

Numéro thématique :

COLOMBIE CONTEMPORAINE : PERSISTANCE DES CONFLITS

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Résumé

On a beaucoup parlé ces dernières années des progrès et accomplissements de l'administration d'Álvaro Uribe Vélez de 2002 à 2010 et, plus particulièrement, de celle de Juan Manuel Santos, Président de la République de Colombie depuis 2010. C'est par exemple sous la tutelle de Santos, alors ministre de la Défense entre 2006 et 2009 que quelques-uns des coups les plus marquants ont été portés au principal mouvement révolutionnaire colombien, et qu'a été signalée l'élimination d'éléments d'extrême droite au sein des organismes militaires et paramilitaires du pays. Cependant, à la lumière de l'information présentée dans la présente introduction et dans les autres articles de cette édition spéciale consacrée à la Colombie d'aujourd'hui, une réalité plus sombre se dessine, révélant à quel point les problèmes qui accablent ce pays si beau ont des sources trop profondes pour pouvoir être résolus selon des présomptions simplistes. Bref, affirmer que des changements substantiels ont pris place en Colombie équivaut à souscrire à une réalité illusoire, un rêve destiné à rendre l'éveil plus rude.

Introduction to the Special Issue:

CONTEMPORARY COLOMBIA: THE CONTINUITY OF STRUGGLE

James J. Brittain¹

On May 5 2003, planes flew over the Colombian department (province) of Arauca and approached an indigenous community in the Betoyes region, Tame. Parachutes began to open as armed combatants began to leap from the visible military aircraft. Upon landing, “armed individuals—identified by survivors from the indigenous Guahibo reservation as National Army troops wearing armbands of the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—raped four adolescent girls and massacred four people, including a pregnant teenager who was one of the rape victims” (Engqvist, 2003: 7). The Guahibo girls assaulted ranged in age between eleven and sixteen. Following the rape of the Omaira Fernández, the aforementioned pregnant teenager, “the attackers reportedly cut her womb open to pull out the fetus, which they hacked apart with machetes”, then “according to the Regional Indigenous Council of Arauca, witnesses from the reservation,” saw the state/paramilitary forces throw “both mutilated corpses into the river” (Fitchl, 2003; Engqvist, 2003: 7; see also Obando, 2004). Reports soon cited the US-trained Eighteenth Brigade of the Colombian army responsible for the atrocity (Leech, 2006: 154-155).

In the hopes of responding to such atrocities the Colombian state has expressed its diligence to crack down on internal corruption, the elimination of paramilitarism, a strengthened economy, and an end to the longest running Marxist insurgency in the Americas. Applause for said achievements have been heard from a variety of sources, including the administration of Barak Obama and the International Labour Organization. A claim might even be made that Colombia is a demonstration of neoliberal efficiency when accompanied by firm-fisted security. Yet when a lens of analysis is broadened away from state-based reports or popular media accounts the clarity of change becomes quickly blurred. While a great deal of rhetoric has been produced highlighting the accomplishments made by the state to ensure domestic stability, the articles throughout this special issue of

Labour, Capital and Society entitled ‘Contemporary Colombia: The continuity of struggle’ encourage the reader to reflect on whether such premises have meaningful or pragmatic credibility.

In the first article Jasmin Hristov not only contextualizes and deconstructs the realities of Colombian paramilitarism, and its formal facilitation of minority-held political-economic interests, but her work demystifies with exceptional clarity a systemic discourse that naively posits how long-entrenched internal fascist elements have, within the blink of an eye, simply evaporated from Colombian society. Arguing the contrary, Hristov provides a much-needed new sphere of analysis, which properly situates paramilitarism as an ever-changing and contributing factor to, and for, capital accumulation alongside the maintenance of the long entrenched political power structure.

Moving to a more focused discussion of labour, Dermot O’Connor and Juan Pablo Bohórquez Montoya’s article highlights the effects of conventional development strategies related to monetary growth and the consequence of such approaches on Colombian workers. The authors do a great job in detailing how both domestic and foreign powers have begun a more nuanced strategy of centralizing power – economically, politically, and militarily – through a mode of state cooperation albeit at the expense of the local population who make such profits accessible through their labour-power and/or the environment that they depend upon for survival.

