

COLOMBIA :
Understanding Recent Democratic
Transformations in a Violent Polity

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- NARCOTRAFICO EN COLOMBIA: DIMENSIONES POLITICAS, ECONOMICAS, JURIDICAS E INTERNACIONALES.* By Carlos Gustavo Arrieta, Luis Javier Orjuela, Eduardo Sarmiento Palacio, and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1990. Pp. 374.)
- VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA: THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.* Edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1992. Pp. 337. \$45.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- COLOMBIA, VIOLENCIA Y DEMOCRACIA: INFORME PRESENTADO AL MINISTERIO DE GOBIERNO.* By the Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia. (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, COLCIENCIAS, 1988. Pp. 318.)
- THE POLITICS OF COALITION RULE IN COLOMBIA.* By Jonathan Hartlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Pp. 332. \$42.50.)
- AL FILO DEL CAOS: CRISIS POLITICA EN LA COLOMBIA DE LOS AÑOS 80.* Edited by Francisco Leal Buitrago and León Zamosc. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1990. Pp. 514.)
- ¿EN QUE MOMENTO SE JODIO COLOMBIA?* By Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza et al. (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1990. Pp. 246.)
- AGUAS ARRIBA: ENTRE LA COCA Y EL ORO.* By Alfredo Molano. (Bogotá: El Ancora, 1990, Pp. 177.)
- COLOMBIA: INSIDE THE LABYRINTH.* By Jenny Pearce. (London: Latin American Bureau, 1990. Pp. 311.)
- ESTADO, VIOLENCIA Y DEMOCRACIA: ENSAYOS.* By William Ramírez Tobón. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1990. Pp. 286.)

As many scholars and practitioners have come to realize, Colombia is impossible to describe and understand in more than partial terms. Any portrayal of this troubled corner of South America is always somewhat distant from the everyday reality of its people, be they the political and economic elites of Jonathan Hartlyn's *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia* or the modern frontierspeople (*colonos*) of Alfredo Molano's *Aguas*

arriba: entre la coca y el oro. These volumes represent two extremes of descriptive and explanatory research on the mosaic called Colombia, or what Jenny Pearce terms a labyrinth. In the end, despite disclaimers and efforts at comprehensiveness, it is only possible to portray the rich tapestry of life of the people and the land as a monochromatic picture, a still life of limited utility. Hence the continuing inability of serious students and casual commentators alike to do more than identify some of the inconsistencies and inefficiencies, whether structural or situational, that have repeatedly led this nation to the edge of the abyss. And yet observers also find a surprising if unsatisfying resilience and resourcefulness at patching things up again and continuing to avoid the anarchy of destruction while effecting gradual societal change. As Hartlyn has observed, "The Colombian political process has confounded pessimists and disappointed optimists" (p. 235).

It is not coincidental that magical realism has found unique expression in Colombia, in politics as well as in literary works. As Jorge Orlando Melo points out rhetorically in the prologue to Molano's narrative, "And do readers know more about Bolívar when they have read a good conventional biography than when they have come close to his thoughts and emotions in the novel by García Márquez, despite its myths and factual inaccuracies? I think not, and for the same reason I believe that in these years of narrative code rupture, scientific exposition is just one form of approximating knowledge that offers a limited and incomplete vision of a much more complex reality" (p. 13).¹ It is precisely personal and social "thoughts and emotions" that are rare in the books under review here. Although all are inherently serious accounts of Colombia, regardless of their epistemological or ontological assumptions, they are no more than slides to be examined under the confined magnification of the scholarly microscope. The comparative theoretical richness represented by Hartlyn's work and the qualified empiricism embodied in Molano's oral history represent the limits of the range of inquiry in the study of Colombia and to some extent in the field of Latin American studies as a whole.

Jenny Pearce's *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* is a rather fractured effort presented in a textbook-like format. The author describes it as "written from the perspective of those who have given their lives to fight for a better society, the many activists of the popular movement . . . who have been targeted by the army and right-wing paramilitary groups for extermination" (p. 4). Although doubtless a noble effort, the book ultimately falls short of its objective because the activists' voices are muffled in the straitjacket of class analysis. While Pearce recognizes early on that "the struggle of classes does not explain everything in Colombia today" (p. 10), her analytic framework and conclusions belie this disclaimer. For exam-

1. The novel Melo refers to is Gabriel García Márquez, *El general en su laberinto* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1989).

ple, she ends the formal part of the book with a reference to Antonio Caballero's image of the country as a "political time bomb" that will continue ticking "until the left proves itself to be able to unite the people around an alternative social and political project" to that of "the archaic political order that has kept . . . [a] minority in power [that] has proved incapable of . . . provid[ing] the majority of its population with a humane existence and the means to a livelihood" (p. 287). The main part of the book also contains many seemingly unassuming personal accounts (mostly by popular activists whom the author seeks to empower in the text) and explanatory bylines that are not always clearly related to the context in which they appear.

The notion of a self-serving and myopic political class has proven to be a popular theme in the literature on Colombia. Yet this Manichaeian portrayal is increasingly mythical, given the continued expansion of democratic space in the peace processes under Presidents Belisario Betancur, Virgilio Barco, and César Gaviria. Indeed, a casual overview of continental developments initiated by the transitions to formal democratic rule in the 1980s, along with the end of the cold war in the 1990s, seems to indicate wider acceptance of liberal democratic norms, regardless of their substantive implications, than those envisioned by Pearce. The alternative future offered by the left, which was popular in the 1960s, had lost all legitimacy and relevance for insurgents and general populations by the early 1990s.

Pearce's volume is divided into three formal sections or what she calls "threads" in the Gordian knot of Colombian politics. Pearce traces the knot back to Bolivarian efforts at centralization that were "thwarted by the parochial vision of the local elites . . . [who] imported democratic formulae from Europe, drew up impressive constitutions and established parties which even took their names from similar parties in the old world. But these formulae bore no resemblance to the political reality, which had a profoundly elitist, undemocratic and unstable character" (p. 4). Pearce nonetheless seems uncritical of the popular movements she champions, particularly those of the left, apparently unable to perceive that while their political projects respond to genuine social needs and demands, they are also premised on an equally "elitist, undemocratic and unstable character." Suffering and murder at the hands of the government or organized rightist criminals (particularly drug traffickers) does not guarantee that a popular movement is democratic in nature or that it deserves a niche in the pantheon of egalitarian mythology.

