

Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism

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Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation
in Colombia and Beyond

Jasmin Hristov



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1

Introduction: *The Spectre of Paramilitarism*

What you have to understand my dear is that business needs security. We do business and we work with businessmen too. All those Leftists are not good for business. They are trouble makers. That's all they do. We try to establish order, do business which also benefits the community and the poor because we improve the roads, the schools, etc. But the problem is that while we work to bring progress to our country, all they do is put stupid ideas into people's heads. While we construct, they destroy. We don't want communists or socialists or terrorists. You see, we work with the state, we don't work for the state, but with the state. The state doesn't have to give us orders and tell us what to do. It's the reality and our interests that dictate what we do. Those people don't realize that it's the wealthy who give jobs to the poor. And, well, even when our profits come from activities that are seen as all bad, at the end we spend them here, we invest here, you know we benefit our economy, there is nothing wrong with that.

Oscar, member of a paramilitary group,
Department of Santander, Interview 2009

This work employs a Marxist political economy perspective to explore the role of violence in processes of capital accumulation, dispossession and the exacerbation of social inequalities. It is my belief that, while multiple forms of and motives for violence are present in Colombian society, it is possible to discern one pervasive and persistent kind of violence capable of reproducing itself that is of central importance to the armed conflict and to any future prospects for peace. It rests upon the fusion of economic and political power, is spearheaded and organized by considerable sections of the Colombian capitalist classes, and is facilitated through the support of various state institutions. The phenomenon of paramilitarism is the very embodiment of this kind of violence. Hence, the central focus of the book

is the nexus between the paramilitary, capital (local and foreign), and the state in Colombia.

On the surface Colombia appears to present a paradox. Of all the countries in Latin America, it is the one that has had the fewest military coups and spent the least number of years under military dictatorship in the twentieth century (Zuleta 2005). It has been repeatedly regarded as Latin America's oldest and most stable democracy (Palacio 1991) and even as one of the longest-surviving democracies in the Western hemisphere (Holmes, Gutierrez and Curtin 2008). Yet, in merely seven years (1988–95) under democratic governments, this country witnessed 28,332 political killings, greatly exceeding the number in each of the other South American nations during their periods of military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s¹ (Giraldo 1996). Throughout Colombia's history, violence has been a decisive structuring process (Oquist 1980) and has manifested itself in some of the most extreme and inhumane ways, as Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) have eloquently described:

Almost all of the brutal and senseless paraphernalia of slaying known to history have been exhibited in Colombia. The ever-present feeling of menace, fear, and death, the actual visual presentation of mangled bodies and other sadistic manifestations, together with a desire for revenge in those children whose parents or relatives have been victims of violence, all tend to perpetuate a situation which possibly has no equal in contemporary Western Civilization ... But nowhere in the Western world in recent times since the Second World War has senseless brutality, a genocidal pattern, and a non-war pattern of violence been nearly so total as in the Colombian tragedy. (Cited in Oquist 1980: 276–79)

Zuleta describes Colombia as an 'explosive mixture of democracy and dirty war' (2005: 133). In 50 years (1960–2010) there were at least 61,604 cases of forced disappearances² (Mechoulan 2011). In the period 1985–2000, four presidential candidates, over 1,200 police officers, half of the Supreme Court justices and 200 journalists and judges were murdered. Between 1996 and 2002, a homicide was committed every 20 minutes and a kidnapping every three hours. In 2002, Colombia's homicide rate exceeded 40 per 100,000 inhabitants, giving it one of the highest homicide rates in the West (Briceno-Leon and Zubillaga 2002). In 2002 alone, 144 politicians and public officials were assassinated, 124 were kidnapped, and

more than 600 mayors were threatened with death (Pardo 2000, cited in Holmes, Gutierrez and Curtin 2008). It is not surprising that Colombia has earned an informal reputation for being the most violent country in the Western hemisphere.

