

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



## Book Reviews

### **Palacios, Marco (2012) *Public Violence in Colombia: 1958-2010 (Violencia Pública en Colombia: 1958-2010)*. Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica.**

**Maximiliano E Korstanje<sup>1</sup>**

University of Palermo, Argentina

In Colombia, the problem of terrorism not only divided public opinion but also initiated hot debate about the role of the United States as protector or, alternatively, instigator of conflict. Marco Palacios' book explores beyond existing paradigms. The text, based on the Gramscian legacy, proposes an all-embracing diagnosis that expands the current understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism.

Throughout this valuable project, Palacios argues convincingly that the Colombian elite promoted the protection of their interests but did not devote major efforts to keeping peace in the hinterland. As a result, Colombia has grown in a dualist structure where the urban fabric contrasts with that of rural areas. Since its inception, the economy has been based on colonial latifundium. The rivalry between capitalist landowners and peasants has been shaped by their access to land. Unlike other Latin American countries, neither the military forces nor the police deployed resources to regulate the hinterland. Thus Colombia is unique in its genesis and consequent evolution. As a result, peasants resolved disputes through social conflict.

Lack of state intervention in these places enhanced the power of the elite in the main towns of the rural hinterlands. The gravamen of financial taxes generated a continual state of emergency that resulted in a climate of resentment and exclusion. Problems in the administration of the finances also created serious imbalances in material wealth in the country. The situation in the main cities was not much different. Incipient discontent of worker-unions became a concern for the elite. So as not to lose control, terrorism through violence became an instrument for disciplining the workforce. Unlike neighboring countries where military forces were dispatched to conduct coups against the civilians, in Colombia the government used terrorism.

In philosophical terms, Colombia had serious problems to consolidate a project of state that monopolised the use of force. Legal and illegal means were used to raise the consciousness of the aristocracy about worker-union claims and to dissuade continuance of such claims. The legal circuits of trade determined the world of jurisprudence, nationhood and order. At the same time as the aristocracy argued in favour of democracy and the respect of law to protect their businesses, the human rights of poorer peasants were systematically and repeatedly violated. The threat of terrorism became the pretext for the introduction of policies which otherwise would have been rejected by Colombian society.

Two events were central to the deepening of the conflict between the Government and the rural hinterland. The first was related to Castro's revolution in Cuba and its effects on other developing Latin American countries from 1970 to 1980. The conflict between cities and the rural hinterland was accelerated by the Cuban revolution and by the Cold War. Guidelines suggested by the United States to regulate internal conflict may have appealed to the state and aristocrats but insurgents were inspired by Cuba to carry on their anti-establishment activities. Palacios reminds us that guerrilla terrorists were implanted in those zones where the authority of government was weakest. If the anomie created by the government was initially in its best interests, subsequently this lack of involvement became a big problem.

Based on a romantic discourse, Castro inspired the rebels of many countries in Latin America against the US and towards the Soviet bloc. In Colombia, peasants adopted the model of Cuba but, at the same time, the old stereotypes of rivalry between the centre and its periphery was reproduced. The populist voice initiated through the allure of the Gaitanismo political movement was now silenced by the cold war. Palacios said that Colombia failed to forge a national consciousness according to its own needs and history.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the conflict did not decline but changed its face. The second event, the introduction of drug-trafficking in rural zones, gave financial resources to the Guerrilla movement from the 1990s onwards. Cocoa leaf growers in the Cocalero movement were forced to live on the edge of crime. This environment favoured the interest of traffickers who established a bridge between the cities and the hinterland by supporting the old demand of the Cocaleros to gain access to land. In parallel with that, in 1989 the Columbian government criminalised a group of left-wing movements which were then forced to live a clandestine existence in the jungle. Among these were M-19, EPL and FARC. Their claims were directed against the government which was accused of being the cradle of neo-liberal policies.

How might Che Guevara be linked to narcotics leaders? This book broaches a pithy point which has been ignored to date: the pervasive role of the elite in creating a state of emergency which would be later used in its own interest. Castro's revolution which widened the gap between the centre and its periphery would be filled by Pablo Escobar-Gaviria and other narcotics leaders.

The support given by the US to Colombia was strengthened after the attacks to World Trade Center in 2001. The doctrine of homeland safety contributed to the issuance of financial and military assistance to those countries which represent a serious threat to the US. Although communism had been embedded in the consciousness of many peasants, this major event galvanised loyalties. The war-on-terror declared by the Bush administration changed the way of perceiving terrorism forever.

One of the most troubling aspects that characterises modern terrorism is its global scope. Today, terrorism is very difficult to localise as it may operate within a network that does not recognise nations, religions or other affiliations. The top-down logic of terrorist cells in former decades paved the way for a new wave of small networks with seemingly international operational ranges. Therefore, other movements characterised by acts of terrorism such as the IRA and ETA were dissuaded from laying down arms. In Colombia, the government planned to negotiate with FARC and permit access to land if they stopped supporting of narcotics traffickers. In this valuable book, Palacios explains that terrorism depends on many factors, some of them embedded in the core of democracy.

*Correspondence:* Maximiliano E Korstanje, Department of Economics, University of Palermo, 179 Larrea Street, Buenos Aires, CP 1414, Argentina.. Email: maxikorstanje@arnet.com.ar.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Emeritus Professor Geoffrey Skoll from Criminal Justice Department of Buffalo State College for his time in editing and improving this manuscript as well as the valuable comments of Professor Kerry Carrington.