

## False positives in Colombia: State violence, ignorance and the epistemic struggles of victims

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### Abstract

This article analyses the epistemic dimensions of the false positives phenomenon in Colombia, where thousands of civilians were forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed by members of the Armed Forces and later falsely presented as combat casualties. Drawing on recent epistemological theories, we argue that these crimes were enabled not only by the deliberate production of ignorance – through concealment, victim profiling, denial, and discrediting of whistleblowers – but also by widespread hermeneutical insensitivities that prevailed across Colombian society. These forms of epistemic injustice, rooted in entrenched negative stereotypes about marginalised populations, severely undermined the credibility of the victims' families and obstructed access to truth and justice. We also explore how these injustices were institutionally produced and sustained, exacerbating the victims' epistemic marginalisation. Finally, we examine the epistemic resistance carried out by victims' collectives, especially MAFAPO, showing how their practices – public testimonies, symbolic actions, and truth-telling efforts – have disrupted dominant narratives, regenerated public sensibilities, and reconfigured the public knowledge space, thus playing a decisive role in confronting impunity and reclaiming memory. *Keywords:* Victims, state crimes; false positives; epistemic injustice; hermeneutical insensitivity; epistemic resistance; state violence, Colombia.

## Resumen: Falsos positivos en Colombia: Violencia estatal, ignorancia y las luchas epistémicas de las víctimas

Este artículo analiza las dimensiones epistémicas del fenómeno de los falsos positivos en Colombia, donde miles de civiles fueron desaparecidos forzosamente y ejecutados extrajudicialmente por miembros de las Fuerzas Armadas y posteriormente presentados falsamente como bajas en combate. Basándonos en los nuevos desarrollos de las teorías epistemológicas recientes, argumentamos que estos crímenes se vieron favorecidos no sólo por la producción deliberada de ignorancia – a través de la ocultación, la elaboración de perfiles de víctimas, la negación y el descrédito de los denunciantes – sino también por la insensibilidad hermenéutica generalizada que prevaleció en toda la sociedad colombiana. Estas formas de injusticia epistémica, arraigadas en estereotipos negativos ampliamente difundidos sobre las poblaciones marginadas, socavaron gravemente la credibilidad de las familias de las víctimas y obstruyeron el acceso a la verdad y la justicia. También exploramos cómo estas injusticias fueron producidas y sostenidas institucionalmente, exacerbando la marginación epistémica de las víctimas. Finalmente, examinamos la resistencia epistémica llevada a cabo por los colectivos de víctimas, especialmente MAFAPO, mostrando cómo sus prácticas – testimonios públicos, acciones simbólicas y esfuerzos por contar la verdad – han trastocado las narrativas dominantes, regenerado la sensibilidad pública y reconfigurado el espacio público de conocimiento, jugando así un papel decisivo en la confrontación con la impunidad y la recuperación de la memoria. *Palabras clave:* Víctimas, crímenes de Estado; falsos positivos; injusticia epistémica; insensibilidad hermenéutica; resistencia epistémica; violencia de Estado, Colombia.

## Introduction

From 2002 to 2008<sup>1</sup>, at least 6,402 civilians in Colombia were forcibly disappeared and killed by the Colombian military in what official reports term “Killings and Enforced Disappearances Falsely Presented as Combat Casualties by State Agents” (Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, 2022a). These cases, informally known as false positives<sup>2</sup> have been examined from multiple disciplinary angles, yet their epistemic dimensions remain comparatively understudied. Building on the work of Miranda Fricker, José Medina, Gaile Pohlhaus, and Fernando Broncano – scholars who analyze how epistemic mechanisms interact to generate ignorance – we argue that the false positives scheme relies on complex strategies designed to implant false or selectively true beliefs about the victims’ identities and thereby conceal the crimes. We label these strategies a *deliberate production of ignorance*: an intentional, strategic, and harmful use of ignorance that goes beyond the utterance of simple lies. Such production interacts with and reinforces other epistemic phenomena, including hermeneutical insensitivity and active ignorance.

We contend that the deliberate strategies to produce ignorance crafted by the state-created and maintained *bodies of ignorance*<sup>3</sup> that contributed to epistemic harm in the form of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices against indirect victims – encompassing mothers, siblings, children, and caregivers of direct victims. Furthermore, through this process, the state cast shadows that unfairly obscured the understanding of the victims’ identities, relegating them to inhabit a predetermined social space to which they did not belong – labelled as

subversives, criminals, enemies of the nation, and so forth. The application of the category of epistemic injustice to contexts of massive, systematic human-rights violations is not only pertinent but urgent. Too often in such settings, the epistemic dimension is ignored, even though it underlies key elements such as the role of prejudice in “justifying” state violence, the delegitimization of victims’ testimony in judicial proceedings, the excess credibility granted to state agents, and the epistemic barriers that impede effective access to justice and rights.

This analysis emphasises the structural dimension of epistemic injustice, recognising that epistemic dehumanisation both precedes and enables human rights violations by stripping certain groups of their status as knowers and rights-bearers. Although the article focuses on the Colombian case, its perspective could be extended to other contexts of grave human-rights abuses – such as the genocide against the Palestinian people, denial of the Armenian genocide, or the stigmatisation of the forcibly disappeared in Mexico – where mechanisms of ignorance production, active ignorance, and hermeneutical insensitivity are likewise evident. These contexts show that the criminalisation, racialisation, or systemic silencing of specific groups not only precede and legitimise physical violence; they also sustain it by erasing subaltern narratives and entrenching hegemonic discourses.

From this perspective, the Colombian case is not an anomaly but a paradigmatic instance of structural human-rights violations with deep epistemic roots. The theoretical framework developed here thus offers tools for understanding similar phenomena and for strengthening critical analyses of contexts in which the state plays the contradictory roles of guarantor and violator. In such settings, the struggle for truth, memory, and recognition becomes a form of epistemic resistance to institutionalised violence.

This article unfolds in three main sections. The first section contextualizes the false positives phenomenon within Colombia’s socio-political and legal landscape, tracing the policies and institutional logics that enabled systematic extrajudicial killings. The second section analyzes the deliberate production of ignorance, showing how state actors distorted truth and obscured accountability through practices such as concealment, discriminatory profiling, denial of responsibility, and the discrediting of victims and whistleblowers. This section also examines related epistemic harms – including testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical insensitivity, and active ignorance. Finally, the last section turns to the epistemic resistance of victim collectives such as MAFAPO and MOVICE, illustrating how their actions have disrupted dominant narratives, regenerated public sensibilities, and transformed collective understandings of violence, memory, and justice.

## Socio-political and legal context of the false positives

The false positives phenomenon unfolded within Colombia's internal armed conflict, which pitted the state's military forces against the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, for its acronym in Spanish), other guerrilla movements, and paramilitary organisations. These extrajudicial killings occurred at the height of a full-scale military offensive against the FARC-EP. Central to that offensive was President Álvaro Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy – a flagship campaign pledge that helped secure his electoral victories in 2002 and 2006 (Buitrago et al., 2018). Given the markedly personalist nature of Uribe's administration, his political fortunes became closely bound to the perceived "success" of this military strategy.