Statistically, this country ranks as the world's most dangerous place to be a member of a labour union. On average, over the last 24 years, every three days one unionist has been murdered (USLEAP 2011). Colombia is also among the nations with the largest number of internal refugees (Moloney 2005). According to the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento, or CODHES), 5.5 million people have been forcibly displaced³ as a result of violence in the last 26 years (CODHES 2012). Over two million have fled the country since 1985 (Holmes, Gutierrez and Curtin 2008).

Who Exactly is the Paramilitary?

Parainstitutional violence⁴ – encompassing violence carried out by paramilitaries, death squads, vigilantes and warlords – has been a long-standing tradition in Colombia. The latter is regarded as one of the few countries in the world where such violence has been so prevalent in recent decades and where paramilitary organizations have amassed such a substantial share of territorial control and political power (Jones 2008). Paramilitary⁵ groups, with the complicity or direct participation of state forces, have been responsible for the majority of the murders, torture, forced disappearances, forced displacement, and threats against the civilian population. Even conservative (state) sources confirm the magnitude of civilian deaths at the hands of paramilitaries – 14,476 between 1988 and 2003. During President Alvaro Uribe's first term in office (2002–6), 8,582 civilians were murdered or disappeared by the paramilitary and/or state forces (Boletín Virtual 2009). The political party Patriotic Union (Union Patriótica, or UP) had over 3,500 of its members murdered or disappeared by paramilitary groups between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s (Holmes, Gutierrez and Curtin 2008). Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba stated during her speech addressed to the European Union in September 2010, 'Colombia is a mass grave, it is the largest cemetery of Latin America' (cited in *El Tiempo* 2010). Her statement alluded to the number of mass graves⁶ that had been discovered throughout the country

in 2010 where state and paramilitary forces had buried the corpses of their victims.

Colombian paramilitary organizations are armed groups, created and funded by wealthy sectors of society, with military and logistical support provided unofficially by the state. Their principal aim is to eliminate or neutralize individuals or groups that constitute a threat or obstacle to the interests of those with economic and political power. Murder, torture and threats are typically used by paramilitaries to silence social activists, eradicate support for the guerrillas,⁷ and displace people from areas of strategic economic or military importance. Criminal activities such as trafficking, theft, extortion, kidnappings and assassinations are often part of their sources of funding. Paramilitary groups were first created in the 1960s as part of US-Colombian counter-insurgency projects (with the support of sectors of the local elite), and began to expand in the 1980s as large portions of the local capitalist classes (including large-scale landowners, agribusinesses, mining enterprises and drug-traffickers), as well as some foreign companies present in Colombia, took on a leading role in the creation of paramilitary organizations in various parts of the country. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a considerable growth in their financial and military power as well as rapid territorial expansion. Paramilitary bodies, with cooperation from sectors of the armed forces, the police, and justice system institutions, actively sought to exterminate or at least intimidate any person or group that was considered to be potential collaborator or sympathizer of existing guerrilla movements.

With regard to the composition of paramilitary organizations, it is important to note that they comprise two categories of people. The first is the leaders (using the term in a broad sense) – including the founders or those providing the funding, high-level commanders, and those responsible for major decision-making of a military, economic or other nature which has a direct influence on the organization's operations and determines its future course of action. The leaders belong to the economically dominant classes (landowners, cattle-ranchers, agribusiness owners, mining entrepreneurs and drug-traffickers) as well as those with political power (such as mayors, other politicians, and military and police officials). The second category of paramilitary members consists of the rank-and-file combatants and low-level commanders who are paid a salary. These are the people who perform directly the acts of violence, security duties, and sometimes intelligence gathering. They are usually recruited from low-income sectors of society such as: unemployed youth in urban

and rural areas (including youth gangs), *sicarios* (hired gunmen); private security companies personnel; low-rank state army and police personnel; other state personnel who have had military training; those who wish to join the paramilitary for personal reasons (such as having been victimized in some way by guerrilla forces); and forcibly recruited individuals (minors and adults often recruited by deception where, for instance, they are told they will be given a job at a farm or a construction site). The use of the term 'paramilitary' throughout this book encompasses both categories – leaders as well as rank-and-file combatants. When statements are made regarding paramilitary decision-making or economic/political power, obviously these refer to the first category.

