

# PARAMILITARIES AND THE ECONOMIC ORIGINS OF ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

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**Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia.** By William Avilés. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Pp. x + 192. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780791466995.

**Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War.** Edited by Virginia M. Bouvier. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2009. Pp. xxiv + 489. \$65.00 cloth. \$32.50 paper. ISBN: 9781601270382.

**Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia.** By Jasmin Hristov. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009. Pp. xxiii + 263. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781897071502.

**Y refundaron la patria: De cómo mafiosos y políticos reconfiguraron el Estado colombiano.** Edited by Claudia López Hernández. Bogotá: Random House Mondadori, 2010. Pp. 524 + CD-Rom. Col\$49.000 paper. ISBN: 9789588613154.

**Guerreros y campesinos: El despojo de la tierra en Colombia.** By Alejandro Reyes Posada, with Liliana Duica Amaya. Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2009. Pp. xi + 378. \$28.35 paper. ISBN: 9789584515322.

**Social Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs: The Cases of Colombia and Mexico.** By James F. Rochlin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. 240. \$79.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780230602823.

During the past three decades, Colombia has suffered the most extreme violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in all of Latin America. In January 2011, the office of Colombia's attorney general reported that 174,618 homicides and 1,614 massacres had been committed by demobilized armed groups, the vast majority of them belonging to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a coalition of right-wing paramilitaries officially disbanded by 2006.<sup>1</sup> In December 2010, two U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that there were more than 42,000 unresolved cases of disappearances in the consolidated database of the Colombian government.<sup>2</sup> These profoundly disturbing, indeed terrifying, figures underscore the extent to which Colombia continues

1. "Gestión Unidad Nacional de Fiscalías para la Justicia y la Paz a 31 de diciembre de 2010," <http://www.fiscalia.gov.co/justiciapaz/indes.htm> (accessed February 18, 2011).

2. Lisa Haugaard and Kelly Nicholls, *Breaking the Silence: In Search of Colombia's Disappeared* (Washington, D.C.: Latin America Working Group Education Fund and U.S. Office on Colombia, 2010), 17.

to experience the violence of an internal conflict involving state security forces, right-wing paramilitaries, and leftist guerrillas.

That the general public outside of Colombia is ignorant of this conflict goes without saying. That many scholars of Latin America continue to be unaware of its depth and impact is inexcusable. Textbook discussions of human rights tend to focus on the violations committed by military regimes in the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s, even as Colombia outstrips all of these together in the number of disappearances, massacres, political homicides, forcibly displaced persons, and so on. Although factors such as drug trafficking and U.S. military aid make Colombia's conflict particularly complex, a largely ignored but pivotal element is the role of right-wing paramilitaries. Long considered by human rights activists to be the most violent of all actors in Colombia, these forces are at last receiving attention from Colombian and North American scholars, with a spate of recent books on their development, nature, and impact. The six works reviewed in these pages exemplify this trend.

Although there is broad agreement on the essential character of Colombia's paramilitary forces, scholars, activists, and policy makers continue to debate their relationship to the state, social classes, civil society, and political parties. This debate is of pressing importance, given that a number of paramilitaries either did not disband or have reemerged in new and vicious guises after formal demobilization of the AUC under President Álvaro Uribe in 2006.

A critical interest of these works is the relationship of paramilitaries to Colombia's state and ruling classes. Did the government control paramilitaries, or did they enjoy significant autonomy? Are paramilitaries exclusively an expression of the interests of the dominant class? Jasmin Hristov's *Blood and Capital* is a passionate condemnation, particularly of the ties between Colombia's upper classes and its paramilitary forces. The work's passion is at times an obstacle to a full and accurate understanding. Hristov's class-based analysis attributes the origin, development, and persistence of Colombia's conflict directly to the rapacity of the upper classes, which also control the state. She writes, "The aim of the dominant classes—to maintain their power and privileges and enrich themselves further by progressively dispossessing the working class and destroying all forces of resistance—is the heart that keeps the war alive" (202). According to Hristov, this intent entails the use of what she calls the state's coercive apparatus (SCA), an entity comprising not only military, police, and intelligence forces but also death squads and paramilitaries. Because the latter are an "essential but unofficial and illegal part of the SCA" (26), Hristov alleges that "all of Colombia's paramilitary human rights violations are motivated by the need to protect and advance the wealth and interests of the upper classes and maintain the status quo" (125–126).

