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**The organization of immigrants as enhancer
and/or inhibitor of their settlement in host
societies: The case of Colombians in Spain**

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ABSTRACT:

Colombian migration to Spain has increased significantly in recent years due to the convergence of many different factors; one of the most decisive factors is the deterioration of economic conditions as well as social and political contexts due to the worsening of Colombia's armed conflict. This article takes into account the country's circumstances that directly or indirectly underlie the explanation of Colombian's mobility. It also poses a question —as basis of the analysis— on the Colombian community's settlement processes in Spain, in which collective practices play an essential role. In order to undertake the analysis, some theoretic concepts are used to examine the associative initiatives attempted by immigrants, and to stage a preliminary approach to Colombian's organizational processes in Spain. Even though these are not quantitatively significant yet, they are an important tool for the analysis of migrations because they might be part of a *strategy* used by migrants to achieve adequate levels of survival, to gain social and economic stabilization, and a closer relationship with the new cultural and social milieu; a strategy that would also allow these migrants to improve their conditions of insertion into the Spanish society. This article seeks to clear the way for an investigative challenge based on the need to examine the conditions, evolution and impact of organizational processes, as one of the fundamental aspects of multidimensional migratory processes.

KEY WORDS:

Colombian migration, Colombian migrants in Spain, context of departure, associative initiatives.

Introduction

Colombian migration is not a timely, temporary phenomenon, product of an escalating armed conflict; it has been present throughout the country since mid-20th century, a time when it was associated with the unfolding of political violence, the development of a highly excluding economic model and the role played by a State that was gradually losing its ability to guarantee safety and a respectable life for its citizens. Peasant migrations to cities such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali, as well as migrations crossing national boundaries starting in the 1960s, were all provoked by the partisan political violence that swept both rural and urban areas, creating an atmosphere of insecurity for the entire population; being also the product of an economic system's strength and forcefulness that, after consolidating itself, pushed aside a large portion of marginalized people. This restrictive aspect of migration was ignored during Colombia's industrialization process and by the improvement expectations provided by life conditions in other countries, especially the United States at the time of the first migratory movement.

In spite of being a long standing phenomenon, what was truly novel –starting in 1985– was the size of the problem, its relation to economic globalization, international militarization and the complexity that Colombia's current armed conflict projects –also in quantitative terms– upon the country's migratory processes. Its magnitude is described as a great humanitarian crisis that has forced millions to move within national borders, as well as to cross neighbouring countries' limits (Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Brazil and Panama) as legal or illegal immigrants mainly in North American and European countries.

There is a humanitarian crisis expressed in the so-called Colombian diaspora¹, people who abandon their birth place and spread throughout Colombia's towns (internal forced movement) as well as around other places in the world (economic migration, refuge, asylum). This forced movement of Colombia's citizens is quantitatively expressed in the following way: in the form of internal forced movement 3,832,527 people changed location (CODHES Informa N° 69: 2006)²; in a similar way, approxi-

1. Regarding the "emerging Colombian diaspora", especially in order to analyse transnational migration see: GUARNIZO, Luis Eduardo. La migración transnacional colombiana. Implicaciones teóricas y prácticas. En: MISTERIO DE RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES. Colombia nos une. Memorias del Seminario sobre Migración internacional colombiana y la conformación de comunidades transnacionales. Bogotá: junio de 2003, p. 29.

2. According to SUR-Universal Registration System (2006), Colombia's official source, estimates that before 1995 and until May 31st 2006, 1,807,337 in total had moved. According to the Census of 2005, Colombia's total population reaches up to 41,242,948 people (Rojas, 2006). According to the Ombudsman's Report, provided in the Republic's Congress

mately 3,331,107 people live beyond national frontiers (DANE: Census 2005), many of them economic immigrants; as well as: 233,600 refugees, 315,000 non-recognized migrants; 16,000 expelled Colombians, 24,500 repatriates (Comité for Refugees and Immigrants, 2004).

Different explanatory factors –integrated within a working hypotheses– as to forced migration in Colombia offer a common interpretative framework both for international and internal migrations, above all in contextual interpretative frameworks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Colombia Nos Une Programme, 2003; Consuelo Ahumada Beltrán and Álvaro Moreno Durán, 2005; Roberto Carlos Vidal López, 2005) and in the construction of explanations, still hypothetical, related to the aspects linking forced internal and international migration, within the larger scope of a globalized migratory phenomenon. Four factors synthesize this assemble of explanatory hypotheses regarding recent migration processes: neoliberal globalization, the consolidation of drug trafficking, internal political conflict and precarious conditions as to the enforcement of Colombian citizen's rights.

Thus, Colombian emigration has been often looked upon as the result of individual decisions made by those who seek to better their situation –economic, social, labour–by settling abroad. Similarly, internal migration has been explained as a one of the aspects of constant and intensified armed conflict, the tragic expression of war and its strategies. Explanations beyond these commonly held interpretations, demand rigorous research in order to unveil the complex dimensions of human mobility processes in the context of Colombia's recent history.

