

Introduction

To survive in Colombia it is necessary not to think, give opinions, criticize, or express our points of view verbally or in writing. . . . Talking, writing, thinking, and arguing are precisely the reasons why many people meet their death too early. We live in a misconceived democracy where opinions, opposition, criticisms, and different forms of thinking are not accepted as the essence of a democratic system.

—Colombian lawyer, August 2005

Constructing a meaningful and comprehensive explanation of the complexities, dynamics, and contradictions of Colombia's multidimensional present-day conflict is a significant intellectual challenge. Yet, for scholars who see themselves as agents of social transformation grounded in principles of social justice and whose work aims to build an understanding of popular struggles, as well as help in the visualization and strengthening of those struggles, the realization of such a project is of utmost importance. Consider the following: How are we to make sense of the \$600 million awarded yearly by the U.S. administration to the anti-narco-terrorist efforts of current president Álvaro Uribe Vélez,¹ if Uribe was in fact one of the most wanted international drug traffickers according to the Pentagon's 1991 National Security Archives?² What are we to make of the fact that the Colombian armed forces—which have earned a reputation as one of the world's worst human rights violators due to their involvement in the torture, rape, and murder of students, human rights activists, trade unionists, peasants, and kids (to name few of their victims)—have nevertheless enjoyed billions of dollars in U.S. support since the early 1990s? Is the North American public aware that while peasants' harvest, livestock, their own health, and that of their children are being mercilessly destroyed through aerial fumigation operations supposedly carried out to eliminate the cultivation of illicit crops, members of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency

(DEA) easily arrange U.S. visas for paramilitary narco-lords? How much does the public know of the fascinating character of Washington's most important Latin American ally, Uribe, including his numerous connections to paramilitary groups and the drug trade? How many people realize that Colombia is the world's most dangerous country in which to be a union leader . . . that the persecution of human rights activists through threats, torture, and assassination, has reached crisis proportions . . . that the number of forcibly displaced people (and bear in mind that displacement often entails unimaginable atrocities) is already close to 4 million? Why is it that in one of the most resource-rich countries in Latin America, nearly 10 million human beings are homeless, close to 5 million children live in poverty, and half a million children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition?³

The question is not only about the existing lack of awareness of these issues in the North. What portion of Colombia's upper-middle and upper classes even care about the plight of their fellow citizens and think beyond their immediate concerns for their own personal property and lives? While the worries of refined individuals belonging to the "fifth segment" (*extracto cinco*, referring to the urban upper class) are filled up by matters such as plastic surgeries to remove fat or insert silicon in order to achieve their ideal image of beauty, 65 percent of the population lives in poverty, unable to regularly satisfy basic subsistence needs.⁴ While the "fifth segment" take their kids to see the wonders of Florida's Disney World, over half the country's children go to bed hungry. Naturally, the priorities of the wealthy include displaying the latest fashions, visiting the gym regularly, protecting their luxury cars from theft, and enjoying upscale restaurants and entertainment. Often made possible through illegal capital, these luxuries detach them from unpleasant and inconvenient details such as the poor who die in the hallways of public hospitals and the children who instead of sitting in classrooms stand on street corners begging and selling whatever they find, including their own bodies. As long as these people remain in their own world, swallowing their humiliation silently, the well-off can belong, undisturbed, to the sphere of the new global elite. However, whenever *los miserables* cross the boundary and become a nuisance or a threat, the upper classes are prepared with their quick-fix strategy of *limpieza social* (social cleansing).⁵ How is it possible that under a twenty-first-century (formally) democratic regime, torture has become an art, per-

haps surpassing in severity the barbarities used in the eighteenth-century English punishment of so-called vagabonds and those under Latin America's dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s, including cutting still living persons into pieces, or mutilating women's bodies beyond recognition? How much can we trust the Colombian government's plans for peace and security if it continues to offer numerous privileges and protections for groups that have for years been dedicated to displacing, torturing, and assassinating unarmed civilians?

