

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Colombian Paramilitaries and Their Successor Groups

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This essay reviews the following works:

The Frontier Effect: State Formation and Violence in Colombia. By Teo Ballvé. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 228. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781501747540.

Paramilitarismo. Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico. By Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH). Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018. Pp. 234. Free e-book. ISBN: 9789585500051.

Agrarian Capitalism, War and Peace in Colombia: Beyond Dispossession. By Jacobo Grajales. New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 190. \$44.95 paperback. ISBN: 978036775707.

Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitaries and the State in Colombia (1982-2007). By Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. Pp. 480 pages. \$72.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781787073654.

Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War. By Annette Idler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 496. \$29.00 paper. ISBN: 9780190849153.

Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America. By Sarah Zukerman Daly. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 344. \$25.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781107566835.

Studies of the Colombian paramilitaries and their successor groups offer valuable insights into civil wars, states, pro-government armed groups, and their demobilization and remobilization. Along with government security forces and leftist guerrilla groups, right-wing paramilitaries were principal actors in the Colombian conflict, especially at its height in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹ Unlike guerrilla groups that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, targeted the government, and advocated for land and wealth redistribution, paramilitary groups appeared in the early 1980s and supported the political and economic status quo. While guerrilla groups were responsible for most of the 27,023 kidnappings between 1970 and 2010, paramilitaries (often with security forces' complicity) committed most of the 1,982 massacres from 1980 to 2012 and most of the 16,346 selective assassinations from 1981 to 2012.² The paramilitaries

¹ The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013), 38, estimates that 220,000 people (18.5 percent combatants and 81.5 percent civilians) died in the Colombian conflict between 1958 and 2012.

² CNMH, GMH, 16, 26, 42.

were notorious for their terrifying violence, especially public massacres of unarmed citizens, and massive population displacements.

Commonly shared counterinsurgency goals bound the paramilitaries with a heterogeneous mix of backers, including regional elites, large businesses and multinationals, security and intelligence forces, and drug traffickers. In the mid-2000s, judicial investigations uncovered the parapolítica scandals, revealing how such alliances allowed the paramilitaries to infiltrate the political and judicial systems. As Ballvé documents, paramilitaries gained control of at least four hundred municipal, regional, and federal legislative offices across the country, including a third of the Congress (85).

Following the demobilization of more than thirty-two thousand paramilitaries, paramilitary armed successor groups (PSGs) emerged, mostly composed of former or never-demobilized paramilitaries.³ Although they have not espoused counterinsurgency dogmas and have avoided large-scale massacres, PSGs have engaged in organized crime, selective killings, and politically motivated assassinations. They are heterogeneous, ranging from small gangs to large, organized groups that control significant sections of Colombia. Along with still-active guerrilla groups and reactivated rebels, PSGs help form the multiplicity of criminal, armed groups in present-day Colombia.

Existing scholarship about the paramilitaries and their successor groups

Although the paramilitaries have accrued less attention than the guerrillas, the scholarship and debates about the paramilitaries are long-standing and robust.⁴ After the paramilitaries' appearance in the 1980s, academics began developing explanatory frameworks about them, many of which were focused on exploring the paramilitaries' relationship to the state. Driven predominantly by Colombian scholarship, the early literature can be divided into two approaches. The first viewed paramilitaries as vigilante groups operating separately from the state.⁵ This approach conceived of them as resulting from a weak or nonexistent state, being linked to illicit drug economies, and being supported by clientelism and local elites fearful of rebels. In contrast, the second approach viewed the paramilitaries as an example of state terrorism.⁶ It saw them as being closely intertwined with the state and its outsourcing of violence and as serving domestic and global capitalist elites' interests.⁷

In the 2000s, a third approach emerged out of Colombian academia, bridging the gap between the "all or nothing" stances of the vigilante and state terrorism perspectives. It focused on the paramilitaries' hybrid nature as neither completely of the state nor apart from it; the paramilitaries' and the state's heterogeneity; the importance of the paramilitaries' alliances and supporters, especially regional elites; and the subnational and regional level's importance for understanding the paramilitaries.⁸

³ Winifred Tate, "Paramilitary Forces in Colombia," *Latin American Research Review* 46, no. 3 (2011): 191–200, 191.