The Democratic Security policy sought to restore public safety by expanding the presence and legitimacy of the armed forces throughout the national territory. Yet several studies (Cárdenes & Villa, 2013; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (CEVCNR), 2022d) identify a direct link between this security agenda and the rise of false positives<sup>4</sup>. Within its framework, the government issued administrative measures and public policies that "rewarded" military personnel for captures or battlefield kills with cash payments or paid leave for up to ten days, and offered comparable incentives to civilians who acted as informants (Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos, 2008). In military jargon, these results soon came to be labelled "positives." Beyond the incentives, these policies also functioned as a source of intense pressure on officers and troops to deliver results.<sup>5</sup>

The Democratic Security policy was implemented in tandem with two bilateral programmes between Colombia and the United States – Plan Colombia and Plan Patriota – which, according to the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (2022b), promoted a counter-insurgency national-security model aimed at curbing drug trafficking and defeating the guerrillas by force. Collectively, these initiatives encouraged "a marked tendency to expand the military's remit over public-order matters and to guarantee its autonomous operation" (CEVCNR, 2022d, p. 388). The Final Report of the Truth Commission (CEVCNR, 2022a) reinforces this point by documenting the diffusion of a paramilitary "social-cleansing" discourse within sectors of the Armed Forces – a narrative that, as noted earlier, was echoed by numerous mainstream media outlets.

The implementation of these policies was reinforced by an official communications strategy that denied the armed conflict's political nature, depicting armed actors as terrorists and narco-traffickers. According to the *Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos* (2004), the state used its institutional legitimacy to impose a single narrative of the conflict, profoundly shaping Colombian public opinion. By portraying insurgents as an abhorrent enemy that could only be defeated militarily –and by turning war into spectacle through nightly death counts, images of bodies in black bags, and the relentless promotion of

“successful” operations –the authorities fostered a climate in which segments of society became increasingly desensitised to the war.<sup>6</sup>

The final contextual point is that false positives cases remain under active investigation. On 26 November 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC-EP signed the Final agreement to end the conflict and build a stable and lasting peace. Point 5 of that accord created a transitional-justice system charged with providing comprehensive redress to the conflict’s victims. Legislative Act 01 of 4 April 2017 gave effect to this mandate by establishing the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition (*Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición*, SIVJRRN), a constellation of judicial and extrajudicial bodies: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Truth Clarification Commission (CEV) and the Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed Missing (UBPD). These institutions are responsible for upholding victims’ rights and have documented and investigated state responsibility for crimes against humanity, including extrajudicial executions.

Foremost among these bodies is the JEP, a transitional-justice tribunal responsible for investigating, clarifying, prosecuting and sanctioning – on an exceptional and preferential basis – acts that violate Colombian criminal law, human-rights norms and international humanitarian law in connection with the conflict. One of the JEP’s flagship proceedings is Macro-Case 003, “Killings and enforced disappearances falsely presented as combat casualties by state agents.” This case is particularly significant: according to section 11 of Order 005 (17 July 2018) issued by the Chamber for the Acknowledgment of Truth, Responsibility and Determination of Facts and Conduct, roughly 90 percent of the security-force members who have submitted to the JEP – most of them members of the National Army – are alleged to have participated in such acts.

### **False positives and deliberate production and maintenance of ignorance**

A central question in analysing the false positives phenomenon is how such large-scale, systematic violations of human rights could occur – and persist – within a country that possesses long-standing democratic institutions. The puzzle is heightened not only by the sheer number of victims and the direct involvement of state agents, but also by the fact that the killings continued despite repeated denunciations from relatives and human-rights organisations. Any single-factor explanation risks oversimplifying this complexity. A rigorous account must therefore attend to the constellation of epistemic conditions that enabled the crimes, with particular emphasis on the interplay between deliberate and non-deliberate forms of ignorance production that shaped public understanding, institutional responses, and, ultimately, societal complicity.

Deliberate ignorance production must be distinguished from simple falsehood. Whereas falsehood relies on fabricating statements that are demonstrably untrue, deliberate ignorance involves a broader, more intricate manipulation of the public knowledge space. In contexts of large-scale human-rights violations,

perpetrators weave accurate or partially accurate information into biased framings and mobilise negative social stereotypes that dehumanise the designated “other.” Such practices thrive only when they tap into *active ignorance* – a cultivated willingness, on the part of broad sectors of society, not to know – and into the *hermeneutical insensitivities* that accompany that stance.

Within this web of practices, deliberate ignorance operates by distorting factual truths, concealing crucial events, selectively releasing partial truths, and activating long-standing prejudices. Together, these moves supply a seemingly coherent narrative while systematically depriving the public of the conceptual and evidentiary resources needed to question it. Only when combined with the social desire to remain uninformed, and with the widespread interpretive numbness just described, can such ignorance achieve its intended effect – shielding state violence from scrutiny and discrediting the testimonies of those who attempt to expose it. In the subsections that follow, we detail how these interconnected mechanisms – the state’s strategic production of ignorance and society’s often unconscious, will-to-ignore response – combined to sustain the false positives and the bodies of ignorance that surrounded them.

### *The deliberate production of ignorance*

The deliberate production of ignorance is a crucial epistemic feature of certain forms of social interaction. It entails more than an absence of knowledge: it is an intentionally cultivated condition that distorts truth, normalises violence, and creates enduring bodies of ignorance. In the false positives case, this strategy unfolded through two intertwined modalities. First, state actors withheld reliable information, leaving broad segments of society without true beliefs about what was happening, for example, initial public ignorance of the killings’ systematic nature. Second, they promoted false beliefs that legitimised the violence, such as the widely circulated claim that the victims were guerrillas or criminals rather than unarmed civilians. These examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive; later sections document further mechanisms, including media framing and victim-profiling practices. Acting together, withholding and falsification reshaped the public knowledge space, both removing evidence that might disrupt the official narrative and supplying stereotype-laden explanations that guided how the violence was perceived and discussed.

Authors such as José Medina (2013, 2019), Fernando Broncano (2019, 2020), Charles Mills (2007) and Gaile Pohlhaus (2012) have shown how epistemic mechanisms generate ignorance, spread misinformation and inflict serious harm on individuals and democracy. Building on their discussions of active, wilful and *white* ignorance, our analysis revisits these insights in light of Colombia’s false positives case. This perspective reveals additional nuances: deliberate ignorance – whether by withholding truths or promoting falsehoods – proved essential for constructing the “biased imaginaries” and “public narratives” that sustained the killings.<sup>7</sup> By manipulating what people knew, or believed they

knew, state actors shaped political convictions and directed collective understanding of the conflict.

Fernando Broncano, in discussing the strategic use of ignorance, describes these mechanisms as intentionally designed barriers to the production and dissemination of knowledge, whose purpose is “either avoiding responsibilities for damages produced or generating doubts about social demands” (2019, 223). These barriers to the spread of knowledge encompass intricate strategies that, in the context of false positives, included concealment, denial of responsibility, victim profiling, and the discrediting of whistleblowers. We now examine each of these elements in detail, illustrating how each contributed both to the absence of true knowledge and the active inculcation of false beliefs among the public and institutional actors.