Though internal migration and emigration have been common features in previous times, only in the last two decades have they become especially relevant; among other reasons, because great many Colombians who *move* do it in especially traumatic conditions, determining and explaining their decision. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1998) has underlined the forced nature of contemporary migration processes which are closely tied to global dynamics and their impact on the deterioration in life conditions of great part of the world's population. Thus, it is not surprising that beyond the rationality traditionally associated with migratory decisions as a search for personal benefits, it is today agreed that forced mobility processes are also the product of dominant socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances.

and Joint Reports by the Ombudsman Office and the Attorney General's Office in the compliance of T-025 sentence, among others, the number of migrants would almost reach three millions. See the Commission of Jurists (2005: 7).

To address the migratory phenomenon in the case of Colombia, as to possible connections between forced internal mobilization, cross-border and transnational migration, involves an unveiling of the context's specific dimensions and features, and in particular, of the way in which establishment and settlement processes in host societies are conditioned by the migration process itself, also determining people's decision to return to their native countries. We would like to point out the significant role that a *context of prolonged violence* plays in the analysis of Colombia's case study, viewing it neither as an exceptional position in the complex plot of today's conflicting dynamics nor as the direct or exclusive detonator of Colombian migration.

In particular we would like to underline the importance we concede to context as an explanatory factor in the evolution and influence of organizational processes. In order to do so, we establish a fundamental link between context and collective action, which has not been properly considered so far, undoubtedly because the different theoretical approaches have stressed other aspects of the problem. In our case, and without assigning a determinant role to context in accordance with different forms of collective action, we primarily assume the challenge of examining some of the context's dimensions in greater detail, beyond the institutional/political order, especially when facing extremely conflicting or violent contexts. We would also wish to explore the conditions explaining the precarious organizational construction of emerging social actors and the limited impact of their actions. This is particularly based on the Colombian conflict's brutal character, that neutralizes action by repression, but also, for the fact that violence has taken hold of society in such a way that it has become a significant feature in Colombia's social and cultural environment, somewhat conditioned by social practices adopted by entire communities'.

Dieter Rucht has highlighted the importance of advancing in comparative work as to social movements in different contexts to assess the development and impact of collective actions in the present circumstances, which greatly exceed the predominant explanatory approaches concerning this subject. In this case, one look at the Colombian context implies the articulation of different dimensions and variables of the problem, in order to reveal the way in which these distinctive features serve as the basis for the variety of human migrations that have been relevant in recent years. This is to be done, not only in relation to their quantitative magnitude, but especially based on these features' diversity and complexity, without overemphasizing the exceptionality of their occurrence in the global context.

With these precisions, and as part of the purposes of “*The Colombian diaspora: human rights, forced migration*” investigation, this article is firstly interested in those features of the context that, in a subtle and explanatory way, underlie the explanations of Colombians’ mobility –such as determinants, detonators or inhibitors– but that, in any case, materialize particular features of the migratory process in the Colombian case.

Secondly, we point out some of the aspects underlying the present circumstances on which Colombian migration to Spain are based; Spain being one of the destinations that has undergone a considerable increase in Colombian migrants in the last five years.

Thirdly, and as the hub of our explanation, we analyse what we consider to be one of the settlement process’ main characteristics: the associative initiatives carried out by immigrants in Spain, as part of a *strategy* that, beyond assuring adequate levels of socioeconomic survival or stabilization, evolves into a propitious space for immigrants to rebuild their lives. These processes further attach immigrants to their new cultural and social environment, helping them improve their settlement conditions in the host society.

Finally, we outline a preliminary approach concerning Colombians’ organizational strategies in Spain, with the aim of initiating a line of work we estimate as important in spite of these processes not bearing significant quantitative weight. The examination of these strategies’ conditions, their evolution and impact, serves as a challenge in order to fully grasp their importance.

The international migration of Colombians: Conditions, motivations and immigrants’ characteristics.

The study of migrations can be approached from an historical-structural perspective in order to understand them as phenomena made up of a dynamic whole linking native society’s conditions with the host society’s particular features, emphasizing the assessment of migratory processes as the articulation of human flows, beyond individual or isolated people. Also, the historical perspective helps us identify the main transformations occurred in progression, which unveils specific structural conditions and their impact on social processes such as human migrations. Thus, economic, political, cultural and symbolic phenomena would serve as the foundation for our analysis, acknowledging, as Lorenzo Cachón does (2001), that the distinct nature of contemporary migrations is determined by the market and State logics, though closely tied to microanalyses, highlighting individual behaviours and decisions in the context of so-

cial relations, which belong to a differentiated and supplementary level of analysis as to socioeconomic and political structures (Colectivo IOE, 1999).

Though migratory flows have been a fixed reality throughout history, contemporary migrations have been analysed within the larger scope of globalization processes, with all the consequences derived from it. We have recently found a growing interest in the Colombian migration dynamics, in particular regarding cross-border and transnational mobility, whose considerable increase becomes noticeable throughout the 1990s. However, we shall state that they are the flip side of the most dramatic human mobility processes as happens with forced internal migrations, which have reached a number of more than three million Colombians in the last twenty years³. The disproportionate growth and the human tragedy it represents explain the major importance studies on internal displacement have acquired. On the other hand, Colombian citizens' migration toward other countries becomes a much debated issue during these years, not for humanitarian reasons, but especially, due to this phenomenon's impact on the nation's economic situation. This has raised relevant questions –which remain unanswered– related to migration as a development factor, or better, as a form of mitigating poverty in Colombia.