Hristov usefully underscores that force has been instrumental in capital accumulation in Colombia and properly criticizes the negative impact of Colombia's brand of neoliberalism on peasant farmers and poor urban dwellers. She is also correct in asserting that the violence carried out by paramilitaries serves primarily to maintain the established sociopolitical order and that "none of the institutions belonging to the SCA engaged in any effort to contain the spread, prevent the emergence, or discontinue the functioning of those groups" (69). In this vein,

Hristov presents a good summary both of the ways in which state security forces have cooperated with paramilitaries (82–90) and of the latter's modus operandi (90–100). Backed by dozens of capsule descriptions, she also provides an overview of the range of abuses committed by paramilitaries. Not least, she outlines key problems of the demobilization that ended in 2006, including the violation of human rights by paramilitaries during the preceding cease-fire and factors such as drug trafficking, land concentration, and the unequal distribution of wealth that facilitate the continued existence of paramilitaries and the lack of justice for victims and their families.

Despite these virtues, Hristov's overly rigid class analysis tends to the same "black and white explanations" that she decries in other scholars (xii). Her simplistic view of social classes and the Colombian state is particularly evident in her portrayal of the upper classes, which she describes as attempting "to extinguish any viable opposition from below" (7). She provides no empirical data to justify this sweeping conclusion, and Hristov does not consider that such extreme intolerance is not practiced by many—perhaps not even a majority of—members of the upper classes. Likewise, Hristov assumes that the lower classes are united in opposition to the neoliberal policies of the Colombian state. Unfortunately, this leaves her grasping for an explanation of the extraordinary cross-class popularity that Uribe enjoyed throughout his two terms in office, which she ultimately dismisses as unreal or attributes to manipulation by the media. In a similar fashion, her view of the state as a homogeneous body controlled by the upper classes prevents a more accurate understanding of its fragmentation and heterogeneity in Colombia. Hristov thus dismisses the importance of Colombia's judiciary and state human rights institutions, arguing that "it is obvious that the state would not allow institutions that would impede the job of its coercive apparatus" (130). Such claims disregard that some state institutions (notably the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the offices of the inspector general and of the human rights ombudsman) have acted, however imperfectly, as real checks on the power of the executive branch in Colombia.

William Avilés also discusses the relationship of capitalism to democratic reforms and civil-military relations to make a similar, but more sophisticated, analysis of developments in Colombia since the late 1980s. His *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia* argues that democratization has produced a low-intensity democracy in Colombia that allows for political opposition, elections, and individual freedoms but is more concerned with providing a hospitable environment for investment by transnational corporations than with addressing poverty and inequality in a serious way. Likewise, although the institutional prerogatives of state security forces have been significantly curtailed, civil-military relations are marked by a notable lack of interest in restraining violations of human rights by state security forces, in confronting paramilitary forces, and in ending ties between the armed forces and paramilitaries.

According to Avilés, the primary explanation for both the origins and the limitations of democratic and civil-military reforms in Colombia is capitalist globalization. The latter not only decentralizes capitalist production and diffuses neoliberal policies around the globe but also transforms nation-states into trans-

national states that serve the interests of an emergent global bourgeoisie, or transnational elite. This transnational elite works, in turn, "to create a business environment amenable to the needs of transnational corporations" (3). Avilés argues more specifically that the transnational elite finds it useful to foster low-intensity democracies to limit the traditional prerogatives of the military and curtail the state's direct repression of civilians. Such repression was instead outsourced to paramilitary groups in Colombia.

Avilés generally coincides with Hristov in viewing paramilitaries as a force deliberately implemented by the state, but to suit a transnational elite. His book is well written, is closely argued, and has an interesting thesis, but informed readers might question whether the primary purpose of the reforms enacted in Colombia in the early 1990s was to establish a democracy amenable to the interests of transnational corporations. Leaders of the time were instead trying to deal with a crisis of political legitimacy. That their reforms also proved a boon to transnational corporations does not make this the rationale for their implementation or for the accompanying transformation of civil-military relations. Avilés's arguments for capitalist globalization also fail to account for the fact that paramilitarism arose and flourished in Colombia with the support of certain sectors of the armed forces for at least a decade before the neoliberal policies of Virgilio Barco and César Gaviria. Moreover, the key upper-class supporters of paramilitarism have been traditional rural landowners, not a new globalizing transnational elite. Despite these weaknesses, Avilés is correct in finding that recent Colombian governments have sought to enact neoliberal reforms, to attract direct foreign investment, and to maintain a procedural liberal democracy, all while failing to hold the military accountable for human rights abuses, to directly attack paramilitaries, and to end the military's ties to paramilitary forces. It is doubtful that capitalist globalization alone can account for all these developments.