In contrast to the disappearances under the Southern Cone dictatorships, the extrajudicial executions carried out by the Colombian army were not marked by total concealment. The very purpose of the killings was to show “enemies” killed and thus deliver results to public opinion. It was therefore necessary not merely to acknowledge the deaths but to turn them into a regular media spectacle – one that convinced viewers that the war led by Colombian institutions was being won and, in doing so, normalised the rising number of deaths and disappearances as the outcome of lawful military actions. Scenes of bodies lined up in black bags were broadcast on national news channels, accompanied by the roar of Colombian army helicopters and the pounding of chords designed to heighten tension in an audience desensitised by war.<sup>8</sup>

However, the full truth of the events could not be presented to this same audience. They were allowed to see the bodies and celebrate the casualties, but the process that had led to these thousands of deaths was concealed.<sup>9</sup> Context-free media coverage created a narrative that hindered the circulation of knowledge among the population. Through active processes of ignorance production, the efforts of the victims’ families – whose relatives were presented as combat fatalities – were obstructed, and the state agents involved were able to evade responsibility. This process entailed various strategies designed to fabricate scenarios that would legitimise the claim that the homicides had occurred amid purported combat.

Various deceptive practices were employed during the commission of these acts. The youths – selected beforehand through a profiling process (which we will discuss later) – were lured and transported from their places of residence to remote locations known for the frequent presence of guerrillas and criminals. There, active army members killed them in staged combat. Issued and confiscated weapons were used to simulate combat and execute the victims. A complete “legalisation kit” was then used to plant false evidence at the crime scenes and on the bodies, standardising and facilitating the portrayal of the executions as legitimate combat casualties. The orientation of the bodies was manipulated, and their clothing was replaced with camouflage garments and boots. Testimonies from surviving victims, the families of those killed, and perpetrators

themselves confirm that many exhumed bodies wore boots on the wrong feet, boots of incorrect size, or uniforms with no bullet holes – evidence of post-mortem staging.<sup>10</sup> However, the concealment did not end with the victims' murders and subsequent staging. To perpetuate the deception before the public and the judiciary, the victims' identification documents were deliberately removed, presenting them as “nomen nescio” (N.N.) before burial in mass graves. These measures were accompanied by other deceptive practices, including the falsification of official documents and corruption within the higher ranks of the military to validate reports legitimizing the casualties.

The army's selection of victims was no random exercise. It relied on systematic profiling that exploited negative identity prejudices to render investigations and accountability efforts difficult and inconclusive. As the Truth Commission's reports (2022a) show, instructions were clear: target young men with criminal records or drug-use histories, homeless individuals and residents of conflict-affected areas – people presumed by public opinion to be prone to illicit activity due to their social vulnerability. This abuse of vulnerability also reflected socio-economic bias, as most victims came from low-income backgrounds, demonstrating overt class profiling.<sup>11</sup>

Profiling constituted an integral aspect of the deliberate production of ignorance. While it did not involve falsifying information, it leveraged existing prejudices to justify to the public and judicial institutions the notion that the deceased were combatants. This practice exemplifies the intentional use of ignorance to obscure the truth. Those responsible for profiling were aware that these stereotypes would activate societal biases in a population desensitized by war. These biases not only hindered social scrutiny and subsequent judgment but also facilitated the continued perpetration of these actions. Regrettably, this strategy proved highly effective: widespread media discussion of “false positives” only emerged in May 2008, by which point state agents had already claimed the lives of numerous young individuals.

In 2008, after years of reports and complaints, the facts began to be widely discussed, and the authorities were forced to acknowledge the existence of extrajudicial executions.<sup>12</sup> When strategies of ignorance production were finally exposed through judicial and epistemic resistance (discussed below), many involved institutions initially denied the facts and then denied any responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Once the evidence made the official narrative of “combat deaths” untenable, complete denial (Cohen, 2001) was no longer feasible. Colombian institutions then adopted what Cohen (2001, p. 105ff) describes as an “interpretive denial,” reframing the facts in a manner calculated to preserve their legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> This reinterpretation involved the discursive minimisation of victims' testimonies, framing their complaints as attacks on the Armed Forces or attempts to undermine military morale and aid the insurgency.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the state labelled bereaved families as “false accusers,” accusing them of seeking to “paralyse the Public Force” in various regions of the country.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this deliberate production-of-ignorance strategy could not contain the legitimacy crisis provoked by the extrajudicial executions. In response, authorities adopted a damage-control approach: they denied the true scale of the killings, conceding only a fraction of the real cases, and argued that the events resulted not from a systematic policy but from the irregular actions of a few rogue individuals within the institution.<sup>17</sup> The strategies mentioned above were reinforced by a concerted effort to discredit those who publicly denounced the crimes. State agents consistently cast doubt on the victims' testimonies, both in court and in the media. This discrediting of the complainants constituted, as Miranda Fricker has termed it, "testimonial injustice."<sup>18</sup>

Testimonial injustice occurs when a person suffers an unjust deficit of credibility owing to identity prejudices (Fricker, 2007). This phenomenon typically draws on exclusionary narratives about marginalised groups, which, as noted above, were seized and weaponised by state actors to conceal crimes and silence victims. The institutional standing of the aggressors merits deeper study in epistemic-injustice literature: those individuals wielded considerable power as perpetrators, inflicting profound epistemic harm by silencing victims and denying them the opportunity to seek justice over an extended period. Their capacity to do so derived from the excessive credibility granted by their privileged position in the public sphere. Critically, undermining credibility carries far greater weight when it emanates from a president or another high-ranking official than when voiced by an ordinary person.

While testimonial injustice against victims and their families was pervasive across various social spheres, including public opinion and private contexts, our analysis focuses on specific cases that arose during interactions between victims and state representatives. These officials embody institutions charged with ensuring access to justice and protection. By centring our inquiry on these encounters, we highlight the State's role in producing epistemic injustices through stigmatizing crimes perpetrated within its structures.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, these contexts vividly expose the many barriers that discriminated individuals must overcome to exercise their rights effectively.

This section presents several accounts demonstrating how identity prejudices led to an unjust deficit in credibility for victims' families. These testimonies are primarily drawn from the Observation Hearing held on October 17, 2019, before the JEP and from the final report of the Truth Commission (2022a). Kelly Jhoana Ruiz, widow of Daniel Andrés Pesca – who was killed by army soldiers and falsely presented as a combat casualty – states:

According to the voluntary statements that I have been able to hear, where the majority referred to the young people as belonging to gangs, as kidnappers, as rapists, as having criminal records, as *vuelteros* (low rank thieves), those were some of the words that the participants used (...) He did not have money, but that did not make him a dangerous person. For us, what happened in the hearings was very exhausting and very cruel because we had to

confront the military, and they would re-victimize themselves, saying that they were not good people, that they were no minnows, that they were there for a criminal purpose.

Anderson Rodríguez, brother of Jaime Estiben Valencia, a minor who was killed by the army, mentions in his testimony that:

When my brother disappeared, my mom started looking for him. She went to the Soacha Prosecutor's Office, and they told her, 'Don't worry, ma'am, your son must be with his girlfriend or at a party.' My mom said, 'But I've been looking for him for three days...' She went back after eight days, and they still told her the same thing.