Hence, the conflict's dynamic in the most recent conjunction, the degradation of socioeconomic conditions affecting great part of the Colombian population and the local situation's connection to continental and global processes, reveal the forced migration of the population, not only along the national territory's edge, but also, and with recent importance, toward neighbouring countries (Ahumada and Moreno, 2005); even towards other destinations (Garay, 2006). Consequently, the present study assumes an analysis approach that encompasses migration processes –both transnational and internal– inserted within the larger space of social issues and their contemporary reconfigurations (Ramírez and Ramírez, 2005).

Thus, Colombian international migration is part of a *new world order* that favours the free circulation of capital and merchandise, while it hinders people's mobility. Additionally, *global strategies for security and*

3. Until now the Colombian Government admits that between January 1995 and the 30th of June, 2005, a total of 1,877,328 migrants have been registered in the Universal Registration System (SUR). The Information System on Forced Displacement and Human Rights (SISDHES), operating within CODHES since 1995 and that includes figures by the Episcopal Conference of Colombia from 1985 to 1994, shows that around 3,832,527 people *have been* displaced in the last twenty years (between the 1st of January, 1985, and the 30th of June, 2006).

struggle against terrorism which serve as a framework for the measures adopted on a national level –current democratic security policies and the development of the Plan Patriota (Patriot Plan) in the south of the country–; as well as the demobilization process as to paramilitary groups, the dispute over the control of strategic territories between different armed groups, the transferring of crops toward areas controlled by armed outlaw organizations, the context of food supply instability derived from fumigations, the blocks or confinements, are, among other factors, realities which intensify forced internal, cross-border and transnational migration (CODHES INFORMA, 2004).

The intensification of Colombian migratory flows⁴, starting in 1990, has been associated with multiple internal and external factors: one is the degradation of the national economy –especially since the late eighties and early nineties– as a consequence of neoliberal structural reforms performed on a national scale. These unleashed, among other things, the massive collapse of private businesses, some of which were unable to compete under the new economic liberalization measures. To this we must add the decrease in coffee's international prices, which weakened the coffee economy, as well as the bankruptcy of thousands of producers, the unemployment increase and the reductions affecting one of Colombia's main sources of foreign currency. On top of that, the reforms included relevant cutbacks in civil servants' wages and the dismissal of workers derived from the privatization of public companies; this situation raised the open unemployment rates and the underground economy to an all-time high, especially in regard to people with university studies.

Apart from the economic degradation, the country confronted an intensification of the crisis on the political, social and military levels. The spread of violence –political violence, common crime, drug trafficking– throughout the national territory contributed to create an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty to which emigration seemed the only viable and advisable way out for ever growing sectors of the population. As Guarnizo points out (203), two additional factors – one macro and the other micro-structural– create a breeding ground for massive Colombian migration. On a macro level, the consolidation and expansion of the international drug market contributed to this process. In fact, the rise in the demand and offer of illicit drugs generated, in turn, a demand in manpower, which enabled people to leave country, some of whom would never have done so, otherwise. It also helped people remain abroad whi-

4. Here we discuss ideas from the work by Gloria Naranjo and Deicy Hurtado. "Explanatory Contexts on Forced Migration in Colombia: Internal Displacement, Cross-Border and Transnational Migration". Pablo de Olavide University-University of Antioquia, Op.cit.

le, in any other case, they would have had to return due to precarious economic conditions. Although the proportion of migrants connected to drug trafficking is relatively small, the drug trafficking stigma has been tied to Colombian immigrants, particularly since the eighties, not only in host countries but in Colombia as well.

Yet another form of migration associated with illegal drug trafficking, although less common, has been disastrous for Colombians' image abroad: migrations related to ordinary crime. Some criminal networks within Colombian cities expanded throughout American and European cities. In many cases these were controlled by the drug cartels, establishing criminal operations of some relevance.

On a micro-structural level, the consolidation and development of transnational social networks has served to ease the way for recent migration flows, providing Colombians with final destinations. Relatives, friends, neighbours and compatriots living abroad open new avenues and encourage others to leave the country, especially for those whose lives and expectations are unbearable. The older generation of emigrants provide logistics and information for newcomers, from giving tips on the host society's migration system to offering legal support, housing, employment and loans to finance the latter's migration processes.

But, which sectors of the population are migrating? The rise in Colombian emigration shows that people from all walks of life have left the country: masons and professionals seeking for better wages; businessmen wanting security and stability; people harassed due to their class or political position; left and right-wing refugees; the pursuers and pursued (Guarnizo, 2003: 33). The last Colombian migration wave is largely made up of people with an education level above the national average –professionals with university degrees, small and medium-size entrepreneurs, middle class youths willing to continue studying abroad; but also, to a great extent, people with marginal backgrounds, including ordinary criminals.

In relation to migrants' origins (Guarnizo, 2003: 35), although all of the country's regions are represented in this unfolding diaspora, both in USA and Europe, Colombian migration is above all urban, originating in some of the country's most developed areas, that is, the communities more closely associated with the national and global economic system, such as Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Pereira (including Dosquebradas) and Bucaramanga.

