
The Parastate in Colombia: Political Violence and the Restructuring of Barrancabermeja

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Abstract: This article examines how terror and fear hastened the neoliberal restructuring of Barrancabermeja and the creation of a violent surrogate state. It argues that neoliberal reforms arose in the context of a severe social crisis. Massive violence and disorder ruptured social solidarities and facilitated the incorporation of some working people into exploitative forms of labour regulation, rent extraction and political subjugation that deepened neoliberalism and undergirded the creation of a public order in which the private power of paramilitarism merged with the state.

Keywords: Colombia, informal working class, parastate, neoliberalism, crisis, violence

Résumé: Cet article examine la façon dont la terreur et la peur ont accéléré la restructuration néolibérale de Barrancabermeja et la création d'un État de substitution fondé sur la violence. On y présente la façon dont les réformes néolibérales ont vu le jour dans un contexte de crise sociale sévère. Des violences et désordres massifs ont ébranlé les solidarités sociales et ont facilité l'incorporation de certains travailleurs dans des formes de réglementation du travail fondées sur l'exploitation, l'extorsion des loyers, et l'asservissement politique, qui ont renforcé le néolibéralisme et sous-tendu la création d'un ordre public où le pouvoir privé des paramilitaires a fusionné avec l'État.

Mots-clés : Colombie, classe ouvrière informelle, para-État, néolibéralisme, crise, violence

A number of scholars have documented the social decomposition that arose as states in the Andean region and around the world aligned their policies and practices with the rationales of neoliberal economic theory in the late 20th century. The process of neoliberalization entailed the reorganization of states and societies to facilitate the accumulation of wealth by domestic and foreign elites, both new and old. Through the enactment of "flexible" labour laws, cuts in social welfare expenditures, the deregulation of foreign capital, the privatization of state enterprises and the commodification of public assets, state policy makers and corporations dispossessed peasants and working people and they facilitated the dismantling of social relationships through which the poor had taken care of themselves and each other. Many of the institutional forms, such as labour unions and state welfare agencies, that provided some people with cover from the ravages of capitalism were also destroyed or weakened (see for example, Breman 2003; Collins 2003; Davis 2006; Gill 2000; Seabrook 1996; Winn 2004). The dispossession and dislocation of broad sectors of the population has aggravated old inequalities and given rise to new vulnerabilities.

The social disarray generated by neoliberalism is most evident in cities, where downsized workers and ruined peasants struggle with the marginalized urban poor for diminishing returns in the informal economy. Davis calls this growing army of the dispossessed an informal proletariat (Davis 2004, 2006). This working class is dominant demographically in a way that the industrial proletariat never was, but its members are ever more superfluous to capital accumulation under neoliberalism. As the neoliberal state has retreated from the provision of social services, government officials treat this class as a disposable workforce and demonstrate little initiative to provide for the economic security of impoverished peoples. Consequently, marginalized urbanites must rely on their own solutions to the chaos imposed upon them. Unlike the

industrial proletariat, which organized to fight exploitation and the power of capital through trade unions, their efforts to rebuild social solidarities and confront deepening poverty include a variety of solutions, including neoliberal development NGOs (Gill 2000), evangelical churches (Stoll 1990), gangs (Bourgois 1996), social movements (Sawyer 2004), vigilante groups (Goldstein 2004; Godoy 2006) and guerrilla insurgencies (Burt 2007).

These myriad initiatives reflect the enormous heterogeneity of the new informal working class and they raise questions about how this working class, which enjoys few rights and protections, is being incorporated into networks of power that have emerged within, alongside of and against the formally constituted state. They also raise questions of order and control for nominally democratic states, which are increasingly unable to manage the disorder that their policies have always generated. It is therefore not surprising that as states have retreated from the provision of social welfare, Pentagon planners worry about the military challenges posed by so-called “feral cities” (Norton 2003; Graham 2007) and militaries and police forces remain key to upholding the very order that neoliberal policies undermine (see for example, Aiyer 2001; Davis 2006; Gill 2000; NACLA 1998). Yet as states outsource the provision of security to private entities, both legal and illegal, they allow these groups to accumulate wealth and power within the institutional apparatus of the state and this, in turn, threatens states’ control over the exercise of violence.¹

Although all states assert rights over a territory and people in the name of the nation, these claims have grown more untenable as privatization and outsourcing have reconfigured state power under neoliberalism (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). And in Andean societies, the capacity of states to claim effective control over diverse regions, urban neighbourhoods, and political constituencies has always been limited and uneven (see for example, Burt 2007; Ceballos Melguizo 2001; Mauceri 2004; Nugent 1997; Vargas 2004). Perhaps the most extreme example is Colombia, where an enduring civil war and the politics of neoliberalism have become intertwined (Hylton 2007). For 40 years, left-wing guerrillas have used illegal violence to oppose the state and Colombia’s largest and oldest guerrilla group—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—has itself taken on many state-like characteristics, such as the control of territory, the extraction of “taxes,” the provision of security and the administration of justice. In contrast to the guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries have operated alongside the official state since the 1980s and used terror to combat the insurgencies. The paramilitaries have also taken on state-like char-

acteristics, but unlike the guerrillas, who aspire to create an alternative state, the paramilitaries defend the status quo and in some instances have become a kind of surrogate state in regions where the power of the official state is either absent or ineffective (Bejarano and Pizarro 2004).

