

## BOOK REVIEW

# Public Violence in Colombia, 1958-2010

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*Public Violence in Colombia, 1958-2010*

*(Spanish Edition)*

Marco Palacios

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In Colombia, the discussion about terrorism rests on a dichotomy between the pro-US discourse and the post-Marxist paradigm. To date, the scientific research to understand the reasons and effects of terrorism seems to be subject to a biased-argument coined by the Cold-War. As a form of transcending these barriers, Marco Palacios presents his book *Violencia Publica en Colombia 1958-2010 (Public Violence in Colombia 1958-2010)* recently published by FCE, Fondo de Cultura Económica. Although this text is centered on Gramscian legacy, it proposes a new more-balanced reading of the problem. Undoubtedly, this book represents a serious effort to integrate both stances, into a single-handed argument.

At some extent, Palacios tries to recall that aristocracies appealed to the sense of peace only to preserve their own interests. Sometimes, adding unconditionally to US-policies, others ignoring the big problems in hinterlands. Unlike the most left-wing theories, he is convinced that United States did not facilitate the upsurge of terrorism, unless by the intervention and adoption of Colombian governments, that manipulated the safety doctrine, coined for the hemisphere, according to their interests. More interested in moving the resources and police to protect their own business, aristocracies did not put efforts in achieving a lasting peace. This resulted not only in an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, but in weaker democratic institutions which are unable to control the social conflict. In some circumstances, violence was inadvertently adopted as a cultural value of much broader national character in the urban fabric.

From its beginnings, as author examines painstakingly in the preliminary chapter, Colombia was economically based on colonial latifundium where land owners and peasants

competed for access to the soil. As an incomplete project that never engendered a stable sentiment of nationhood, the state played a pervasive role in regulating this conflict. Elites more interested in maximizing their profits have never intervened unless their interests were at stake. As a result of this, two types of archetypes surfaced. One agrarian based on the conflict and dispute for the land, where the authority is always negotiated. The other side signals to a much broader sense of civilization constructed according to the respect for the law and legal framework. At the surface, the constitutional order generated serious problems and asymmetries among classes. The aristocracies gained further legitimacy not only creating an economic dependency, but also leaving the hinterlands without the presence of state.

In the rural areas democracy should be interpreted as an ideal term, in some situation a condition sustained by the gravamen of taxes. The ongoing state of emergency in Colombia's rural enclaves was aggravated by the imposition of new, higher taxes. This triggered an atmosphere of resentment. The urban aristocracies avoided paying taxes, displacing the problem of government finances to other sectors. One of the most troubling aspects of terrorism, according to the thesis of this book, is that violence was used by elites to prevent the workers' union claims at the urban cities. In others Latin American countries, the privileged sectors used military forces to conduct countless coups; rather, in Colombia militaries were used to fight against guerrillas.

Abundant studies in political science emphasized democracy as a mediator between the war of all against all, but few drew further attention to the case of Colombia, which went in another direction. The rural conflicts were commoditized to deter the workers' union demands, at the same time the army was occupied in homeland safety issues. However, unlike other states, Colombia did not have any wars with other states nor did it have problems in

maintaining its external boundaries. Military forces did not participate in any coup; they were supported urban elites by strengthening the perimeter of financial businesses that connected Bogota with other cities. While many states constructed their concept of sovereignty based on wars with neighboring countries, Colombia faced a bloody escalation of violence internally, which jeopardized all social institutions and democracy. It is interesting not to lose sight the idea of an absent state defies on Gramscian conception of politics.