Jaqueline Castillo, referring to the way testimonies from complainants belonging to the Mothers of False Positives collective (MAFAPÓ)<sup>20</sup> have been discriminated against, mentions the following:

Because, well, we all know, many of them are *mamitas* who have been displaced from their land, the vast majority do not have a job, and almost all of them did not have an education.

These testimonies illustrate multiple ways in which testimonial injustice occurred during interactions with institutions. Victims experienced an unfair deficit of credibility arising from various identity prejudices, including their victimhood (suggesting that their claims should be dismissed as biased towards their sons and husbands). Assumptions – such as that a 16-year-old living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood who disappears for a few days must be involved in alcohol consumption, or that a mother expressing concern about her son's disappearance is overreacting – reflect broader social narratives. When these narratives are left unaddressed in the institutional sphere, they undermine effective police intervention and obstruct access to justice, forcing families to conduct their investigations, as evidenced by these and similar cases. This institutional failure lies primarily within the judicial system, constituting a painful form of revictimization<sup>21</sup> that must be acknowledged in ongoing legal proceedings.

This case highlights how the state exploits asymmetrical power dynamics between the epistemic positions of victims and its agents to undermine victims' credibility and evade responsibility for these crimes through stigmatization. The production of testimonial injustice by state institutions in contexts of massive human rights violations extends the structural analysis of epistemic injustices.<sup>22</sup> According to Anderson (2012), institutional practices, discriminatory policies, and biased procedures systematically marginalize certain testimonies, thus perpetuating prejudices and reinforcing the epistemic exclusion of marginalized subjects. This is demonstrated here in two ways: firstly, it was presumed that indirect victims or relatives lacked the epistemic capital necessary for their accusations against the military forces to be credible; secondly, the state leveraged its disproportionate credibility to stigmatize these individuals as relatives of

guerrillas, a practice which, combined with their extreme socioeconomic vulnerability, eliminated any possibility of effective denunciation and recognition as victims for many years.

### *Hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical insensitivity and active ignorance*

The phenomenon of the *false positives* in Colombia cannot be fully understood without examining the epistemic conditions that rendered certain experiences unintelligible, or rendered them intelligible only to be actively discredited. In this section, we clarify how hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical insensitivity, and active ignorance functioned as mutually reinforcing mechanisms within the broader strategy of ignorance production described in the previous section.

Hermeneutical injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007), arises when individuals or groups lack the conceptual or interpretive resources needed to make sense of their social experiences. In our case, however, the injustice faced by the victims' families went beyond a mere deficit of interpretive tools. Following Pohlhaus (2012) and Medina (2012, 2013), we argue that these families were not epistemically incapacitated; on the contrary, although they were systematically denied full access to hermeneutical resources, many of them grasped quite early the nature of what had occurred and played a key role in confronting the official narrative, a dimension we explore in the next section.<sup>23</sup> Yet their capacity to share and validate this understanding was systematically obstructed by institutions and broader social imaginaries. Hermeneutical injustice thus emerged not simply from an absence of sense-making, but from an asymmetrical and exclusionary distribution of interpretive authority (Medina 2012, p. 98). As Medina observes, such injustice "goes deeper and concerns not only a deficient self-understanding, but also and more fundamentally a precarious and unequal relation to expressive and interpretative practices in which experiences are shared with others" (2012, p. 207).

A key mechanism that sustained this injustice was what Medina terms hermeneutical insensitivity: a widespread failure to hear, register, or respond to others' attempts to make sense of their suffering. This form of insensitivity is not passive, yet neither is it fully deliberate; it stems from structural limitations in the dominant social imaginary – limitations that restrict the range of experiences deemed worthy of interpretation, empathy, or public concern. The discursive normalization of war, the militarized framing of the conflict, and the spectacularization of violence in mainstream media all contributed to a collective numbing that precluded genuine listening. As detailed above, images of corpses presented as "combat casualties" circulated widely, while victims' relatives were dismissed or ridiculed. Such responses are not isolated failures of empathy; they are indicators of hermeneutical insensitivity operating on a systemic scale.

In a situation like the one described, victims' complainants encountered indifference from institutions and the public and misinterpretation and hostility. As noted in the previous section, when authorities or the media did acknowledge

the victims' accounts, they often reframed them not as legitimate complaints against the military, but as part of a political strategy to discredit the armed forces. The popular phrase "they must have done something" was echoed at the highest level of government when President Álvaro Uribe<sup>24</sup>, in response to the Soacha mothers' denunciations, infamously remarked that "the young men from Soacha didn't leave to pick coffee" – suggesting that their disappearance and death implied culpability and thus justified their execution.

This widespread insensitivity was a central component of what Medina calls active ignorance. Unlike ignorance as mere lack of knowledge, active ignorance is sustained by psychological defence mechanisms and epistemic vices such as arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness. It describes a condition in which individuals or institutions are not simply uninformed, but are epistemically invested in not knowing (Medina 2013, p. 109). Active ignorance protects itself; it resists correction – often unconsciously – because acknowledging the truth would require confronting deeply held beliefs, social privileges, or institutional complicity.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of the false positives, hermeneutical insensitivity operated as a protective barrier for active (wilful) ignorance. As outlined in the previous section, Colombian society had numerous opportunities to recognize the injustice being committed, as shown by early denunciations from victims' families and human rights organizations. Yet many sectors of the public chose not to listen, or listened only to dismiss. The state's strategies of concealment, profiling, and denial did not merely misinform the public; they created fertile ground for epistemic avoidance. In this sense, hermeneutical insensitivity was not a mere cognitive failure – it was a form of complicity and, we argue, a site of moral and political responsibility. Certain actors – be they state officials, media professionals, or members of civil society – did not simply fail to recognize the truth; they chose not to. This choice was shaped and supported by structural factors, including political interests, ideological alignments, and the defense of institutional legitimacy. The desire not to know, especially when reinforced by nationalist or militaristic narratives, became a powerful force in sustaining hermeneutical injustice. As Medina reminds us, "communities share a collective responsibility to do everything they can to facilitate everyone's ability to participate in meaning-making and meaning-expressing practices" (2012, p. 215).

Accordingly, the difficulty victims faced in articulating and communicating their experiences should not be interpreted as a cognitive or expressive shortcoming. Rather, it reflects a social environment saturated with epistemic mechanisms designed to undermine, redirect, or silence their efforts to make sense of what happened. Hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical insensitivity, and active ignorance are not discrete or isolated phenomena; they form a tightly woven epistemic fabric that enabled the crimes and delayed their public recognition. Though often described as "passive" or unintentional, these processes played a central role in facilitating large-scale human rights violations. When embedded within a social context that privileges the perspectives of institutional and

economic elites while systematically marginalising others, they create the conditions for the deliberate production of ignorance, the normalization of violence, and the perpetuation of epistemic injustice. As the following section will show, it was only through persistent epistemic activism that these deeply entrenched structures were ultimately challenged.