Widespread political violence has torn apart social solidarities and exposed peasants and working people to extreme social and economic insecurities. Thousands of trade unionists have died—most at the hands of the paramilitaries—in the last 20 years and Colombia now has the largest internally displaced population in the world after Sudan and Iraq (UNHCR 2009). As people have grown more vulnerable, they are available for incorporation into or exclusion from the social relations of neoliberal capitalism on terms not of their choosing. They must also struggle with each other to overcome the chaos that civil war and economic restructuring have imposed on their lives. As displaced peasants, the urban poor and downsized workers compete for jobs in an expanding urban informal economy, they must simultaneously negotiate their security, social and economic well being, and a variety of norms and practices with armed authoritarian groups under conditions of extreme fear.

This essay examines the violent neoliberal restructuring of Barrancabermeja, an oil refining centre in Colombia’s conflicted Middle Magdalena region, which was, for many years, a stronghold of leftist guerrillas and was then taken over by the Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB), a powerful paramilitary bloc of the now defunct Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). AUC co-ordinated, for several years, the actions of paramilitary groups operating throughout the country. I argue that the production of terror and fear in Barrancabermeja by paramilitaries allied with the state hastened the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the erection of a violent surrogate state. The creation and manipulation of crisis was central to this process. Massive violence, terror and repression ruptured social networks and the organizational forms, such as labour unions, that protected people from the full impact of the market. They pushed people to the extremes of vulnerability by threatening their lives, eliminating any feeling of safety and making daily existence completely unpredictable. The social disorganization and crisis then facilitated the incorporation of some working people into new exploitative forms of labour regulation, rent extraction and political subjugation that deepened insecurity, weakened any collective response and facilitated new forms of capital accumulation for regional elites and a new rising class of narco-entrepreneurs.² All of this undergirded the creation of a new public order in which the private power of paramilitarism merged with the state itself.

The case of Barrancabermeja allows us to grasp how fear and disorder aggravated the marginalization of working people under neoliberalism and facilitated their incorporation into new networks of power. It also enables us to consider how a clandestine, paramilitary army strengthened the repressive power of the central state at precisely the moment when the official state was retreating from its social service responsibilities and free-market policies were eroding social well-being and creating widespread discontentment. Yet as the paramilitaries transformed themselves from auxiliaries of the state's security forces into a partially autonomous, surrogate state, they had to contend with new tensions that emerged in the social "order" over which they presided; tensions that arose from the unregulated "gangster capitalism" that engulfed the city and the brutal violence that sustained it. The official state, for its part, had to confront the Frankensteinian monster it had created but could no longer control.

The paper is organized in the following manner. The first section describes Barrancabermeja and the regional conflicts that lead to the paramilitary takeover in 2000-2. The second section examines how paramilitary terror ruptured social ties, exposed the working class to new insecurities, and accelerated the neoliberal restructuring of the urban economy. The discussion then focuses on how paramilitaries incorporated dispossessed people into clientelist networks that constituted the fabric of a repressive surrogate state whose boundaries are often indistinguishable from the official state, and its considers the instabilities that arose from this process.

Barrancabermeja in the Crosshairs

Barrancabermeja (population 300,000) developed as an enclave economy on the banks of the Magdalena river after the Rockefeller-owned Tropical Oil Company won a government concession in 1918 to extract oil. The initiation of oil production drew migrants from different provinces to jobs in the nascent export industry and the city emerged as a centre of populist and left labour activism (Vega Cantor 2002). The powerful oil workers' union (Unión Sindical Obrera, USO), which formed in 1923, won the nationalization of the Colombia oil industry in 1951 and led the city's vibrant labour and popular movements throughout the 20th century. By linking the concerns of its members to those of the broader community, the union forged close ties with Barrancabermeja's working class districts. It fought for infrastructure and public services in poor neighbourhoods on the urban periphery, supported an array of civic activities—sometimes with its own funds—and defended the national sovereignty of the oil industry (Delgado 2006).

As Colombia's civil war heated up in the 1980s, Barrancabermeja's working class communities provided fertile ground for expanding guerrilla groups seeking to extend their power in the Middle Magdalena region. Three guerrilla organizations—FARC, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and most prominently, the National Liberation Army (ELN)—established a presence in the city, and from the 1980s to the early 21st century, they played a part in the development of poor neighbourhoods. Their eventual eviction was the climax of a long process of massacres, disappearances and massive civilian displacement that, for two decades, accompanied the expansion of paramilitary power throughout the Middle Magdalena region where the struggle over land had attained crisis proportions.

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, an emergent agrarian narco-bourgeoisie based in the cities of Medellín and Cali started to launder drug profits through the purchase of some of the best, most fertile properties in the countryside. The massive infusion of drug money ignited a speculative market in land that led to the unprecedented accumulation of rural holdings at the expense of poor peasant cultivators, whose land claims were based less on property titles than settlement and use. This process constituted a veritable "counter agrarian reform" and it provoked tensions between drug-barons-turned-landlords, cattle ranchers and some merchants on the one hand, and peasants on the other hand. The consolidation of land holdings and the conflicts sparked by it aggravated a long-term agrarian crisis and quickened the decline of subsistence agriculture. Not surprisingly, many small cultivators formed alliances with ELN and FARC to protect their interests (Richani 2002).

The worsening agrarian conflict placed the regional bourgeoisie on edge. By the 1980s, the guerrillas—especially FARC—controlled large swaths of the countryside and they extorted, kidnapped and harassed rural power holders to such an extent that many felt unsafe visiting their rural properties. In addition, the emergence of the left-wing Patriotic Union political party, which was tied to FARC, and the unification in 1986 of the national trade union movement under the umbrella of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) symbolized the resurgent power of social movements. Moreover, the decentralization of political power, including the first mayoral elections of 1988, opened new opportunities for previously excluded groups to gain a foothold at the local level, and peace talks with FARC initiated by President Belisario Bantur (1982-88) raised expectations about the incorporation of the insurgents and their political demands into the political system (Romero 2003). These developments threat-

ened the regional bourgeoisie, who feared that the balance of power would shift to favour the insurgents and their sympathizers. They also worried the armed forces who opposed peace talks with the guerrillas.