A very different perspective is set forth in James F. Rochlin's comparative study of Colombia and Mexico through the prism of what he calls the revolution in military affairs (RMA). Because this paradigm of the RMA is multifaceted in the extreme—encompassing "epistemological considerations, asymmetry, complexity, elements of political economy, ultra-surveillance, network organization, identity politics, as well as fear and terror" (5)—its use to explain the changing strategic relationship of the state, paramilitaries, and other social actors is problematic. Rochlin finds in Colombia an RMA "from above," represented by Plan Colombia, whereas Mexico is an RMA "from below," typified by the Zapatistas in Chiapas. This demonstrates one of Rochlin's key claims: the "RMA can be exploited by a vast array of players—including transnational criminal syndicates, NGOs, labor unions, newfangled insurgents, and autonomous communities, in addition to more traditional entities such as the state and international organizations" (5). Rochlin argues that civil society can empower itself by understanding the RMA; this is his primary normative concern.

Rochlin explores the impact of Plan Colombia (the massive U.S. aid program begun during the Clinton administration) on state security forces and its consequences for AUC paramilitaries, guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's displaced

population, and the labor movement. Rochlin's view of paramilitaries broadly coincides with that of Hristov and Avilés; he argues that they "have represented the class interests of often illicit national capital, in addition to their allegiance to transnational capital and the strategic interests of the United States" (34). Nonetheless, he is elusive as to the exact nature of their relationship to the state. On the one hand, he states that "the proliferation of the paramilitaries" has been "the most important weapon" of the U.S. and Colombian governments (49) and that paramilitaries are "the state's antidote to asymmetric warfare in Colombia" (50). On the other hand, he does not claim that they are a direct instrument of the state. At any rate, Rochlin correctly notes that Colombian and U.S. troops have not combated Colombia's paramilitaries in a systematic fashion and that there are numerous cases of collusion between paramilitaries and state security forces. He furthermore points out that paramilitaries "have been the leading purveyor of assassinations of and threats to members of labor unions and other progressive elements of civil society" and have "stifled the development of critical NGOs" (181).

Although Rochlin usefully recounts the difficulties facing Colombian civil society, he is on less firm ground in repeatedly stating that the latter is weak mainly as a result of "fragmentation, a weak state, warfare, and violence" (26). Although, as Rochlin notes, union membership has declined in Colombia since the mid-1980s, civil society remains extraordinarily vibrant, even under extremely adverse conditions (a point underscored in the volume edited by Virginia M. Bouvier and reviewed here). Also mistaken is Rochlin's sweeping conclusion that "the FARC has morphed into a ferocious and criminal armed group occupying the shell of what was once a legitimate leftist guerrilla movement" (84). This statement unhelpfully echoes right-wing critics who seek to discredit the FARC by alleging that it is primarily motivated by greed, because of its participation in the drug trade, kidnapping, gold mining, and so on. On the whole, Rochlin deals more successfully with Mexico, particularly in discussing little-known groups such as the Ejército Popular Revolucionario and the Policía Comunitaria in Guerrero. Because Rochlin plows little new empirical ground in the study of Colombia, readers with a primary interest in this country may find the book and the RMA of limited utility.

The social class that has suffered the most from paramilitary violence is undoubtedly the rural peasantry, as Alejandro Reyes Posada underscores in *Guerreros y campesinos: El despojo de la tierra en Colombia*. Reyes examines the rural underpinnings of Colombia's conflict, particularly the highly skewed distribution of land and the negative changes in land tenure over the past three decades. His analysis is guided by the conviction that "the heart of Colombian violence is the struggle to strip peasants of their land and resources in favor of a caste of large rent-seeking landowners" (27). Reyes notes that support for agrarian reforms declined after the administration of Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966–1970) and that repression by the state weakened social movements and enhanced the credibility of guerrillas. This, in turn, led landowners to join with state security forces to create private militias for self-defense, the precursors of Colombia's paramilitaries, to combat the "extortion and kidnapping imposed by guerrillas on rural property owners" (118).

