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From Cold War Origins to The Neoliberal Order: Formation, Trajectory and Social Base of Colombia's Far-Right

Kyla Sankey

Abstract

In Colombia, three decades of neoliberal policies have driven deeper inequalities, precarious livelihoods and displacement amongst the rural poor. Yet the particularity of the Colombian case is that it is the far-right that has taken political leadership over the dislocations and discontents generated by neoliberalism. Here, a form of reactionary authoritarian populism, with origins in counterinsurgent groups, landlords and narco-mafias, has strengthened its dominance over both the state and civil society in the contemporary era. This paper seeks to provide an interpretation of this phenomenon through a closer examination of the dynamics of political mobilisation around the processes of agrarian change. My argument is that contemporary right-wing populism can be traced back to the historical trajectories of Colombia's rural struggles. Throughout the course of capitalist development in the Colombian countryside, landlords linked to local and regional political machines and military forces have blocked reforms at every turn, instead engineering a landlord-led, reactionary path of agrarian change. Since the 1980s and 1990s, these reactionary forces have gradually augmented their political power by building counterinsurgent paramilitary militias with a strong social base amongst the displaced, informal and unorganised new working classes in semi-urban areas. Taking a case study of the dynamics of mobilisation, organisation and alliance-building amongst various political forces in the face of a rapidly transforming rural society in the Middle Magdalena region, this paper seeks to provide new insights into the everyday politics of far-right mobilisation Colombia.

Introduction

In a referendum on the 2nd of October 2016, Colombians were asked to confirm their approval of a peace agreement set to bring to an end over half a century of armed civil conflict between the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Colombian government. However, the alarming response was “no”. In the profusion of discussion and analysis that followed the referendum, commentators were quick to blame the result on the manipulative power of the far-right. Through a campaign predicated on manipulation, lies and fear-mongering, the so-called ‘opponents of peace’ had successfully galvanised a solid voting bloc opposed to the accords. Taking advantage of public misunderstanding of the implications of a peace agreement, they raised fears about everything from attacks on private property, threats to family values, impunity for “FARC terrorists” to or even a dictatorship of “Chavista-Castrista” communists in the event of a deal. Popular support for this bloc should not be over-estimated. Most Colombians did not vote—the abstention rate was over 62 percent, and those in rural areas most affected by the conflict did indeed vote to end it. But low turnout notwithstanding, few would deny the result was a triumph for the most reactionary faction of the dominant classes. More than simply manipulative power, what the referendum revealed was the sizeable base for a militarised, far-right agenda amongst the Colombian population, based on a pro-capitalist and anti-Communist ideology rooted in conservative and religious values and with ties to paramilitary death squads.

Colombia’s far-right is commonly associated with ex-President Alvaro Uribe’s two terms in office from 2002 to 2010. There is little doubt Uribe’s electoral victory symbolised a triumph for the most reactionary faction of the dominant classes. In 2002—the same year Uribe was first elected—politicians allied with the paramilitaries occupied a third of seats in congress, and in 2006 they won 22 of 32 departmental governorships (López & Martínez 2010). In power, Uribe and his allies wrote laws virtually guaranteeing paramilitaries immunity from prosecution for war crimes whilst taking a hard-line stance against the FARC, who they branded as ‘terrorists’. This authoritarian, militaristic stance targeted not only guerrilla insurgents but any social or political organisation, unionist or human rights worker that did not agree with his policies. Uribe’s presidency was characterised by extensive and systematic abuse of human rights and permanent confrontation with the judicial branch (Hristov 2009; Richani 2007). But while there is no doubt that Uribe’s electoral success served to further empower reactionary forces, this triumph was made possible far before Uribe’s election. The rise of the far-right bloc was the product of decades of formation of a multi-class coalition led by conservative politicians, landlords, cattle ranchers, regional elites, urban businesspeople and religious leaders, but which also counted with a support base amongst rural middle farmers and urban middle and working classes, particularly precarious and unorganised workers inhabiting the poorest neighbourhoods around provincial towns.

