

REVIEW ESSAYS / ENSAYOS DE RESEÑA

“THE WAR ON DRUGS” IN RECENT LITERATURE

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- *Lesley Gill, The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004
- *Alfredo Molano, Loyal Soldiers in the Cocaine Kingdom.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- *Donny Meertens and Michiel Baud, Colombia from the Inside: Perspectives on Drugs, War and Peace.* Amsterdam: CEDLA, 2004.
- *Christina Rojas and Judy Meltzer [eds]. Elusive Peace: International, National and Local Dimensions of Conflict in Colombia.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- *Hugh O’Shaughnessy and Sue Bradford, Chemical Warfare in Colombia.* London: Latin American Bureau, 2005
- *Doug Stokes, America’s Other War.* London and New York: Zed Books, 2005.
- *Michael Taussig, Law in Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia.* London and New York: The New Press, 2003.

“So many controversial things have been said on the origins of narcotics trafficking in Colombia...” Alfredo Molano tells us, “...that it is almost impossible to approach the issue without being suspected of sympathy with one or another political orientation” (2004: 63). This is certainly true, just as it is true that a review of recent works on ‘the war on drugs’, let alone on the armed conflict in Colombia, will certainly face the same dilemma. ‘The war on drugs’ becomes here also a text, which inevitably will be reviewed alongside the scholarly and activist works.

Within both the academic and activist communities concerned with the Colombian panorama there is a seeming consensus on the necessity of broadening, if not replacing, president Uribe’s current security strategy with extensive social and economic reforms. Donny Meertens and Michiel Baud contend, in their introduction to *Colombia from the Inside*:

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Perspectives on Drugs, War and Peace – the volume where also Molano's essay appears – that the Uribe government's military definition of security fails to consider social, cultural and economic elements required for long-term solutions. Meertens' and Baud's observation, resonating with the discussion on a widening of the concept of security initiated almost a decade ago, finds support in the works of scholars of a variety of disciplines appearing both in their own edited volume and in Rojas and Meltzer's *Elusive Peace: International, National and Local Dimensions of Conflict in Colombia*. Álvaro Camacho, who appears with a contribution in both volumes, stresses the need for varied and integrated strategies, arising from the relation between poverty of Colombian peasants and illicit drugs production on the one hand and between illicit drugs production and expansion of irregular armed groups on the other. Gonzalo Sánchez, contributing to Meerten's and Baud's volume, concurs and recommends an agrarian reform through expropriation of drug traffickers' land.

As much as there is a seeming distance between the recommendations of concerned writers and the policy of the Colombian and the U.S. governments, there are however also sharp differences between actual interpretations of the trajectory of the present policy within the choir of recently published works. Doug Stokes points, in *America's Other War* to the continuity of a U.S. policy aimed at counterinsurgency in Colombia, articulated consecutively as cold war, war on drugs and war on terrorism. That view is supported by Hugh O'Shaughnessy and Sue Branford in *Chemical Warfare in Colombia* whereas Camacho, on the other hand, stresses a gradual shift towards counterinsurgency within the framework of Plan Colombia (in Rojas and Meltzer).

While neither an intentionalist nor a functionalist interpretation of the genesis of U.S. policy seem fully convincing except in its own respective paradigm, the stated U.S. objective behind the fumigation of coca crops has since 2000 de facto varied from a means to reduce consumption of illegal drugs in the United States to reduce income that the FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército Popular*, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People's Army) and the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, United Self-defense forces of Colombia) derive from the cocaine trade and, recently, to accomplish both a reduction of illegal drugs consumption and 'crucial revenues' for the FARC-EP. Ricardo Vargas, contributing to Meertens and Baud's volume, is clear in his critique of the fusion of anti-drug and counterinsurgency policies. By increasingly presenting drugs as a security problem, higher levels of militarization are attained. Nevertheless, Vargas reminds concerned policy-makers, militarization is problematic to justify if

the drug problem is approached from an accurate angle – namely, by applying the law to narcotics traffickers. While policy-makers, who to Vargas appear to blame the very narcotic substances, magnify the scenario of the dangerous Amazon jungle where crops for illicit use are grown, narcotics traffickers conquer more political spaces, increase their means for transporting illegal substance and privatize counterinsurgency war. The profitability of this privatization, in addition, remains invisible to the State Department and its reports. Vargas seems to assume a position different from most other voices in the debate, opening up for a possibility for the otherwise mostly critical or technical address of ‘the war on drugs’ as either a military-political or economic issue, to take on the form of a cultural critique. Misinterpretations and misrepresentations, rather than hidden agendas or simple failures, are here allowed to account for the lack of progress. It seems a promising approach. For is it not, after all, a rather clear example of commodity fetishism that Vargas addresses?