Reyes also emphasizes that one of the least visible but most significant con-

sequences of drug trafficking has been the massive purchase of rural properties by drug barons. This has changed the terms of Colombia's agrarian problems by further concentrating land ownership, with a corresponding growth in displaced peasants. Indeed, more than half of Reyes's book is a detailed study of the dislocation of peasants in the decade between 1997, when the AUC was formed, and 2007, when it had finished demobilizing. As background, Reyes notes that paramilitaries were supported, as of the 1990s, by an alliance of drug traffickers, hacienda owners, businesspeople, politicians, and multinational firms, with the cooperation or tolerance of state security forces. The paramilitaries sought to eradicate guerrillas, to control the drug business, and to take over both land and local governments (147). As well, despite starting as a means to protect landowners "in the majority of the regions of extensive cattle raising" (118), paramilitaries came to receive significant collaboration from poor and middle-class rural workers, and state security forces were instrumental in their expansion and consolidation.

Reyes acknowledges that demobilization did not eliminate paramilitaries. However, those operating today are different from their predecessors in that they dedicate themselves primarily to large-scale corruption, violent extortion, and robbery. Reyes's optimism about the immediate future of Colombia is surprising. For an author harshly critical of paramilitary forces, Reyes is almost disconcertingly positive in his assessment of the Uribe administration, which he credits for initiating "the dissolution of paramilitaries and the retreat of guerrillas . . . with majority support of the populace" (366). Although this may be true, Reyes is overly sanguine in asserting that, as a result, "the populace subjected to paramilitary dominance has been liberated from the terror of massacres and displacements" (110). Reyes's unwarranted optimism is also evident in predicting the imminent end of Colombia's guerrilla movements: "The true dilemma is whether they still have time for a final negotiation, or if the end of their history is complete military defeat" (71). Such wishful thinking is unjustified, nor does Reyes provide a convincing rationale for his claims. Readers should, therefore, focus on the book's invaluable analysis of the agrarian problem, the peasantry, and the regional control that paramilitary forces exercise in Colombia's civil conflict.

The impact of paramilitaries on Colombia's political parties and political system was equally large. This influence, at both the departmental and the national levels, is the focus of the collection of essays edited by Claudia López Hernández, *Y refundaron la patria*. Beyond the long-standing impact of paramilitaries on local and regional politics, the Uribe administration witnessed the massive election, particularly to Congress, of national politicians with paramilitary ties. López notes that these *parapolíticos* (parapoliticians) exercised a critical and decisive role in the governing coalition (52).

Members of respected Colombian think tanks wrote the chapters of *Y refundaron la patria*, which is supplemented by a CD-ROM with case studies of each territorial department in Colombia. This joint effort makes clear the extent and effects of paramilitary influence at the national level in Colombia. Elisabeth Ungar and Juan Felipe Cardona (from Congreso Visible) conclude that politicians elected in 2002 and 2006 with the support of paramilitaries did not operate as a cohesive block (269) and were no more organized, active, or successful in their legislative

efforts than other members of Congress. Their positions also did not differ often from those of their political parties. As well, parapolíticos rarely acted alone, but rather as cosponsors with legislators who lacked paramilitary ties. Nevertheless, by examining eight key pieces of legislation, Ungar and Cardona show that parapolitical support was crucial to the initiatives of the Uribe administration, especially in congressional committees. Mauricio García Villegas, Javier Revelo Revollo, and Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes (from Dejusticia) argue that the bills in question had deep institutional impacts favorable to paramilitary interests, such as provisions for the reelection of President Uribe, modifications to the penal system; a regime of transitional justice; and agrarian legislation that hindered the state's ability to expand access to landed property, regulate natural resources, and ensure the autonomy of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Another chapter by García Villegas and Revelo treats the role of the judiciary in checking parapolitical power. The Constitutional Court ruled unconstitutional parts of the Justice and Peace Law and the Biofuels Law and struck down in their entirety the Antiterrorist Statute, the Forestry Law, and the Rural Development Statute, as well as the law to hold a referendum on Uribe's reelection. Likewise, the Supreme Court showed its autonomy by investigating legislators for links to paramilitary groups and by refusing to extradite paramilitary leaders to the United States on drug-trafficking charges unless they fully confessed their paramilitary crimes in Colombia.

Overall, the evidence presented in this volume leads to the conclusion that the Uribe administration advanced an agenda favorable to paramilitary interests and did not hesitate to use parapoliticians to bolster its legislative majority. As Claudia López argues, the problem was not Uribe's "conservative and right-wing project" but that Uribe rarely condemned the paramilitaries' penetration of his governing coalition (73).

