a potential funding source, we observed that the three smallest children were "asked" to meet him at the door and explain the benefits of the program. The use of the smallest children also appealed to the press whose articles about the littlest ones sold newspapers. Whenever articles or books were written about the street children, no matter what the content, the front cover was of a small child and usually in the most dire of circumstances.

Each of these groups, in the pursuit of their own goals, knew that "little" could become large, so the image of the smallest children was incorporated into the slogans for helping "abandoned" children. Putting a fedora on a small child is a compelling, if not marketable, image.

Even the children were aware that their smallest colleagues had great advertising potential. That is why, as I have suggested, they were put on public display to ask for alms, purposefully prepared to look pitiful and announcing after serious rehearsals that they were indeed "abandoned." They had learned to dwell on the emotive quality of the word's association with rejection. Thus both the street children and the culture which served them had reason to distort the real nature of the alleged abandon-

ment, making it appear more like rejection than the subculturally normal way of development it was.

Some Age Differences on the Streets

Because of the image that small children generated, they were often more productive than the older ones, and they often suffered less than assumed. Many of the 10-year-old street children appeared as if they should still be dependent on their mothers for many of their basic needs. They often weighed less than 70 pounds and were no taller than the tables at restaurants where they could be seen successfully begging for food from the patrons. Paradoxically, their resilience was the result of looking so small and young that they stood out against the large "real world" in which they apparently roamed without supervision. This produced a dissonant image in those who watched the youngsters' antics. The society's concept of a child as innocent and in need of a family for protection, and a child capable of producing a self-sustaining livelihood are incongruent. It became easier to grant these children the status of helpless and dependent children, no matter how independent they may have been, than to change the concept of the capability of children. This was why small children were paid to clean the windows they had just dirtied, or were described as cute at the moment they were picking someone's pocket.

After being on the streets a short time, the children adopted one of two different lifestyles. The first was that of the *gamin*. Coming from homes without permanent men in them, the *gamines'* mothers expected them to be independent at an early age. Rather than being abandoned, many of these *gamines* had early contact with other children who were living on the streets, and they often made a *measured choice* to leave life at home for life on the streets. Once on the streets they learned to take advantage of the public. They arranged their clothes and prepared speeches with appropriate body and facial movements to appear both cute and needy. They were given money or food as they told their patrons that their mothers were sick, or their stepfathers were abusive. In the arrangement of these endeavors, the *gamines* adopted a style which improvised cunning and haughtiness.

But not all the children were like this. Some children adapted to street life by becoming servile to the more powerful. These *chupagruesos* (*chupar* means to suck or absorb, *gruesos* are heavysset people; thus, awkwardly translated, the expression means those who suck up to the big fellows) depended on pity and lacked the independence of the *gamines*. They became

lackeys to the more powerful children with whom they were said to trade homosexual favors for security. Although this was rarely the case, the children were often taken advantage of in other ways. For example, soon after he fled from his stepfather who demanded that he bring home a certain amount of money each day for his room and board, Luiz was befriended by Jorge. Jorge made his living by shining shoes. He taught his trade to Luiz, but after a few weeks Jorge also demanded that Luiz, despite his fear, ask for money on buses. After doing this for a while, Jorge then taught Luiz how to help him steal a watch from a street vendor. As Jorge walked behind the vendor and got his attention, Luiz was supposed to grab a watch and run, but the man grabbed Luiz instead, which led to Luiz being put in the reform school.

When the children got bigger their ability to live on the street depended on how well they were able to make and take advantage of "connections" or, in Colombian terms, *palanca*. Whereas the families of the more affluent Colombian adolescents assumed the task of making connections for their children, the adolescent street children, in order to overcome their lack of *palanca*, received their help from peer groups called *galladas*. The *galladas* were composed mostly of adolescents, but they also contained some prepuberty children and a few adults. Each *gallada* had an adolescent boss (*jefe*) and depending on its size, several *subjefes*. Each member had a role to perform that helped them all secure food and other necessities. Despite the fact that the *galladas* were perceived by the public as delinquent gangs, they were functional groups which helped the preadolescent street children adapt to puberty and integrate into the existing poor urban subculture.

As a consequence of the children getting bigger and appearing more menacing, particularly when gathered in groups, they were not simply ignored. They elicited envy from people who vicariously enjoyed the children's apparent freedom or rebellion, while they elicited disdain from those who perceived the children to be abusing legitimate authority.

The dynamic tension in the larger culture over the proper way to raise children, the appropriate amount of love, liberty, and freedom that ought to be given to children, was a matter of urgent concern in Colombia. This was in great part due to the existence of so many street children. Their presence made this poignant because the power of the traditional patrifocal family to demand the obedience of its children, like the power of the family to control civic life before *La Violencia*, was eroding.