This paper examines the formation and development of the Colombian far-right on the basis of a case study of the Middle Magdalena, a region known as the birthplace of paramilitarism, and where a sign at the entrance to one municipality welcomes new arrivals to “Colombia’s anti-subversive capital”. I trace the emergence of this bloc back to its Cold War origins, when provincial landlords, elites, drug lords and military bosses, sponsored by the US, forged tighter alliances in response to the growing threat of reformist and revolutionary peasant movements in the countryside, founding provincial counterinsurgent militias throughout the 1980s. I then examine how, with the end of the Cold War from the 1990s, rather than disbanding, this paramilitary-aligned right bloc expanded into provincial urban towns such as Barrancabermeja, the centre of the Middle Magdalena, and became pervasive particularly amongst precarious and unorganised workers inhabiting the poorest neighbourhoods. The key to its triumph, I argue, was not only their success in defeating the Left, but also their role in facilitating the establishment of socio-economic transformations under neoliberalism. As with many provincial towns and rural peripheries, in the Middle Magdalena the paramilitary-aligned right bloc act as facilitators of the neoliberal order, creating the conditions for processes of labour flexibilisation, peasant dispossession, resource extraction and political subordination. My account traces the political struggles between left and right movements in urban peripheries around the processes of depeasantisation, urbanisation and marginalisation in the 1980s to the 2000s. Although the Left

initially made inroads organising and mobilising new urbanites, eventually it was the paramilitary-aligned far-right that seized control of urban areas, combining tactics of violence and terror with the social construction of legitimacy. In urban peripheries, the decline in power of the new working classes simultaneously creates ideal conditions for the far-right to flourish. A combination of individualised working environments in the informal economy, the atmosphere of fear, and the limited possibilities for collective resistance closed space for collective organising whilst establishing a society of fragmented, atomised and acquiescent individuals. The field research is based on semi-structured interviews with rural and urban activists, human rights defenders, unionists and workers in the palm sector, politicians, NGO workers, community action committee members and urban residents from the Middle Magdalena conducted on two visits in 2016 and 2017.

This paper proceeds in three parts. I begin by identifying the rural origins of the Colombian far-right in the Cold War logic of counterinsurgency. The case of early paramilitary formations in the Middle Magdalena is illustrative of the new forms of elite pacts and the social goals of counterinsurgency that emerged during this time to counter the rising guerrilla threat. The next section explores how these regional counterinsurgent armies were reconfigured under neoliberalism. Against the background of economic crisis and a legitimacy crisis for the Colombian state in the 1990s, political elites, together with rural and urban businessmen resorted to closer alliances with paramilitaries to protect their power and interests. As a result, from their origins as provincial counter-insurgent militias, paramilitaries expanded, forming armies that acted as the shock troops for neoliberal reforms and aimed at generalised territorial and social control. The final section explores in greater detail how paramilitaries moved into urban peripheries such as Barrancabermeja, where they first overpowered the left before moving on to control regional politics as well as the informal economy amongst dispossessed peasants and marginalised urban poor.

The rural origins of Colombia's far-right

Colombia's far-right is not new. It can be traced back to the Cold War, when landlords and their regional allies responded to the threat posed by the surge in revolutionary and reformist movements by hiring private armies and forging new political pacts. By the 1970s, the Colombian Left was establishing itself as a powerful force. After decades of low political activity, a wave of civic protests and general strikes erupted and quickly spread across the country (Archila, 2003). In the countryside meanwhile, peasants initiated a wave of land invasions, and by the end of the decade myriad guerrilla armies had emerged, including the FARC and the ELN (National Liberation Army), which rapidly expanded throughout the agrarian frontier, mushrooming in size and even capturing a handful of small rural towns (Broderick 1977). The triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 had raised expectations: Colombia's revolutionary moment seemed just on the horizon.

The emergence of the modern far-right was driven by four main forces. First were landlords, who were developing their political muscle and organisational strength against the threat of appropriation posed by the land reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s by forging pacts with politicians and hiring private armies in order to block reform (Reyes 2009). Secondly, the United States began stepping up its support for Latin American militaries on the basis of counter-terror operations from the 1960s in the form of "Plan Lasso" (Leech 2004). Third was the military, which was restructured and given greater autonomy under President Turbay's (1978-82) anti-communist agenda (Alonso, 1997: 140). Later in the 1980s, when President Betancur (1982-1986) initiated peace negotiations with the guerrillas, the military interpreted the talks as a threat to their power, and responded by increasing their autonomy from the state. Fourth were the drug traffickers who had emerged with the coca boom of the 1980s. By 1989 the illicit drugs industry represented 6 per cent of GDP and employed over half a million people, giving rise to a narco-bourgeoisie from the urban and rural petty-bourgeoisie (Rocha, 2000). Initially, landlords were reticent to accept the arrival of these *nouveau riche*, who they dubbed the *clase emergente*. But as drug traffickers began buying up lands in agrarian frontier regions, agrarian elites were soon motivated to build alliances on the premise of a common interest in defending their property and power against the threat of the rural insurgents.