If Colombia's armed conflict has received relatively little notice, the diverse efforts to achieve peace have been accorded even less attention. This lacuna is addressed in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, edited by Virginia M. Bouvier. With twenty-three chapters by more than thirty activists and scholars mostly from Latin America, particularly from Colombia, this collection covers a range of local and international initiatives to bring peace to Colombia. Its analyses are also (though indirectly) valuable to anyone interested in the ramifications of paramilitarism. Part 1 examines contextual matters such as the emergence of a national peace movement, government-sponsored peace negotiations, and the principal illegal armed groups (e.g., FARC, ELN, AUC). A standout chapter by Adam Isacson and Jorge Rojas Rodríguez reviews the relatively brief history of peace activism in Colombia to conclude that "civil society peace activism remains vibrant and creative," especially at the local and regional levels (36). Parts 2 and 3 describe peace initiatives by the Catholic Church, educational and business groups, women, and indigenous organizations. Among the many contributions found here, Angelika Rettberg provides a useful corrective to the notion that the business community is inherently hostile to peace building by examining cases in which it supported community organization, the improvement of local governance, and education and employment initiatives. In another notable chapter, Catalina Rojas shows the

tremendous diversity of women's peace groups in Colombia while insisting that they are united in condemning the violation of human rights, in opposing military solutions and international military aid, in favoring a negotiated settlement, and in advocating a gendered perspective in the design and implementation of peace and development projects.

Part 4 examines local and regional peace initiatives, focusing in particular on four of the most conflictive regions: the Middle Magdalena Valley, Eastern Antioquia, the Montes de María on the northern coast, and Putumayo. Several contributions in this part are first-person testimonials that, though lacking academic rigor, afford insight into the tremendous challenges that civil society faces and into its concrete, albeit fragile, achievements. Christopher Mitchell and Sara Ramírez's comparative study of three peace communities is notable for its finding that ending corruption and *politiquería* was often more important than issues of violence and insecurity as a motive to set up a peace community. Mary J. Roldán's well-written historical narrative of the origins and development of the peace movement in Eastern Antioquia shows the valor and creativity of local peace activists, concluding that their success depends to a significant degree on outside power holders: "Local peacebuilding efforts do not and cannot exist in a vacuum" (294). Part 5 turns to the international context, especially the initiatives of the UN Development Programme, the U.S. government, U.S. NGOs, the European Union, and Norway's foreign ministry. The result is a sobering picture. The authors find that U.S. foreign policy (particularly Plan Colombia) has undermined the prospects for peace and human rights in Colombia, U.S. NGOs have failed to change U.S. foreign policy, and Europe as a whole fails to see Colombia's armed conflict as a direct security threat or as a top priority for its foreign policy.

Bouvier's concluding chapter calls on peace advocates to join local, regional, national, and international initiatives "within a framework of mutual reinforcement" (431). Citing the government's alternation between efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement and efforts to win the war, she argues that the Colombian president is the primary determinant of the direction and speed of the pendulum's movement, whereas civil society (at all levels) plays a supporting role in trying to shape his decisions. Bouvier suggests that civil society might be more influential were it to put forward a common and comprehensive solution, establish denser alliances and networks, and intensify its promotion of peace initiatives. It is perhaps doubtful that such actions would suffice in the face of paramilitary and guerrilla obduracy, government indifference, and U.S. opposition.

Paramilitaries have had a profound and highly negative impact on life in Colombia, and this has by no means disappeared with the dismantling of the AUC. All the works reviewed here share a fundamental understanding of paramilitaries as extremely violent actors backed by sectors of the upper classes and military in order to eliminate guerrillas and their presumed supporters, control the drug business, extend their hegemony to rural areas, and influence all levels of government. The most careful and convincing of these works also acknowledge the support that paramilitaries have received from lower- and middle-class citizens in the regions where they dominate. These studies also resist viewing the state as a homogeneous entity and note that some of its sectors, particularly the judiciary,



have attempted to combat paramilitary influence. As well, the best studies underscore changes in paramilitary forces over time and note their autonomy from the state on significant occasions. Finally, while affirming that paramilitary influence has deeply penetrated some political parties, they refuse to dismiss all nonleftist parties as paramilitary lackeys. Such complexity of analysis is no weakness if the facts of the case warrant it. Colombia's armed conflict is as complex as any in the recent history of Latin America and merits not only the harshest condemnation of its execrable abuses but also the most careful and accurate analysis that scholars can provide.