All of this prompted closer collaboration between the armed forces and the regional bourgeoisie, who complained that the state was not doing enough to protect it or to eliminate the guerrillas. Rural landlords also claimed a right to "self defense" in a region where property holders had long organized private armies to protect land acquisitions, and where paramilitarism had deep roots.³ Their claim highlighted the state's continuing inability to monopolize the use of violence. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the state began to collaborate more closely with regional power holders and to clandestinely expand its power in the Middle Magdalena region. With the technical support of the military and the financial muscle of major drug traffickers, it promoted the growth of covert paramilitary groups to fight an expanding counterinsurgency war.

The Middle Magdalena river town of Puerto Boyacá became the epicentre of paramilitarism in Colombia when, in 1982, the town's mayor, the Texas Petroleum Company, cattle ranchers, drug traffickers, foreign mercenaries and members of the armed forces financed and supported the creation of a paramilitary group to join the military's fight against the guerrillas (Medina Gallegos 1990:173). Puerto Boyacá was, at the time, a stronghold of the Colombian Communist Party (CP) and its military wing, FARC. The newly formed paramilitary group and the army concentrated their efforts on disrupting the political organization of the CP and FARC and disarticulating the ties between the party and the insurgency (Medina Gallegos 1990). Yet the repression did less damage to the guerrillas than to unarmed members of the CP and labour and peasant leaders who were easier targets.

Despite the initial "success" of the Puerto Boyacá paramilitaries, they were little more than hit-and-run death squads that never expanded beyond the Middle Magdalena region. They did, however, serve as a source of experience and training for other paramilitary groups that emerged in northern Colombia and elsewhere (Madariaga 2006). By the 1990s, with the enormous profits from the cocaine traffic, regional-based paramilitary entities morphed from roving death squads into standing armies and their commanders began to dispute territorial control with the guerrillas (Duncan 2006). Regional armies obtained increasing autonomy from the state, and they federated in 1997 under a national umbrella organization called the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) that centralized under its command 18 different

groups, or approximately 75% of Colombia's paramilitaries (Bejarano and Pizarro 2004:110).

The AUC then grew more lethal with the passage in 2000 of Plan Colombia, a US\$1.3 billion, mostly military, U.S. aid program that strengthened the police and the military, the AUC's closest allies. Plan Colombia targeted the guerrilla-controlled coca fields in southern Colombia for fumigation and put pressure on FARC by displacing peasants who formed the guerrillas' support base in the region. Yet it left paramilitary-dominated areas in the north largely untouched and there was little effort to wrest control of strategic cocaine trafficking corridors, like the Magdalena River, from the paramilitaries. Not surprisingly, the paramilitary blocs consolidated their political power and territorial control in many areas once ruled by the guerrillas (Hylton 2006) and civilian displacement became less a consequence than a strategy of an intensifying dirty war.

For many years, as paramilitary massacres and terror displaced peasants from the Middle Magdalena countryside, refugees flooded into Barrancabermeja and the city swelled with displaced victims of rural violence. Most refugees came from areas once under guerrilla control and, during the 1980s, many benefitted from the support and solidarity of the city's trade unions, neighbourhood committees and social organizations united under the umbrella of the Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja. Refugees from particular rural areas tended to cluster together in emerging neighbourhoods, and it should come as no surprise that the guerrillas followed their support base into the city and established a strong presence among them (Interview, human rights worker, 2007).⁴ The city's capacity to receive traumatized immigrants changed when the AUC turned its sights on the city.

By the end of the 20th century, Barrancabermeja was the only regional urban centre not under paramilitary control but it was not immune to the escalating violence as state security forces within the city collaborated with the AUC. A Navy-controlled death squad, for example, helped to pave the way for the AUC takeover by assassinating at least 68 trade unionists, journalists and human rights defenders in the late 1980s and 1990s (CINEP/CREDHOS 2004; Loingsigh 2002). The oil port offered the AUC the possibilities of capturing profits from the illicit sale of gasoline produced by the state-controlled oil company (ECOPETROL), of strengthening its grip on cocaine traffic through control of commerce on the Magdalena River and the coca fields in adjacent Bolívar province, and of limiting the provision of supplies to surviving guerrilla redoubts in the countryside. Moreover, the presence of three guerrilla groups in a city known for

its militant social organizations made capturing Barrancabermeja an important political victory.

The Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB)—one of the most powerful blocs in the AUC—executed the takeover of the city. The late AUC leader, Carlos Castaño, had established the BCB in the northern province of Córdoba and, throughout the 1990s, the BCB extended its operations to some 11 Colombian provinces that spanned the length and breadth of the country, amassing a fighting force of 7,000–8,000 mercenaries. The BCB conquered and held territory by forcing guerrillas and other paramilitary competitors to either join forces with it and abandon areas that they claimed or face destruction, and by expelling or massacring civilians who opposed it. Castaño and his brother, Vicente Castaño, also expanded the BCB's influence by “franchising” its activities to drug traffickers such as Carlos Mario Jiménez, alias “Macaco,” who had amassed a fortune and a private army through his affiliation with the North Valle drug cartel (Semana 2007).