The first part of *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* is a historical narrative focusing on the past up to the last year of La Violencia. The second part concentrates on "The Crisis of the Political Order," from 1966 to 1986. The final section, entitled "Counter Offensive," describes the reform efforts of the Barco government in response to what the author perceives to

be increasingly effective popular “challenges that now faced the political order,” demonstrating that “Colombia is a democracy without a people” (p. 207). This line of argument, centered around the exclusive nature of Colombia’s political and economic life, will be discussed further in reviewing the work by Jonathan Hartlyn.

Perhaps the phrase “a democracy without a people” effectively conveys the frustrating and restrictive nature of Colombia’s political system prior to the adoption of the Constitution of 1991. Although this latest political fact has yet to be turned into an inclusive social reality, it is nevertheless the most significant achievement since the Frente Nacional brought a pact and formal end to the carnage of La Violencia. The new constitution represents a remarkable achievement given the Colombian reality: the elites’ continued reluctance to relinquish formal political power; the inability of the opposition, guerrillas as well as those who tried to function within the system as catalysts for change, to produce an alternative political project; the endemic, almost agonistic violence of common and petty criminality; and the organized brutality of greed-driven and drug-related and -financed paramilitary organizations and death squads.

Although Pearce’s work is well documented, it is in the end peculiarly unsatisfying. While the book seems to champion the dispossessed, it patronizes the reader by evoking pity and compassion for those who suffer rather than empathy for their plight in a world where formulae for revolutionary change (and for reactionary repression) have become increasingly irrelevant. The lesson to be learned from the Colombian experience is the ability of its people to avoid authoritarian rule by either the right or the left. As the Salvadoran and Guatemalan insurrections are being gradually defused through mediation and negotiation, the Colombian precedent of conflict resolution through negotiation becomes more and more relevant. Although violence from above and below has been the catalyst for change in Colombia, having avoided the extremes encouraged by cold war fears (whether exemplified by the Argentine “dirty war” or the Salvadoran civil war) is an impressive achievement. This view in no way denies the bloodbath of La Violencia or the factional strife that has characterized Colombia. It does, however, recognize the necessarily incremental nature of change that is so inimical to impatient militants. If any lesson has emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union, it is the impractical nature of social change that is imposed rather than indigenous. Social engineering, whether orchestrated by the right or by the left, appears to run counter to human nature.

Jonathan Hartlyn’s *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia* is already considered a classic in comparative politics.² Its theoretical foundations

2. See Gary Hoskin’s reviews of *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia* by Jonathan Hart-

and strong empirical justification via extensive fieldwork and interviews have given it a legitimacy in U.S. social science that few other works on Colombia enjoy. Yet this recognition has arisen from the work's acceptance in U.S. academic circles more as a methodological exemplar to be emulated by diligent social scientists than as an accurate description and explanation of Colombian political reality. Indeed, the relevance of the consociational framework for Colombia, even during the heyday of the Frente Nacional (1958–1974), is questionable unless several qualifying assumptions are made, most of them revolving around the “undemocratic” and limited nature of politics in Colombia. These assumptions do not invalidate Hartlyn's work, but they do call into question the applicability of his framework to the Colombian case.

In essence, the pacted nature of democracy in Colombia has grown out of a limited competitive framework premised on a two-party system. Yet with leaders and representatives of various business, trade, and financial associations strenuously opposing economic and political measures that they consider inimical to their interests, the continued independence of the Colombian economy from the political realm challenges the idea that these associations would genuinely support the consociational or cooperative arrangements prominently featured in Hartlyn's analytic framework. In effect, this interpretation would question his contention that “consociationalism—coalition rule and muted inter-party conflict—facilitated an essential policy focus on key macro-economic variables and a relative absence of populist politics at the national level . . .” (p. 105). In the end, coalition rule, particularly if elitist and removed from the broader economic and social interests of a country (these being independent of Colombia's political class, which simply allowed the economy to be controlled by key economic and producer associations), does not necessarily imply consociational practices.

Hartlyn notes that in Colombia, “one of the regime predicaments was a threatened lack of popular responsiveness.” Yet despite this defect, the country also “had an enviable record of limited democracy . . . , not by some absolute standard, but by comparison” (p. 145). In terms of this comparative standard, relevant for Colombia and presumably also for the case on which this norm is premised (the United States), much needed to be achieved to expand the practice of democracy. Nevertheless, as with much contemporary social science literature, “Democracy is defined in this book along procedural lines” (p. 257, n. 9). The implications of this approach are clear in Hartlyn's consistently conventional understanding of the dynamics of change, which is premised on his recognition of a regime crisis that began in the late 1970s following a “partial deflation of

lyn and *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelist Politics and Guerrilla Warfare* by Jorge Osterling. In *American Political Science Review*, no. 84 (June 1990):688–90.

state capacity brought about by drug trafficking, growing criminal violence and guerrilla activity. A more fundamental challenge to the state and economically dominant groups, built upon the country's glaring social and economic inequalities, though, was still distant. The growing problems of the 1970s responded to the predicaments of an unchanged regime in a changed society. The state was not in danger of collapse, though the regime was in danger" (p. 199).