### **Epistemic activism in contexts of massive violations of human rights**

The previous identified concealment, profiling, denial, and discredit as mutually reinforcing tactics within a broader strategy of deliberate ignorance. These tactics presupposed – and in turn intensified – a background of hermeneutical insensitivity, the socially distributed inability (and at times refusal) to grasp the meaning of victims' testimonies. Operating alongside them was active (or wilful) ignorance: the conscious choice to disregard publicly available evidence to protect institutional legitimacy or group identity. The interaction of hermeneutical insensitivity, active ignorance, and the four tactical practices transformed sporadic indifference into durable *bodies of ignorance*, enabling both the commission and the persistence of the false positives phenomenon. The present section traces how victims' collectives confronted this harmful configuration, resisted the epistemic oppression that sustained the crimes, and advanced claims for truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

As Bohorquez Farfán, et.al., (2019) have stressed, the term 'victim' does not have a univocal connotation. Its conceptual irreducibility prevents a sort of "essentialization of the victim condition based on a fixed identity (e.g., being a woman, being indigenous, etc.)" (p.40). Based on the intersectionality of oppressions, Bohorquez Farfán and her collaborators argue that univocal identity categories cannot be used as a framework for defining people affected by violence, since the victimizing event and reparation are woven around several differential approaches that intersect (p. 39). An intersectional approach, therefore, requires viewing victims as plural political actors, not merely as parties in an ordinary criminal proceeding. In the context of Colombia's armed conflict, this means recognising victims as political and epistemic agents who denounce, expose, contradict, and name injustice, and who, above all, demand their rights to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

As we will discuss further, the social understanding of the victims transformed – shaped by epistemic processes – and there is now a plurality of ways to approach that category. The notion of "victim" was neither bestowed on them nor passively assumed; it was contested and re-signified. Initially, the sons, daughters, mothers, and siblings of the murdered ones were framed as the family of guerrillas killed in combat. Consequently, the State denied them any rights, and Colombian society – desensitised, as noted earlier – offered them neither empathy nor consideration. This sociopolitical category had to be fought for, and continues to be contested, both legally and epistemically, for these families to name themselves and be acknowledged as victims of the State. In doing so, they

have reshaped the sociopolitical meaning of “victim” and, in an adverse context, become political and epistemic agents who persist in resisting denialist narratives.

### *Epistemic activism as a form of resistance against oppression*

Although the *bodies of ignorance* created through deliberate concealment, hermeneutical insensitivity, and active (wilful) ignorance are formidable, they are not impregnable. Work by Iris Marion Young, Jacques Rancière, and José Medina provides insights into the way in which marginalized groups resist oppression. These contributions help us understand how oppressed subjects contest the very conditions – discursive, socio-political and institutional – that enable and sustain the injustices they endure. Young (2000) and Rancière (1996) both offer a fundamental critique of liberal-deliberative models of politics. Young argues that limiting political debate to ‘neutral’ rational argument systematically privileges already empowered voices and marginalises affective or artistic expressions. Rancière deepens this critique by arguing that politics only truly begins when the excluded disrupt the established order that assigns fixed roles and positions. These disruptions – often expressed through art, storytelling, or collective performance – make visible what dominant narratives conceal, showing that non-hegemonic forms of expression are not decorative, but essential to making claims for equality audible and thinkable.

Medina (2013, 2019, 2023) builds on these insights to develop a systematic account of epistemic resistance. Since ignorance is not only sustained by false beliefs but also by affective complacency, resisting oppression requires more than supplying counter-arguments: it demands disrupting and transforming communicative habits, regenerating public sensibilities, reconfiguring collective spaces, and securing institutional recognition (Medina 2019, p. 34). What he terms positive emotional friction – moments that provoke empathy, shame, or moral shock – can awaken hermeneutical sensitivity in audiences dulled by violence, making them newly receptive to marginalised perspectives. Epistemic resistance thus consists of “a dynamic ensemble of cognitive and affective practices that actively confront oppressive power structures and the epistemic vices – arrogance, laziness, closed-mindedness – on which they rely” (Medina 2013, p. 109).

Within this framework, the most effective practices are those that mobilise public sensibility. Protests and the occupation of public spaces, acts of iconoclasm, photography, artistic activism through graffiti or muralism, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, documentary film, performance, and digital campaigns all work to reconfigure what the broader public feels – and therefore what it is willing to know. They cultivate the emotional conditions – empathy, indignation, rage, and mourning – without which structural ignorance remains intact.

On January 12, 2025, the mural *Las cuchas tenían razón* (the mums were right) appeared on the walls of Comuna 13 in Medellín. The slogan, which was

quickly replicated in various regions of the country in support of the women known as *las cuchas*, referred to the forced disappearances they had been denouncing for years, insisting that the bodies of their sons and other missing relatives were buried in *La Escombrera*. The mural was painted shortly after the first human remains were discovered in *La Escombrera* on December 18, 2024, by the Search Unit for Persons Deemed Missing (UBPD) and the JEP. *La Escombrera*, a rubble disposal site long identified by the local community as a place used to conceal victims, had been at the centre of these women's claims. This artistic intervention vindicated the struggle of the women from the territory, who for decades have maintained that it was not insurgent groups, but rather state security forces and their paramilitary collaborators who abducted and disappeared their loved ones during Operations Orion and Mariscal.<sup>26</sup>

Following the appearance of the mural, the Medellin Mayor's Office took steps to erase it, prompting a wave of responses: the phrase *Las cuchas tenían razón* was reproduced in multiple locations across the country and even abroad. In this way, the message became part of a public struggle over truth, reaffirming that the challenge to institutional narratives extends beyond the false positives cases and encompasses the many instances of forced disappearance carried out by state agents. These expressions converge to form counter-narratives that contest the official version of the truth upheld by the state.

Figure 1. Digital reinterpretation of the original mural “Las cuchas tenían razón”. Source: Mutante.org<sup>27</sup>



The following pages offer a detailed analysis of some of the most significant forms of resistance that have emerged around the false positives crimes. Particular attention is given to the case of the Mothers of False Positives of Soacha and Bogotá (MAFAP), whose sustained repertoire of resistance practices against forgetting has repeatedly forced Colombian society to confront truths it had long preferred to ignore, as well as to the case of the number 6,402 – reproduced as the paradigmatic figure of victims – invoked through the question *Who*

*gave the order?*, which was formulated as a strategy by the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE). These two cases are examined as key to understanding the phenomenon and to explaining why they constitute instances of epistemic friction.

### *Gathering and believing: MAFAPO's epistemic resistance strategy*

The Mothers of False Positives of Soacha and Bogotá (MAFAPO) emerged in 2008, when a small group of women – faced with police indifference and media stigma – began to realise that their sons' deaths followed a disturbingly similar pattern: offers of temporary work, sudden disappearance, and the subsequent discovery of their bodies far from home, officially registered as guerrillas killed in combat. Their initial grief encountered an epistemic obstacle: each case appeared isolated, masking the magnitude and systematic nature of the crime. These women bravely challenged state-sponsored oppression – not only by filing complaints despite threats, reprisals, and widespread social stigma, but also by developing and sustaining forms of epistemic resistance. Their central epistemic strategy was the fundamental act of coming together and believing in one another.<sup>28</sup> These gatherings became spaces of collective inquiry. By comparing recruitment accounts, autopsy photos, military certificates, and phone records, the mothers identified recurring patterns and, crucially, began to grasp the scale of the killings. This knowledge – largely inaccessible to isolated families and whose absence produced a hermeneutical deficit, as discussed earlier – began to fill the epistemic gaps created by entrenched bodies of ignorance.