Colombian immigrants in Spain⁵

Though one may identify personal motives and social determinants explaining the increase in Colombian migration flows towards Spain, beyond those motives, which are mostly economic, there is also the workforce demand to be found in Spain since 1995 due to the growth of the economy and the increased participation of women in the job market. This economic growth process signals a new organization of production and the restructuring of the job market, which evolves into a demand for flexible workers who are willing to accept low wages to cover the outsourcing demands in urban centres, as well as transformations taking place in the agricultural sector (Pedone, 2006: 55-57). In this initial approach it has been noticed that precisely these sections of the job market attract the largest numbers of Colombian immigrants coming to Spain.

Under these conditions, massive Colombian immigration arriving in Spain is a relatively recent phenomenon, as shown in research studies and statistics carried out both in Colombia and Spain. In particular, the researcher Luís Jorge Garay (2006: 6) points out that “Colombian migration in Spain is a recent and growing phenomenon, subject to constant transformation [that] requires continuous attention and analysis”. On the other hand, Adriano Díez (2006) identifies two periods as to Colombian migration in Spain: the first one, from 1995 to 1999, when the size of this collective gradually increases; the second, since 2000, when the size of Colombian population living in Spain rapidly grows doubling its size yearly.

The figures also reflect this growth. The results provided by Colombia’s General Census (2005) shows how Spain occupies the second place (23.3%) among host countries for Colombian people who live abroad, the first being USA (35.4%)⁶. According to data provided by the INE (2007), Colombians are the fourth largest group of non-European Union immigrants living in Spain, behind Moroccans, Ecuadorians and Romanians, with a total of 265,141 persons (6.40%). However, these official figures do not completely reflect the magnitude of Colombian immigration due to the fact that among these a significant number embody irregular migration⁷.

5. In this section we recaptured features discussed in Pilar Cruz’ work. “The Colombian migration to Spain flows and typologies, 1996-2006”. In: The Pablo de Olavide University, University of Antioquia, 2007, *Op. cit.*

6. Other host countries are: Venezuela (18.5%), Ecuador (2.4%), Canada (2.2%) and with much lower percentages, Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico and Australia (DANE, 2005).

7. For 2002, the study carried out by the Comillas Pontifical University and the Autonomous University of Madrid estimates the number of Colombian immigrants in Spain to be

Additionally, and as a first exploration seeking to characterize Colombian immigration in Spain as well as to specify their settling conditions in the country, one could say that Colombian immigrant groups are made up of four groups, whose circumstances are well defined⁸: people who migrate in search of a job or seeking better life conditions (most Colombian immigrants fit this description); immigrants who move for family reasons (regrouping and reunifying cases); political immigrants whose life is in danger while living in Colombia escape the country to find asylum and refuge, as well as immigrants who travel in order to study.

This classification is reflected in the results of two research projects recently carried out among Colombians living in the Community of Madrid. Thus, 75% of the three thousand people interviewed by the Ortega y Gasset Institute noted that their main motivation was the economic circumstances they faced in Colombia, as well as the search for a job, while only 4.2% of them referred to violence and insecurity as the main reason for leaving Colombia. Also, according to Garay's investigation two of every three people interviewed pointed out that the search for a job and the lack of opportunity served as a motivation to leave Colombia (specifically 49% of them left the country to find a job, 11% due to a lack of opportunity, while 6% left in order to do business); other motives given were family-related reasons (25% wanted to reunite or follow relatives), or study-related issues (5%).

As to the chosen destination in Spain, working reasons mainly determine the concentration of foreign population in urban areas such as provincial capitals and great Spanish cities like Madrid or Barcelona, but also small communities where predominant occupational activities demand agricultural workforce (Murcia and Almeria). The need to find better job offers also determines the migration flows of foreign people in Spain (Pumares, García and Asensio, 2006). Colombian residents' case is not different from these population patterns. We find people concentrating in large cities, above all (Madrid and Barcelona), while they are subject to intense mobility. Between 1998 and 2006 the five Autonomous

350,000, of which 120,000 would be legal immigrants or waiting to be officially recognized as such, while the remaining 230,000 would remain within the country as illegal aliens. Other sources reveal that in Spain there are around 738,000 Colombian citizens (according to Colombia's sources) or about 500,000, according to Spanish sources, confirming the presence of 100,000 legal immigrants, stating as well, that for each regularized Colombian immigrant there are two living under irregular conditions in Spain. Noticias Hispavista (2006) and Puyol (2006).

8. This typology is based on the distinctions proclaimed by Cristina Blanco (2004: 40) in order to identify new trends dominating international migration.

Communities receiving the largest number of Colombians among their residents were: Comunidad de Madrid, Cataluña, Andalucía, Comunidad Valenciana and Canarias, alternatively followed by Castilla y León, País Vasco and Castilla-La Mancha.

However, beyond systematizing Colombian transnational immigration in Spain from 1995 to 2005, we would like to emphasize aspects such as the respect for human rights and the way in which migration policies are viewed by immigrants, as experience has shown that regulations, both national and international, seem clearly overwhelmed by the immigrants' reality; we have focused especially on analysing immigrants' exit and destination conditions –both in local and international contexts–, on the configuration of networks, as well as on the adoption of strategies and actions by immigrants in order to organize themselves and demand positive solutions to their problems. Thus, our work's emphasis is placed on what we here call the settlement/insertion process⁹ in which Colombian immigrants are involved while in Spain; a process that in this case encompasses three specific dimensions: the organizational forms adopted, socio-political practices (networks, collective action) and cultural dynamics that help immigrants build social ties focused on recognition, inclusion, equity and justice.