Since the 1960s, the state's perception of the principal security threat has coincided with the paramilitary's official enemy – the guerrillas. Thus, throughout major military initiatives sponsored by US administrations, such as counter-insurgency campaigns against the threat of Communism (1960–80s), followed by the War on Drugs (1980s–90s), and finally the War on Terror (2001 onwards), there has been a systematic cooperation between state forces and paramilitary organizations. Regardless of their ideological covers, all of these 'wars' have essentially consisted of military operations and legal measures targeting an 'internal enemy'.⁸ Jointly, state and paramilitary violence has facilitated processes of capital accumulation by repressing social movements, eliminating political opponents, displacing populations, intimidating journalists and human rights activists, and engaging in social cleansing.⁹ Although, officially, paramilitary groups had demobilized by February 2006 after peace negotiations with the government, in reality since then there has been an upsurge in paramilitary violence.

The growth in paramilitary activities and the territorial expansion of such organizations between 1990 and 2005 was in parallel to the onset of neoliberalism in Colombia. Starting in 2002, neoliberal restructuring was especially accelerated under former President Uribe and comprised the privatization of public services and resources, deregulation of the labour market, increasing the presence of foreign enterprises (especially extractive industries), and drastic reduction of spending on social services. President Santos (2010–14) has enthusiastically continued the neoliberal agenda. The detrimental impacts of these market-oriented policies on human development are clearly evident as the precarious existence of millions of people deteriorates and social inequalities widen further. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report from 2011,

Colombia's Human Development Index¹⁰ and life expectancy are among the lowest in South America (higher only than Bolivia and Paraguay). With poverty at 45.5 per cent, Colombia ranks as the country with the second highest percentage of the population living below the national poverty line in all of South America, after Bolivia (UNDP 2011). Thirteen per cent of the population live in extreme poverty¹¹ (Prensa Latina 2012). Fifty-five per cent of the population considered economically active (which amounts to 23 million people) have an income that is less than the minimum salary (Caracol 2013), and approximately 20 per cent of the population are homeless (DANE 2009). Around 45 per cent of Colombians work in the informal economy unprotected by labour laws, and almost half of the employed people earn an income less than the legal minimum wage (Prensa Latina 2012). Colombia's rural areas, where 31 per cent of the population live, are ridden with problems of food insecurity, malnutrition and hunger. Half of all rural households experience food insecurity and 20 per cent of rural children suffer from chronic malnutrition (Agencia Prensa Rural 2013). Around 2.5 million children between the ages of six and 17 are forced to work (DANE 2009). The average illiteracy rate is 8 per cent but is as high as 22 per cent among indigenous women (Boletín Virtual 2009). By being complicit in forced dispossession, implementing policies that favour agroindustries and large-scale local and foreign mining companies, combined with the absence of reliable public education, housing and health care, the state has allowed problems of homelessness, landlessness, deterioration in nutrition and health and concentration of landownership to become aggravated.

This bleak picture of human development is accompanied by considerable wealth inequalities. Based on the UNDP 2011 Report, Colombia has the highest income Gini coefficient¹² in the Americas, standing at 58.5. Moreover, it is the third most unequal country in the world after the Comoros Islands and Haiti. Landownership inequality is particularly acute. Sixty-eight per cent of landowners (mostly small-scale farmers) own only 5.2 per cent of Colombia's fertile land (Richani 2007) while 67 per cent of the country's land is in the hands of 4 per cent of the population (Bonilla 2013). In the same way that poverty and social inequality have been a steady characteristic of Colombian society, violence enacted by the dominant classes and the state has been a permanent feature of its political landscape. Any social movements that have sought to establish a more egalitarian distribution and control of productive

resources have been met with repression through legal, ideological and especially military means. This continues to be the case.