In a different direction, yet still in the rubric of political economy and society, Terry Gibbs provides one of the first academic writings in English on the role of women in the struggle for substantive change in Colombia. After years of research, field studies, and the documentation of first-hand narratives, Gibbs provides a compelling and insightful analysis of the trials, tribulations, and trajectories of women who are engaged in direct action against forces of discrimination. The importance of such work, as described by the author herself, is to offer, “a glimpse into the meaning of social justice to these women and into the current state of social movements in the country from the perspective of gender”.

Closing out the special issue is the renowned Colombianist scholar Nazih Richani whose work on the country’s political and economic structures is a reference point for any serious scholars of Colombia. Richani continues to demonstrate his talent by embarking on a highly important examination of both the formal and informal

economic sectors of the country and how these influence the maintenance of the national status quo. Complementing the work of Hristov and O'Connor and Montoya, Richani paints an important picture of how the state – through governance and coercion – has been an integral partner in the facilitation of capitalist (and in no way social) development in Colombia, which has only weakened the societal welfare of the vast majority of the country's constituents that it proclaims to protect and assist. Within the context of this special issue the reader is exposed to, and subsequently informed on, a broad array of subjects be they civil war, power relations, state-based oppression, and advanced capitalist development. Such prose takes one on a journey that questions how a state can affirm that the social, political, and economic makeup of a country is better-off while poverty remains rampant, land ownership still reflects a reality where roughly two-thirds of the country's arable land is owned by less than 0.5% of the population, or levels of internal displacement now surpass the five million person mark. Even more complex is how all this can occur at a time and in a region that has witnessed a shift to the centre-Left in Latin America.

As many countries in Latin America have seen a push toward the state attempting to improve the lives of working-class peoples, Colombia has experienced the reverse. In countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, some measure of support has been devoted to increased public spending on education and health-care coupled by greater localized social development through higher levels of community-based political-economic control. Paradoxically, in Colombia one witnesses a continuity of neoliberal and post-neoliberal policies with the specific intention of benefiting a select minority; a (very public) coercive mechanism aimed at anyone struggling for more equitable economic and political policies; and an accelerated political-military subservience to the interests of foreign powers, most explicitly those within the United States, as shown through the expanded presence of seven US-based 'Cooperative Security Locations' (CSLs).

While seldom analyzed, such reactionism is, in part, based on the very real consequential momentum of a group every author in this special issue has mentioned in some form, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), and its opposition to the state acceptance of the capital system. The Colombian state, alongside support from Washington, has battled

this Marxist-Leninist guerrilla insurgency for almost five decades, yet the movement continues to wage devastation against state forces and instill fear in the consciousness of the dominant class. After spending almost ten billion US dollars in an attempt to dismantle the FARC-EP, the insurgency still fluidly exists and holds territory throughout the country (Brittain, 2010). While some aspects of the FARC-EP have experienced severe blows in the past few years, the insurgency has been able not only to stabilize campaigns against selected targets, but increasing activities on an annual basis. For several years the FARC-EP modestly amplified armed campaigns (949 [2004], 1,008 [2005], 1,026 [2006], 1,057 [2007]) against state forces. The last three years, however, witnessed a considerable jump in operations. In 2008, argued by the state as being a year of decline for the FARC-EP, the guerrilla deployed a total of 1,353 attacks, while 2009 saw the number of military attacks engaged by the insurgency averaging over five per day [1,614] (Martínez, 2010). Nevertheless, it was 2010 that witnessed the greatest number of insurgent-based attacks against state forces in fifteen years, totaling over 1,800 and resulting in the highest number of casualties of state forces in a decade (Leech, 2011). This is no surprise when one examines the above data. As Adriaan Alsema (2009) concluded, “despite nearly eight years of an aggressive military offensive against the guerrillas, the FARC are far from beaten but appear to be on the rebound. According to [one] report, the guerrillas increased their military attacks by 30% in 2009” (online source).