In Barrancabermeja, the BCB's first objective was to eliminate the leadership and destroy the support base of any organization that represented an alternative to paramilitarism. This not only included the guerrillas but also trade unions, human rights organizations, student groups and neighbourhood councils, which, it claimed, were guerrilla fronts. To accomplish this objective, the BCB unleashed a wave of terror that killed or forcibly displaced thousands of people from the impoverished northeast and southeast sectors. Eighteen thousand people fled the city between 1998 and 2001. Yet the uncertain life of a refugee was better than the fate of others who remained behind. Between 1998 and 2001, 800 people died in the city, mostly at the hands of the paramilitaries (Romero 2003:107), and Barrancabermeja had a per capita death rate in 2000 that was three times higher than the rest of the country (Madero 2001). Because of the terror and confusion, residents no longer knew whom to trust and merely leaving home for work became an act fraught with fear, as fire fights erupted without warning, dead bodies with signs of gruesome torture littered the streets and uniformed paramilitaries patrolled openly in some neighbourhoods. Guerrillas intensified the disorder, according to some survivors, when they switched sides and exposed their support networks to the paramilitaries (Gill 2008).

The paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja had less to do with the absence of the state than with its presence and active collaboration with the BCB. Two military bases, several fortified police stations and the bunker-like headquarters of the Department of Administrative Security (DAS)—Colombia's maximum law enforcement

agency—operated in the city. They allowed truckloads of BCB fighters to pass freely through military checkpoints; they refused to respond to civilian pleas for help; and, they looked the other way as the BCB committed gruesome atrocities. The total impunity with which the paramilitaries operated left residents feeling completely unprotected. Many human rights crimes went unreported because residents worried that they too would become targets and this, in turn, empowered the paramilitaries to continue terrorizing local people.

The behaviour of the guerrillas also eroded the legitimacy of the insurgents and created a climate conducive to the entry of the paramilitaries. The paramilitary assault on Barrancabermeja coincided with the initiation of U.S.-backed Plan Colombia. As FARC contended with stepped up assaults on its southern Colombian strongholds and confronted growing repression in Barrancabermeja from the state and the BCB, it showed less interest in the political education of residents than in extracting more onerous “war taxes” from city merchants to finance military operations and in using the city as a source of recruits. The escalating war also gave rise to more severe guerrilla “justice” in which suspected informants were executed without any serious investigation of the allegations against them, and guerrilla attacks on police and military installations in densely populated urban areas demonstrated a disregard for civilian life. This behaviour alienated the insurgents from urban residents, and relations between them and many of their supporters soured (Interview, human rights worker, 2007).

By 2002, the initial wave of paramilitary terror had passed and an uneasy calm hung over the city that continues today. Wholesale massacres of suspected guerrilla sympathizers were no longer necessary as the guerrilla militias had retreated from the city, but the paramilitaries used death threats and the selective assassination of social leaders and their family members as a tactic to keep the opposition frightened and off balance. The death and displacement of so many people had ruptured community networks and severed the ties that bound Barrancabermeja's unions and social organizations to a support base in the city's northeast sector. Widespread impunity precluded any public accounting for the human rights abuses and it left perpetrators free to continue terrorizing urban residents. An imposed silence in working class neighbourhoods spoke of the persistence of fear, feelings of hopelessness and worries about the future. All of this accelerated the neoliberal transformation of the local economy, which had begun in the early 1990s. Weakened unions and social organizations found themselves poorly equipped to challenge new “flexible” work arrangements and the

rising cost of basic services as state utilities passed into private hands.

Terror and Neoliberalism

In working-class Barrancabermeja, where opposition to neoliberalism was intense, the links between paramilitarism and the state's neoliberal project were readily appreciated. Paramilitaries targeted labour leaders with particular ferocity, especially during moments of labour conflict that intensified with the initiation of neoliberal reforms. Even more than the official state, they refused to distinguish legitimate protest and the insurgency, and paramilitaries presumed that residents of the city's poor neighbourhoods were guerrilla supporters, regardless of their actual sympathies and associations. Unlike the guerrillas, who opposed opening Colombia to greater foreign investment, the paramilitaries had no position against multinational involvement in the economy and, according to Richani, "this allows for an affinity between the AUC and the foreign companies, particularly those invested in areas of conflict" (2005:130). More importantly, paramilitaries conceptualized local power holders as "the people" (Romero 2003:113) and supported the far-right, neoliberal candidacy of Álvaro Uribe, who became president in 2002, because, according to AUC head Carlos Castaño, Uribe was "the man closest to our philosophy" (Hylton 2006:104). In contrast to the guerrillas, the AUC was less concerned with overthrowing the state than in shoring up and participating in the status quo, and serving as the violent enforcers of its most reactionary elements. They presented Barrancabermeja's company managers with a violent means of labour discipline that helped to create the political conditions for the advancement of neoliberal policies.

During the early months of the BCB occupation of Barrancabermeja, paramilitary commanders summoned labour leaders to meetings in which they advised people to keep a low profile and laid out the new rules of social engagement: no protests, no strikes and no public statements against employers. One union leader who was an outspoken human rights advocate refused to attend these meetings. He explained that:

[After the takeover], the paramilitaries began to send emissaries to tell me that I should meet with them. They did this to all the trade union leaders in the city, but we were one of the only unions that always refused to meet with the paras. We have a policy to never talk to any of the armed actors. So they started to squeeze me and to threaten me more. [Interview, trade union leader, 2006]

The pressure culminated with the attempted kidnapping of his four-year-old daughter, when she was with her mother in a public park. When the mother's screams attracted attention, the kidnappers fled. The labour leader explained that two days later "a paramilitary boss reached me on my cell phone and called me a guerrilla son-of-a-bitch. He said that I was very lucky; they had planned to kill my daughter because I refused to meet with them" (Interview, trade union leader, 2006). Those trade unionists who responded to paramilitary pressure for meetings did not always survive these encounters.