The answer to this legitimacy crisis is less than clear, with a uninspiring forecast being offered at the end: "If the recent past is the best indicator of the immediate future, then the process of consociational transformation, of political re-accommodation, will be drawn-out, resisted and uneven" (p. 235). Hartlyn's cautious assessment is a function of his politically correct conclusion that "Especially given the country's history of violence without social change, it is not at all evident that promotion of violent revolutionary change is a preferred option in Colombia to pressuring for continued change within an open, though resistant, regime" (p. 249). In the case of Colombia, however, violence continues to be a catalyst for change, although in unexpected forms. Hartlyn is not as deterministic as Pearce, but he too is somewhat restricted by his theoretical focus, applying a consociational framework to the societal understanding of a limited formal process that never quite permeated the Colombian polity. While it may be difficult to understand Colombia, it is impossible to explain the dynamics of change—whether from the structuralism of class analysis or the voluntarism of a consociational framework, even if partial elements of each may in fact be present in the political and social environment under consideration. Although the theoretical parsimony of each analytic approach proves to be useful formally, the political reality continues to escape the inherent limitations of these and other bounded frameworks.

An essential component of the Colombian political reality is the issue of drugs. Although the production, processing, consumption, and trafficking related to drugs is in no way condoned by the Colombian government or people, the realities of a demand-based high-income economy have forced recognition of the state's limited power to legislate morality. This point is acknowledged in *Narcotráfico en Colombia: dimensiones políticas, económicas, jurídicas e internacionales* by its authors, Carlos Gustavo Arrieta, Luis Javier Orjuela, Eduardo Sarmiento Palacio, and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian:

[W]hile it is true that demand does induce supply, it is not true that it [the supply of drugs] has to be located in Colombia. The reason this happens to take place in our country is due to the competitive advantages that create an ideal environment for the movement of surplus [profits] and the installation of all the infrastructure required for the production [of drugs]. Thus resolution of the problem is tied to the disappearance of this competitive advantage that would consist of elevating the

costs of illegality, strengthening the judicial systems, and creating a strategy that seeks to immobilize the surplus, something not compatible with the existence of a window for labor remittances, free exchange, and total commercial opening. (P. 35)

The shredding of the social fabric that accompanies large-scale drug use in much of the advanced industrial world cannot be regulated by legislation alone. This much has been learned by the Colombian political establishment, which is somewhat more familiar with the ravages of a culture of social violence than officials who express the more complacent attitudes prevalent in the United States. The result of this process does not require absolving criminal acts, but it does point to the need for a fundamental reassessment of the nature of crises of governability—in the inner cities of the North as well as in the urban sprawl of the South. Thus the authors of *Narcotráfico en Colombia* conclude that “narcotrafficking has acted as a catalyst of the crisis of the political regime, exacerbating its political, economic, and social factors” (p. 273).³

The realization that politics as usual—in the form of tired formulations of the political polarities of left-right or legal-illegal—is no longer applicable or even extant has not yet received much scholarly attention beyond the somewhat marginal work of poststructural academics. The changes experienced by the Colombian polity, however, have been gradually digested and analyzed by a growing number of local professionals and practitioners.⁴ The collective efforts of these scholars have produced a

3. Several works are of related interest: Mario J. Arango and Jorge Child V., *Narcotráfico: imperio de la cocaína* (Bogotá and Mexico City: Editorial Diana and Edición Compañía Editorial, 1987); Alvaro Camacho Guizado, *Droga y sociedad en Colombia: el poder y el estigma* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1988); and Fabio Castillo, *Los jinetes de la cocaína* (Bogotá: Editorial Documentos Periodísticos, 1987).

4. Many of these scholars expose the methodological and epistemological foundations of their training in a rather unself-conscious manner. Thus it is possible to discern that much of their training occurred in the United States, with an emphasis on social processes. This trait is particularly, but not exclusively, noticeable in the research undertaken at the Centro de Estudios Internacionales at the Universidad de los Andes. The other major source of influence on Colombian social sciences is French thinking, with the accent on structuralism and poststructuralism being recognizable in the work of many of the members of the Instituto de Estudios Políticos at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá. Fortunately, sterile methodological debates among communities have been limited, allowing for creative collaborations combining varying epistemological and methodological approaches, as is apparent in all the edited volumes reviewed here (especially *Narcotráfico en Colombia*). These increasingly sophisticated approaches exhibit all the necessary accoutrements of modern social science in their careful use of quantifiable methodologies and statistics. But their most appealing characteristic is their explicit interpretive nature, even in cases where an evident positivistic influence can be traced to the behavioral revolution in the United States. It appears to be easier for these authors to be constructively critical than it is for the international observers who comment on the Colombian scene. Finally and most rewarding, increasing numbers of scholars are receiving much of their postgraduate training in Colombia, a trend that is producing innovative and incisive work.

rich and nuanced body of literature on various dimensions of Colombian reality.

Representative of these developing schools of research are (in addition to *Narcotráfico en Colombia*): *Colombia: violencia y democracia*, the report of the Comisión de Estudios sobre La Violencia; *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez; *Al filo del caos: crisis política en la Colombia de los años 80*, edited by Francisco Leal Buitrago and León Zamosc; and *Estado, violencia y democracia: ensayos*, by William Ramírez Tobón. In a different but complementary category are the oral history provided in Alfredo Molano's *Agua arriba: entre la coca y el oro* and the collection of commentaries provocatively titled *¿En qué momento se jodió Colombia?* Although distinct in content and style, all these works strive for a native understanding of Colombia's problems, although they partially "legitimate" their efforts by including foreign or expatriate authors or by citing mainstream bodies of literature. Some of the works cited, however, bear the same equivocal relevance to Colombian reality as Hartlyn's use of the consociational framework.

The report of the Comisión de Estudios sobre La Violencia, which was solicited by Ministro de Gobierno Fernando Cepeda Ulloa in January 1987, was issued after marshaling a variety of considerations on the nature of the violence in Colombia that went beyond "the forms of negotiable violence (political violence)" (p. 10). The commission thus undertook one of the first large-scale inquests into the endemic nature of violence as a constituent of the country's social, economic, and political life. The commission distinguished political violence from various other kinds: socio-economic violence, sociocultural violence, violence against indigenous peoples, and finally, the culture of violence "reproduced through the family, schools, and the media as central agents of the processes of socialization" (p. 11). The report's central thesis is summarized in this conclusion: "the recent governments have concentrated their attention on the political and narcotrafficking violence, while they have looked, with a certain indifference, at the alarming growth of other modalities of violence that, taken as a whole, generate a much greater percentage of victims and are profoundly affecting the everyday life of the Colombian population" (p. 11). *Narcotráfico en Colombia* thus disaggregates the problem of narcotrafficking into meticulous analyses of political, economic, legal, and international dimensions.