The case of Puerto Boyacá in the Middle Magdalena provides an illustrative example of the formation, composition and activities of this new far-right coalition. From its foundation in the 1950s, Puerto Boyacá had been a bastion of left-wing politics, supporting independent left-wing parties including the Communists, and in the 1970s the 4th Front of the FARC moved into the rural area. The FARC's legitimacy in the region was derived from its ability to establish social order in a territory devoid of effective state control, in exchange for which it raised funds by collecting a tax from landlords (the "*vacuna ganadera*"), who generally accepted their presence in exchange for their maintenance of social order. However, this initial era of relative stability was short-lived. On a national level, the FARC was expanding rapidly, and began funding its growth by kidnapping landlords and other local elites. The FARC's acceptance amongst the middle and upper classes soon waned, and cattle ranchers and landowners began organising associations such as ACDEGAM (Asociación de Ganaderos del Magdalena Medio) to defend themselves against the insurgent threat (Medina 1990).

Meanwhile, the Middle Magdalena was quickly becoming an attractive location for drug mafias. There were two main reasons for this: first, the absence of state authority and second, the low price of lands, which had fallen to 300 pesos a hectare in the economic downturn of the 1980s (De Rementería, 1987: 344-5). It was in this context that one of the first paramilitary groups, the MAS (Muerte a Secuestradores or "Death to Kidnappers") was formed in 1981 on the back of meetings between narco-entrepreneurs, cattle ranchers, sectors of the urban elite and the Texas Petroleum Company. Known locally as the "Masetos", the Pablo Escobar-backed groups of henchmen drove large white vans and sported army-style jackets and balaclavas.

The activities of early paramilitary death squads clearly followed the counter-insurgent logic of the Cold War. The goal was not only to annihilate the guerrillas as a military force, but to sow terror and anxiety amongst the entire population, deterring any potential sympathisers. Terror operations began in 1982 in the neighbouring municipalities of Puerto Berrío and Puerto Boyacá, where MAS hitmen assassinated dozens of activists and councillors (ASFADDES, 2010: 29). The attacks precipitated the disintegration of Communist organising, and by 1983 the Communist party had closed its regional office in Puerto Boyacá. The MAS then worked its way up, expanding to form another 12 units by 1984 throughout the Middle Magdalena with names like "Rambo" or "Death to Revolutionaries", who targeted civilians and activists living in left-wing strongholds (Molano, 2009; Van Isschot, 2015). The 1988 massacre of Segovia in North-East Antioquia left 46 victims, including slaughtered bodies displayed in central points of the town with visible signs of torture, designed as a visible warning against activists, community organisers and residents. By the end of the decade, records attributed a total of 1,710 assassinations, 353 disappearances and 351 tortures to paramilitaries in the Middle Magdalena (Molano, 2009: 45).

Mirroring the strategy of their opponents, counterinsurgent forces combined military operations with social projects aimed at winning the 'hearts and minds' of local populations. The social dimension of paramilitary control was the brainchild of General Yanine, a graduate and former instructor of the School of the Americas (Grandin 2006; Van Isschot 2015). As Yanine saw it: "Whoever wins over the civilian population will win the war with the FARC" (cited in Van Isschot, 2015: 93). Violence was combined with legitimate activities such as public campaigns, building schools, providing medical services and setting up community shops as a means of wresting local support from the grip of the Communist Party (Melo 1990). As Communist activists and sympathisers fled the region, support plummeted and the town's left-wing traditions quickly dissolved (Van Isschot, 2015). The FARC themselves later accepted they had made "strategic errors" in the region by underestimating drug traffickers and pressuring local elites.

Yanine's social tactics acted as the 'carrot' to the 'stick' of paramilitary terror, legitimising the paramilitary movement amongst local residents and irreversibly transforming local politics.