MAFAPO soon became a visible political actor, known for its broad repertoire of actions. Marches with life-size portraits of the victims, protests in front of military barracks, public gallery installations, the viral hashtag #NoMásFalsosPositivos, and uncompromising testimonies before the JEP in Macro-Case 003 all exemplify the contestation of the active ignorance and hermeneutical insensitivity that sustain state narratives. These actions forced journalists, judges, and citizens to confront the evidence. Their practices embody Medina's claim that epistemic resistance must “[regenerate] public sensibilities” and “reconfigure public spaces” (Medina, 2019, p. 34) – a crucial dimension in the pursuit of epistemic justice and the transformation of collective affective orientations. In doing so, they transformed lived pain into communicable knowledge, articulating a new understanding that challenges official narratives.

By insisting on being heard, the mothers rendered the victims' humanity – and the structural nature of the crime – intelligible to broader publics. They offered an interpretive key and an epistemic counterpoint to dominant narratives. Their actions underscore the political and epistemic agency of victims, demonstrating the capacity of oppressed groups to develop critical insight and generate the disruptive force required for social transformation.

The actions described above clearly illustrate how victims occupy a distinctive epistemic vantage point, enabling them to perceive not only their oppression

but also the limitations, biases, and blind spots embedded in dominant perspectives (Medina, 2013, p. 186ff). The families of false positives victims, through their persistent denunciations and unwavering claims about the innocence of their loved ones, have exposed state mechanisms of deception and concealment, thereby demonstrating a deeper, more critical understanding of the structures perpetuating injustice. Acknowledging this epistemic advantage highlights victims' active epistemic agency: rather than passively suffering injustice, they actively produce counter-knowledge that disrupts state-imposed narratives. By gathering evidence, presenting testimonies, and constructing alternative archives, these families have generated a robust counter-hegemonic understanding of events, effectively challenging the epistemic authority of dominant state narratives.

#### *“Quién dió la orden” and 6,402 victims: Bringing visibility by MOVICE*

The story<sup>29</sup> of the mural *Who Gave the Order?* began in October 2019 as an initiative of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE). Painted in front of Bogota's main military academy, the mural displayed the faces of high-ranking army officers under whose command thousands of extrajudicial executions – known as false positives – had been committed. It also featured the number 6,402, alongside the question “Who Gave the Order?” The mural was censored and painted over by members of the military just hours after its creation. In response, the generals filed a constitutional protection lawsuit (*acción de tutela*), claiming damage to their honour, and a civil court ruled in their favour, ordering the removal of the image from both public spaces and social media. However, this attempt at censorship failed, as the image went viral and thousands of posters flooded cities across the country, turning the mural into a powerful symbol in the struggle against impunity.

Later, the course of the case shifted due to two key events. First, the JEP confirmed the chilling scale of the crime, establishing that at least 6,402 people had been killed in false positives between 2002 and 2008.<sup>30</sup> The number quickly migrated from judicial records to the streets: it was projected onto government buildings, printed on banners, and circulated widely under the hashtag *#NoMásFalsosPositivos*. Then, in November 2021, Colombia's Constitutional Court overturned the earlier judicial ruling, issuing Decision T-281 of 2021 – a landmark judgment that protected the mural as a legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and of the victims' right to truth and memory. Empowered by this ruling, activists and relatives of the victims repainted the mural in December 2021, this time updating it to reflect the figure of 6,402 victims and including the faces of additional commanders allegedly responsible – consolidating the mural not only as a question directed at those in power, but as a powerful emblem of active memory in Colombia.

Figure 2. Mural. Source: <https://x.com/susanamuhamed/status/1879330429679120797>

By codifying what had previously been alleged only qualitatively, the mural provided a stable reference point around which subsequent claims could coalesce, rendering the structural scale of the crime salient even to audiences unfamiliar with the judicial proceedings. From an epistemic standpoint, it also dispelled lingering suspicions that the mothers were exaggerating and shifted media framing from the “rotten apples” trope to that of a “systematic practice.” The number’s force, however, lay in its hybridity: quantitative data were fused with the faces and stories carried by collectives such as MAFAPO in street demonstrations, thereby sustaining the affective charge needed to keep the public reckoning alive and to push transitional-justice institutions toward higher-level accountability.

“En Colombia las personas se mueren dos veces, el día en que son asesinadas y el día en que son olvidadas”.<sup>31</sup> This phrase captures one of the central concerns of the victims’ families and their ongoing struggle against forgetfulness and denialism, which continues to gain traction in some political sectors. Their epistemic activism has significantly impacted Colombian society, increasing visibility of the false positives crimes, promoting institutional changes, and sparking sustained debate about memory and reparation. Yet, their work is far from over. As of 2024, the case of “Murders and Forced Disappearances Falsely Presented as Combat Casualties by Agents of the State” remains under judicial prosecution and continues to provoke social polarization. The analysis presented in this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the violence perpetrated during that period and of the epistemic conditions that enabled it.

### Final remarks

Emphasising epistemic dynamics has allowed us to clarify aspects of the false positives that legal, institutional or purely political analyses leave partly

unexplained. By tracing how ignorance was deliberately produced, socially sustained and ultimately resisted, we show that the phenomenon's complexity cannot be reduced to operational incentives or command structures alone; it also depends on the circulation, blockage and reshaping of knowledge. Concepts such as deliberate production of ignorance, active ignorance, hermeneutical insensitivity and testimonial injustice make visible layers that had long remained in the shadows – why particular victims were targeted, how their relatives were discredited, and how large sectors of society came to interpret staged executions as legitimate combat. Our findings underscore that epistemic injustice is not limited to isolated exchanges between individual speakers and hearers. Rather, it possesses a structural dimension, rooted in enduring configurations of power–performance metrics that privileged body counts, media routines that dramatised “enemy” deaths, and entrenched prejudices that pre-empted sympathy for young men from marginalised communities. The article details how such arrangements established a durable “body of ignorance,” and examines how that body confined victims’ families to the margins of intelligibility.

Within this structural field, different actors played differentiated roles. At one pole were those who developed deliberate strategies to produce ignorance: policy-makers who designed kill-count incentives, commanders who reframed civilian deaths, and institutional actors who adapted procedures to mask irregularities. At the other pole were citizens, local officials and some media practitioners who, without consciously fabricating falsehoods, nonetheless facilitated their persistence through active ignorance and hermeneutical insensitivity. The interaction between these poles illustrates that systematic violence relies both on intentional manipulation and on a social environment inclined to “not know”. Finally, the response of the victims’ families demonstrates the importance of epistemic activism. By documenting inconsistencies, challenging official narratives and reclaiming their relatives’ identities, they exposed the mechanics of ignorance and reopened public space for truth-seeking. Their struggle suggests that any meaningful programme of redress must address not only material harms but also the epistemic conditions that enable such harms to occur, recognising, in particular, the central place of those who have borne the brunt of both violence and ignorance.