⁴ For a review of this scholarship, see Edwin Cruz Rodríguez, "Los estudios sobre el paramilitarismo en Colombia." *Análisis Político* 20, no. 60 (2007): 117–134.

⁵ For the vigilante approach, see Jorge Orlando Melo, "Los paramilitares y su impacto sobre la política," in *Al filo del caos: Crisis política en la Colombia de los años 80*, ed. Francisco Leal and León Zamosc (Bogotá: Iepri-Tercer Mundo Editores, 1990).

⁶ For the state terrorism perspective, see Carlos Medina Gallego, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico en Colombia: Origen, desarrollo y consolidación: El caso "Puerto Boyacá"* (Bogotá: Editorial Documentos Periodísticos, 1990); Germán Palacio and Fernando Rojas, "Empresarios de la cocaína, parainstitucionalidad y flexibilidad del régimen político colombiano," in *La irrupción del paraestado: Ensayos sobre la crisis colombiana*, ed. Germán Palacio (Bogotá: ILSA-Cerec, 1990).

⁷ William Avilés, "Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low-intensity Democracy," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 379–408.

⁸ For the hybrid approach, see Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas, 1982–2003* (Bogotá: Temas de Hoy, 2003); Fernán González, Ingrid Bolívar, and Teófilo Vázquez, *Violencia política en Colombia: de la nación fragmentada a la construcción del Estado* (Bogotá: Cinep, 2003).

Because PSGs are a more recent phenomenon, less scholarship exists about them. Among the extant literature, two theoretical perspectives predominate. Like earlier vigilante frameworks, the first one underscores the “failed” Colombian state and its inability to impose order, maintain the rule of law, and establish a strong state presence, especially in regions with drug trafficking, rebels, demobilized guerillas, PSGs, or paramilitaries. This approach has had proponents mostly from outside Colombia.⁹ A second approach emerged out of the civil wars literature led by academics based mostly in the United States and Western Europe. It emphasizes the importance of micro-level, bottom-up views of civil conflicts, their complexity, and the rationality of actors and their actions.¹⁰ Despite differences, both perspectives conceive of PSGs as independent from the state.

A long-standing, rich academic literature about paramilitaries and PSGs exists, especially debates about their relationships with the state. This review examines six books that build on that scholarship, each contributing theoretical advancements and a wealth of knowledge about paramilitaries and PSGs. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the scholarship and suggesting future directions for research.

The paramilitaries’ heterogeneity and regionalism

Written by two rapporteurs, Teófilo Vásquez Delgado and Víctor Barrera, *Paramilitarismo: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico*, summarizes the findings on paramilitaries from the more than two hundred books and documentaries released by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) and Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH) in Colombia. Formed in 2011, the CNMH originated from the earlier GMH that came out of the paramilitary demobilization process. Many of Colombia’s most respected academics worked with the GMH or CNMH to document the Colombian conflict and its historical memories. In 2019, the conservative administration of Iván Duque (2018–2022) appointed a controversial new director, Darío Acevedo, to replace the GMH’s and CNMH’s longtime, distinguished director Gonzalo Sánchez G. Nevertheless, academics still frequently cite the CNMH’s works because of their depth and high-quality research, including extensive fieldwork across many regions and interviews with victims and paramilitaries.

Influenced by the hybrid approach, the CNMH book reviewed here integrates the main findings about the paramilitaries and PSGs from the various GMH and CNMH studies. Situating them in the broader academic literature, it begins with a valuable discussion of scholarly debates on paramilitaries and their role in the Colombian conflict. The first sections focus on debates about the paramilitaries’ origins in the 1980s, including studies about rural elites’ reactions to increased guerrilla activity and government negotiations with rebel groups, and the roles of security forces and drug trafficking in the paramilitaries’ development; conceptualizations and periodizations of the paramilitaries’ different generations, organizational growth and dynamics, territorial expressions, and evolution from small armed bands to a national confederation that included large armies in the late 1990s and early 2000s; different depictions of paramilitary groups’ relationships to the “agrarian problem and the rural world” (11); and the paramilitaries’ political project and linkages to the political system (11).