The success of this pilot experiment went on to define the new model for paramilitarism across the country. Throughout the 1980s, paramilitary groups began establishing themselves in areas of large-scale commercial agriculture, spreading fear through massacres, torture and disappearances amongst civilian populations (Richani, 2007, 2012; Hristov, 2010). Although such groups were outlawed in

1989, by then it already was too late to stem the tide. In the same year, 140 similar groups had been recorded throughout the country. In 1994, when President Gaviria used emergency powers to legalise paramilitary groups once again, the same groups operated openly as CONVIVIR (“special vigilance and private security services”) (CREDHOS 1999). While the interests of the landlords that had initially founded such groups had been restricted to defending their own regional chiefdoms, it was the addition of drug traffickers that provided national and international networks and organisation around a nationwide counter-insurgent agenda (Duncan 2006). In 1997 Carlos Castaño, founding member of MAS, united regional paramilitary bands into a nationwide umbrella organisation United Self Defence Forces of Colombia, or *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), complete with its own uniforms, logos, hymns and doctrines.

Neoliberalism and the Colombian far-right

While the far-right originated in the Cold War logic of counterinsurgency, with the end of the Cold War in the 1990s it reconfigured and adapted its strategy. In the 1980s and 1990s the Colombian government enacted a series of reforms aiming at closer integration of the national economy in global markets, including lowering tariff barriers, flexibilising labour, and privatising state-owned enterprises and the pension system (Estrada 2006). Free-market reforms are often characterised as part of a broader ‘class project’ of capital against labour, but it is worth pointing out that these rapid transformations initially posed a threat to the power of the rural elite. Colombian economist Ocampo summarised the economic restructuring as ‘a massive redistribution of income between the city and countryside.’ In his analysis, ‘the biggest winners were high-income sectors in urban areas, while the biggest losers were high-income sectors in rural areas’ (Ocampo 1992: 115). One of the biggest threats facing agrarian capitalists came from the lowering of tariff barriers. In 1985 Colombia’s tariff barriers were the highest in Latin America, but by 1992 barriers had all but disappeared, soon becoming second lowest in the region (Ocampo, 2006). The removal of state support for agriculture exposed previously protected agrarian capitalists to new market pressures, forcing them to compete under different terms and destabilising their position. In 1970 the agricultural sector had represented around a third of national GDP, whereas by 1995 it was only a fifth. In 2015, it was just one-tenth (BNR, 2017). The Colombian economy was becoming more urban, more modern and more competitive, and given the provincial and unproductive nature of the agrarian elite, its survival seemed anything but guaranteed (Gutiérrez Sanín and Barón 2005).

The agrarian elite of the Middle Magdalena, which included cattle ranchers and palm oil growers, were hit by a commodity price slump that jeopardised not only their profits but also their class power itself. One palm oil boss Enrique Andrade described the scenario as follows: ‘when the economic opening was implemented and palm oil prices dropped, we were faced with a dilemma: either adjust the company or close it down’ (APSA 2016, 27) which effectively meant lowering the costs of labour. However, the militancy of palm workers and the organisational strength of the unions represented a major obstacle to achieving the new objectives of competitive accumulation (Molano 2009). The period 1990-1995 saw 17 major labor actions take place in the palm sector, including strikes, roadblocks and slowdowns (Delgado 2006: 107-109). ELN guerrillas often backed the strikes— with or without workers’ support— kidnapping bosses and providing armed accompaniment to rallies (Delgado, 2006: 139). The crisis reached tipping point in 1992 when the region’s largest Palm Oil company Indupalma announced its liquidation, blaming high labour costs for the company’s decline. The new systemic pressures threatened not only the power of traditional agrarian elites, but their very existence as a class. As they saw it, the choice was to either adapt to new competitive pressures or cede their position in the social hierarchy.

The goal of meeting new objectives of competitive accumulation on the one hand, and the obstacle presented by labour militancy on the other motivated palm companies to forge tighter alliances with paramilitaries to defend their interests. In his account of the re-organisation of labour systems in the palm industry during this period, sociologist Alfredo Molano explains that: ‘this radical transformation in palm oil’s productive structures required tighter social control and enforcement of law and order’