As is pointed out in *Narcotráfico en Colombia*, much of the Colombian experience with drug production and trafficking (beyond the relatively low, but rising, levels of local consumption) has been closely tied to demand in the United States. The implications of this development have been far-reaching. They have resulted in part in the extraordinary measures taken to confront the criminal dimensions of the problem while

neglecting considered analysis of the causes and effects of the drug culture in the United States (the primary market for drugs) and in Colombia (the main commercial nexus of drug trafficking). Indeed, according to the authors, "Washington has defined the narcotrafficking problem as a subject of national security comparable to the theme of subversion. The policy of the United States, then, favors as a response to the problem a repressive strategy, accentuating the new internal enemy now defined as 'narcoterrorism'" (p. 272).⁵

The pragmatic short-term resolution to the most virulent forms of violence via proscribing extradition in the new constitution was distasteful to many because of its apparent capitulation to the drug traffickers. But it served nonetheless to emphasize the continuing preference among Colombian elites as well as the rest of society for negotiated solutions to otherwise unmanageable predicaments. This type of reconciliation may appear to be unethical, but it is firmly grounded in an unspoken awareness that zero-sum contests, including those with the old and new insurgent groups, demand an excessively high social cost that is unacceptable to the vast majority of Colombians, who are already living under precarious conditions.

It is not unreasonable to expect that the next president of Colombia may try to legalize part or all aspects of the drug trade (production, processing, consumption, and export). The idea has already been championed by one possible candidate, Ernesto Samper Pizano, when he was president of the Asociación Nacional de Instituciones Financieras (ANIF). It is not foreseeable, however, that this step will take place independently of the United States, despite Colombia's great strides in seeking an autonomous yet friendly foreign policy vis-à-vis the "Giant of the North."⁶ The realistic conclusion reached in the section on the economy of narcotrafficking in *Narcotráfico en Colombia* is not necessarily politically acceptable at present: "At the same time that [Milton Friedman] appears to be a great salesman for the freedom of the market, he has no doubts about recom-

5. Accordingly, it is possible to claim in the section entitled "The Foreign Policy of Colombia toward the United States, 1978–1990: The Subject of Drugs and Its Place in the Relations between Bogotá and Washington" that "The poor and even faulty information on the subject of drugs is notorious in Bogotá and Washington. In every one of the debates that arise over legislation, crop eradication methods (such as using chemical herbicides), extradition, militarization, and negotiation, no serious work exists that can evaluate the advantages and disadvantages, the convenience, viability, need and utility, legality, and the political and socioeconomic effects, internal and external, of the actions that are undertaken or the options that are offered or the alternatives that are rejected. All of this constitutes an additional reason—not to be disregarded—for insisting on the urgency of elaborating and executing a Colombian policy, internal as well as external, autonomous and realistic, regarding drugs" (*Narcotráfico en Colombia*, p. 367).

6. An excellent review of Colombia's foreign policy, old and new, is found in Martha Ardila, with Julieta Lizarazo, *¿Cambio de norte? Momentos críticos de la política exterior colombiana* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1991).

mending the legalization of drugs. Friedman knows better than anyone that in a context of this nature, it is not possible to regulate only one market. The only viable solution is the legalization of drugs" (p. 90). Such conclusions are no more popular in Colombia than they are in the United States, but they do offer a different perspective on the dynamics of drug trafficking beyond the discourse that associates this social condition with the implicit decay of Western Civilization.

The Comisión de Estudios sobre La Violencia undertook a comprehensive examination of the broader context within which drug trafficking can be located, collecting an impressive array of commentaries by specialists on various forms of violence. The topics covered ranged from the family and the socialization of violence to international policy and the peace process. These materials were enhanced by extensive interviews and research by the commission members. The resulting work is divided into two large parts: one on violence (political violence; urban violence in the 1980s; organized violence; violence against ethnic minorities; the relationship of violence to the media; and family violence); and one on policies (official policy; regional disequilibria and social conflicts between 1980 and 1987; criminality, impunity, and justice; international policy and national pacification; and a section of final reflections relating violence to human rights). Each part was subdivided into sections that present each problem and make general and policy-related recommendations. The section on organized violence, minus the accompanying recommendations, is reproduced as Chapter 12 in *Violence in Colombia*, making at least this portion of the study available to English-speaking audiences.

The significance of *Colombia: violencia y democracia* lies in its extraordinary comprehensiveness, which was validated by the efforts of its members. One of them was a retired general who indirectly represented the armed forces' view on the commission. He dissented from some of the findings and expressed his reservations in an appendix, predictably entitled "The Armed Forces and Their Contribution to Social Harmony."⁷

7. A peculiar and somewhat self-serving history of the Colombian Armed Forces from colonial times to the Frente Nacional can be found in Mayor Gonzalo Bermúdez Rossi, *El poder militar en Colombia, de la colonia al frente nacional* (Bogotá: Ediciones Expresión, 1982). The book is dedicated to "The comrades of the armed forces fallen in the fields of the fatherland, in defense of belittled principles." A much older and even more idiosyncratic book is a collection of meditations on the Colombian military and its role written by a "shadow" minister of war. See Tomás Rueda Varas, *El ejército nacional* (Bogotá: Imprenta y Litografía de las Fuerzas Armadas, 1969, originally published in 1944). In general terms, the Colombian Armed Forces have been understudied, while the more accessible and formal factors of political life (like political parties) or the more "interesting" areas of study (like economic development) have been favored. I know of no serious military sociologists as such or political scientists in Colombia or abroad who are focusing on Colombian civilian-military relations. Perhaps Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez could be considered a military sociologist (he provided one of the stronger contributions to *Violence in Colombia*). He has also published a three-part series on military professionalism in *Análisis Político*, nos. 1-3 (May-Aug. 1987, Sept.-Dec 1987, Jan.-