⁹ For the failed-state perspective, see Peter DeShazo and Phillip Mclean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State: Lessons from Colombia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009); Silvia De Giuseppe, “Deconstructing Narco-Terrorism in Failed States: Afghanistan and Colombia,” <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/97965>.

¹⁰ For the civil wars approach, see Stathis Kalyvas and Ana Arjona, “Paramilitarismo: Una perspectiva teórica,” in *El poder paramilitar*, ed. Alfredo Rangel (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Planeta, 2005); Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Building on previous scholarship, the book highlights the findings by GMH and CNMH on paramilitaries' heterogeneity, especially regional differences, and their significance for paramilitary groups' trajectories and violence over time. For example, the rapporteurs make a basic distinction between two types of regions. The first type is an area (e.g., Magdalena Medio) where paramilitaries arose endogenously from their alliances with regional elites, security forces, and drug traffickers in the 1980s and 1990s. In these regions, elites, threatened by leftist social movements and guerrillas, were able to maintain their political and economic control through paramilitaries and their social orders of violence. The second type is an area (e.g., Putumayo and the Cúcuta subregion) where, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, paramilitaries' rule was exogenously imposed from outside the regions. These takeovers and land dispossessions were part of the project of the main paramilitary confederation Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) to gain nationwide, territorial control, especially over lucrative drug-trafficking routes and coca cultivation. Compared to exogenous regions, endogenous regions were more likely to have stronger paramilitary ties with local elites, greater paramilitary consolidation and legitimacy, and a higher likelihood of robust PSGs with less contested domination. Building on the distinctions, the rapporteurs examine four "territorial matrixes" that look at the paramilitary groups' particular mixture of backers and interests (e.g., mafia and drug oriented or not) and their different goals (e.g., locally focused or expansionist) (172). Together, the schemata emphasize the pronounced regional differentiations in paramilitary groups' goals, local alliances, internal structures, territorial control, and financing.

The book catalogs numerous other noteworthy GMH and CNMH findings, many of which emphasize the value of analyzing the paramilitaries at the subnational and local levels. They include Colombia's territorial heterogeneity and its shifts over time; the Colombian state's uneven presence and control; *parapolítica's* regional diversity; tensions between subnational and national elites over the paramilitaries; paramilitaries' presence in peripheral regions and more integrated areas, including urban ones; paramilitaries' role in the imposition of rural development models based on large-scale, mining, agriculture, and cattle ranching; and paramilitaries' expediting of regional transitions to fuller integration into national and global economies. Collectively, the CNMH book contributes to academic debates about and knowledge of paramilitaries and PSGs.

Clientelistic warfare and social impasses

In his book *Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitaries and the State in Colombia (1982-2007)*, the Colombian scholar Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín maintains that the paramilitaries and their violence were "a continuation of clientelistic politics by other means" (16). Using numerous sources (e.g., qualitative interviews, surveys, government data, paramilitary documents, and an original database of judicial confessions by demobilized paramilitaries), the book is valuable for its complex theoretical arguments, an extension of the hybrid approach, and evaluations of Colombian and international scholarly approaches about the paramilitaries.

Drawing from institutional approaches in sociology and political science, Gutiérrez-Sanín contends that "the paramilitaries appeared, grew, and developed as part of a system of indirect rule and clientelism that has regulated the links between the central state and the country's regions, but at the same time deeply transformed this system, triggering large-scale interactive failures, collective action issues, principal-agent structures, and misalignment of interests" (1). Gutiérrez-Sanín groups the last four concepts under the heading of "social impasses." He describes numerous social impasses that the Colombian state and the paramilitaries faced and the effects of those impasses, including support for demobilization.

The book's discussion of the national government and its particular social impasses is an example of its contributions to understandings of the state, clientelism, and pro-government armed groups. On the one hand, many influential regional elites and politicians advocated for government security forces and intelligence services to back paramilitaries despite their enmeshment with drug trafficking. Regional elites supported the paramilitaries because they needed their violence to secure their economic and political control and to keep it away from left-leaning activists and guerillas.