(2009: 142). Paramilitary violence was the main weapon for undermining the capacity of organised workers in the palm industry to negotiate wages and defend working conditions, and unions became the first target of a new paramilitary offensive. Paramilitary forces arrived in the palm regions in the late 1980s under the pretext of counter-insurgent operations, although in reality the terror extended much further- to assassinations, tortures and persecutions of non-armed union and community activists. 56 union activists in the palm oil industry were assassinated in the Middle Magdalena between 1988 and 1995 (Delgado 2006: 109). Paramilitaries abducted workers, drove them to their camps and demanded that every petition made by the unions should be verified by them before being made public. Massacres, assassinations, death threats and forced displacements against union activists and their entire families provided the setting for negotiations between union leaders and palm companies over changes to labour legislation. Union leaders lucky enough to escape the assassination attempts either resigned or fled, leaving a movement fragmented in its base and uncoordinated in its leadership. By 1995, union meetings held to discuss the implementation of new labour laws were barely attended, and negotiations ended with the establishment of a new labour contracting system known as the Associated Work Cooperatives model (CTA). The CTA reclassified palm workers as independent contractors, lowering their pay and withdrawing their benefits, protections, and right to unionise (Molano 2009, 142). Under neoliberalism, the weakening of organised labour came hand in hand with the strengthening of the paramilitary right, as agrarian elites seeking meet the objectives of competitive accumulation and flexibilise labor increasingly resorted to violent tactics and forged closer ties to paramilitaries to defend their interests and power.

After a decade of neoliberal restructuring and against the background of domestic economic and political crisis, at the turn of the century a primary commodities boom deepened Colombia's integration into the international division of labour on the basis of extractive exports (Sankey, 2015). While primary exports have a long history in Colombia, this new phase of economic 're-primarisation' was propelled by a surge in domestic and foreign investments in mining oil, gas and coal, as well as agri-business such as palm oil. Under the 'new' extractive model, traditional landlords and agrarian elites transformed themselves into competitive capitalist producers for global markets, but they were also motivated to form closer ties to paramilitary groups. The transformation came on the back of new, precarious forms of labour, and served to entrench the power of the most reactionary sector of the dominant classes and reinforce their ties to paramilitaries.

The Middle Magdalena was one of the principle sites set aside for the expansion of palm cultivation in the context of the commodities boom. Between 2000 and 2013, the area cultivated with palm increased from 40,000 to 155,000 hectares (Fedepalma: 2016). However, before these major territorial transformations could take place, the ground would first have to be 'prepared' by reconfiguring the pre-existing property arrangements based on smallholding agriculture that prevailed in these zones. In the Middle Magdalena, like many zones dominated by large-scale commercial agriculture, violent land appropriations and the "pacification" of territories in the hands of paramilitaries facilitated the reconfiguration the pre-existing property arrangements. In the decade between 1995 and 2005, 88,000 people were displaced in the region, including 44,000 people in the years 2000 and 2001 alone (ACNUR 2005). Small and medium farmers accounted for the majority of those displaced— 51% were from plots of 10 hectares or under, and 85% came from plots of less than 50 hectares (CNRR, 2013: 59). An investigation into the relation between palm cultivation and violent displacement reported that prime areas for palm cultivation in the low-lying river basin such as Sabana de Torres, Puerto Wilches and San Alberto were amongst the chief military targets for displacements (FIAN 2007: 24).

During the 1990s, then, paramilitaries and agrarian elites forged closer ties on the basis of shared interests. For paramilitaries violent peasant displacement served both the Cold War logic of 'pacifying' territories and ejecting the communist threat, as well as providing an outlet for laundering illegal wealth. For the agrarian elite paramilitary violence created pacified and governable spaces, paving the way for new forms of globalised capital accumulation. One local palm company manager described how, following the paramilitary terror: 'The political map was re-formed [...] The guerrillas left and the army entered, and that gives guarantees, so that you could invest as a businessman'

(Castro 2010). The combined interests in enhancing their wealth and pacifying territories not only spurred tighter alliances between landlords, agrarian capitalists and paramilitaries, but it also pushed them towards an agenda of securing Colombia's position in international markets (Chomsky 2007). Indeed, paramilitary boss Carlos Castaño appeared to conceive his role this way when he described his organisation as the 'defenders of business freedom and of the national and international industrial sectors' (cited in Stokes, 2006: 10). Under neoliberalism and against the background of social political and economic crisis, the drive to meet the demands of greater market competition and open up new spaces for world market production made paramilitary violence more central to the capital accumulation process, spurring the formation of a right-wing alliance on the basis of enhancing profits and securing political and social goals.