Five Hundred Years of War on the Poor

The examples above provide merely a glimpse into the multiple expressions of an engine of terror, death, fear, silence, and hunger, which this book attempts to expose. Of particular importance to comprehending such contemporary relationships as that between poverty and violence is understanding the historical roots of such problems. Two intertwining motifs run throughout Colombia's history: (1) social relations marked by inequality, exploitation, and exclusion and (2) violence employed by those with economic and political power over the working majority and the poor in order to acquire control over resources, forcibly recruit labor, and suppress or eliminate dissent. As in many other Latin American countries, we can find the seeds of present-day social inequality and strife in the concentration of Colombia's land and resources under the control of a tiny minority, matched by the progressive dispossession of the majority of people, which originated with colonialism in the sixteenth century. Central to these developments and, more broadly, to the establishment and survival of capitalism have been the separation of peasants from their means of subsistence and the appropriation of communal land by large-scale landowners.

Starting in the late 1500s, the conquerors began clearing the indigenous population from territories with desirable characteristics—mineral deposits, fertile soil, access to water, transportation routes, and so on. The separation of the indigenous from their means of subsistence allowed the formation of a local colonial elite who transformed what used to be the native inhabitants' communal lands into large estates, or haciendas. The creation of landless peasants facilitated the supply of labor for the Spaniards'

ventures, such as mining and agriculture.⁶ The colonizers introduced the *encomienda*, an arrangement through which certain Spaniards could appropriate the labor of the local population through coercion as well as receive other forms of tribute.

The economically dominant groups that emerged during Colombia's colonial period remained in control of the country's wealth and political power after independence (1810). Their vision of progress was to be achieved through modernizing their country, which implied adopting the neoclassical economic model. The latter rested on the premise that capitalist markets function smoothly and regulate themselves and that therefore the state need not restrict the pursuit of bourgeois interests in any way.⁷ By the mid-1800s the elite strongly advocated an expansion of the export of goods associated with the primary sector—silver, gold, coffee, tobacco, indigo, quinine, and other agricultural commodities. This required the further expropriation of land and labor from the peasantry. Consequently, the expansion of landlords' estates not only increased the production of cash crops but also ensured the availability of labor by depriving peasants of their land.⁸

Toward the second half of the nineteenth century, as more and more haciendas began to export coffee, sugarcane, and tobacco (which entailed a change in agricultural techniques), there was a transformation in relations between landowners and peasants. Many peasants (*peones*), who previously had a right to a small plot of land in exchange for compulsory labor, which they performed for the landlord, were eventually evicted and replaced with day laborers paid only a cash wage.⁹ Since capitalist farms could not employ all those deprived of their land, the problem of landlessness became more and more serious. The inequalities that were forming within Colombia were inextricably linked to the country's positioning in the global hierarchy of economic power. The nineteenth century marked the consolidation of Colombia as an exporter of goods intensive in unskilled labor and primary materials, something that continues to characterize the country's foreign trade even today.

The twentieth century saw a solidification of the general patterns that had begun to emerge throughout the history of Colombia up to that point—the massive appropriation of collective property and the expropriation of small-scale and tenant farmers by economically and politically dominant groups. Even while the import substitution model (consisting of

industrial protection to encourage the manufacturing of goods that would otherwise be imported) was promoted by the state starting in the 1950s, the state maintained certain agricultural policies that continued to aggravate the inequality in landownership. For instance, the big coffee exporters received support in the form of credit and machinery at subsidized prices; meanwhile peasants were hurt through measures such as controls on food prices. It is not surprising that, by the 1980s, land distribution in Colombia was among the most unequal in the world. Sixty-two percent of all agricultural properties (1 million peasant units) represented only 5.2 percent of the area farmed, had a mean size of 1.2 hectares, and were mostly located in sloping, eroded, infertile areas.¹⁰ Landless peasants who could not find work on plantations or haciendas had no other option but to migrate to nearby cities and take low-paying, unstable jobs. Further, the significant integration of the country into the world economy, which began toward the end of the 1960s, continued the upward trend of primary-sector exports such as coffee, bananas, gold, and fossil fuels.¹¹ This meant that simultaneous with the growth of local capital and uneven land distribution, a considerable portion of the agricultural and primary resources sectors were penetrated by foreign enterprises, such as the United Fruit Company, which marketed bananas under the Chiquita brand.¹²

Today, economic liberalization has once again reinforced the uprooting of rural inhabitants and the privatization of collectively owned land. These two processes have also been associated with the persistence of the following conditions:

- precarious living conditions and a lack of economic security for the working majority
- an ongoing shift of resources and wealth to the upper classes
- considerable control of public resources and sectors of the economy by foreign enterprises
- a lack of state autonomy from politically and economically powerful groups, foreign corporations, and international bodies
- dependence on foreign markets