Why the Children Performed as Well as They Did

Getting an accurate appraisal of the children through the cloud of the cultural perceptions about them was difficult. And indeed all the children were not alike. About a quarter of them were suffering from emotional problems, and many could certainly have used constructive guidance. But the majority of them were doing remarkably well. There are reasons for this. Their daily lives on the streets necessitated an initiation and completion of tasks without supervision. They had to develop a social awareness to gain access to food and shelter, and they developed an ability to move around the city, often at great distances from their local neighborhoods. These very behaviors have been shown to improve cognitive skills. It may be that, rather than detracting from intellectual growth, street life actually added to it.

Although the street children were denied the type of family care that the wealthier children received, few of them, as I have said, were rejected by their parents. Rather than being abandoned, they were allowed considerably more independence from parental authority than their counterparts. Once they were on the streets, almost all the children had a series of benefactors. This fact was often overlooked by people who assumed they were abandoned and without assistance. Alarico, an ex-street child before being taken in by a family who helped him find work, was a typical benefactor. Word got around and many of the street children knew that Alarico could be persuaded to come to their aid by offering them something to eat and a place to sleep.

By the time they were 10 or 12 they had developed, as Roberto and Antonio demonstrated, intense friendships or "chumships" with other children their own age. I was struck by the intensity of these close friendships. I would rarely see a street child alone; instead I would see them in small groups of two or three, immersed in such intense play that they would be oblivious of outside events. They made plans with friends. They roamed the streets together. In buses they contrived to make money by performing as orchestrated partners; they attracted the attention of drivers by working together on both sides of the car; they ate their food by splitting in equal amounts what they had; and at night they slept in secret corners wrapping their arms around each other for warmth. With their chums they explored their neighborhoods and enjoyed the liberty which freedom from closer parental scrutiny allowed them. Over the months of observing their chumships I recalled the images of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer and the power their friendship had to ward off the difficulty of their circumstances. There is no doubt that in the

absence of parental scrutiny these two boys, and indeed the street children, were living out the childhood fantasies that many of us have when we dream of eternal childhood. Their chumships brought them a great deal of support which contributed to their emotional well-being.

Conclusion

In Colombia two forms of childrearing have created a dynamic tension not only between family structures, but also between social classes. The socially acceptable and class dominant Spanish patrifocal form of child rearing demands that children stay close and loyal to their families. Thus the middle-class adolescents congregating in front of the Kentucky Fried Chicken as they waited to study English were appropriately pursuing certain desires of their parents. The working-class children were learning to follow their fathers by being vendors or vendors' helpers in *El Centro*. However, street children with matriarchal family structures were also following their family tradition by being allowed to drift away from home and parental authority much earlier. If the street children, like the ones working with the deranged in the *Plaza de Caicedo* or with the blind in front of *La Ermita*, were seen as functional, they might well have debunked the importance of "family" as it was perceived from the patriarchal point of view. Thus the street children found themselves inheriting a class struggle which also involved deep-seated cultural and family traditions. Their lives were not carefully examined because the children had more value as objects in this larger struggle than they did as individuals.

The children also participated in this scenario. They had learned to outwit authority and thus irk society's concept of the appropriate role of children. In so doing they were living out the fantasies of many children who dream about outwitting their parents, as well as the fantasies of many adults who dream about outwitting those to whom they are beholden. In fact, the street children were uncompromising heroes in a society where there was little room for heroism, particularly within the confines of the existing political and social power structure. As such, they were repellent to some and attractive to others.

After returning to the United States and trying to reorient myself to my own culture, I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* entitled, "Singin' in the Rain." In this cartoon a child is dancing in the rain on a city street. His umbrella is folded in his hand and he is skipping merrily along while the reader sees only his backside and the notes of the music coming from his mouth. He is enjoying, as an unsupervised child might, the pleasures of

playing in the rain. Staring at this libertine child's bravado are the parents of a boy who is safely in tow under his mother's umbrella and totally battened down from well-buttoned rain-coat to heavy galoshes. He is barely allowed to contemplate a childhood with such liberty. The parents, clutching their umbrellas and their child, are looking with distraught faces at the happy boy. They are telling their child that this boy is setting a "terrible example" and will "catch a cold." If they were in Colombia they would be seeing not just one "terrible example" but thousands of children like this, and the relationship between unchallenged parental authority and childhood submission to that authority would appear more precarious. If the child singing in the rain was black and from a poor neighborhood, and if he was multiplied by thousands, the precariousness might lead to accusations about appropriate childrearing, adequate parental responsibility, and other explanations for changing aberrant "cultural differences." What we in the United States can barely imagine, but as the parents in the cartoon suggest we can fear, is the image of our children gaining a foothold in an age-old battle between parents and their children. This is precisely what the street children bring to Colombia, the ramifications of which have reverberated throughout their society.