Coca-growing peasants in the southern department of Putumayo, the “ground zero” of Plan Colombia, often state that there is something special to the plant at the bottom of their economy. It grows in any piece of land in the Amazonian lowlands – yellow, red or black – even if the land has been worked constantly for several years. While any other crop requires a regular rotation of farmland every two or three years in order to let the soil rest and the subsequent crops not to deteriorate, the land never tires of coca. The bush is strong too. It grows and yields irrespective of season and weather, even during the tropical rains of the winter months, and can be planted almost at any time. The wealth to be made from coca has dramatically decreased with the trade-regulations imposed by the paramilitaries since 2000, while violence and risk associated with cultivation of crops for illicit use has dramatically increased. As much as frustration with these conditions is widespread, their contingency remains however mostly unarticulated among coca-growing peasants in the region. The blame for the conditions tends to be given, in a narrative as subaltern as it is obscurant of structure and agency alike, to the coca plant itself. This fetishism of coca recaptures a significant part of the mystification of relations of production once accounted for by Taussig in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980). Like Taussig’s plantation workers narrate that it is the sugarcane, backed up by the devil, that sucks out their energy, coca peasants express that the coca bush brings about violent death and poverty as the devil’s instrument – the diabolic connection being seen in the unusual strength of the plant and its capacity to lure people into catastrophe by mesmerizing promises of a better life. While no explicit contract with the devil is ever mentioned in Putumayo,

the idea of a Faustian bargain is obviously there. While few would fail to see the aspect of fetishism of commodities in this peasant narrative, few critiques apart from Vargas' point towards a similar ideology of mystification reflected in US policy. If fetishism of commodities, arising when humans come to regard products of labour as independent entities and let the social relationships between the producers appear as 'social relations between things' is best approximated, as Marx put it, as something in the misty realm of religion – then perhaps a militarized war on drugs, whose only aspect irreducible to plain counterinsurgency appears to be the chemical war against plants, need to be understood in somewhat similar terms. Undeniably, some degree of animism seems required in order to hold that the civil war in Colombia – or, for that reason, the various problems related to drug trafficking and abuse in the U.S. and other consumer countries – would originate from a bush.

At a refreshing distance from academic jargon, and without intention to engage neither disciplinary representatives nor politicians in debate, the genre of storytelling finds expressions in Alfredo Molano's *Loyal Soldiers in the Cocaine Kingdom* and Michael Taussig's *Law in Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia*. Molano tells the tales of drugs, gunmen and mules – the latter referring to the men and women transporting drugs within or across borders, often to end up imprisoned as representatives of the evil machinery behind personal and social corruption for which illegal drug trafficking is held. A description of seven individual fates that would otherwise have remained invisible, is here allowed to fill out a space often all too empty even in the works of committed scholars and activists – that of lived experience. Presenting to be heard the very human voices of the men and women whose daily lives and anxieties otherwise remain far behind the text, yet without for a moment failing to define the nature of the human condition in which they are most literally caught, Molano's compilation of short biographies, rather than stories, is a welcome addition to any other recent work on Colombia.

Taussig provides something of a postmodern poetic account of the way the presence of paramilitary forces in the Cauca department shapes the lifeworld in a seemingly lawless land, illuminating in this way several aspects of life under a reign of terror but leaving the subject disturbingly unaddressed from a political as well as economic point of view. What perhaps strikes the reader most is the sheer risk allegedly taken by the author merely by seeking his way into the hinterlands whose lawlessness his appraised account concerns. The comment that "a week here is outer limit for safety" (p. 107) resonates with the fear that many urban residents in Colombia display for the poorly administered rural regions. The author's

return back to the relative security and urban comfort of the metropolis Cali becomes "...an escape from hell, from the immediacy of fear into a pretense of normality that allows us to look back and reflect on the week we have just passed" (p. 107). The anthropologist as Marlowe, or Dante, descending into an inferno and living to tell about it – all the while reminded by the encounters with death, like Dante when faced with the burning Ulysses in *Canto XXVI*, about the deadly risks of going too far. The particular form of essentialism inherent in the metaphor of hell may escape a lot of critique thanks to Taussig's emancipatory ambition. When principle stands against another principle, ethics become aesthetics. Some serious problems arise nevertheless when violence, culprits and victims are allowed to constitute a mythic-holistic unity. "Infernal" representation delivers an unwanted hybrid child when read with the dim eyes of vulgar relativism – in Hesse's repeatedly quoted words that "life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap." Thus: *Taussig's hell may be only his own. The Colombians are long since used to it.* The fact that a field diary, even of a *limpieza*, may in the end tell the audience more about the author than about the field may also situate the symbolic dimension of hell – along with the indisputable skill in observation – in the eyes of the anthropological beholder.