Ecuadorian sociologist German Chavez (2007: 97) suggests that the aforementioned CSLs are a tactic on the part of Washington to stabilize at least a portion of Latin American territory. Securing some form of control over Colombia – and subsequently using the country as a centralized outpost – will enable officials in the US to deploy ‘sub-regional military operations’ throughout the domestic and regional geography (Campos, 2007: 31). A United States Department of the Air Force report revealed as much when officials clearly stated the bases would be used against surrounding countries that do not favour US policy:

Development of this Cooperative Security Location (CSL) provides a unique opportunity for full spectrum operations in a critical sub region of our hemisphere where security and stability is under constant threat from narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-US

governments, endemic poverty ... Access to Colombia will further its strategic partnership with the United States. The strong security cooperation relationship also offers an opportunity for conducting full spectrum operations throughout South America (2009: 216).

The aforementioned is why analysis related to contemporary Colombia is of great importance and why some have gone so far as to refer to the country as the last bastion of US imperial power in Latin America and thus the necessity to ‘secure’ it from social transformation (Perkins, 2008: 149; Petras, 2001a). While Washington further entrenches its military boot heels in the land of Colombia – where it has had little success – it is, however, important to note that the United States has been involved in fighting internal struggles for social justice in the country since the mid-twentieth century.

Apart from the use of troops, ‘advisors,’ and weaponry, Washington supplied napalm to state forces to attack peasants in areas of autonomous resistance well before its use in the Vietnam war. Dating back to 1962, US forces became intimately involved in training Colombian soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques. A leading General, William Yarborough, advised members of the Colombian state (and military) that a

concerted country team effort should be made now to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations ... This structure should be used to pressure toward reforms known to be needed, perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and, as necessary, execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States (Stokes, 2005: 70).

As Yarborough compelled Colombian forces to adopt extreme tactics in an attempt to dissuade Communist sympathies in the countryside, the US advocated “physical and mental coercion” against civilians as a means to combat insurgents (Stokes, 2005: 60-61). It was not surprising then that, after their training, Colombian army personnel immediately targeted non-combatants throughout suspected rebel-extended regions. As noted by Timothy P. Wickham-

Crowley:

... personal testimony providing particular examples of government torture, beatings, and killings was given before the Colombian Congress in November 1964 ... Among the techniques reported were the placement of a grenade in a prisoner's mouth and threatening to pull the pin; faked firing squads; punching, kicking, and walking on prisoners; electric current applied to the genitals, hands, and ears; burning with cigarettes; and outright execution (1990: 212).

Such tactics allow one to see that the methods that have emerged in Colombia are not simply the initiatives of a few degenerates but rather a systemic approach of 'draining the water,' where state forces psychologically and forcefully target marginalized civilian bodies, as a means to arrest social change. A theme found in all the following articles.

This introduction began with a disturbing account of atrocities committed against a group of young children in the municipality of Tame, Arauca in 2003. Yet, almost eight years later, on October 14, 2010, three children from this very same region – Jefferson Torres [6], Jimmy Torres [9], and Yenni Torres [14] – were tortured, straggled, repeatedly stabbed, and eventually decapitated (and in the case of Yenni, also brutally raped) by members of the Colombian military's Fifth Mobile Brigade whose officers were, like those in the 2003 violations attributed to the Eighteenth Brigade, trained by the United States. Rather than ceasing conflict, Washington and Bogotá have purposely maintained an assault on many within Colombia; ironically citing them, the victims of political and economic exclusion, as criminals.

The above, as do the articles by Hristov, O'Connor and Montaya, Gibbs, and Richani, demonstrate that Colombia is far from living up to the claim of substantive change. Rather, it is a country arguably trapped in a epoch of reactionism. Nevertheless, what those in power fail to understand is that as long as inequitable sociocultural and political-economic conditions pervade society, seasoned with fascist military endeavours targeting the most marginalized, so too will a base of support for those struggling against such a system continue to rise.

Endnotes

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