On the other hand, the national government faced national and strong international counter-pressures to fight the illegal drug trade (especially from the United States) and curb human rights violations by security forces and the paramilitaries. Related social impasses for the Colombian government included political tensions, realignments, destabilizations, and conflicts stemming from the paramilitary's gaming of the political system of indirect rule via clientelism; *parapolítica's* coercive reworking of local governance; threats to the government's sovereignty as drug traffickers and paramilitaries acquired significant influence in several regional political coalitions; and the deepening of the state's internal divisions, as some branches (e.g., the judiciary) opposed the paramilitaries while others allied with them. The Colombian government's dilemma was that "it could strengthen its territorial reach and control, through highly narcotized counter-insurgent coalitions and their paramilitary expression; or it could strengthen its international recognition" (23). It, however, could not simultaneously achieve both contradictory goals, leading the national government to eventually favor the paramilitaries' demobilization.

Gutiérrez Sanín also analyzes the paramilitaries' own social impasses and their effects, including why they decided to demobilize at the height of their power. As does the CNMH, he argues that the paramilitaries were heterogeneous, varying in "the coalitions that supported them, the types of intermediaries that linked them to the state, their type and degree of territorial groundedness, how disciplined they were, and their duration" (120–121). Relatedly, the paramilitaries faced deep fissures and social impasses arising from internecine battles over control over territory and drug-trafficking routes; disagreements over distribution of profits, especially those from the illicit drug industry; debates about the paramilitary's close alliances with drug traffickers; AUC's rapid expansion, as well as its organizational opacity and lack of common organizational goals and plans; fractured networks and splintered alliances with key allies such as security forces and elites; armed competition among paramilitary groups; and paramilitary reorganization and new units in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, when the paramilitaries agreed to demobilize, they were in "a situation of deep disarray, precisely because of the social impasses and sovereignty crises triggered by their activity" (38). Like the Colombian government, the paramilitaries' various social impasses were a major factor in bringing about support for demobilization.

The agrarian question and the paramilitaries

Unlike the national scope of the two previous books, *Agrarian Capitalism, War and Peace in Colombia: Beyond Dispossession* studies the paramilitaries at the provincial level. Jacobo Grajales, a Colombian academic based in France, investigates the paramilitaries in the *departamento* Magdalena, employing numerous interviews, fieldwork, archival research, and geographic data. Like the rest of northern Colombia, the province experienced widespread and extensive paramilitary violence, population displacements, and land grabs. Drawing from political economy and the hybrid approach, the book documents Magdalena's history of land battles and peasant mobilizations; attempts at agrarian reform; support for and participation with the paramilitaries by elites, large businesses

and farms, ranchers, and multinationals; the titanic effects of drug trafficking there; and peacemaking endeavors after 2006. Like Mauricio Romero, Grajales applies Volkov's concept of violent entrepreneurs to the paramilitaries and their rollback of agrarian redistribution efforts (e.g., promoting shady land transfers or forcibly appropriating properties).¹¹

Seeing the state as a disjointed, incoherent entity and "a field of competition," Grajales's main question is how do "war and peacemaking reshape access to land and transform rural societies, class relations, and more generally, agrarian capitalism?" (3). He argues that armed violence is not an unusual, abnormal, or illegal phenomenon. Rather, aggressive coercion and land grabs are integral to the formation of agrarian capitalism, being firmly rooted in political and economic institutions, power structures, and relations of exploitation and accumulation (3). Magdalena's paramilitaries, then, were not historical aberrations but rather a continuation of ongoing historical struggles over land, agrarian transformations, and inequities.

The book critiques many scholars' and practitioners' representations of violence for presenting a misleading "differentiation between wartime plundering and legitimate accumulation" (3, 4). It takes many peace-building efforts and "postconflict" land distribution projects to task for presupposing that when conflicts end, violence will disappear as "normality" returns. Grajales argues that this false dichotomy obscures armed violence's normalcy and hides its complex connections to the legal economy and "conventional, mainstream" society. This concealment ends up legitimizing relationships of exploitation and accumulation, including those from the paramilitary and postconflict eras, in the name of capitalist economic development.