The organizational dimension entails an examination of the configuration and identification process carried out by immigrants collectively, their articulation and organizational strategies in host societies, as well as the different approaches and actions they utilize in order to demand answers to their problems and to restart their lives in the new context in which they are immersed. This bears a particular theoretical interest as to the migratory interpretational perspective, especially due to the fact that these organizational processes take place in a context of constant mobility.

We are particularly interested in identifying some of the features that define the way in which immigrants live and work in an alien society, in what ways they face the challenges derived from that new experience and how they construct new public spaces for the collective solution of public problems that particularly affect them. This, as one of the main goals of this investigation, entails an assessment of specific details deter-

9. We are referring to the conditions and challenges that Colombian immigrants face when living in Spain and the strategies they adopt to settle themselves in the country, in terms of personal, family and social experience. We do not approach the theoretical discussion which distinguishes, within the migratory phenomenon, between socio-political and cultural implications resulting from the so-called assimilation, acculturation and integration processes.

mining immigrants' settlement process –which is no doubt variable– in a country such as Spain, while they find ways of improving their life conditions and denouncing the abuses they fall victim to; but also, in regard to their participatory and organizational potential, which could favour a less traumatic settlement within the host society.

Based on preliminary explorations and on different studies, we acknowledge the existence of diverse collective initiatives among immigrants, that, nevertheless, present differential and uneven organizational resources, forms of social action and political perspectives. Simultaneously, we find a *trend* toward settling in the host society by adopting a *low profile*, with the aim of covering up their origins and the reasons for leaving their countries, as well as taking advantage of the possible benefits derived from anonymity in the host country. The range of settlement expressions reflected in Colombian immigrants' reality while in Spain serve as a reason to explore and interpret the different dynamics involved in the organizational process that links the immigrant population to the host society and its possible tie to previous forms of knowledge proper to their contexts of origin.

Among the multiple problems that the settlement in a new society ensues, we are particularly interested in exploring the conditions affecting the organizational processes in which immigrants are involved, due to the transitory measures tending to find better alternatives to overcome the difficulties posed by their situation, or otherwise, as resistance and self-protection formulas used to adjust to new territories. The treatment of these aspects is a central element in this article, synthesized in the following sections.

Immigrants' organizational processes in host societies: premises for interpretation

Though we understand that organizational initiatives are not in themselves a defining element as to the immigrant population's self-awareness, we do not reject the role played by this trend in relation to their settlement process in Spanish society.

However, we do not start out from a supposed level of organization (high or low), nor based on a consolidated or emerging process, we simply ask ourselves about associative practices that link the immigrant population to the projects, programmes or punctual actions, to find out how immigrants, when they initiate or activate organizational processes, may also be trying to build, maintain or reconstruct communitarian forms that help them ensure their identity and sense of belonging rights, articulating solidarity dynamics and relations with the host community while empowering the management of scarce resources, with the view to

improve their welfare and achieving the recognition of the host State and society.

In this direction, we do not presume the existence of an immigrant population as a fully formed social group, nor do we suppose their cohesion with and articulation around other larger social processes; it is a matter of exploring the conditions in which immigrants emerge as a group, the circumstances that promote their identification and the acceptance of their autonomy, their potential to organize themselves and the features that define their performance, in the context of a repertoire of actions both historically significant or unknown. Nevertheless, this precarious collective identification process does not ignore the existence of immigrant groups coming from a same region, family or community that naturally share meaningful specific features that shape their identity as collective actors.

In this vein, it is possible to formulate some theoretical premises for the interpretation of immigrants' organizational processes in host societies, let's see:

A) *The resource mobilization approach*. In accordance with this approach, aspects such as the mobilization of resources, mobilization strategies, forms of internal organization, the construction of solidarity and of communication networks, would serve to found immigrant organizational process analysis. Beyond the existence of grievances that move immigrants to change location, we would like to investigate the *conditions* that link the actors to their actions, and in whose framework the subject of **organization** becomes relevant. We here conceive organization not only in a logistic, bureaucratic way –whose perspective attaches great importance to the role that *agents* as promoters of action to plan and structure to gather resources, the definition of goals and strategies–, but also, as a breeding ground for inner links that unite the group.

In the same way, tracing issues such as the awareness that groups have of their own interests, the ways in which they create ties of solidarity and belonging, as well as mobilization strategies in view to address the **social conditions of mobilization**, helps us understand Tilly's terms (1978): that a group is *better organized* for the defence of its interests in so far as its **voluntary sociability networks** enable it to build identities according to objective conditions.

Now then, in building an identity for the referred collective group, it is relevant to consider the so-called *collective action frameworks*, defined as the existence of cultural values and references created by the actors themselves, as shared meanings that stimulate involvement in the action; confidence, cooperation ties and cultural discourses are elements

that bring the actors together while encouraging them to act.

In this aspect, and following Melucci, it is important to approach the **identity acknowledgement and configuration** processes concerning actors, as a decisive factor in the social construction of collective action. This process implies a conception of the immigrant as generator of **cultural codes** that are alternative to the dominant ones, helping identify the features that define action as a construction in process and not as a firmly established starting point. To approach the construction process of a collective actor among immigrant population, revealing in it the interaction, the exchange, the negotiations and the decision making moment that lead individual actors to adopt mechanisms seeking collective cohesion and compromise among themselves; it is a matter of explaining how immigrants reach an interactive and shared definition of the meaning and goals attached to their action, in order to construct an *us*; most of the time within negotiation processes concerning interests opposed to theirs.