While Colombia has been named the most violent country in the West, it has had the most sustained economic growth of all Latin American nations (Holmes, Gutierrez and Curtin 2008). It is worth noting that since 1985, while 5,445,406 people were forcibly uprooted from their land (CODHES 2012), 90,000 were disappeared, 95,000 were murdered (Semana 2014b), and more than 2,800 labour unionists were assassinated (El Espectador 2012), gross capital formation in Colombia doubled. Net inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) also reached a record level in 2005, making Colombia the country with the highest FDI in South America and also surpassing Mexico. Interestingly enough, and parallel to these developments, the military expanded from a force of 167,000 at the beginning of the 1990s to 441,000 by 2008. The defence budget steadily increased from 2.2 per cent in 1990 to almost 6 per cent in 2008, representing the largest share of government expenditure (Richani 2010). Human rights violations by state and paramilitary forces have continued to take place in substantial proportions even after the so-called demobilization of the paramilitary in 2006. Between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2011, referred to by the Colombian government as a 'post-conflict' era, 1,512,405 people were forcibly displaced (CODHES 2012) and 218 unionists were murdered (USLEAP 2011; El Comercio 2012).

The Significance of Paramilitary Violence Beyond Colombia

The importance of understanding the relationship among processes of violence, capital accumulation and a deepening of wealth inequalities extends beyond Colombia. As Sluka (2000) rightly argues, 'There appears to be a direct correlation between the increasing power and wealth of the elite [within and between countries], the steadily increasing gap between rich and poor, and the growth of state terror, perhaps the three most obvious global characteristics of the last quarter of the twentieth century' (cited in Jones 2008: 32). Although the experience of each country is contingent upon its particular demographic, political, economic, environmental and cultural characteristics, the insights we derive from Colombian social processes have considerable relevance for other parts of Latin America. Neoliberal restructuring of the economy, along with an impoverishment of the working majority, the presence of transnational corporations (TNCs),

high levels of violence, human rights abuses of civilians by state forces, and the formation of paramilitary-like forces, are features that countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras and Brazil have in common to varying degrees with Colombia (Koonings and Krujit 1999, 2004; Pansters and Castillo 2007; Rozema 2007; Mazzei 2009).

When it comes to international war, Latin America has been one of the most pacifistic regions in the world in the past two centuries (Pereira and Davis 2000). However, the use of violence in the acquisition of land and resources as well as in the confrontation of peasant and worker mobilizations has historically been a typical characteristic of most of the continent.

For purposes of clarity, the term 'peasant' and '*campesino*' are used interchangeably throughout this book to refer to the Latin American small-scale farmer who engages in the production of subsistence or food crops for his or her family's needs and/or for sale at a local market. An exception to this is where small-scale farmers turn to the cultivation of illicit crops, discussed later in the book. The size of a small-scale farm in Colombia is no more than 200 hectares. Koonings and Krujit (2004) observe that social and political violence in the region has appeared to be enduring, despite the consolidation of formal (political, electoral) democratic systems. The findings of the UNDP Report of 2011 confirm violence and inequality as the two defining features of the region currently. According to Heraldo Muñoz, UNDP Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin America has the highest income inequality and the most violence in the world – the region represents 9 per cent of the world's population but concentrates 27 per cent of the world's homicides (Domingo 2011). Homicide rates¹³ have been increasing steadily in Latin America since 1984 (Pearce 2010). By 1998, violence was the leading cause of death in Latin America among people in the 15–44 year age group (Briceno-Leon and Zubillaga 2002). In fact, today Latin America is second only to South Africa in levels of homicide in the world (Pearce 2010).