The far-right and the unmaking of Barrancabermeja's working class

In the Middle Magdalena, as throughout the rest of Colombia, peasants and the rural poor pushed off the land, whether by economic pressure or violent force, were crammed into the peripheries of provincial towns. In 1985, approximately 66 per cent of the population of the Middle Magdalena lived in urban areas, but by 2015 this had grown to 76 per cent, equivalent to nearly 100,000 new arrivals to the Middle Magdalena's urban peripheries in two decades (PNUD 2011). Slums swelled with dispossessed peasants and downsized workers desperately eking out their livelihoods in unfamiliar surroundings. Abandoned by the state and marginalised from society, newly arrived urbanites were forced to find strategies for coping with the precarious conditions of urban life.

Most new migrants to the Middle Magdalena's provincial towns were displaced peasants, afro-descendants, small miners, or fishermen from surrounding villages. Given the strong leftist traditions of rural zones, many were actively involved in, or at least sympathetic to, guerrilla movements. Collective experience of land occupations and cooperative work in frontier settlements had forged and strengthened bonds of trust and solidarity, popular culture of opposition amongst the Middle Magdalena's rural poor. Past organising capacities were soon applied to the challenges of new urban environments, and the energy of the dispossessed was channeled into radical movements. Newly urbanised peasants provided the main support base for a new wave of mobilisations in the form of civic strikes. Between 1980 and 1993, 22 civic strikes took place in the Middle Magdalena region, both in the main town of Barrancabermeja, as well as smaller municipalities like San Pablo or Yondó in the Cimitarra Valley. Civic mobilisations often emerged spontaneously, with local residents forming assemblies to express their frustration with the lack of institutional attention issues like public services, water supply, or roads. What had first erupted as spontaneous mobilisations quickly developed towards the construction of political instruments. Neighbourhood associations known as Community Action Committees (JACs), which had originated in the 1960s as a means for traditional political bosses to establish clientelistic relations with the poor, were transformed by the civic strike movement into instruments for popular struggle, providing the basis for participatory decision making and resource redistribution. The upsurge in urban political activity was reflective of a broader trend of emergent forms of independent left wing political activity that were sweeping the country. In the 1986 municipal elections the Patriotic Union elected 24 deputies and 275 council representatives, with one of their strongest support bases in the Middle Magdalena (Dudley 2004).

A significant example of the new forms of activism is provided by the urban land invasions carried out by displaced peasants, fishermen, miners and rural labourers in the eastern periphery of Barrancabermeja. Between 1970 and 1980, ten such invasions took place, founding what are today large neighbourhoods like the Primero de Mayo. Land invasions were carefully planned and well-organised operations. Each invasion, which always took place under the cover of night, was carried out by groups of 20 to 30 families. The first step was to invade the land then divide it into plots. Then, each family would be allocated a plot, and they would quickly assemble makeshift homes with corrugated iron. The next step was to mobilise the whole community, petitioning councillors and neighbouring communities. Public sector unionists would come at weekends to set up services like electricity, water, erect lampposts, or build roads. Activists from the urban occupations emphasised

the importance of experience of political education and organisation gained from the countryside in creating the sort of cohesion and trust needed to carry out the operations. One Communist organiser recalled that:

The left was strong [in the cities] because our work in the countryside had been very strong [...]. Many of the displaced people [arriving in Barrancabermeja] had come from regions with Communist Party presence. Even if they weren't Party militants, they knew our work and they knew we defended peasants (Interview 1).

Against the background of labour strikes, civic movements and land invasions, the 1970s and 1980s represented the apogee of the Left in the Middle Magdalena as throughout the rest of Colombia. Movements were not only successful in mobilising grassroots support and forming solidarities, but also building political instruments with the aim of challenging the political order.

But new popular organisations were only in early embryonic stages when they faced a brutal counter-attack. Not content with repelling the guerrilla insurgents in the countryside, paramilitaries set their sights on urban centres, and Barrancabermeja was made a prime objective due to its centrality in the oil industry and the growing strength of the Left in municipal politics. AUC leader Carlos Castaño notoriously declared his intention of drinking a cup of coffee in the town of Barrancabermeja by 2001. In the 1990s two counterinsurgent military bases were opened in the town, which were shortly followed by the arrival of paramilitaries from the rural areas into urban centres. Barrancabermeja and its surrounding municipalities quickly descended into violent chaos. Between 1998 and 2002 Barrancabermeja became the most violent city in Colombia, with estimates suggesting up to a thousand people were murdered and five thousand more displaced during this time. True to their promise, the AUC affiliate Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB) seized control of the city in 2002 (Bonilla, 2007; Van Isschot 2015). Since this time, around 97 per cent of actions of political violence in the region can be attributed to paramilitaries or state security forces.