According to this analytic perspective, the transition from the individual to the collective realm, the issue of how the *actors* involve themselves in common interests, or in other terms, of how a collective actor is formed, is a first rate challenge if one wants to research the process taking place in a conglomerate such as immigrant populations, more so if we consider, as we here do, that *its existence* is not a fact in itself, but a process that must be explored in each and all of its dimensions and moments.

To sum up, we are dealing here with looking into the organizational logics and institutional dynamics that lead immigrants to get involved in public spaces as well as in participation and association devices that, beyond providing an immediate solution to the problem, promote a process of articulation as to other collective and institutional issues. The main question that underlies this exploration thus is if the immigrant population is undergoing a collective actor identity construction process (social and political).

B) The associationist approach. Another perspective, and one of today's theoretical lines dealing with the associative phenomenon, is that which views associations as the main actor in civil society and as an element of renewal in democratic societies (Subirats, 1999; Barber, 2000; Etzioni, 2005). This approach pays special attention to the immigrant population's organizational potential and the process of identification and construction of sociableness in regard to its role within the host society and its relation to the society of origin; a trend towards associativism that is naturally determined by current migratory dynamics.

But, how do we specifically define the integration of immigrant population? What types of common interests bring immigrants together in

order to guarantee their will to associate? In what measure does immigrant population's associationism favour the achievement of that group's specific claims, or, to what extent are the most universal mobilizations articulated?

The trend towards associationsim as a form of reflecting the interests of different groups within a given society, as well as an information and participation mechanism involved in political participation that prevents the isolation of individual action (Tocqueville, 2002), helps approach the study of those hindrances that immigrants must overcome in their settlement and integration process in the host society: associationism enables them to overcome social isolation, promote sociability and the exchange of experiences, as well as to find references that facilitate an effective integration into society.

In the first phases of the migratory process, this need is accentuated through a sense of isolation and loneliness that ensues from facing an unknown environment, often perceived as hostile. Immigrant associations provide a sense of belonging that promotes security: in these, the immigrant can be a "person among persons", not a "stranger among strangers"; in these organizations one can find "value in oneself", not in accordance with the stereotypes that the majority attaches to the group to which the immigrant belongs. Therefore, associationism among immigrants is the product of individuals' "affective imperative". The association is a space where social isolation, traditionally associated with immigration, is neutralized (Sánchez Herrera, 2006).

However, we must admit that these organizations' roles are ambivalent, for, at the same time, they may hinder people's integration into the host society, as they are a form of withdrawal that tends to reproduce cultural contexts dominant in people's society of origin. Nevertheless, associations should be acknowledged as catalysts of social integration processes among immigrants. Voluntary immigrant associations are the forceful manifestation of these people's settlement, far from interfering with minorities' assimilation, enabling a negotiation for their effective participation and integration.

Although associations, as providers of stability and protectors of minorities' interests, may encourage social integration, it is necessary for these organizations to avoid the institutionalization of parallel structures that may evolve into *ghettoes*.

Associationism's twofold effect –as enabler and inhibitor of social integration–, which mediates between the state apparatus and individual projects and necessities, is an important element in the diverse way in which associations are formed among immigrants; a contradictory reality

underlying this group's complex identity construction process.

We thus acknowledge that immigrants' arrival and settlement in host societies imply the voluntary or induced creation of organizations that will perform different roles depending on the moment, the context and the degree of consolidation these have reached. But also, the organizational trend may improve or obstruct the integration process.

These observations are connected with a particularly interesting issue: the process by which immigrants establish themselves as social and political actors; in our view, this calls for the analysis of particular forms of identification that precisely precede any organizational possibility. That is, the immigrant's condition does not presuppose the existence of identity features drawing individuals together collectively, for it is the migration process itself by which a group identity is constructed simultaneously enabling cohesion; a process that functions beyond previous identity features, such as the immigrant's belonging to a given ethnical and cultural community, and in relation to the immigrant's situation as a common foundation for identity.

As happens in the configuration of social movements, political awareness stems from a reality perceived as unfair by immigrants, and which is shared by a group of individuals that, in Tilly's terms (1990), define common interests that precede the formation of *their* collective identity. The idea according to which immigrants establish political cooperation and association ties within the host society is based on the presumption that immigrants have specific interests that want to be demanded through mechanisms such as organization. This would imply that the definition of a shared interest precedes the formation of the immigrant's collective identity as a political actor. However, as a person involved in the job market as well as in the host country's everyday life, the immigrant establishes ties with compatriots and other immigrants, due to which one may notice the process through which these individuals build their identity as social and political actors, in simultaneous and interrelated ways.