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## Notes

- 1 Official sources indicate that the crimes can be traced back to the mid-1980s. For example, the Executive Secretary's report to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) cited in section C of Article 13 of Auto 005 (2018) and the Noche y Niebla reports published semiannually by the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), cited in section D of the same Auto, both place the phenomenon's starting point around 1984.
- 2 This designation derives from the term “positives” in military jargon, which is frequently used to refer to the achievement of certain operational goals.
- 3 Bodies of ignorance are not simply innocent absences of knowledge or mere conceptual gaps, which, as Medina (2013, p. 56) notes, could be remedied by merely supplying the relevant information. Rather, they emerge from epistemic interactions deeply embedded in power relations and struggles (Crerar, 2016; Schiebinger, 1998), and at times, from deliberate, manufactured intent. These bodies function as obstacles sustained in part by the presence of epistemic vices – such as epistemic laziness, arrogance, and closed-mindedness (Medina, 2013) – which systematically obstruct the recognition that something needs to change or be improved, thereby impeding the pursuit of truth. Although no single

agent can create a body of ignorance in isolation – its formation requires the convergence of multiple factors – there can undoubtedly be an intentional agenda driving its production.

- 4 As already noted by CINEP as early as 2008: “The very variety of locations, dates, and operational units makes it easy to dismiss the idea that these events were accidental or sporadic. Instead, it points to their systematic nature, indicating the presence of institutional factors operating beyond the level of local units.” (Noche y Niebla, CINEP, 2008, p. 16, p. 18).
- 5 As noted by CINEP (2006-2007) in Noche y Niebla report, as early as July 2006, three colonels and two majors – battalion commanders who spoke with journalists from the newspaper *El Tiempo* – stated: “People can’t begin to imagine the psychological torture of having to deliver results every single day” (*El Tiempo*, July 2, 2006, pp. 1–2). Likewise, Army advisor Alfredo Rangel revealed in *Cambio* magazine (No. 677, June 25, 2006, p. 27) that “a problematic performance evaluation scheme has been implemented: it places excessive – and at times exclusive – value on enemy casualties, while disproportionately punishing operational failures. The consequence: a tendency to achieve casualties without taking risks, without too much exposure – or better yet, none at all. The result: defenseless civilians who turn up dead in combat scenarios that never actually happened.”
- 6 This desensitisation helps explain both the discrediting of those who denounced the phenomenon and the limited public outcry even after its existence became evident.
- 7 We are grateful to one of the reviewers for highlighting this point. Specifically, we demonstrate how this deliberate production of ignorance (in both its forms) serves as the fundamental means to create the ‘biased imaginaries’ and ‘public narratives’.
- 8 A substantial body of research – drawing on large collections of news reports – has examined how Colombian media portrayed the armed conflict (Córdoba, 2018; García Maruga, 2012, 2021; Gómez Giraldo et al., 2009; Pardo, 2013). Across these studies, four features appear repeatedly: superficial coverage that lacks context, systematic bias, the sensationalising (espectacularización) of violence, and a tendency to reinforce, rather than challenge, the conflict. García’s (2021) work, for example, shows that news outlets routinely downplayed paramilitary responsibility, styling these groups as “self-defence forces” and assigning them minor offences, while casting the guerrillas as the primary authors of the war. This media pattern aligns with the deliberate-ignorance strategy behind the false positives: just as the executions were publicised to demonstrate military “success”, the biased portrayal of armed actors shaped public understanding and deflected scrutiny from state-aligned forces.
- 9 Although reports like Noche y Niebla (CINEP, 2006–2007) had already denounced false positives as a systematic practice, mainstream media continued to reproduce the official narrative. On September 24, 2008, *Caracol Radio* interviewed General Paulino Coronado – then commander of the 30th Brigade – who categorically denied that eleven young men from Soacha had been executed, claiming instead that they had died in combat as members of illegal armed groups. However, the Soacha case marked a turning point. As *Semana* reported in “Las cuentas de los falsos positivos” (January 27, 2009), although such killings had occurred for years, the case finally brought national attention to the issue. In 2022, General Coronado formally admitted his responsibility before the JEP, confirming what victims and independent monitors had long maintained.

- 10 Jacqueline Castillo, one of the relatives of the victims of this crime, pointing out several irregularities in the forensic examination and the legalization of combat before military criminal judges, mentioned with frustration during the Observation Hearing held on October 17, 2019 before the JEP that: “there is no coherence between their versions (...) for me, these military criminal judges, either are accomplices, forgive me the expression, or they are idiots, but they should have realized that something was happening, just like the CTI [Technical Investigation Body] would have done. It is not possible that the CTI, who also have to have a lot of education to reach that position, could have made examinations on the bodies, finding boys with new boots on the wrong feet, boys with camouflage uniforms without holes, because the holes were inside the clothes they were wearing. Why didn’t they report this? It’s very easy to realize that something was happening.”
- 11 The report *Cuando los pájaros no cantaban* records one perpetrator’s admission: “For example, I have not seen any case of a false positive of a boy who studies at EAFIT or Externado [private universities], or who is a doctor from El Bosque. They would catch boys from a more humble, lower social class and maybe with little education. Or people who were in poverty” (CEVCNR, 2022b, p. 200). CINEP’s *Noche y Niebla* report (2008, p. 16) similarly warned that “from the perspective of the victims, the practice of false positives creates a climate of extreme and total insecurity: any citizen – man or woman, especially those living in rural areas or urban zones stigmatized by poverty or political preferences – faces a permanent risk of losing their life, integrity, or freedom if the circumstance arises [beyond their control] in which their lack of protection presents a convenient opportunity to armed agents of the State or para/State actors, who operate in the shadows, to obtain rewards or simulate the ‘results’ periodically demanded of them.”
- 12 See volume *No matarás* (CEVCNR, 2022d, p. 524 ff.).
- 13 These denial strategies, common to many states, have been studied by Stanley Cohen in *States of denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering* (2001), particularly in Chapter 4: Accounting for Atrocities Perpetrators and Officials.
- 14 Even the term *false positives* was already an effort to reinterpret the phenomenon in a way that made its most terrible elements less evident. It was, in essence, a certain form of euphemism that allowed one to talk about the phenomenon without directly referring to the killings of civilians by the security forces.
- 15 In 2009, the then-president Alvaro Uribe Vélez declared: “The Armed Forces of Colombia, in the process of being effective and transparent, gladly correct any mistakes, do not accept ‘false positives’ and will not be intimidated by false accusations. We are the first to demand that there be no ‘false positives’, that there be total transparency, but we have to be the first to denounce that many people, shielded by the issue of ‘false positives’, have made false accusations to try to paralyze the action of the security forces against terrorists.” (CEVCNR 2022d, p. 532-533). See also: <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/uribe-dice-que-desaparecidos-de-soacha-murieron-en-combatientes-42410/>
- 16 In 2023, former President Álvaro Uribe still professed to be “hurt and mortified” by the military’s deception – a force he and his administration had trusted.# On its face, the admission is startling: one would not need extraordinary investigative acumen to doubt the military when it stood accused of egregious crimes. Yet Uribe’s reaction reflects the enduring legacy of the “Democratic Security” era. Many Colombians, then and now, preferred not to inquire too closely into the army’s conduct, choosing instead to place faith in an institution that had, in reality, been deeply compromised. The following link

provides an account of the statements of former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez related to the investigation of False Positives in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace: <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/partidos-politicos/alvaro-uribe-habla-sobre-falsos-positivos-tras-audiencia-de-jep-en-dadeiba-781899>

17 The military still persisted in 2021 that the figures regarding false positives were “inflated, biased, and distorted”: <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2021/02/25/infladas-sesgadas-y-distorsionadas-militares-retirados-sobre-las-cifras-de-falsos-positivos-de-la-jep/>

18 Miranda Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as harm inflicted on an individual or group in their capacity as knowers. This form of injustice directly undermines human dignity, since the ability to know is an essential human capacity (Fricker 2007, p. 44), and provides further justification for legally classifying these acts as crimes against humanity, as the JEP has done.