The growing strength of the Left in municipal elections had also posed a challenge to regional political bosses, motivating them to forge closer alliances with paramilitaries to protect their power and wealth (Romero, 2004). In some cases, existing politicians sympathetic to paramilitaries began working more closely with them or were enlisted through bribes or coercion; in others, paramilitaries sponsored their own candidates (Lopez, 2010). Associations with names like 'Amipaz' provided the the basis for a tightening of bonds between regional elites and paramilitaries. One paramilitary boss claimed to have been colluding with mayors and councillors in 37 municipalities in the Middle Magdalena (*La Portada*, 2012).

The neighbourhood committees that had provided instruments for popular mobilisation under the civic movements were re-appropriated by paramilitaries and political bosses through the use of coercive threats, intimidation or physical force against leaders. By administering access to local services and funds for micro-development projects, the far-right used the JACs as a means to secure support by re-incorporating residents into clientelistic relations. This allowed them to garner a support base amongst the middle classes— medium farmers, farm and cattle ranch managers and urban residents, especially people employed in the coca industry as merchants, transporters, medium and large coca growers, as well as sympathetic coca workers (Gutiérrez 2004). In the late 1990s, when negotiations between the ELN and government led to the creation of demilitarised zones in the San Pablo municipality, paramilitaries successfully organised a multi-class coalition led by local politicians and elites and funded a social movement, 'Asocipaz', to protest the peace talks (Gutiérrez 2004).

Paramilitary violence sowed terror, confusion, and fear amongst the entire population, but it was also part of a process of 'political cleansing' of the town (Romero 2004). Activists, union leaders, left-wing politicians and human rights defenders were the main targets of attacks. One local human rights organisation reflected the fears of Middle Magdalena activists when it stated: 'community leaders, lawyers, journalists, politicians from all parties and people who are critical of the state and the government in power, have all now become targets' (CREDHOS 1999). Between 2001 and 2012, over a thousand human rights violations, including death threats, targeted assassinations and displacements

were counted against activists and social organisations. Key leaders, like Patriotic Union councillors Leonardo Posada and Ismael Jaimes, or unionist Manuel Chacon were assassinated, sowing fear and panic amongst organisers left behind. Seeing their comrades murdered, having their homes raided and bombarded with death threats, activists were soon made to realise that the political space they had opened had now been resealed. One activist described how: ‘we knew that putting an activist into a leadership role was equivalent to giving the paramilitaries a target for assassination’ (Interview 2). Violent repression quickly put organised political activity on the defensive. By 1997, all UP activists had fled, some into exile abroad, and others into rural territories where paramilitaries had not penetrated. Meetings that had once counted with hundreds of participants dwindled to a handful of activists. Radical demands for social transformation were reduced to petitions for human rights. Barrancabermeja and its surrounding municipalities, which had once been bastions of left-wing political activity, were brutalised into submission.

Paramilitary violence not only fractured social and political movements, but it also spread shock and confusion throughout civil society. The disarray not only dissuaded sympathisers from allying themselves with political movements, but also established the preconditions for the emergence of new forms of inequality and precariousness in people’s working lives. In her anthropological account of the impact of paramilitarism in Barrancabermeja, Gill describes how: ‘escalating violence spread fear and insecurity; [...] it disorganised social life and made working people available for incorporation into new relationships of inequality’ (2016: 87). The enactment of free-market reforms like labour flexibilisation and the privatisation of state-owned firms reconfigured labour-capital relations, as mass layoffs and waves of rural-urban migration swelled the ranks of informal and precarious workers in urban peripheries. By 2010, just under 60 per cent of the labour force was categorised as informally employed, lacking social protections or any control over their working conditions, either through law or collective labour organisations (Ferreira 2016). Characterised by Marx as the ‘industrial reserve army’, and commonly referred to today as the informal proletariat, this sector of the working class became increasingly surplus to the requirements of capital under neoliberalism (Davis, 2006).

