

Book Review

Higgs, Johanna. *Militarized Youth: The Children of the FARC*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020, 233 pages.

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Children's involvement in armed groups is far from a new phenomenon in Colombia. After all, child soldiers participated in combat during the Thousand Days' War at the beginning of the twentieth century (33). Still, more than half of the people who joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) did so before they turned eighteen. However, little is known about the stories, the lives, the emotions, and the agency of these child soldiers. Johanna Higgs fills this gap. These children are often framed as victims of armed conflicts, and yet their political agency and violent actions are still understudied. Without putting aside the need to understand child soldiers as war victims, *Militarized Youth* looks into the process of their militarization in an innovative manner.

Johanna Higgs is an anthropologist whose work has centered on the lifeworlds of child soldiers. In this book, she analyzes the life scripts of the children recruited by the now extinct Marxist-Leninist guerrilla of the FARC-EP. The author demonstrates how their militarization is bound by cultural and social factors in which the war takes place: continuously exposed to violence, children come to embody the military at early ages.

The book, *Militarized Youth*, offers two major contributions to the field of anthropology. First, it proposes a compelling year-long ethnography in multiple sites in Colombia, where violence has profoundly affected social landscapes. Second, it provides an epistemological shift in the comprehension of the involvement of the child soldiers. Instead of following a common humanitarian approach, Higgs goes beyond this narrative and “delves deeper into the specific social and cultural aspects of the Colombian conflict to give a contextualised, culturally relevant understanding of the process of militarisation” (v). By

using a theoretical framework borrowed mainly from the phenomenological perspective and mobilizing *lifeworlds* as a central category, *Militarized Youth* is concerned with the shaping forces of child militarization in Colombia.

Consistent with her theoretical framework of lifeworlds and militarized scripts of engagement, the author's focus is on the transitions between the "civilian" and the "militarized" worlds. Militarization is conceptualized as a "process of becoming a soldier and being a soldier" and a "moving between different spheres of social reality where the values, norms and ideas differ" (3–4). As such, this ethnography shows how child soldiers face structural and cultural factors that lead to their militarization, and how they are inscribed in a continuum from their household to their time within the FARC-EP, and then to their reintegration to civilian society. What is particularly important is how the book weaves together constant reference to participants' narratives, even in the chapters referring to methodology and theoretical frameworks. It leaves a deep feeling of immersion, and a profound sense of the embodied experience of violence.

The book begins with a contextualization of children's involvement in the FARC-EP, a general portrait of violence in Colombia, and a global perspective on child soldiers in armed conflicts. Chapter 1 exposes the multiple deployments of militarization—the shaping of masculinities and femininities, the intergenerational tensions, and the hostile and violent social and cultural environments of children's educational and affective systems.

Chapter 2 turns to child soldiering as a global phenomenon, demonstrating the centrality of each local context in understanding why children participate in armed actions. Exploring other armed conflicts in the world, Higgs deconstructs the concept of childhood and insists on the necessity of de-universalizing what it means to be a child, and what it means to be a soldier. A key point here is to understand the "diversity of children's experiences and motivations in wartime" (38). Criticizing the "humanitarian approach to children in war," Higgs argues that this narrative mostly portrays children as victims and inherently vulnerable, denying them any form of agency (17–18). By linking this analysis with the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the author draws out the patterns of recruitment and violence in the country: the "everyday regulation of life" has been a central part of the normalization of militarization and in the naturalization of violent relational practices (36).

Chapter 3 turns to the author's two-phase fieldwork. Higgs spent six months in a demobilization center for child soldiers, and then another six months conducting ethnographic work in different parts of Colombia. Drawing upon insights from Carolyn Nordstrom's (1997) "ethnography of a warzone" (49), Higgs provides a detailed account of the context of her fieldwork and the spatial dynamics of the conflict in Colombia. She makes a compelling stance for choosing ethnography as a method that permitted her to establish a deeper dialogue with the children, to explore silence, to dwell on the reluctance to speak, and to consider gendered aspects of militarization. Still, despite this comprehensive account of the many people with whom she interacted in her fieldwork, readers—especially students in anthropology—would have appreciated insight on the ethical questions regarding interviews conducted with children. Indeed, there is little ethical consideration given, except on pages 52–53, which is surprising due to the book's reliance on interviewing children. The chapter would have gained in making explicit the different strategies of the researcher, considering she herself mentions the power relationships in her fieldwork as a foreign white woman.