For Palacios, what is important to discuss in the successive second and third chapters, is the fact that in the midst of Colombian mayhem, Washington DC has historically created the necessary stereotypes to impose its agenda on Colombian leaders. Starting from the premise that any state represents a kind of Leviathan, which in Hobbesian terms monopolizes the use of force, Colombia seems to be a clear exception. This type of schizophrenia created two diverse circuits, legal and illegal. While a unified aristocracy protected their businesses by means of the democracy and law, the human rights of poorer sector were cynically ignored. This process deteriorated the social institutions necessary to forge nationhood. The legal framework determined the relationships in the urban centers, among lawyers, businessmen, blue and white collar workers, and of course the workers' union leaders. Trade was instituted as a stepping stone of the urban Leviathan, which controlled all transactions and taxes. In contrast, in rural areas people embraced the cause of bandits (bandoleros) whose main activity was to steal from travelers on the roads. Although, acts of this nature were typified as crimes, they were left beyond the intervention of state. The life in these rural areas has grown, based not only in the employment of violence and force, but with an increasing rivalry with respect to the city.

This begs an insightful question: may we define terrorism as a result of lack of regulation?. Through the four and five sections, Palacios

recognizes that any order may exist without the violence, but this obscures understanding, because it supposes that violence engenders order. This was exactly what happened in Colombia. Since the rural violence never questioned the order established in the most important cities, the elite failed to extend a broader pacification in the country, a necessary requirement to nourish a national discourse. Throughout rural peripheries, inhabitants bled to death in ongoing civil wars, whilst in large cities the process of modernity changed the colonial institutions by replacing the authority of patriarchy with secular rationality and constitutional law. This aspect would be of paramount importance to understand the reasons why terrorism enrooted in the politic life of the country.

Two events were of capital importance to deepen the conflict between the Government and its hinterland. One of them signals to Castro's revolution and the effects to other developing countries, which ranged from 1970 to 1980. Secondly, the introduction of Drug-traffic in Rural zones to give financial resources to the Guerrilla, whose epicenter started from 90s decade on.

As explained above, the conflict between cities and hinterland was accelerated but not determined after the Castro revolution in Cuba and by the Cold War. If the state and aristocrats adopted the suggestions of the United States as guidelines to regulate internal conflict, insurgents were inspired by Cuba revolution to continue with their anti-establishment activities. A correct understanding of the situation recalls that terrorists (guerrillas) have been implanted in those zones where authority of government was weakest. The state of anomie generated when the rules are not respected, circumscribed farmers and peasants to the authority of guerrillas and paramilitaries. Castro's revolution in Cuba not only generated aspirations among students and workers in Colombia but also in the rest of Latin America. This revolution was neither imagined nor sought by the United States or Soviet Union. The revolution in Cuba mounted

serious challenges for bourgeois states in the rest of the world, simply because it defied the hegemony of both Empires. Soviet Union even called guerrillas an invention of bourgeoisie and commended them to a humdrum failure. But neither the United States nor the USSR were directly involved in aftermath of this revolution in Latin American countries. While the long-simmering insurgent movements adopted the Cuban example, states followed the doctrine of homeland security proposed by Washington. If Cuba inspired the left-wing insurgents, the United States did the same with regard to bourgeois sectors. There were serious reasons to reconstruct the old archetypes of living in the city versus living in the country. Rural zones were seen as pristine and pure enclaves in opposition to cities, which were synonymous with political corruption and alienation. Without any practical results, the state devoted money and efforts to conciliate the student demands. The populist discourse initially encouraged by "gaitanismo" a couple of decades back, was silenced by the threat of terrorism in a country, where directly or indirectly, the Cold War had impacted, modified, and organized its social scaffolding.