Company managers took advantage of weakened unions, the social disarray engendered by widespread terror and the expulsion of the guerrillas, whom Delgado describes as the trade unionists' "uncomfortable allies" (2006:139), to push through reforms. On the eve of the paramilitary takeover, for example, the outsourcing of jobs by the state oil company to non-unionized workers had already weakened the USO and the strike had become an increasingly ineffective weapon of resistance. The paramilitary reign of terror displaced or eliminated some of the most dynamic leaders, and it weakened the USO's ties to community organizations and the broader labour movement. All of this debilitated the union's ability to challenge the loss of jobs and the reconfiguration of the oil industry; a 1999 civic strike, for example, was the last time that the USO led a major protest that shut down the city. The USO's storied solidarity with the urban working class became limited to the defense of its members rights and benefits that had been won in the past.⁵ In addition, the restructuring of the oil industry, which began in 1991 and culminated in 2003 when the government split ECOPETROL into two companies, opened the door for greater multinational involvement in oil production.

A similarly bleak scenario played out in other parts of Barrancabermeja. In the city's Coca-Cola plant, trade unionists observed plant managers talking with known paramilitaries whom, they asserted, extorted protection payments from the company (Interviews, Coca-Cola workers, 2004-7). Although it was well-known among workers that the Company had once paid "war taxes" to the guerrillas, the extortion payments (*vacunas*) made to the paramilitaries guaranteed protection from the demands of labour. Paramilitary threats, harassment and assassination attempts pushed workers to renounce their union membership and accept coercive buy-out deals when the production line closed in 2003. Union membership plummeted and the number of Coca-Cola workers with stable contracts and relatively good wages declined, as the plant was downgraded to a storage and distribution centre. The company increasingly ignored collective bargaining agree-

ments negotiated with the union, and a new generation of non-unionized, subcontracted labourers who earned lower wages entered the workforce. As the ties of familiarity that once bound workers to each other eroded, fears that paramilitaries operated in the plant limited workers ability to make effective demands on the company (Gill 2007).

By weakening or decimating organized opposition to neoliberalism, paramilitaries hastened the elimination of full-time, unionized employment, the rise of subcontracting and the privatization of public entities. This aggravated long-standing problems of un- and under-employment and it limited the access of poor urban residents to basic services and forced them to pay more for them. The downsizing and anticipated closure of the public hospital—the only hospital in Barrancabermeja—aggravated a health care crisis and forced people to travel to the provincial capital for certain treatments that were no longer available in the city. Telephone service and electricity became more expensive in the wake of privatization and water rates followed a similar trajectory when the government prepared the public water utility for sale to a Spanish firm. Yet when several hundred residents protested usurious electricity rates, after newly installed meters malfunctioned in their homes, paramilitaries threatened them and the members of a citizens' group that organized to oversee the cost of public services.

Barrancabermeja became bloated with the victims of neoliberal restructuring and paramilitary violence. Ruined peasants, downsized urban workers and shell-shocked residents of the northeastern neighbourhoods toiled alone as owners of marginal businesses, temporary wage earners and itinerant vendors. They had little choice but to rely on fragile personal networks for their daily survival. Yet, as they fell back onto fragmented or newly reconstructed bonds of personal support, people discovered that friends and relatives were not able to provide them with all that was necessary and the organizational forms that had once channelled their demands to employers and the state were either severely weakened or had ceased to exist. Many people found themselves obliged to turn to the paramilitaries for the support that they had once provided to each other. They did so as the new lords of the city extended their grip over a range of local organizations that became vital to establishing authoritarian clientelist relationships with local people and to embedding paramilitarism in the fabric of society.

The Parastate and the Informal Working Class

Nowadays, the paramilitaries no longer operate as a mercenary army that wages a dirty war under the protective

wing of the state. They have in effect become the state itself. The paramilitaries have penetrated the official state apparatus and erected a mafia-like surrogate state in which organized crime fuses with the politics of counterinsurgency. They manipulate elections by openly or tacitly supporting certain candidates, while intimidating others and dictating to people how to vote, and because of their enormous power, aspiring candidates for political office seek out their support, albeit surreptitiously. Through the control of government office, the paramilitaries can thus tap into municipal treasuries, dictate who receives government contracts and demand kickbacks. They also monopolize the illegal cocaine traffic and the theft and sale of gasoline from the state oil company, and they operate a variety of legal businesses, such as the lottery, transportation enterprises, private security firms and subcontracting agencies. In addition, the paramilitaries have divided up the city into zones of control with the state security forces, with whom they cut deals and make compromises as they negotiate the imposition of order with them.⁶ And finally, like the guerrillas before them, they operate a protection racket that extorts payments from merchants and demands financial "contributions" from residents to ensure their safety.

In Barrancabermeja, the paramilitaries strengthened their control of the local economy by incorporating dispossessed, working-class *Barranqueños* into rigid, hierarchical relationships that were undergirded by violence and fear. They seized control of neighbourhood councils that had once advocated for affordable public services and used them to mobilize residents for political meetings (Loinsigh n.d.). They wiped out entire trade unions and, after murdering 20 members of the taxi drivers' union (UNIMOTOR) in 2000, they transformed the organization into a source of rewards for supporters who received jobs in exchange for using the taxicabs to carry out intelligence work (Loinsigh n.d.). Paramilitaries also took over subcontracting firms that proliferated with the enactment of neoliberal labour laws designed to give employers greater access to part-time workers. By controlling the subcontracting process, paramilitaries could not only extort money from both workers and employers, they could also dictate who worked and who remained unemployed.