Chapter 4 explores the concept of lifeworlds which prove to be an effective analytical category to understand contextual and identity-related configurations of children's militarized bodies. She argues that the process of militarization most likely begins in their home and the social environments where they were born (73). Drawing upon phenomenological accounts of lived experience with authors such as Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, Higgs contends that there are two broad (overlapping) collective worlds in Colombia: "the world of violence and the world of non-violence" (78). Of course, within those lifeworlds, there exist many "small worlds" and individuals may experience many of them (81). What is at the centre stage of this theoretical framework is the intersubjective part of the construction of a militarized body. As such, shifts in identities occur in accordance with our environments, bodily perceptions, collective memories, and social as well as cultural landscapes. In the case of child soldiers, these shifts in identities take place in everyday sites of violence, as demonstrated by the narratives of ex-FARC children.

The final chapters explore how child soldiers join armed groups; how they live, before, during, and after their time in the guerrilla. Chapter 5 focuses on how "violence has interlaced its way" (105) into the lifeworlds of many children in Colombia, playing an important role in their involvement in armed groups.

Higgs investigates how violence is normalized and spoken in a very casual way by most ex-child soldiers, and analyzes the longstanding impacts of direct participation in armed violence. Following her findings, everyday sites of “lived experience” are marked by violence and poverty, creating a sense of normalcy for children living in areas affected by the presence of armed actors.

In that sense, Chapter 6 shows how commanders of the FARC-EP use the memories of injustice and violence for the building up of a collective identity that further legitimizes the use of violence in the name of a greater good; in this case, the liberation of the *campesinos* from oppression by the Colombian state. The chapter provides insights into how the FARC-EP ensure that children enter the guerrilla lifeworld and adopt its identity. The creation of “warriors” implies training, education, bodily practices, and the mobilization of collective memories, while also establishing a system of dependency for survival and protection by providing the children with material goods (141). It is a process of embodying combat through erasing the self and constructing an “other” as the enemy.

Finally, in Chapter 7, we learn about the complex phenomenon of “coming home” after being part of an armed group. Children face numerous challenges in their return to a civilian society lifeworld: social stigma, isolation, trauma, as well as all the difficulties of overcoming the demilitarization of their lives in the context of an ongoing armed conflict. Children must transform their identities as they enter this new lifeworld where love and acceptance are at the center of a difficult transition.

On reading Chapter 8, one key question remains: after the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016, what is the road to peace and to the transformation of violent lifeworlds?

Higgs leaves readers with questions. How are “civilian” and “militarized” lifeworlds interconnected? What are the consequences of the normalization of violence on the configuration of daily life in Colombia? What about a culture of silence, fear, and mistrust? What to think of a separation between armed groups and civil society that was never hermetic and clear? How did the numerous and porous lines between the Clandestine Communist Party, the *Movimiento Bolivariano*, and the armed guerrilla intersect? What are the consequences of such overlapping of the “lifeworlds” on children’s politicization?

Equally, in many interviews, children show their political agency, but the link between being a “victim” and a “perpetrator” of violence might have been

further analyzed with a possibility of finding other forms of agency—other than violent action—in the transition between past life/armed violence/and civilian society. How do children transform their grief, their past memories, and what they have learned within the armed group into non-violent actions? Such analysis would contribute to further push the critique of the humanitarian approach, especially as cycles of violence and militarization continue to be reproduced in Colombia. One point that might have been further developed in the book is the way many children, even though they have grown up in a militarized context, do not necessarily come to embody militarization and violence. Higgs' compelling analysis of FARC-EP child soldiers would have also benefited from exploring how their experiences might open political possibilities.

A book about child soldiers is inevitably marked by difficult and emotional narratives. Its portrait of the embodied violence in Colombia for so many years makes reading Higgs' book no easy task. Still, in a writing style targeting different audiences, the author skillfully contributes to the understanding of the daily manifestations of violence in Colombia with insights coming from multiple actors across different parts of the country. Her work will provoke thoughtful future research in anthropology, but also actions and policy orientations to prevent the militarization of the life of children.

Note

¹ Here I use the present tense because the armed conflict in Colombia continues and child recruitment is still ongoing.

References

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1997. *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.