Precisely, from this immigrant identification process stems, according to its particular condition –which is expressed in fundamentalism, racism and xenophobia, and in rejecting any acknowledgement of the immigrant as well as underrating the group's value on the part of the host society–, some form of “immigrant identity”, particularly based on a shared situation involving social exclusion and extreme precariousness. For instance, this unleashes reactions within the host society ranging from rejecting the *foreign* to supporting the immigrant. In this last case, the different *pro-immigrant* groups' agendas include the *right to belong*, *to equality* and *to non-discrimination*. In this sense, immigrants are today

included in various forms of struggle for justice and acknowledgement. Nevertheless, and as Mezzadra notes (2005), we should avoid turning the immigrant into a “revolutionary”, creator of social change. At the same time we shouldn’t underestimate these groups’ political potential, as they defy culturally homogeneous National State models by promoting changes in the civic space –access to rights– and the demand for cultural acknowledgement, advocating the construction of more hybrid collective identities.

In this direction, the construction of an immigrant identity entails, on the one hand, the individual’s integration as a *social actor* into the host society, building and strengthening interaction with others who share his/her situation and creating, among others, cooperation actions. On the other, their identity, which is associated with their shared migratory experience, implies the acknowledgement of the conditions in which the person is immersed –exclusion, marginality, subordination–, something that probably reinforces the immigrant’s constitution as a *political actor*.

C) *The social network approach* undoubtedly offers an important interpretative tool to understand contemporary migration processes. It specifically deals with the political context and the role that migration policies perform in host countries in order to control the number of arriving immigrants, a situation that undoubtedly determines the configuration of these networks (Pedone, 2003)¹⁰.

The migration chain and network approach serves to interpret the migration problem beyond economic analyses that omit aspects related to the behaviour and experiences of actors themselves, the latter being an essential element to explain migration’s complexity in recent years. From our perspective, as Claudia Pedone shows (2003: 106), it is particularly interesting to view immigrants as subjects capable of designing and carrying out migratory strategies in order to move between micro and macro-structural contexts typical of today’s capitalism.

In this sense, migration networks dynamically link immigrant populations to members of the host society, while they transcend individual actors, what implies approaching their specificities as a structure, in terms of socio-political, economic and cultural contexts, and other diverse forms of action performed in the host society. The analysis of migration networks demonstrates that these are determined by flows based on family, friendship or personal networks that help immigrants reach the

10. As Claudia Pedone shows, social network analysis had, among its first practical applications, as field of study, the realm of migration networks. Wellman, B. “Structural Analysis: from method and metaphor to theory and substance”, in *Politics and Society*, “Social Networks Analysis” N°. 33. January-May, 2000.

host society; it helps deconstruct the monolithic and individualistic discourse according to which subjects change location for personal reasons based on a rational calculation seeking personal gain, and in contrast, explains political, economic and social motivations as major causes of migration (Grau and Ibarra, 2003).

The establishing of migratory chains and networks, beyond facilitating migration, also evolve into a learning process previous to the organizational trend that emerges among groups settled in the host society. Thus, it is not circumstantial that the reinforcement of networks helps form immigrant organizations to guaranty, on the one hand, the success of future journeys and, on the other, the complex socioeconomic settlement in a new context.

In conclusion: Approaching Colombian immigrant's organizational processes in Spain

The mentioned settlement process is undoubtedly slow and traumatic; besides, it compromises economic, working, political, social and cultural issues. In this context, associative processes involving immigrant populations in Spain have advanced in recent years, undoubtedly due to circumstances that favoured the urge to organize as an option to access legal procedures that should enable immigrants' active involvement in the Spanish economy. This process is neither homogeneous nor is characterised by similar conditions among residing collectives; and although we are interested in following Colombian immigrants' particular itinerary, we do not disregard its similarity to processes involving other collectives, especially Latin American.

According to estimations provided by immigrants themselves in collective meetings¹¹, there are some features that typify each kind of organization, the obstacles that this process faces and the strengths it holds. These immigrants underline the fact that though there is a will to organize, there is still a lack of compromise among organizations to guaranty long term action. Features such as accumulated experience in organizational work, association diversity and heterogeneity, integration into larger working platforms –even on a European level– and their potential to become true social movements, are some of the positive features found in the organizational process.

We question the paternalistic character of some NGOs' initiatives

11. Encounter on the Associationism of Immigrant Population in Seville, November 12 and 13, 2006; Training and reflection days for associations of Immigrants and refugees: "Associationism as a tool for citizen participation". Encuentro Estatal Madrid, 18th and 19th of November, 2006.

concerning the organization of immigrants, for these proposals, though they intend to reinforce the ties of solidarity, are decided on without consultation while disregarding each group's specificities as well as their socioeconomic and cultural origins. For this reason, though we acknowledge the effort, which includes some actions carried out by the Spanish Refugee Aid Commission –CEAR–, we would like to further examine each experience in accordance with those groups' specific conditions as well as taking into account concrete aspects proper to each Autonomous Community, for immigrants' settlement is defined by the favourable or hostile context into which they move.

We would also wish to underline the growing importance of large associative networks, federation type, to articulate different groups' work while promoting their ties to more relevant demands in territorial terms and according to more universal objectives beyond immediate solutions. In this sense, FERINE's work, done together with CEAR, has been of great importance as a step towards the constitution of an organizational option on a national scale¹²

In the case of the Colombians living in Spain, though we have not the time in this article to detail every aspect, we would like to highlight the role we attach to associative initiatives, as part of the development of strategies that contribute to an appropriate settlement and adjustment to the host society. Thus, the first approach to the phenomenon brings forth some of the features that characterise this process, some of which are nothing but working hypotheses that should later be corroborated. Such exploration helps us distinguish some of the most relevant components in regard to organization of immigrants in the different Autonomous Communities: Madrid, Cataluña, Valencia, Andalucía and País Vasco.