19 Under Case 003, the JEP has advanced to the national instruction phase and has determined the responsibility of senior Public Force officials, holding public hearings widely broadcast on official channels. Similarly, the final report of the Truth Clarification Commission (CEV, 2022), in its volume *Hasta la guerra tiene límites. Violaciones de los derechos humanos, infracciones al derecho internacional humanitario y responsabilidades colectivas*, devotes a full chapter to state responsibility, including the extrajudicial executions of civilians falsely presented as “combat deaths.” That report reveals that, of 548 interviews collected on these crimes, 44 per cent of respondents said they had been stigmatized; 23 per cent faced obstacles when denouncing; 14 per cent reported impunity; and 13.7 per cent experienced discrimination for coming forward. This institutional evidence supports the existence of significant underreporting due to fear of reprisals and illustrates how state-led stigmatization functioned as a form of epistemic injustice. Moreover, the report identifies state strategies to delegitimize complaints – such as the deployment of a “legal warfare” narrative accusing human-rights defenders and victims of insurgent ties to discredit the Public Force. These practices not only obstructed investigations but also helped to reinforce the epistemic exclusion of those who dared to denounce.

20 MAFAPO (Mothers of False Positives of Soacha and Bogotá) is a collective composed mainly of mothers and relatives of victims of extrajudicial executions known as “false positives” in Colombia. The collective actively seeks truth, justice, and recognition for their loved ones. We discuss MAFAPO’s epistemic activism in more detail in subsequent sections of this article.

21 Revictimization describes acts that place victims back into situations where their rights are violated, often stemming from or related to the original victimizing incident. This can manifest as victim-blaming, disbelief, ignoring the victim’s experience, or forcing them to relive the trauma. Revictimization carries severe repercussions, including heightened psychological distress (such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD), physical health issues, and social difficulties.

22 Miranda Fricker’s theoretical proposal on epistemic injustice has generated extensive debate, particularly due to its initial emphasis on interpersonal interactions and transactional dynamics. While her contribution has been fundamental in establishing the field, several authors – including Anderson (2012), Doan (2018), Schotte (2022), and Medina (2011) – have stressed the importance of incorporating a structural approach to fully grasp these forms of injustice. This article adopts precisely such a structural perspective, arguing that

epistemic injustices are rooted in unequal social structures that limit epistemic agency, understood as individuals' capacity to question, interpret, evaluate, and share knowledge, as well as to maintain their own beliefs and understandings (Anderson, 2012). Within this framework, social institutions play a pivotal role in shaping meanings and practices by consolidating collective imaginaries, discursive norms, and legal frameworks (Doan, 2018). Consequently, it becomes relevant to explore the connections between Medina's structural approach and perspectives from the political economy of knowledge, which examine how epistemic resources are unevenly distributed in contexts marked by power relations.

- 23 In this case, as we have seen, indirect victims had from the outset the hermeneutical resources to understand that their relatives had been murdered – they never believed the official account. However, they experienced a partial form of hermeneutical injustice in Fricker's sense: while they were able to make sense of individual events, they lacked access to the epistemic conditions necessary to grasp the full scale and systematic nature of the phenomenon – that is, they could not name or frame the phenomenon in its totality and complexity. This was not due to cognitive or expressive limitations, but to deliberate state-led strategies that restricted access to crucial information and withheld institutional recognition. As detailed earlier, families were forced to carry out their investigations and reconstruct the fragmented evidence of a much broader pattern of violence. It was only when victims found one another and began to organise collectively that a more complete understanding became possible.
- 24 The following link provides an account of the statements of former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez related to the investigation of False Positives in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace: <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/partidos-politicos/alvaro-uribe-habla-sobre-falsos-positivos-tras-audiencia-de-jep-en-dadeiba-781899>
- 25 Beyond the direct perpetrators of the crimes, who, for obvious reasons, stood to benefit from the ignorance they produced, a broader segment of society also profited from not knowing. The Truth Commission (2022) referred to these groups as “beneficiaries of the war”: political and economic actors with a vested interest in obscuring the true scale of the conflict and in ensuring that the military continued to deliver quantifiable “results.” This form of epistemic complicity contributed to the preservation of institutional legitimacy and, in turn, reinforced confidence among investors and international allies.
- 26 A large-scale military intervention carried out by the Colombian Armed Forces on 16–17 October 2002, aimed at expelling FARC and ELN guerrilla fighters from the neighbourhood
- 27 See <https://mutante.org/contenidos/las-cuchas-tienen-razon-quienes-dijeron-que-no/>; <https://www.lespectador.com/colombia/medellin/quien-es-la-mujer-que-aparece-en-el-mural-las-cuchas-tenian-razon-en-medellin/>
- 28 The case of MAFAPO is not the only one. Fabiola Lalinde, mother of Luis Fernando Lalinde and a forerunner of the many women who have tirelessly made the archives speak, initiated the so-called Operation Sirirí, named after the bird known for its relentless efforts to protect its chicks from predators. The term encapsulates her unwavering pursuit of justice following the disappearance of her son Luis Fernando, in 1984. Operation Sirirí represents a legacy of memory, truth, and collective action carried out by victims and their families, who continue to fight for justice and the visibility of the crimes committed.
- 29 See <https://pbicolombia.org/tag/movice/>

30 On 18 February 2021, the JEP issued Auto 033/21, estimating 6402 civilians murdered and falsely presented as combat deaths between 2002 and 2008. This was the preliminary number identified by the Chamber for the Acknowledgment of Truth for the period between 2002 and 2008, after comparing the statements provided by those appearing before the court with files from the Attorney General's Office, reports from the Inspector General's Office, data from the Accusatory Criminal Justice System, the Observatory of Memory and Conflict of the National Center for Historical Memory, and the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (CCEEU).

31 The phrase “In Colombia, people die twice: the day they are killed and the day they are forgotten” has been widely used by human rights organizations, particularly by MAFAPO, as part of their epistemic resistance against the erasure of victims from public memory. It emerged within their broader efforts to challenge the ignorance and hermeneutical insensitivity that surrounded the false positives crimes. One of the earliest documented uses dates back to 2016, during the campaign “A Premiere for Those Who Are No Longer Here”, where MAFAPO collaborated with cultural producers to honour the murdered youth (LatinSpots, 2016). Since then, the phrase has circulated in social media, public exhibitions, and commemorative events, including a Women's Day gathering organized by MAFAPO. Activists such as Jackeline Castillo, one of the collective's main spokespersons, have repeatedly invoked this expression in speeches and written statements, highlighting the essential role of memory as a form of justice and social reparation (see Periodismo Público, 2020).

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