While Latin Americans and many people in other parts of the world are aware of the high prevalence of violence in this region, it is mostly the sensationalist simplistic accounts presented by mainstream media that the public is exposed to. The systematic violence employed by the dominant classes and the state's coercive apparatus remains largely neglected in favour of isolated criminal acts in large cities. Numerous scholars have pointed out that today most Latin American societies are primarily urban. It is believed that people move to the cities because there

are more opportunities, which is in turn presumed to be sufficient ground for disregarding the question of rural class structure and land ownership altogether. Consequently, the focus on the 'urban' and the 'criminal' obscures the fact that a considerable part of the rural-to-urban migration is actually an intentional product of displacement (whether direct/forced or indirect). This often entails an element of violent dispossession carried out by irregular armed groups and/or state armed forces on behalf of local capitalist sectors and foreign enterprises. The focus on criminal activities in urban centres also misses the violence targeted at popular movements and social actors such as labour unions, women's organizations, and human rights activists, even when these in fact occur in an urban environment. When reported on, such cases are presented as isolated incidents rather than as part of a strategy of repression and intimidation against those who in some way challenge or represent an obstacle to the interests of the dominant classes. Examples of violence associated with land appropriation, displacement and ownership as well as the repression of rural and urban workers' struggles are abundant across Latin America. Yet their coverage is largely limited to journalistic accounts, which have been exposing the growing importance of land in recent years. According to a 2011 report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the skyrocketing of food prices has been accompanied by increasing acquisition of fertile land by multinational corporations (MNCs), a process which has been referred to as land-grabbing¹⁴ (Albinana 2012). Millions of hectares of farmland in Latin America have been acquired by corporations investing in the production of food crops and agro-fuels for export (GRAIN 2010).¹⁵ Land-grabbing involves forced evictions, dispossession, migration and the criminalization of those who resist giving up their land (GRAIN 2011).

It is not only foreign investors who are behind the dispossession currently taking place in Latin America. Historically and up to the present, the political and economic power of local elites has been derived from landownership, evident in the very unequal patterns of land distribution. For example, in Brazil, 3.5 per cent of landowners have nearly 60 per cent of the best farmland, while the poorest 40 per cent of farmers have access to merely 1 per cent of the land. Landowners and logging companies continue to force more people off their land, while their private armed forces silence land reform, human rights, trade union and environmental activists. In a period of 16 years (1985–2001) 1,237 murders linked to land disputes were reported in Brazil according to official sources (Frayssinet 2007). This number does not include all the other human rights violations

that do not necessarily result in death. In Mexico, the militarization of some regions as part of the War on Drugs¹⁶ has facilitated the operations of extractive industries, as rural activists who organize resistance against mining companies are targeted by state as well as private security forces. For instance, Dante Valdez, who engaged in activism against Minefinders – a Vancouver-based company that operates an open-pit gold mine (Paley 2011) – was murdered by a group of 30 armed men in Madera. Similarly, in Peru mining companies hire private security firms made up of former police and military personnel to target communities who protest the negative environmental and social impacts of large-scale mining (Ford 2009). In Venezuela, former President Hugo Chávez introduced a law in November 2001 aimed at land redistribution for the benefit of poor farmers. The refusal of large landowners to obey the law was symbolized by their act of publically burning copies of the law and broadcasting this on television. From the introduction of the law until 2011, peasants faced a campaign of intimidation and violence enacted by the private armed forces of the landed elite, resulting in the death of 255 people (Fuentes 2011).

Paramilitary-like formations are not limited to agrarian conflicts throughout Latin America. Such forces have also been employed to conduct social cleansing and confront urban criminal gangs in Central America and Brazil. For instance, across various cities in Brazil, what Pearce (2010) refers to as ‘para-state death squads’ engage in extrajudicial executions of youth gang members as well as other residents in poor communities.¹⁷

Another reason why the Colombian case bears relevance to other parts of Latin America has to do with the current militarization as well as decentralization and privatization of violence underway in Central America, promoted and organized by the US, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. In 2010 the US created the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), with a budget of \$165 million and the participation of private security contractors, the CIA, as well as the US and Colombian military forces. The main role in CARSI so far has been played by Uribe, who has been promoting, through a series of conferences¹⁸ across Central America, the Colombian model of decentralized policing through ‘public-private partnerships’ (that is, cooperation between state military forces and private security contractors) and the expansion of electronic surveillance. Colombian paramilitarism serves as the blueprint for the design of these police and militarization reforms, which are already underway in Honduras,¹⁹ Guatemala and El Salvador (Bird 2011). Such programmes are