Does the antagonistic alternative to the imaginative embracement of the postmodern condition – political economy – offer a better instrument to grasp the horrors lived by so many? While the postmodern or even phenomenological critic would oppose such an approximation as arrogant and colonial at best, one should neither forget that the novelist's predilection for the lifeworld and the lived experience extrinsic to scholarly science is largely, as Milan Kundera somewhat proudly expresses it, a European tradition as well. Analyses of terror as part of economic processes have little else to cling to than Marx' concept of primitive accumulation of capital. Primitive accumulation of capital refers to the creation of property relations propelling the emergence of capitalist relations of production. In short, it is a critical archaeology of capitalism which sustains that the creation of the urban industrial proletariat takes place in the forceful separation of peasants from their land, i.e., their means of production, whereby they become forced to sell their labour and produce for a capitalist instead of working for themselves.

In some recent ethnography and historiography concerned with violence in Colombia, the logic of primitive accumulation shines through as a substratum in separate analyses of land distribution (Fajardo 2002), displacement (Meertens 2001) and of violence itself (Uribe 2004). Fajardo observes the highest concentrations of individual property in the areas in

which paramilitaries, assumingly enforcing the interests of wealthy landowners, provoke the major displacement of small-scale property-holders and from which the major migration movements originate (2002: 67f). The displaced become, like the evicted peasants in Marx' account on England, forced to offer their manpower to the extent that they cannot access arable land anywhere else (ibid.: 68). Meertens' observations of the characteristics of the recent separation of people from their land are, even if less concerned with the issue of land distribution than with the fate of the displaced, in striking conformity with Fajardo's. The objective of aggression is to increase landholdings, the aggressors are identified as well-organized paramilitary units in alliance with members of a wealthy landholding class, and the victims are left at the mercy of their own luck and the structural conditions determining their eventual economic opportunities (2001.: 136). Uribe's analysis of violence identifies the bodily manipulation of victims in massacres of present day Colombia as well as during the years of civil war between 1948 and 1958, known by the elusive name of *La Violencia*, as a component intimately linked to the eviction of peasants from their land. While not explicitly identifying today's paramilitaries as instruments for the continued concentration of land in Colombia, she makes a telling general statement on the objective of terror.

The bodies of murdered persons became terrifying alterities, pedagogical and exemplifying texts that always achieved their objective: to frighten the local inhabitants away from the area, their houses, and their livestock. Upon coming back, if they ever did, they would find that others had usurped their property. As in other parts of the world, terror in Colombia was used to frighten people away from their land (2004: 89).

While the typical death in a massacre during *La Violencia* came with a bullet in the back of the head, dead bodies were subsequently often ritualistically mutilated with machetes as to give the most horrendous impression possible to the victims' friends, relatives and neighbours. Two forms of manipulating the dead bodies stand out as more recurrent than others: *the necktie*, consisting of the victim's tongue pulled out through a hole cut in the trachea, and *the flower vase*, consisting of the victim's head, arms and legs cut off and stuffed inside the victim's emptied thorax (ibid.: 88). These and other techniques, for instance those to *bocachiquear* and *picar para tamal* – that is, to cut the body of human being like that of the fish *bocachico* for easier cooking and to dice it like meat to be used in a corn *tamal* respectively (ibid.: 89) – indicate a repertoire of means to manipulate the human body to which the brutal killings accounted for by Taussig do not seem very far. Nevertheless, *limpiezas* as such mostly take

place in urban environments and have little to do with the eviction of peasants, and in the rural areas haunted by paramilitary violence far from all register a concentration of landed property in the aftermath of terror.

It appears that approximations of terror as an economic strategy in Colombia are intimately related to a latifundio-centred narrative which, although highly fit to conceptualize developments in specific regions, derives most of its empirical ground from developments in what may be referred to as the centre in relation to peripheral regions – such as Putumayo. It is perhaps because of the lack of analytic instruments and political-economic narratives alternative to “primitive accumulation” that academic works seem to highlight the economic aspect of paramilitary violence against civilians mostly in relation to the key areas registering processes of increased land concentration. If social science is not to be replaced by storytelling when addressing violence in other regions, or lawlessness not to be elevated from a suggestive to an analytic category, this deficit must obviously be balanced out.