Colombia's history shows that the destruction of existing social structures, the expulsion of indigenous people from areas of strategic economic

importance, and the appropriation of peasant labor—all of which began with the European conquest of Latin America and were later reinforced under dominant developmental models—were in fact made possible by the regular use of violence. Initially, the colonialists used armed force in the dispossession of indigenous peoples and their subsequent subjugation under arrangements such as the *encomienda*. In response to the rapid decrease of the indigenous population, the Spanish crown awarded these communities with territories known as *resguardos*. However, starting in the 1700s, through both individual and organized attacks, hacienda owners and other elements of the ruling class began to expropriate these collectively owned territories. In addition to confrontations of this kind, military activities also supported the *encomienda* and slavery. For instance, army expeditions often sought to destroy communities of escaped slaves.¹³

National independence did not put an end to the ruthless methods of colonial times, now used to dispossess *indigenistas* and suppress uprisings. It was also not uncommon for competing elites seeking to control popular movements among the poor. This was the underlying motive of the Thousand Days' War (1899–1902) between the Conservatives and the Liberals, which claimed about one hundred thousand lives. The war reemerged in the 1940s, provoked by the assassination of the popular Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and carried out by armed groups associated with each political party, such as the Conservatives' *pájaros*, known for their bewildering ferocity. Despite its appearance as a battle between opposing political fronts, the economic underpinnings of La Violencia, as this period came to be known, was the proletarianization of small-scale farmers by large coffee producers industrializing their holdings.¹⁴ Many of the peasants violently dispossessed by landlords began to settle in the Amazon region of the country in the 1950s, where they realized that coca was a profitable crop to grow.¹⁵ Liberal and Conservative big landowners, frequently with the support of state armed forces, violently subdued peasant resistance whenever it challenged the existing power structures. La Violencia continued in rural areas until the 1960s, leaving between two and three hundred thousand dead.¹⁶ In addition to those conflicts arising from the growing proletarianization of peasants, there emerged simultaneously a variety of social struggles such as indigenous movements for land recovery and the institution of labor organizations on banana plantations, oil fields, mines, and transportation companies. As in

the case of peasant movements, the repression of these organizations often sprang from alliances between the oligarchy's death squads and the military. The 1928 massacre of banana workers of the United Fruit Company and their families in Ciénaga, Magdalena, is only one illustration of a pattern that runs throughout the country's history.¹⁷

The further disempowerment of the working class, lack of redistributive action, and the state's inability to eliminate problems such as lack of food, undernourishment, lack of proper sanitation infrastructure, and access to health care and education created fertile ground for the further mobilization of peasants, urban workers, and students by the Communist Party. Attacks against the latter by the death squads of the Conservatives and the Liberals as well as by the state military caused the party to form its own self-defense groups. By the early 1960s, the Communist Party controlled five small municipalities in the department of Tolima inhabited mostly by peasants. In 1964 the Colombian government decided to destroy these communist strongholds, or what it referred to as "independent republics." With U.S. military assistance, it bombed the area, causing the survivors to flee into the countryside and the mountains, where they began rebuilding their armed organization. Out of that reorganization in 1966 was born the principal present-day guerrilla group—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC). Subsequently the Colombian government began strengthening the state's coercive apparatus through the development of a national security doctrine grounded in a counterinsurgency ideology.¹⁸ The role played by the United States in the design and military execution of antisubversion offensives cannot be overestimated and in fact continues at present.

The last twenty-five years have not weakened the bond between capital accumulation and violence. The neoliberal model adopted in the late 1980s allowed for the intensification of key economic and political trends that had been underway up to that point: concentration of land ownership, wealth, and decision-making power; consolidation of the subordinate position of Colombia within the global hierarchy of power; and the upper classes' attempt (with the support of the state) to extinguish any visible opposition from below. Although in mainly pro-neoliberal and postmodernist circles the idea that state power is no longer of significance to understanding economic and political conditions in the twenty-first century has

gained dominance, the Colombian case proves otherwise. It is true that the role of the state has shrunk, but this has to do largely with its withdrawal from responsibilities in the realm of social development, by