The commission thus achieved its goal of placing the inclusive concept of violence into the context of respect for and advocacy of human rights: "Violence can be viewed as something that impedes the attainment of human rights, beginning with the basic one: the right to life" (p. 17). Readers will also find explicit recognition of the fact that recent governments have lost the monopoly over the use of violence, a basic attribute of the state that must be regained in order to reestablish the rule of law by and for the people: "It is not possible for a society whose embodiment depends on weapons to feel secure, a society in which armed groups, legal or illegal, legitimate or illegitimate, assume the guardianship of the citizens" (p. 30). This remark reflects the inherent legal nature of Colombian democratic practices. They are premised on a republican tradition based on the French experience but were implemented via the adoption of a centralist constitution in 1886, which never went beyond the ritual repetition of the values of English liberalism in an ongoing effort to strengthen the centralist state envisioned by Conservative President Rafael Núñez and ideologue Miguel Antonio Caro. The centripetal trend was not conclusively reversed until the Constitution of 1991 was adopted (following widespread support for the student-inspired and -promoted Asamblea Nacional Constituyente to revise the charter). Thus was ratified the process of decentralization begun under the administration of Belisario Betancur (1982–1986) with the election of local mayors. The commission's work was validated by the inclusion of some of its recommendations in President César Gaviria's *Estrategia Nacional contra La Violencia*, which was made public in May 1991.⁸

The concern about violence, particularly in terms of the accepted modern monopoly of the use of force by the state as identified by Max

Apr. 1988), in addition to a comprehensive bibliography on the subject. The brevity of the bibliography reflects the inadequate attention devoted to the topic in Colombia (as elsewhere). See "Las fuerzas militares en Colombia (Siglo XX)," *Análisis Político*, no. 5 (Sept.–Dec. 1988):108–10. This excellent quarterly journal published by the Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales of the Universidad Nacional first appeared in the fall of 1987. Its insightful articles and thematic biographies have not been cited in much of the contemporary work available in English on Colombia. Finally, Armando Borrero M.'s contribution to *Al filo del caos*, entitled "Militares, política y sociedad," is a valuable interpretive account that offers an understanding of Colombian military power somewhere between the possibility of unrestrained violence and the potential for diminishing this violence.

8. See Presidencia Nacional de la República, *Estrategia Nacional contra La Violencia*, special edition, *El Tiempo*, 30 May 1991. The strategy received almost no attention outside Colombia, despite its efforts to reduce the space for illegitimate violence through a comprehensive response to the multiple social, economic, and political factors underlying the explosion of violence surrounding drug trafficking. The strategy includes a national rehabilitation plan, the strengthening of the administration of justice, and a bolstering of police forces to deal with criminal violence. The strategy thus distances the Colombian Armed Forces from roles inimical to their inherent role of territorial defense (despite their forty years of fighting insurgencies) and includes nongovernmental organizations in a dialogue of peace premised on negotiated solution of challenges to the Colombian state and society.

Weber, has become the central focus of much of Colombian social science, formal and informal. As in many contexts, substantial overlap occurs between formal social science undertaken by political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others and the commentary of practitioners like politicians, journalists, and retired military officers. The second group of individuals are at times regarded as some of the most respected and authoritative commentators on contemporary events, at home and abroad, and are quoted profusely as knowledgeable or representative of a substantial portion of popular opinion. These kinds of views on Colombia are collected in *¿En qué momento se jodió Colombia?* This work and *Aguas arriba: entre la coca y el oro* are the most unconventional material reviewed here. Before addressing them, however, I wish to consider the more scholarly work found in *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, *Al filo del caos: crisis política en la Colombia de los años 80*, and *Estado, violencia y democracia*. The first two works are collections of somewhat related essays while the third is an idiosyncratic yet insightful commentary on the relationship between the state and social violence.

The collection of essays that make up *Violence in Colombia* is partially the product of work undertaken in 1985 during the first international symposium on this topic. It brought together scholars from Colombia, North America, and Europe "to explore the relationship between the phenomenon known as the Violence (1946–1966) and the violent crisis enveloping the country" (p. vii). Some of the work presented at this conference was published in Colombia in 1986 as *Pasado y presente de La Violencia en Colombia*.⁹ The time lag of nearly six years until *Violence in Colombia* appeared in late 1991, even when allowing for the substantial addition of new material (some especially commissioned),¹⁰ gives an idea of the tremendous delay that occurs between preparation of timely analysis for a limited community of involved practitioners and the material being made available to a larger interested audience. This shortcoming notwithstanding, *Violence in Colombia* is the most refreshing English-language volume on Colombia to have appeared in recent years.

Nowhere in *Violence in Colombia* (or in any of the other titles under review) are the more momentous recent changes in Colombia reviewed more than superficially, despite the fact that some of them appeared as late as 1991, when the potential for relative domestic peace had already

9. Chapters 3, 4, 6, and 8 appear in *Pasado y presente de La Violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Colombiana, 1986).

10. See Chapters 7, 9, and 12, the last being the chapter taken from *Colombia: violencia y democracia*. Chapter 7 by Medófilo Medina and Chapter 9 by Alfredo Molano (the author of *Aguas arriba*) are described as having previously appeared in Spanish, but no reference is given. Chapters 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 13, and 14 were prepared expressly for *Violence in Colombia*. An annoying detail is its incomplete and dated political map of Colombia (as of 1977) that does not show San Andrés and Providencia nor indicate the creation of Casanare and Guaviare.

been realized. These events include the final peace process with the M-19, which led to its incorporation into legitimate political life as the Alianza Democrática M-19, the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, and the Constitution of 1991. More surprising still is the inability of even the most perceptive of authors to provide any forward-looking insight into these changes. Thus one can readily conclude that much of what happened in Colombia over the past two to three years surprised everyone, from the most acerbic and despondent of critics to the most affable and idealistic champions of change. Such a conclusion is something of an indictment of Colombian studies and the sterile research models that dominate the field. Most important, recent developments simply overtook and outran the prophets of doom, who have tended to come from the right of the political spectrum, at home and abroad. Nevertheless, even those scholars who were espousing somewhat restrained leftist or simply reformist tendencies were unable to do more than admonish the nation that reform was needed. Somehow, they were apparently incapable of envisioning the constructive changes that have evolved over the recent past. One example of this tendency can be found in the conclusion to Eduardo Pizarro's otherwise excellent essay, "Revolutionary Guerrilla Groups": "The process of pacification is not dependent solely on the goodwill of the guerrilla chiefs. It is a national responsibility in which the armed forces, the labor unions, the traditional parties, and especially, the right have to accept that any negotiation process implies mutual concessions" (p. 190).