Poor urban neighbourhoods swelled with newly urbanised migrants embroiled in what Mike Davis calls the ‘relentless micro-capitalism’ of the working poor in the informal sector (Davis 2006: 181). Labouring as moto-taxi drivers, street peddlers, taxi drivers, vendors, part-time contractors, or selling arepas, ice-creams, lottery tickets, mobile phone calls, cigarettes or mobile phone parts, or in the cocaine industry as merchants, transporters, farmers or coca pickers, their incomes and livelihoods are characterised by endemic insecurity and precariousness. Paramilitary violence created the conditions for the establishment of this new social order, but paramilitaries and their far-right coalition were also the main beneficiaries of a fragmented and atomised society. Precarious working conditions and contracts pushed people deeper into coercive relationships with paramilitaries. An example for this is access to credit. Workers can only access bank loans with a labour contract as a guarantee. Without these contracts, however, banks would no longer accept loan applications. With the neighbourhoods under control of the BCB, new credit agencies started appearing that provided people with unsecured loans at interest rates of 20 or 30 percent (Interview 3). Poor, desperate and vulnerable, the recipients of these loans had little chance of gaining employment or repaying the money. The loans go towards setting up ‘micro-businesses’: selling *arepas*, cigarettes or mobile phone calls on the streets. When the business fails—which they inevitably do, the lenders would return every day, knocking at the house asking for the interest the debtor is unable to pay. Debt bondage creates economic dependence on the paramilitaries, maintaining their dominance through debts reinforced with the threat of physical violence.

A further implication of precarious working livelihoods is the limited potential for building collective, class-based resistance. Workers in the informal economy typically work alone, tasks are fragmented and subject to change day by day, or even hour by hour in an ever more competitive environment. In Gill’s account, the transformations of daily working conditions have resulted in a ‘new political subjectivity in which self-interested individualism replaced a more capacious understanding of self’ (2016: 112), where people no longer look to collective organisations or the state to redress perceived injustices. In 1980, the unionisation rate was 16 percent, and as high as 31 percent in the oil sector.

However, by 2005 it had reached just 4.5 percent, one of the lowest in the world, where it has remained ever since (Peña, 2017). Too afraid to engage in collective action, resistance takes an individualised form: debtors escaped bondage by fleeing the neighbourhood. One resident described how, ‘People adapted by learning to act like everyone else. They stayed put without saying anything’ (Interview 4). A combination of individualised working environments, the atmosphere of fear, and the limited possibilities for collective resistance closed space for collective organising and simultaneously established a society of fragmented, atomised and acquiescent individuals— ideal conditions for the far-right to flourish.

Conclusion

This case study of the formation and development of the paramilitary aligned far-right in the Middle Magdalena reveals how a movement that originated as a counterinsurgent force in the Cold War evolved and expanded in the neoliberal era towards new forms of generalised territorial, social and political control in provincial urban towns. The case suggests a number of points about Colombia’s far-right. First, the ideology and motivation around the far-right can only be understood in the context of the Cold War polarisations between insurgents and counter-insurgents in rural areas. Nonetheless, the targets of far-right violence extended far beyond revolutionary forces to target all social and political movements that challenged the dominant order. Second, while the far right began as a coalition of traditional landlords and political elites, under neoliberalism these groups transformed their productive processes in line with the conditions of global capital accumulation and were able to maintain their power and wealth with the help of paramilitary violence. Third, whilst the state was instrumental in creating paramilitaries to support its counterinsurgent efforts, by the 1990s the paramilitaries expanded to such an extent that they took over as proxy states in provincial towns. When the state was brought to the brink of collapse in the political crisis that followed the implementation of free-market reforms, political elites increasingly resorted to paramilitary forces to protect their power and interests. Fourth, although the paramilitaries first emerged in the countryside as counter-insurgent forces in the Cold War logic, they expanded to urban zones as shock-troops for the implementation of neoliberal policies, facilitating peasant dispossession and labour flexibilisation as well as superintending the neoliberal order in a fragmented and atomised society. Finally, although paramilitary-aligned right often justify its activities as support for poor peasants, in reality this is more of a middle class and urban movement, with main support base amongst middle farmers, cattle managers, people employed in the coca industry as well as precarious workers in urban peripheries led by landlords and politicians. The study provides further considerations for an understanding of the class origins, trajectory and social base of Colombia’s far-right.

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Interviews

- 1 Personal Interview, urban activist, August 2017
- 2 Personal Interview, peasant activist: December 2016
- 3 Personal Interview, Barrancabermeja ombudsman, August 2017
- 4 Personal Interview, youth leader, August 2017

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