Lawlessness, in the sense of an absence of official and effective machinery for public order, may characterize several rural regions in Colombia even more than Cauca. As an explanation for violence in such regions it is however a disturbingly poor concept, implying that violence would in some sense be endemic to them. While banditry throughout history has flourished in lawless regions, it is less than safe to sustain that the absence of state authority would automatically generate a reign of terror. Quite the contrary, terror in peripheral territories has been observed to be integral to the attempts of the national state to accumulate power and expand its influence over the same regions. This is the bottom line of Lesley Gill’s chapter on Colombia in *The School of the Americas’s: Military Training and Political Violence in Latin America* (2004).

Gill explores the paramilitaries’ role as death squads and auxiliaries to the regular armed forces in the counterinsurgency efforts against the FARC-EP, and the relation that this complicity has to U.S. policy and military training at the former School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. While this approximation of paramilitarism in Colombia unfolds as part of an overarching ambition to account for similarities among the military and police apparatuses in distinct south and central American states and by necessity takes place at the expense of attention to local variations, Gill builds a strong case analyzing paramilitary terror, deployment of US-backed regular army units and herbicide fumigation of coca cultivations – the latter here conceived of as a means to weaken the influence of the guerrilla and demoralize peasants under their authority – as

three complementary and, most of all, coordinated, components of one and the same counterinsurgency strategy.

If something is lost in Gill's analysis, it is the ignored possibility that paramilitaries may not only serve the regular armed forces as extra-judicial death squads but also have their own motives, or be instrumental to those of other masters. While Gill's argument on complicity between regular and paramilitary forces is solidly supported, it would not have been weakened by such a hypothesis. Rather, it seems to be in the pursuit of exactly such a hypothesis that much of that which Vargas finds absent in the State Department's reports can be discovered, and the political economy of paramilitary violence can be extended to domains other than growing *latifundios* – ultimately, perhaps, to shed light on a particularly intriguing aspect of that which Vargas terms “the profitability of privatized counterinsurgency war.”

Sometimes, the soil is not nearly as valuable to the usurpers as what is grown there. Where small-scale peasants grow coca, trafficking propels cash-flows considerably more interesting than the mere land. These domains, the tropical lowlands, are still more peripheral than the locations where people are terrorized in order to leave their land. They are the domains where the evicted historically have sought refuge. The migration movements following the change in property-relations during *La Violencia* did not only lead to urbanization, but also to the colonization of peripheral rural regions and an expansion of the tropical pioneer frontier. While paramilitary activity tends to be associated with land accumulation and somewhat stereotypical alliances with conservative semi-feudal elites, the late process of AUC expansion in Colombia particularly concerns areas in the tropical periphery where land accumulation neither seem attractive nor has taken place. In several of these peripheral areas furthermore, the local paramilitary units are so far also exempted from the present negotiations between the AUC and the Colombian government. One of these regions is, again, the department of Putumayo.

Since 2000 aerial fumigation of coca crops in Putumayo have been intense and supposedly accomplished a reduction of areas under cultivation of coca from 66,022 to 4,386 hectares. In the municipality where the most part of my own fieldwork has taken place, the strongly paramilitary-dominated Valle del Guamuez, the area under cultivation has supposedly been reduced from 13,165 to 471 hectares. Seemingly unaffected by the destruction of raw materials, wholesale as well as retail prices for cocaine hydrochloride in the United States have however only displayed minor fluctuations over the actual period. While this would seemingly indicate that cartels are doing nothing, or even can do nothing, to avoid loss of

surplus, the internal changes in the cocaine economy suggest differently. It is a fact that the paramilitary units who, like Gill tells us, forced the guerrilla to retreat and acquired their present influence in Putumayo at the time when the fumigations started, tax the trade with coca paste and are involved in cocaine trafficking. It is also a fact that prices for coca paste have fallen significantly in coca-producing areas conquered by the paramilitaries from the guerrilla, and with them the production costs for cocaine hydrochloride (cf. Jansson 2005). The question which would indeed need to be asked here is whether the nation-wide paramilitary expansion did reduce the costs of producing cocaine hydrochloride in such a way as to balance out the economic predicament arising from reduction of available raw materials achieved through herbicide fumigation. These are the social relations which are mystified when relations between humans come to be seen as relations between things, and laws are applied less against central actors in the cocaine economy than war is waged against plants. To my mind, Ricardo Vargas offers the most promising approach for allowing the discussion on the war on drugs to develop in the direction of demystification of these relations – a demystification which may prove burdensome for the fusion of counterinsurgency and anti-drug policies.

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