We are especially interested in identifying some of the features that define the way in which immigrants live and work in a society that is different from their own, in what ways they face the challenges associated with their new reality and how they build new spaces to collectively solve the also collective problems by which they are particularly affected; in what way they establish ties with other immigrants and to what extent their actions reflect learning processes on organizational strategies previously carried out in their own contexts of origin.

Though a recent study by Luis Jorge Garay (2006: 62) reveals a precarious associative level among Colombians living in the Community of Madrid –about 70% of the interviewed people do not belong to any association in Spain and only 17% are part of some leisure or sports

12. *Ibidem*.

association, while 6% are part of a religious organization. 83% do not belong to any Colombian organization in Spain and only 37% of them have any knowledge of associations such as these–, in our preliminary explorations we have detected the existence of diverse collective initiatives among immigrants, these bearing differences and unequal organizational resources; the creation of organizations, associations and other forms of collective expression, explained to a large extent by need, the vulnerability of their situation and the need to access resources.

Simultaneously, we find a *trend* toward living in the host society by adopting a *low organizational profile*, with the intention of concealing the origins and the causes that precipitated the immigrant's move, as well as to take advantage of some possible benefits derived from this anonymity¹³; *trend* toward anonymity explained in terms of perceptions of mutual distrust and fear among the Colombian collective; and perceptions that inhibit or limit the option of establishing groups, organizations and other forms of association, as other groups of immigrants have been doing¹⁴.

We find that the **association** is the type of organization adopted by Colombian immigrants. In these organizations members are basically immigrants that have left Colombia due to economic problems –unemployment, loss of purchasing power, lack of stimuli as to small scale entrepreneurship– motivated by the expectancy of better job offers. To a lesser degree, there are also associations for political refugees, people who left Colombia due to a recent and escalating armed conflict –threats, persecutions, murders of human rights activists, forced population displacement.

In accordance with their semi-professional and professional training, members of these organizations are interested in improving their life conditions while settling themselves in the host society. In other words, these associations want Spain to embrace the immigrant collectives. These people have practically discarded the possibility of returning to Colombia in the mid-term, due to which their worry is basically to improve their situation and adjust to the new context¹⁵; conditions that are favoured by their participation in organizational processes that help them interact with Spanish public and private institutions.

13. Interviews with Colombian immigrants in Spain carried out between October and December, 2006.

14. Organizational consolidation is today a goal aimed at by the efforts of part of the CEAR, based on the existence of organizations made up of immigrant collectives for which CEAR has provided support, advice and training, some of these being made up of Colombian immigrants. See: Federación Estatal de Asociaciones de Inmigrantes y Refugiados en España FERINE; Boletín CEAR.

15. Interview. Director of “El Boga” newspaper. Vitoria, 30th of November, 2006.

The reason why individual efforts to establish and consolidate associations have not been very successful collectively speaking becomes obvious, in this scenario; at times the search is related to the improvement in family and job conditions for those who intend to settle for a long time. The management of resources, as one of the objectives sought when establishing an association, is also a mechanism to create opportunity that while satisfying immediate needs may empower the socioeconomic stability of its members in the host society. This does not imply that Colombian immigrants' associations exclusively respond to this condition; however, it does reflect the impact that the search for solutions to precariousness has on organizational processes. Nevertheless, the aims are not only these, and conversely, the diversity of actions and goals of the mentioned collectives reflect the different dimensions of associative life in the host country, as well as the plural interests that they share and the diversity of initiatives tried in order to favour the adaptation process and/or accommodation to new circumstances.

However, the set of actions carried out in order to pursue other goals are not something alien to Colombian immigrant associations; a wide range of activities are commonly performed to incite international solidarity when facing the Colombian conflict's escalation; cultural and political activities that are fundamentally the product of refugee organizations whose profile adjusts to motivations of this nature¹⁶.

In any case, the associations, thanks to the resources they handle, are able to hire paid staff in order to perform the occupations assigned to them by the associates. And although volunteers are an important element in these associations' actions, the management gradually helps create an organizational structure that enables a differentiation of functions between associates and the role of civil servants.

Finally, though we are still in an early stage of the research project, we are entitled to point out that there are no particular conditions affecting Colombian immigrants to define claims that differ in any way from those of other collectives located in Spain. Nevertheless, their conditions when leaving their country –the context of prolonged violence and the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in Colombia– evolves into a permanent aspect of initiatives organized by the Colombian immigrant collective, somehow permeating their nature, their form and their role in Spanish society; but also, conditioning in diverse ways the assimilation process and the environment's expectations. Some collectives' –refugees above all– need to divulge throughout Spain the humanitarian crisis that

16. Interview. Bachué Collective, Vitoria, 30th of November, 2006.

Colombia is undergoing due to the continuation of an *irregular inner war* and to underlying social exclusion. This should be done to make present the potential that some immigrant collectives have in order to inscribe and denounce the systematic violation of human rights faced by international organizations that protect International Humanitarian Law and to situate the country's crisis in the public discussion agendas of the so-called *global civil society*.

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