Nevertheless, things changed a bit with the advent of 80s and 90s decades. The global drug market liberated not only the conflict but also increased the rate of crime in the urban fabric. "El Coccalero" (Coca-grower) was forced to live in conditions of misery and criminality, a situation monopolized by traffickers, which in the city financed the campaigns of presidential candidates and guerrillas in the farms. This great contradiction based on the full-fledged dichotomy Palacios describes, is conducive to elites and status quo. The problem notably aggravates after 1989 when state sanctioned the illegality of guerrilla and paramilitaries. Many army groups such as M-19, EPL and well know FARC were pressed to act out of the law, prescribed in the clandestinity. The *reforma agraria* (agrarian reform) capitalized and reduced the capacities of negotiation of

coca growers. Based on this significant problem, guerrilla takes for granted the fight of cocacero, vindicating their interests before a state which was demonized as the axis of international business and right-wing liberal economy. The opening of international commerce promoted in 1990s decade by the United States facilitated the international drug cartels that took advantage of the already-present asymmetries between peasants and their state. Palacios adds that in a turbulent conjuncture, drug trafficking was introduced thereby igniting the ever entangled situation between the state and guerrillas. Many insurgent groups adopted drug-related businesses as a way to finance their activities. This was the case for FARC. (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia- Revolutionary Army Forces of Colombia). Years of myopia respecting the economic reality of rural Colombia inflicted heavy doses of mistrust of the ruling class. With links to the apparatuses of the state, Narco-corporations not only launched operations in neighbouring countries, but operated within the Colombian main cities. How may be Che Guevara biography linked to Narco-leader?.

What this book opens is a point, many other scholars have forgotten: the US-innovated policies in Colombia were determined by a much broader imperial goal whose negative effects are not mitigated up to date. While the stereotypes fixed in the Cold War opened the country into two camps, the war on global terrorism served to take a direct presence in the region, a form of militarizing the zone to achieve the American policy of preventive war. The ideology of homeland-safety, created by the United States was manipulated and accepted by aristocracy and Colombian state, which unless their economical interests were not in danger, is still not concerned by other matters. This point of indeterminacy opens a deep-seated controversy respecting to the connection between the disciplinary power of capitalism and states. Cuban revolution precedes the resentment and

the necessary financial asymmetries, enlarging the gap that Pablo Escobar-Gaviria and other narco-leaders will fulfill a couple of decades later. Last but not least, the US-led policies of financial assistance and help for Colombia (known as Plan-Colombia) would be triggered after the 9/11. This mediated event marked a starting-point in the international fields that changed the rules in this game. Today, guerrilla has called to negotiate with state to improve their access to lands. That ways, government thinks, Narco-traffic will fly to other countries. Analysts are not sure if these steps exhibit the end of hostilities; or if Mexico will be the next Colombia.

To here, the primary points in Palacios's account has been examined in detail. Although because of time and space we are unable to expand or clarify further, it is important to leave some few lines to places his argument under the lens of scrutiny.

To our end, it remains unresolved the question of state and capitalism. Of course Palacios interrogates himself according to the following concerns, to what extent in a modern state does terrorism hold the possibility of prosperity? If drug trafficking exhibits capitalist enterprise, how can traditional farmers adopt this trade?, the problem precisely is that he cannot reach to an elegant and clear response to these questions. Giving this argument, the dichotomy city vs. hinterland that inspired the post-Marxist studies for long time, should be redefined according to new paradigms. To what an extent, terrorism is resulted from the advance of capitalism, would be a more profound hint which merit to be developed. Secondly, at confirming that 9/11 closed the negotiation to end with Guerrilla in Colombia, it would be interesting to infer further comparison respecting to other similarly-cases as Spain and North-Ireland. Has 9/11 triggered the war against an international globalized Islamic terrorism?, if so, are we living the end of separatist fight or domestic-terrorism?.

Readers, who wish to get this book, will not find a history of terrorism in a strict sense of the term. Palacios does not attempt to provide a cold-eyed explanation of facts, nor a biased-argument of guerrilla. What is one of the problems in the specialized literature in the country. Rather, he opted to enumerate the historical facts as they happened, but giving his personal understanding of the issue. Giving robust evidence of what he says, Palacios provides a valuable platform of discussion to scrutinize the complex nature of terrorism and

its effects on political system. To our opinion, a seminal work that constitutes one of the best books, we have ever read in the field.

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