For workers, access to patronage networks was essential for getting a job in a city with a high and constant level of unemployment. Yet, as these networks fell under paramilitary control, applicants with a trade union background or residence in a neighbourhood stigmatized for its left-wing sympathies were either excluded from them or forced to remain silent and risk physical harm if their personal

histories were revealed. Unemployed ECOPETROL workers, for example, organized the Sindicato de Trabajadores Disponibles y Temporales (SINTRADIT) to pressure the oil company to provide temporary jobs to members and to thereby avoid the discounts and commissions charged by subcontractors. SINTRADIT was one of dozens of similar associations of the unemployed that emerged in the late 1990s as unemployment deepened in the region, but like many other worker organizations, it did not survive the paramilitary takeover.

A displaced leader described how paramilitaries demanded a large sum of money from SINTRADIT as a condition for its continued work with the oil company. When he refused to pay, hit men tried to murder him, and they ultimately forced him to leave the city. Yet the intimidation did not end with his departure from Barrancabermeja. According to the individual, a well-known paramilitary commander visited the home of a family member and explained that “he had given the order to capture me alive. He needed me alive so that he could tie me to a post with barbed wire and destroy me piece-by-piece so that the community would understand how guerrilla leaders died” (Interview, trade union leader, 2007). Such vicious repression shattered SINTRADIT, and workers’ private experiences of terror were difficult to express publicly. As people were displaced from the city or forced to maintain a low public profile, they grew more divided from each other. Mistrust and uncertainty eroded social solidarity in an ever more fragmented working class, while access to jobs and benefits became gifts or favours from powerful, authoritarian patrons instead of social rights.

The erosion of economic well-being pushed some people into coercive debt relationships with the paramilitaries after a health crisis or a financial emergency overwhelmed their ability to cope. Many residents told how fliers offering generous credit started to appear in their neighbourhoods after the paramilitary takeover. To access this money, one had only to call a cell phone number and a young man would appear on a motorcycle to negotiate the deal and provide the funds, which usually required repayment at 20% interest. The arrangement built on an older form of quasi-legal credit known as *gota a gota* (drip by drip) but it required no guarantors, collateral or signed documents, and it turned on fear.

One woman explained that after surviving a traffic accident with a bus, she faced the task of paying for expensive repairs to the vehicle because the owner—a paramilitary—insisted that she bore responsibility for the accident. Yet neither she nor her husband were in a position to assume the cost of the repairs. The husband had lost his job with the state oil company and the family of five

depended on her wages as a nurse for basic necessities. Fearing what might happen if they neglected the damaged bus, husband and wife borrowed money from a local lender whom they suspected of paramilitary ties, and then began to repay the funds immediately. When they fell into arrears, two paramilitaries came to their home and threatened them with harm if the payments did not continue on schedule. As the woman later explained, “I didn’t know what to do. I could borrow from another paramilitary to pay off the first one, or I could plead with my relatives to lend me the money, which they don’t have” (Interview, Barrancabermeja resident, 2007). The paramilitaries wove exploitative relationships of credit and debt out of the vulnerabilities of local residents—vulnerabilities which, to a considerable degree, they themselves had created—and these relationships in turn allowed them to launder drug profits and siphon additional wealth out of the local economy. Debtors faced the impossible situation of living with the imminent threat of violence or squeezing their social networks to the breaking point and deepening their economic insecurity.

Although many people manage to avoid paramilitary credit, they find it much more difficult to ignore the paramilitaries in their neighbourhoods, where local enforcers extort protection payments from them. A resident of the northeast sector described how a BCB protection racket emerged in her neighbourhood after the paramilitary takeover, when a commander called people to a meeting in a public school. He explained that the paramilitaries had entered the city at the request of local citizens to deal with the “security problem” caused by the guerrillas. He then offered the services of his men to the community. Shortly thereafter, young enforcers began to visit individual households on Saturday afternoons, requesting weekly payments of 2000 pesos for neighbourhood protection.⁷ Most residents understood that their “contributions” to these individuals were little more than an exemption—sometimes only temporary—from the violence of the paramilitaries themselves.

The “security” they provided included monitoring the comings and goings of residents and the enforcement of social norms including evening curfews, the repression of prostitution and homosexuality, the prohibition of marijuana, and a ban on the use of earrings and long hair by men. Manuals that appeared in the city around 2003 spelled out the paramilitary moral code for poor urban neighbourhoods—a code that sought to re-establish rigid gender, generational and sexual hierarchies disrupted by years of violence and economic restructuring. A young man from the northeast sector, for example, noted the irony of paramilitaries, who virtually monopolize the ille-

gal drug traffic, enforcing a ban on marijuana consumption and he lamented that some residents did not object to what is widely referred to as “social cleansing,” because “seeing young men on the corner makes them uncomfortable” (Interview, Barrancabermeja resident, 2007).⁸ Because residents were obliged to turn to the paramilitaries to resolve problems, they inadvertently legitimized the power of the mercenaries and the social order that the latter sought to create.