- eliminating state subsidies aimed at making essential items and services such as food, water, transportation, and communication affordable to the working majority;
- considerably decreasing or eliminating subsidies and other support for small-scale farmers;
- partially withdrawing from the duty to provide essential services, such as health care, sanitation, and education; and
- eliminating or drastically reducing the provision of other social support and assistance mechanisms for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to interpret the tendency of the state to retreat from its social obligations as a sign of its diminishing intervention in the sphere of civil society. In fact, it is impossible to understand the neoliberalization of Colombia's economy and its destructive consequence for most of society without reflecting on the part played by all the different governments since the late 1980s. First, Colombian administrations in the past two decades have conducted national policy in a way that has provided private enterprises with the rights and freedoms necessary to maximize capital accumulation, leaving the poor to bear the costs. Second, the implementation of the neoliberal project has not been a purely economic undertaking but has rather been assisted by an array of political, legislative, and militaristic measures designed and implemented by the government. It is not a mere coincidence that during the era of accelerated neoliberal restructuring, the deterioration in the living conditions of the working majority has been accompanied by an increase in the capabilities and activities of military, police, and paramilitary groups, as well as the portrayal of social movements as forces that must be monitored, silenced, and eventually dismantled. Despite the country's official status as a democracy, state security forces and illegal armed groups have tried to exterminate unarmed popular organizations.

The development of paramilitarism (a main ingredient in the formation of capital and class) has had far-reaching consequences with respect to the

onslaught on revolutionary forces, the relentless massive uprooting of millions of rural people, and securing the grip of dominant groups on power. It began in the 1960s as a product of the joint counterinsurgency efforts of the Colombian and U.S. administrations and, thanks to the initiative of the Colombian elite, reached a full-blown stage in the 1980s. For roughly forty years, the Colombian state has been playing a double game: prohibiting the formation of paramilitary groups with one law and facilitating their existence with another; condemning their barbarities and at the same time assisting their operations; promising to bring perpetrators of crime to justice, while opening the door to perpetual impunity; convicting them of narco-trafficking, yet profiting from their drug deals; announcing to the world the government's persecution of paramilitary organizations, even though in reality these "illegal armed groups" have been carrying out the dirty work unseemly for a state that claims to be democratic and worthy of billions of dollars in U.S. military aid. This schizophrenic behavior culminated in the comic tragedy performed through the peace negotiation with the paramilitary that was said to have successfully ended with the disarmament of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC) in February 2006. The embedding of paramilitarism into the very fabric of the Colombian state and economy makes the dismantling of this organization very unlikely (see chapter 5).

Colombia in the Literature: Myths and Reality about the War

The enhanced capacity of the Colombian state to resort to nondemocratic, repressive, violent, and militaristic measures in its exercise of social control during the last fifteen years has been well documented by local and international human rights bodies, certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and social movements of various kinds. However, with regard to the treatment of this topic in academic literature and the media thus far, several patterns can be identified. Both Colombian and North American mainstream scholarship,¹⁹ news broadcasts (such as the Colombian Radio Cadena Nacional, Telepacífico, and Inravisión, the American CNN, and UK-based Reuters), and print media (such as *El Tiempo*, *El País*, *El Espectador*, the *New York Times*, and the Canadian *Globe and Mail*), as well as the Colombian, U.S., and Canadian administrations, have greatly

misrepresented the question of current state-sanctioned repression and violence to the extent that it has not even been named as such.

The limitless use of the term *war* has not been able to adequately capture the magnitude, much less the causes, of the continuous and widespread violations of human rights in Colombia. Instead, both academic literature and the mass media have portrayed the conflict as the result of unique causes restricted in time and space, mainly described as the efforts of the state and its allies to save Colombians from the savage, irrational, and unpredictable narco-terrorist guerrillas. This distorted representation, which dehistoricizes the war on narco-terrorism by stripping it of all its capitalist motivations, claims that any civilian victims of the state's counterinsurgency and counterterror operations are unfortunate but inevitable casualties, justified by the mission of maintaining order and security.

In somewhat similar fashion, some sources have attributed the conflict to the confrontation between illegal narco-terrorist groups—guerrillas and paramilitary—with the state as the actor in the middle, struggling to contain the violence and drug trade. Here, revolutionary armed movements are conflated with right-wing groups of assassins formed by the Colombian state and elite, with generous U.S. support.