In contrast to approaches that bifurcate peacemaking and armed conflict, Grajales contends that the two phenomena are deeply intertwined and conjointly shape agrarian transformations, class relations, and capitalism (3, 4). Given PSG's persistence, the recent expansion of mining and agribusinesses (e.g., palm oil) and continuing difficulties with land redistribution, Grajales's book offers critiques of and alternatives (e.g., radical democracy) to many "postconflict" models.

Statelessness discourses and the frontier effect

Teo Ballvé, an Argentine former journalist and scholar based in the United States, uses another northern Colombian case study, the Urabá region, for his book *The Frontier Effect: State Formation and Violence in Colombia*. Prized for its lucrative drug smuggling routes (e.g., sea access and the border with Panama), Urabá was an epicenter for AUC paramilitaries, their carnage, and *parapolítica*. Using the CNMH book's terminology, Urabá's paramilitary groups were endogenous to the region with expansionist goals. Drawing on ethnographic work, newspaper and historical accounts, and interviews with residents, officials, and former paramilitaries (including El Alemán, a former high-ranking AUC commander), Ballvé documents state formation and the region's bloodstained history. He argues that the conflict in Urabá did not end with the paramilitaries' demobilization. Rather, it evolved into a single PSG, Los Urabeños (a.k.a. Los Gaitanistas, Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, Clan Úsuga, or Clan del Golfo), dominating large sections of Northern Colombia, including Urabá.

Taking scholarship about the paramilitaries in a new direction, the book challenges approaches (e.g., the failed state, civil wars) that posit that greed, economic needs, or statelessness underlie and promote violent political conflicts. Influenced by Antonio

¹¹ Romero, *Paramilitares*; Vadim Volkov, "Violent Entrepreneurship in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 5 (1999): 741–754.

Gramsci and Henri Lefebvre, Ballvé analyzes historically hegemonic notions of the state and its social and spatial production (6, 7). He asks how the state's formation, governance, and territorial dominion can take place in a conflicted region like Urabá, whose residents paradoxically believe the state is nonexistent while simultaneously recognizing its presence. To answer that question, Ballvé develops the "frontier effect" concept, the powerful "generative political influence" of the state's supposed absence (9). The book analyzes how statelessness discourses "shape the imaginaries, practices, institutions, and relationships of political life," obscure the state's presence, rationalize capitalist accumulation, and enable violent actors like the paramilitaries (5).

Even though the paramilitaries worked with the state at multiple levels, they promulgated discourses about the government's abandonment as the root cause of Urabá's problems. According to Ballvé, the paramilitaries used those discourses to justify their actions and violence; establish their legitimacy; cultivate a base of support with residents through speciously claiming to establish state structures; and disguise the government's role in abetting the paramilitaries' takeovers spatially, economically, and politically. Along with Colombia's political decentralization, the statelessness discourses helped the paramilitaries (and later PSGs) to capture many public offices and control municipalities, showing that liberal governance was not incompatible with the paramilitary's dominion (6).

Like Grajales, Ballvé demonstrates that state-building projects do not automatically translate into peace building (6). In Urabá, PSGs solidified the paramilitaries' economic and political control and gains through undercutting land restitution programs; partnering with agribusiness and multinationals; and infiltrating and diverting resources from municipal governments, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, and development and health projects. Ballvé's chapters on PSGs make valuable contributions to understanding the dynamics of state formation and governance, PSGs' repurposing of grassroots projects, *parapolítica*, and the post-2006 Colombian scenario.

Paramilitary demobilization and remobilization

Rather than concentrating on the paramilitaries and their relationship to state formation and state-building, *Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America* examines post-demobilization outcomes and PSG formation. The US-based author, Sarah Zukerman Daly, asks a crucial question: Why did almost half of the thirty-seven demobilized paramilitary groups remilitarize within five years of laying down their arms (1-2)? Influenced by the civil war literature, she conceives of the paramilitaries and PSGs as nonstate, armed groups and concentrates on micro-level dynamics.