The overall quality of the essays of *Violence in Colombia* is good. Yet some of them seem rather immaterial in a volume that purports to be analytical, especially Chapters 2, 3, and 4 by David Bushnell, Catherine LeGrand, and Charles Bergquist. Written by North American authors familiar with the history of Colombia preceding La Violencia, these contributions provide context but have little relevance, despite the book's subtitle of *The Contemporary Context in Historical Perspective*. As is made clear in the report of the Comisión de Estudios sobre La Violencia and in *Narcotráfico en Colombia*, contemporary violence, like all social action, is grounded in the past but is even more situational, the product of contemporary circumstances that are exacerbated, but not completely conditioned, by the past. These three essays offer plausible hypotheses: nineteenth-century Colombia was a violent society characterized by factional and civil war (Chapter 2); the land-tenure system of the country is extremely inequitable (Chapter 3); and the frustrated labor movement may well have contributed to the genesis of La Violencia (Chapter 4). But even if all of these premises are proved, their long-term significance was somewhat qualified by the realities of the cold war as it took shape in the Colombian setting, by economic development, and by the earlier convergence of elements of the "modern" embodiment of the centralist and elitist state created by the Constitution of 1886, which matured and declined with the

establishment of the Frente Nacional and its pacted system of formal and exclusive government. These historical interpretations still need to be measured against the versions provided by the actors involved, as well as by Colombian historians who have actually lived this past. These three chapters are the products of much archival research that is also debatably relevant, given the recognized divergence between the written formal record of political power and the actual use and abuse of such power in Colombia.¹¹

This observation does not diminish their value as historical works, but it does raise the question of their relevance to analyzing the stated topics of subsequent sections, "The Violence" and "The Contemporary Crisis." These sections differentiate carefully between the background and the circumstances that came together to produce extreme and sustained levels of violence. Even when written by political scientists, the approaches employed are sociological in considering group dynamics, particularly those of the groups most involved with violence: guerrillas, colonos, and the agents of the old social and new economic elites—the paramilitary forces and gangs. These nine authors are somewhat more attuned, even sympathetic, to the voices of dissent, again guerrillas and colonos. In the end, however, these contributions are more relevant and more authentic. Yet even Daniel Pecaut, preeminent French student of Colombia, has difficulty in eluding the stranglehold of the past performance of the system: "War and peace, limited democracy and violence; Colombia is far from escaping these prospects" (p. 238).

Philosopher Luis Alberto Restrepo's contribution to *Violence in Colombia* (written in 1988) argues that a desirable resolution of the dynamics of violence could be found in "a citizen movement driven from below, from all entities in society, and with the free participation of individuals from all political parties. This movement would allow for the political destruction of diverse forms of violence and would put pressure on the state and the parties to address urgent political and social reform issues" (p. 292). This "broad-based democratic movement" did not materialize, although the activism of the university students that resulted in the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente may have been the political milestone of the

11. This need to go beyond archival research is evident in Carlos Miguel Ortiz Sarmiento's interpretive account of violence in the heart of the coffee-producing area of Colombia, entitled "The 'Business of the Violence': The Quindío in the 1950s and 1960s" (Chapter 6 in *Violence in Colombia*). An expanded version of this history appears in his *Estado y subversión en Colombia: La Violencia en el Quindío Años 50* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1985). Complementary research on the department of Valle del Cauca from 1930 to 1960 focuses on the pájaros, who were a kind of precursors of the sicarios of the 1980s, a subculture of extraordinary violence that incorporated extremes of callousness as well as compassion and love. See Darío Betancourt and Martha L. García, *Matones y cuadrilleros: origen y evolución de La Violencia en el occidente colombiano* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1991). An important documentary source on the sicarios of Medellín is found in the dramatic oral history compiled by J. Alonso Salazar, *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 1990).

era following the demise of the Frente Nacional, and also the closest Colombia will ever come to democratic “mass movements.”

It would be unreasonable to expect these authors, or the contributors to *Al filo del caos*, to alter or abandon their views on the immobility of the political parties, the elites, and the state or their praise of the antiquated utopian or hard-line positions of the legal and illegal left. What is needed from these analysts now is a measure of pragmatism. Neither the right nor the left had adequate or even relevant political projects to offer to Colombia, and thus when the time came, they were all defeated by change itself. This change, which in Colombia has been called *el revolcón*, is not fully explainable according to the arguments advanced in any of the works reviewed here. Descriptions and interpretations of contemporary events will have to await preliminary resolution and implementation of the formal changes enacted in 1990 and 1991.