A number of politically progressive works published in North America since 2000 have challenged both these depictions. While offering extremely valuable insights, books such as *War, Evil, and the End of History* by Bernard Levy, *Walking Ghosts* by Steven Dudley, and *Violence in Colombia, 1990–2000*, edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez contribute to the emergence of a meganarrative of violence, which exposes the various abuses committed by armed groups and the state against innocent civilians. Even though the popularity and influence achieved by such a discourse about war can be counterhegemonic, it can serve to normalize the problems of violence and human rights violations, thus converting them into commonsense descriptors of Colombian society the way the term *drugs* has already become. As a result, accounts of crimes against human life and rights become matter of fact and acquire a peculiar natural sensationalism, as a result of which they no longer invite one to search beyond them but rather are transformed into the principal objects of analysis.

A second reason to problematize the narrative of war is that most of the time it calls for criticism of the deeds involved on the basis of morality. Yet

invoking a framework of human rights without a class-based analysis does not equip one with the tools necessary to challenge power over the long term, since such an approach is incapable of identifying the ways in which the current profoundly uneven class structure fuels violence. A rhetoric of human rights can be adopted as much by the powerful as by the powerless, since it does not question the long-held privileges of the former. In fact, such discourses have come to displace questions of radical socioeconomic reform. The detachment of violence from the totality of social relations in which it is embedded as well as the material foundations of society out of which it arises, limits greatly the understanding of the forces that drive it. Within such a scheme, one is invited to address the different expressions of dehumanization without naming the apparatus of dehumanization itself. Along the same lines, the sensationalized image of a war-torn setting sometimes lacks a clear articulation of who is waging war against whom.

Another pitfall in such works is the overemphasis on armed actors in the conflict, which underestimates the potential and significance of peaceable popular organizing. Rural and urban labor, indigenous groups, and all those marginalized by the current economic and political system have not been passive victims. As Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos²⁰ of Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation in (EZLN) has put it, "In any part of the world, there are slaves who say they are happy being slaves. . . . But . . . there are those who do not sell themselves, there are those who do not surrender themselves."²¹ These people have in many cases attempted to be, in the words of Freire, the "architects of their own liberation."²² Finally, for the sake of accuracy, it is worth pointing to the common misconception, prevalent in many works, that the pervasiveness of violence in Colombia can be traced back to the war between Liberals and Conservatives that erupted with the assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. But such an arbitrary boundary creates the conceptual impossibility of looking into the economic and political processes that generate bloodshed, since they began much before the 1940s. Consequently, such an approach transforms violence from merely one aspect of a complex issue into the central issue itself, calling for mitigation of the symptoms rather than elimination of the cause.

Quite a few recent publications have dealt with the role of the United States in fueling the crisis, including *America's Other War* by Doug Stokes, *Colombia and the United States* by Mario Murrillo and Jesús Rey

Avirama, *War in Colombia* edited by Rebeca Toledo, Teresa Gutierrez, Sara Flounders, and Andy McInerney, *Inside Colombia* by Grace Livingstone, and *Driven by Drugs* by Russell Crandall. While such works point out the links between U.S. foreign policy, U.S. capital interests, and the militarization of the Colombian countryside, they are likely to overshadow the significance of local power structures arising out of particular patterns of social relations and to divert attention from the importance of internal social inequalities and exclusion. The problem that arises here is twofold. First, since the focus is on the advancement of U.S. corporate interests through U.S. military involvement, the ways in which the U.S. military helps to consolidate the power of the local oligarchy receives insufficient attention. Second, the role played by the United States is given primacy—to the exclusion of other critical local and constantly evolving causes supporting the conflict.

In order to attain credibility, some authors have based their analysis substantially on interviews conducted with leaders and prominent figures representing key players in the Colombian conflict, such as paramilitary and guerrilla groups as well as social movements like trade unions. Nevertheless, there is often a discrepancy between the rhetoric of such individuals and the reality they claim to address. Often leaders speak of their organization or movement not as it is but as they wish it to be. Heavy reliance on such sources tends to characterize the crisis in black-and-white terms, leaving out many crucial subtleties.

A small number of scholars have skillfully managed to situate the Colombian conflict in its wider socioeconomic and historical context by addressing a particular aspect of the relationship between political violence and economic processes on a national or international scale. Among these works are *The Dispossessed* by Alfredo Molano, *The Profits of Extermination* by Francisco Ramírez, *Una democracia asediada* (A Besieged Democracy) by Eduardo Pizarro, and *Systems of Violence* by Nizah Richani. Even though varying in their political and theoretical orientation, the works above, including those by Colombian intellectuals, offer rich analyses that should not be neglected by North American Colombianists.