Daly concludes that the main determinant of remilitarization after five years was social and human geography, specifically the recruitment patterns of demobilized paramilitary groups and nearby armed actors. Conscripts' degree of locality influenced ex-paramilitary and other armed groups' organizational capabilities, social networks, and ability to obtain accurate information about the post-demobilization environment. To support her argument, Daly employs statistical analyses and multiple methods and data sources (e.g., numerous surveys, geocoded data, field research in rural and urban areas, content analysis of Colombian newspapers, judicial testimony by ex-paramilitaries, more than three hundred interviews). She also eliminates several alternative explanations (e.g., international monitors' presence, military capacity, tactical terrain, access to resources, criminality) to her claims.

The book shows that demobilized groups with non-locally-recruited members faced obstacles to effectively regrouping. Paramilitary groups with a national recruitment history were more likely to have their members dispersed throughout Colombia after

laying down arms. As a result, after demobilization, the groups lacked unified leadership and coherent organizational structures. Their former commanders and ex-members had weak social networks and ties, as well as unreliable knowledge about their post-demobilization situation and setting. Those factors led groups with nonlocal recruitment patterns to have difficulties in achieving successful, long-term remobilizations.

In contrast, paramilitary groups with local conscripts had more ex-members staying closer to their demobilization sites. Because many of their former fighters remained regionally based, the groups had greater proximity to clusters of ex-paramilitaries from their decommissioned units; an increased likelihood that their leadership structures had survived cohesively intact; better access to strong local social networks and bonds; and higher-quality, more reliable information about their immediate environment. These resources allowed the leadership of disbanded organizations with local recruits to accurately assess their former members' commitment to remilitarization and their post-demobilization setting, including the capabilities and strengths of other nearby armed actors. The chances of long-lasting disarmament for ex-paramilitary groups with local recruits was greatest when the government was able to integrate their former fighters successfully into society and no other armed groups were nearby (e.g., as Daly documents happened in Medellín).

Another factor influencing the remobilization of disbanded paramilitary groups with local conscripts was their dynamics with other nearby armed organizations and the composition of these organizations. When other armed organizations also had local recruits, all the groups possessed accurate knowledge about one another's power and resources. High-quality information based on local networks led to an increased probability of power balances; peaceful, successful negotiations between all armed groups; and eventually, permanent demobilization.

Conversely, if other nearby armed groups (including other ex-paramilitary groups) had nonlocal recruits, they were more likely to have knowledge gaps about the capabilities and resources of ex-paramilitary groups with local conscripts. These information asymmetries lead to power imbalance and the decreased likelihood of other armed actors negotiating with the ex-paramilitary groups and local recruits. In these cases of failed or nonexistent negotiations, if the leaders of former paramilitary groups with local recruits had their former fighters available and saw remobilization as feasible, PSG formation was likely to occur.

Like the previously reviewed books, Daly contributes to a better understanding of sustainable peace and armed actors' heterogeneity, including those in urban areas, not just rural ones. Her book makes useful contributions to analyzing relationships between different armed groups, including those among PSGs and also between PSGs and other armed actors. After Daly's research concluded, Colombia's largest guerrilla group, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), demobilized in 2016. Given that several ex-FARC fronts rearmed, it would be interesting to explore whether Daly's findings apply to the determinants of these units' remobilizations and their relationships with other armed criminal actors.

Borderlands and PSGs

In *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War*, Annette Idler, an author based in Europe, examines the Colombian borderlands, their varied "nonstate," armed actors, and the interrelationships and interactions among these actors. She investigates armed criminal groups in the 2010s, including PSGs, continuously active guerrilla groups (e.g., the Ejército de Liberación Nacional), and remobilized FARC units. Beginning in 2009, for a decade Idler studied multiple sites along both sides of Colombia's

frontiers with Ecuador and Venezuela (two of its three land border regions), employing ethnography, numerous interviews, and documental, statistical, and archival analyses.

Drawing principally from the civil wars literature but also the failed-state approach, Idler emphasizes the micro level and views armed violent groups as divorced from the state. In contrast to “state-centric” views, Idler advocates for a bottom-up, “human-centric” approach. She criticizes “state-centric” approaches for ignoring the state’s margins and abandoned periphery areas (i.e., borderlands); those areas’ “nonstate,” informal governance system; border populations and their coexistence with armed criminal groups; and nonstate actors’ relationships among themselves rather than with the state.