In *Al filo del caos*, thirteen students of the Colombian scene provide updated analyses (as of 1989) of the political crises of Colombia in the 1980s. The contributors include expatriate León Zamosc and high-profile academic observers like Bruce Bagley and Gary Hoskin. Hoskin's historical contribution, “The Political Parties: How Responsible Are They for the Political Crisis?” is reminiscent and indeed refers to the work of Jonathan Hartlyn.¹² Even here, however, the reader senses a feeling of despondency about the future of Colombia. For example, Bagley concludes that President Gaviria would “opt for a middle-of-the road alternative, in which some sort of informal ‘agreement’ will be reached [with the narcotrafickers] in order to suspend narcoviolence in exchange for terminating extraditions, while renewing efforts to reduce narcotrafficking in Colombia” (pp. 473–74). What Bagley apparently did not expect was the independent action of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente regarding this issue, along with the comprehensive (in contrast to the piecemeal or irregular) effort of the Gaviria administration to come up with innovative and ongoing answers to these dilemmas: the Estrategia Nacional contra La Violencia, the Revolución Pacífica, and especially the civilianization of the state's monopoly over the use of violence.¹³

12. Hartlyn nevertheless indicates the potentially changeable nature of the parties themselves: “We should not underestimate their capacity to adapt to the exigencies of the contemporary political crisis, if this constitutes a prerequisite for their survival” (p. 174). This description certainly fits the case of the Liberal party, while the historical differences within the Conservative party led to a final schism that after the 1990 elections denied it any possible unified majoritarian role in the near future.

13. At a formal level, President Gaviria appointed a civilian as defense minister for the first time in more than forty years, and he also named a civilian to replace the popular General Miguel Maza Márquez as head of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), which spearheaded the drive against narcotrafficking. The first appointment received no international attention, but the second was widely viewed in the U.S. press as a concession to Pablo Escobar and the “Medellín cartel.” Unfortunately, no commentator perceived the im-

Al filo del caos is divided into three coherent parts on political crisis and strategies of recomposition, institutional actors, and social actors. The contributors' presentations complement one another and reinforce the message of the inherent weakness of civil society in Colombia, a condition that must be countered by the state and the government of the day. As Francisco Leal Buitrago and León Zamosc observe in their introduction, "Even though it is weak, the role of the state in this regard is crucial. But it is necessary to remember that the state is administered by a particular government that under the present circumstances [late 1990] has the greatest historical responsibility in many decades" (p. 24).

This recognition of the relative autonomy of the state, previously an exclusively Marxist theme, has more recently been incorporated into mainstream social science. In Colombia this trend was probably introduced by scholars who received advanced training in France, where they were exposed to the structuralism of Nicos Poulantzas and the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault. Certainly, Foucault is quoted with admiration by the authors of the section on criminal justice in *Narcotráfico en Colombia*. The utility of the collective postmodern epistemological and methodological analyses of discourse may be as controversial in Colombia as in the United States, but the interpretive and heuristic legal tradition in Colombia seems to make this type of analysis somewhat more relevant and immediate.

Poulantzas's structuralism is expressed in William Ramírez Tobón's essay in his book *State, Violence, and Democracy* entitled "Does the State Still Exist?" Although a worthy effort that attempts to provide theoretical foundations for understanding the Third World state, this essay nonethe-

portance of civilian controls over the armed forces or security apparatus (the chief of police is still a police general), despite the calls for these moves in countries experiencing transitions from authoritarian rule or continued instability because of the dominant role played by the armed forces in defining military missions and responses to perceived or actual threats. Even more important was the fact that the Colombian Armed Forces readily acquiesced to this move, particularly because the new defense minister, Rafael Pardo Rueda, is an experienced national-security practitioner who participated in the peace process that brought the M-19 Alianza Democrática out of its clandestine life to participate in the Constitutional Assembly as a viable third partner of the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties. This experience could be viewed as an example for other countries not yet having civilians qualified or even empowered to serve as defense ministers in contexts where it is universally agreed that the armed forces must be subordinated to civilian rule. Finally, naming civilian Fernando Brito to head the DAS resolved the rivalry between the police forces and that organization, the latter being defined under Colombian law as an administrative department of a civilian and technical nature similar to that of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Having a police general serve as its head was tactically expedient at the height of the fighting against the drug traffickers, but it lost much significance with President Gaviria's strategic effort to civilianize the struggle against uncontrolled violence, whether criminal, social, or political, to "strengthen our intelligence services [and] create genuine instances of leadership in this field, . . . [efforts] that cannot be delayed and will be undertaken under my personal command." See "¡Civiles, a la carga!" *Semana*, no. 488, 10-17 Sept. 1991, p. 35.

less lapses into the irrelevance common to structuralism, which results from its excessive focus on the formal powers of the state. The inescapable feeling of determinism is uncomfortably reminiscent of the historical analysis of dialectical materialism provided by Stalinism. The other essays in the book are much more enlightening, particularly the piece provocatively entitled "The Mechanical Hare and the Running Greyhound: The Present Peace with the M-19." Despite its unpromising conclusion, this essay emphasizes the new pragmatism of the M-19 by citing a colorful phrase coined by one of its leaders: "a carnivorous capitalism is preferable to a vegetarian socialism" (p. 143). The need to compete for support and to express popular demands resulting from their aggregation, as opposed to the vanguard notions of the past, is a promising glimpse of democratic possibilities, unlike the certainty of ideological rigidity and a never-ending dictatorship of a local *nomenklatura*. Tobón's final essay, "Development and Political Subversion: An Evaluative Framework of the Peace Process during the Government of Virgilio Barco," takes a hard look at this period and efforts at a negotiated solution with the various guerrilla groups in Colombia. A particularly helpful section discusses the ambiguous commitment to peace of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) resulting from the fractured internal nature of the group, which is composed of various relatively independent geographical factions. The FARC's diverse composition has undermined the ongoing peace negotiations with the Coordinadora Guerrillera Nacional Simón Bolívar, which have been hampered by the apparent inability of the FARC to exert full control over its cadres.

Alfredo Molano's *Aguas arriba* is an absorbing oral history of a world that has been little studied beyond the work of investigative reporters like Germán Castro Caicedo.¹⁴ Presenting the personal histories of the colonos who are on the very edge of "civilization," this study richly documents the surprising resilience of the average colono as well as the imperatives of survival.¹⁵ *Aguas arriba* demystifies the conspiratorial image of the guerrillas as power-hungry offspring of a now-defunct Evil Empire (represented today only by Cuba's asphyxiating hard-line and its practical irrelevance). The book also indicates some of the reasons why cocaine and gold appear to be magnets of enrichment that can deliver these colonos

14. Germán Castro Caicedo's pioneering work was *Colombia amarga* (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia, 1976). This work was followed by other notable volumes such as *Mi alma se la dejo al diablo* (Bogotá: Plaza and Janés, 1982) and the less well-received contemporary rendition of the history of the discovery and brutal conquest of the Americas by Europeans, *El Huracán: historias de piratas, brujas, santos, conquistadores, indios, tempestades y naufragios* (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1991).