Vigilante justice, the manipulation of fear, extortion and control undergird the surrogate parastate in Barrancabermeja, and the government’s Justice and Peace Law has threatened to virtually “legalize” paramilitary power and to completely blur the distinctions between the official state and the parastate. The 2005 law, which emerged from talks between the government and paramilitary commanders, has had less to do with justice and peace than with regulating the incorporation of the paramilitaries into the state and the political process. It offers paramilitary commanders who have committed crimes against humanity reduced prison sentences (five to eight years) in exchange for demobilizing their troops, confessing their crimes and dismantling their criminal operations. BCB fighters, like those in other paramilitary blocs, have participated in public ceremonies that marked their official demobilization. Yet the Justice and Peace law makes no effort to expose the state’s responsibility for creating, consolidating and expanding paramilitary entities, and it completely ignores the most fundamental problem of dismantling the organizational and financial structures of the BCB and other former affiliates of the AUC. Even though it requires paramilitaries to hand over arms and wealth acquired illegally, there is no mechanism to force them to do so and paramilitary commanders, who have testified under the terms of the Justice and Peace law, have revealed very little. The law essentially excuses the state and its accomplices for participating in mass murder and dispossessing thousands of Colombians of their jobs, lands and social security.

With their wealth and organizational structure basically intact, the paramilitaries have had little difficulty enlisting new recruits. As the demobilization process came to a close in 2006, with over 30,000 fighters allegedly reintegrated into civilian life, the government declared that paramilitarism no longer existed in Colombia.⁹ Yet at least 70 “new” groups had emerged in the national territory. They counted within their ranks re-armed mercenaries, who had participated in the demobilization process, and former mid-level AUC commanders, who took advantage of a power vacuum created by the demobilizations to rise to the head of reconfigured paramilitary entities. All of

this made clear the connections between the “old” and the “new” generations of paramilitaries.¹⁰

Powerful paramilitaries have also sought ways to legitimate their power and consolidate their control through the creation of foundations and non-governmental organizations. For example, Semillas de Paz is an NGO that illustrates the depths of impunity in Barrancabermeja. Tied to the paramilitaries and comprised of demobilized members of the BCB, Semillas de Paz maintains an office in Barrancabermeja and presumes to counsel victims of political violence and document cases of abuse. In March 2007, it convened a meeting for the family members of victims of the armed conflict to promote its activities and gather documentation about the dead and disappeared. Meeting participants, however, realized only afterwards that Semillas de Paz represented the victimizers of their loved ones and not fellow victims. The widow of a man murdered in a BCB massacre also recalled how members of Semillas de Paz visited her home and expressed a desire to “reconcile.” She found their unannounced arrival extremely intimidating, and when they were unwilling to give information about the fate of her husband, she told them not to return (Interview, massacre survivor, 2007).

Instability, Opposition and Cracks in the Facade

From their beginnings as adjuncts to the state security forces charged with stopping the insurgency, the paramilitaries have obtained relative autonomy from the state and have consolidated a surrogate state in which the boundaries between the legal, official state and the illegal, paramilitary state are difficult to distinguish. They now subcontract labour to the state oil company, multinational corporations and other businesses in Barrancabermeja. They have also secured the rights of private property for a new agrarian, narco-bourgeoisie in the countryside and control municipal governments in Barrancabermeja and other regional urban centres. And today, more people secure their livelihood through highly dependent and insecure relationships with the new lords of the city. The targeted and strategic use of terror remains crucial to this project. It has ripped apart social relationships and accentuated the privatization of the economy and social life.

In working-class neighbourhoods, “security,” too, is under paramilitary control and is increasingly incorporated into the apparatus of the state. Demobilized BCB fighters now constitute legal “private security cooperatives” in some neighbourhoods, while vigilantes dressed in civilian clothing and regulated by the enduring structures of the BCB continue to police other poor neighbourhoods. Residents of the northeast sector complain

about demobilized paramilitaries who continue to threaten and harass them, while collecting government benefits through the justice and peace process. Politically motivated assassinations and disappearances take place with disturbing regularity and the murder of gays, prostitutes and other so-called “undesirables” proceeds with impunity.

Yet even as the Colombian parastate has created the conditions for what *Business Week* describes as an “investment miracle” where “the stats all scream: ‘Go, Go, Go’” (Farzad 2007), it has simultaneously become a threat to the domestic and international legitimacy of the official state. While the paramilitaries and their allies in the security forces were clearing the Middle Magdalena region of guerrillas and destroying reformist political alternatives, government officials willfully ignored the paramilitary pursuit of private accumulation through the cocaine traffic and the dispossession of small rural landholders. They did so even as they backed a U.S.-financed campaign to wipe out coca leaf cultivation and extradite major traffickers. Paramilitary commanders accumulated an astonishing level of political and economic power that surpassed the capacity of the official state to control. As the paramilitaries outgrew their role as the state’s clandestine enforcers and claimed power for themselves, the presence of mercenary armies that massacred civilians and accumulated wealth illegally became untenable for the state.¹¹ Mounting evidence of the links between paramilitary commanders and leading members of President Álvaro Uribe’s ruling coalition and Uribe himself undermined the President’s efforts to negotiate a free-trade agreement with the United States during the Bush administration. Moreover, the eruption of the parapolitica scandal led to the incarceration or investigation of over 60 members of congress.

The parastate in Barrancabermeja is also itself highly unstable. Brutal violence has sustained the five-year paramilitary rule, but this violence has done less to create a legitimate social order than to establish the conditions for the additional accrual of power and resources.¹² Paramilitaries have always represented less a single actor than a marriage of convenience among drug lords, sectors of the state and regional elites, and with the demise of the AUC, which fell victim to its own internal disputes during the demobilization process, there is no overarching entity to regulate the competing claims of reconfigured paramilitary groups and criminal entities in the wake of the demobilization process. Leadership quarrels, conflicts with competitors over territory and tensions between mobilized and demobilized mercenaries are typically resolved through violence, which threatens fragile alliances between powerful bosses prone to betrayal and which makes the present moment highly unstable.