15. Molano's contribution to *Violence in Colombia*, "Violence and Colonization," presents similar material in a more conventional format. Some of the richness and texture of his narrative is lost in this formal version, however, due to either the format or the translation, which is good but cannot replicate the language of the protagonists of the Colombian frontier.

from the desperation of everyday survival. Yet the study also depicts the vicious cycle of profiteering in a free-for-all environment far worse than any scenario of liberalization painted by protectionist ideologues. *Aguas arriba* depicts this situation as the crudest form of possessive individualism, in which a gram of gold or a kilo of cocaine are the price of a woman's body or a bottle of *aguardiente*. This Colombia is not usually revealed in the formal work undertaken to illuminate the finer points of the country's political life.¹⁶ Yet here lie the reasons for being of the guerrillas as well as their supporters. In the end, they represent the only form of law and order known in areas where the state is merely a fiction and violence comes not from landowners or death squads, even though they will be quick to arrive once the roads to civilization have been paved by the colonos' sweat and blood.¹⁷ Violence comes instead from the environment and the very circumstances of life—of eking out a living by any means available. It is a cruel world, but it is also the one in which the country's future is being forged anew every day.

¿En qué momento se jodió Colombia? is a collection of commentary ranging from that of General Miguel Maza Márquez, former director of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, to the circular argumentation of Vera Grabe, former combatant in the M-19 and currently a senator representing the Alianza Democrática M-19. Rich in argumentation and controversy, the collection appeared at the height of the bloodshed caused by state repression of drug traffickers but also when the pacification campaigns of the Betancur and Barco governments were beginning to bear fruit. The work seeks to answer the question of when Colombia was "screwed up." The contributors do not agree on the circumstances that led to the decay of civil society, although they mention the usual array of factors, which include political stagnation, self-serving elites, and misdirected development. Nor do the contributors agree on the potential outcome of the crisis now unfolding. Some have no hope, like the eternally pessimistic and caustic editorialist Antonio Caballero, while others like Jaime Castro, former Ministro de Justicia y Gobierno, insist: "It is not messed up, because although it is true that [Colombia] is experiencing dramatic and very particular situations, it is also true that [the country] has immense possibilities and a promising future" (p. 207). This optimistic assessment was made when the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente was about to become a reality after countless frustrated reformist efforts dat-

16. A well-balanced approach, nevertheless, can be found in Jaime Eduardo Jaramillo, Leonidas Mora, and Fernando Cubides, *Colonización, coca y guerrilla* (Bogotá: Alianza Editorial Colombiana, 1989).

17. In *Violence in Colombia*, Eduardo Pizarro succinctly describes this experience: "The guerrilla movement . . . [the FARC] was constituted in the form of a regional structure of social welfare, of individual and collective survival, which explains why it has been so deeply rooted in the areas where it operates" (p. 182).

ing back to the first term of Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934–1938) and the thwarted attempts of Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966–1970). The M-19 would like to take credit for paving the road to peace with the blood of believers and innocents alike, as Vera Grabe tries to express in the paean to Carlos Pizarro. But the overall picture of Colombia is more complex historically than the abbreviated history of the M-19, which in the twenty-odd years of its existence went from delivering *propaganda armada* (publicity stunts such as the 1980 taking of the embassy of the Dominican Republic in Bogotá) and deeds (the 1985 capture of the Palacio de Justicia) to cochairing the Asamblea Constituyente Nacional. This rapid progress cannot be ascribed to the incoherent programmatic platform of a nationalistic leftist group that never counted more than a few thousand armed members. Although the M-19 used successful media coups to their advantage, they could never really claim that their form of violence was the voice of the people.

Many have claimed to speak for the people of Colombia. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán may have been just such a populist voice. He popularized the epochal distinction between *el país político*, the Colombia known to Hartlyn and other perceptive students of the country's governmental conduct, and *el país nacional*, the country lived in by everyday Colombians and probably best understood by those same people. In Colombia today, such leaders have become irrelevant, as the media and the interdependent nature of the world economy are forcing adaptive behaviors that are inimical to mass movements. It is here that the contradictions of the modern world collide: just as the means for mass control are being refined to degrees that previously seemed implausible, the audience, the mass of common citizens, is disaggregating and acquiring a level of independence that is incompatible with the unrestrained power of one voice to speak for all the disparate and dissimilar needs of the mass of possessive individualists. While postmodernism may be attractive as the trend of the moment in what was the First World, the former Third World appears to have become more pragmatic, to have broken out of its passive mold and grown more aggressive, more confrontational, and more ready to demand its share of wealth. It seeks not to overcome the *dependencia* of yesterday but to conquer the markets of today and tomorrow. More than an empire died with the cold war. An entire way of life is quickly disappearing, and to the dismay of many, it is being replaced by a frightening new world of competition that may well favor those who used to exist on the periphery of capitalism. The future is being shaped in the capitals of the continuously developing countries of today, not the industrial centers of yesterday. This trend does not bode well for those unwilling or unable to adapt or to lead movement toward change.

Despite the criticisms voiced here, all the works reviewed represent substantial and enduring contributions to the comprehensive study

of the Colombian reality. The extensive commentary on the contributions of the various authors is a recognition of their importance as points of reference. The intent here has been to discuss the radically altered conditions prevailing in Colombia and the world that have yet to find much resonance in academic circles. Perhaps such changes must be experienced over longer time and will be addressed by the new generation of Colombian scholars, or by the even more confident and sophisticated wave that will surely follow in their pioneering footsteps. As Hegel decreed, "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk." A similar fate may yet befall many Latin Americanists, including this reviewer, who are still immersed in and even blinded by the paradigms of yesterday.