The Colombian state must now confront the task of harnessing the violence that it unleashed to defeat an insurgency and to create a propitious environment for neoliberal capitalism to flourish. It shares this task with other states that have pursued aggressive neoliberal policies. Although market-based economies can operate with vibrant trade unions, affordable public services and state control of strategic resources, neoliberal regimes have, to varying degrees, intensified processes of commodification and privatization, as well as the destruction, weakening, or co-optation of social solidarities that stand in the way of the redistribution of wealth to elites and global corporations. Colombia is an extreme example: the private power of a mafia-like parastate has usurped many functions of the official state and massive terror has severed social relationships and made working people available for incorporation into new relationships of inequality. New forms of rent extraction and “flexible” labour relationships now form part of illegal networks and organizations that are beyond the reach of the official state and they are maintained by fierce coercion.

Yet to the extent that neoliberal states rely on security forces, both legal and illegal, to contain the social disarray produced to a considerable degree by their own policies, the result is not stability but a durable disorder¹³ that has constrained the idea and the practice of democracy. In Barrancabermeja, where radical political ideas were the coin of the realm, the parastate now strives to stabilize a war-torn city and re-moralize society through the reconstruction of social hierarchies that have long characterized Colombian society. “Security” masquerades as peace, as threatened labour leaders and human rights defenders carve out protected spaces with bodyguards, fortified residences and armoured cars amid continuing threats and uncertainty. As ordinary Barranqueños become dependent on authoritarian, hierarchical relationships with the paramilitaries in an ever more fractured informal economy, the extent to which they can create—and even imagine—relationships that offer them an alternative remains an open question.

Yet Barrancabermeja differs from other regional urban centres and working class communities elsewhere because of the continued vitality of some of its unions and human rights organizations (cf. Lopez 2005). A small group of trade unionists cling to direct labour contracts that continue to provide them with a decent wage and benefits and they do not have to turn to the paramilitaries for economic support. In addition, labour leaders and human rights defenders have built national and international alliances that circumvent the official state and the parastate to support their struggles, provide them with

physical accompaniment and fight impunity. Many ordinary Barranqueños also quietly refuse to give in to paramilitary extortion demands and keep trade unionists and human rights defenders apprised of paramilitary activities (Gill 2007a, 2007b). In these and other ways, people constantly push against the status quo, evaluate its strengths and take advantage of its weaknesses. In so doing, they take stock of what they can do by themselves and with each other. This, in turn, is the first step towards refashioning a broad-based solidarity that can form the basis of a renewed challenge to impunity and capitalist privilege.

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Notes

- 1 Skahill suggests, for example, that the mercenary firm Blackwater USA is no longer willing to remain subordinate to the United States. Its executives envision the company becoming an independent army, akin to a United Nations force, that is unaccountable to any nation (Skahill 2007:343). See also Singer (2003) for more on the privatization of state security forces.
- 2 My argument builds on the work of Naomi Klein and David Harvey. Klein (2007) suggests that neoliberal policy makers exploited moments of crisis, such as natural disasters, indebtedness and war, to enact free-market policies, while Harvey argues that the creation and manipulation of crisis has been a key feature of the liberalization of markets (Harvey 2005:162-165). The strategic use of crisis is part of a broader process that Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession," which, he claims, has intensified under neoliberalism (Harvey 2003:137-182).
- 3 See Roldán 2002.
- 4 For obvious reasons, I cannot use the names of informants here. I have cited fieldwork material as interviews and provided the date and a brief description of the interviewee in the text.
- 5 See Delgado 2006 for more discussion of the labour movement in the Middle Magdalena region and the role of the USO.
- 6 The respected Colombian news weekly, *Semana*, has done some of the best reporting on the embedding of paramilitarism in various regions of Colombia (Semana 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). See also Isacson 2005. For a description of paramilitary control of Medellín, see Hylton 2007. For specific reference to Barrancabermeja, see the comments of for-

- mer AUC leader Carlos Castaño in Serrano Zabala 2007 and in Aranguen Molina 2001 (Pp. 255-257).
- 7 This amount is slightly less than one U.S. dollar.
- 8 See also Taussig 2003 for more on paramilitaries and the "social cleansing" of so-called undesirables.
- 9 For more on the weaknesses of the Justice and Peace Law and the problems with the demobilization process, see Human Rights Watch 2005, Isacson 2005, and Colectivo de Abogados Jose Alvear Restrepo 2006.
- 10 Indepaz, a Colombian NGO, calculated the number of new groups based on information from the Organization of American States and the Colombian military and police. See www.indepaz.org, accessed 2 June 2007.
- 11 The rise of the paramilitaries under the protective wing of the Colombian state shares many similarities with the emergence of the Italian mafia, which the Italian state encouraged as a bulwark against the Communist party in the 1950s (Schneider and Schneider 2003), and the creation of al-Qaeda, which the United States promoted to fight the Soviet Union in 1980s Afghanistan (Schneider and Schneider 2002). In both cases, these entities outgrew the ability of their patrons to control them and posed a threat to the very states that had facilitated their rise to power.
- 12 See Sider and Smith (1997) for more discussion of this point.
- 13 I borrow the term "durable disorder" from Romero (2007).

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