Congruent with her “human-centric” approach, Idler investigates Colombian security dynamics through a “borderland” analytic lens rather than an urban, central government-oriented perspective. She argues that frontier regions are distinctive transnational units with their own social, economic, and political structures and security dynamics. Idler identifies four specific border effects or mechanisms, including the border as a facilitator that obscures illicit activities and residents’ victimization; as a deterrent for armed criminal groups trusting one another; as a magnet for violent nonstate groups who can freely cross frontiers and have less oversight; and as a disguise because of its distance from the “center” camouflages armed groups and its’ residents’ stigmatization (21, 22).

Building on her arguments about border regions’ distinctiveness, Idler conceptualizes a “typology [and continuum] of violent non-state group interactions with eight distinct types that fall into three clusters: combat and armed disputes (enmity/absence of engagement); spot sales and barter arrangements, tactical alliances, subcontractual relationships (rivalry/unstable short-term relationships); and supply chain relationships, strategic alliances, pacific coexistence, and preponderance relations (friendship/stable long-term arrangement)” (16). Notably, she acknowledges the complexity, fluidity, instability, and dynamism of interactions among armed criminal groups.

Idler’s examination of armed criminal groups, including PSGs, in the understudied and little conceptualized border areas makes a significant contribution. An obvious point of comparison for Idler’s work is Ballvé’s book, which studied a different land-border region, the Colombian-Panamanian frontier dominated by Los Urabeños. Unlike Idler, Ballvé did not take residents’ claims about statelessness at face value. Rather, he critically interrogated those claims given *parapolítica*’s deep entrenchment and the close, grassroots intertwinements of PSGs and government institutions in Urabá’s frontier areas. The books’ disparities are due not only to distinct border regions that were investigated but also to their authors’ different theoretical stances (i.e., the civil wars literature versus critical social science theories), differences in their acknowledgment of the state’s importance in border areas, and positions about the validity of the state-nonstate dichotomy.

Conclusion

As the authors reviewed here recognize, the complete truth about paramilitaries and their violence will never be fully revealed. Through their extensive, high-quality, and original research, their books, however, have added significantly to the knowledge about the paramilitaries and their successors. Their investigations range from national-level studies to case studies about northern Colombia and multisite ethnography on Colombia’s borders with Ecuador and Venezuela. Based on qualitative and quantitative methods, and multiple data sources, the works’ firsthand research is a contrast to many works on paramilitaries and PSGs, which often rely principally on secondary sources.

Collectively, all the books add to knowledge about regionalism (including border and frontier regions); indirect rule and clientelism; right-wing armed groups’ relationships to the state, as well as their alliances with elites and transnational crime; demobilization and

remilitarization; and land restitution, development, and prospects for permanent peace. Most of the books have significant sections or chapters discussing the comparative implications of their findings, making them valuable for understanding pro-government armed groups, civil conflicts, and peacemaking regionally and globally.

The works under review advance theories about the paramilitaries and PSGs in several noteworthy ways. Several of them significantly extend and deepen the hybrid approach. The CNMH book stresses the importance of regionalism, elites, and the subnational level for understanding the paramilitaries and their heterogeneity. Gutiérrez Sanín draws on institutional frameworks to examine armed clientelism and social impasses, including those for the government and paramilitaries. Employing political economy theories, Grajales looks at conceptions of violence, its normalcy, and agrarian transformations. Taking scholarship about paramilitaries in a distinct direction from the hybrid approach, Ballvé critically interrogates discourses of statelessness, applying Gramscian concepts of hegemony and Lefebvre's theories about spatial social formation and reproduction. Last, utilizing the civil wars literature, Daly and Idler develop models of post-demobilization trajectories and armed criminal groups in border areas, including PSGs, and their interactions.

Despite their key empirical and theoretical contributions, these works have several limitations. First, they would benefit from a more robust exploration of the different dimensions of social inequality. Although the four books focusing on the paramilitaries conceptualize and study their relationships with elite groups well, the Daly and Idler books overlook the PSGs' links with elites. Given that PSGs' predecessor groups were so deeply intertwined with elites and *parapolítica's* continuance after demobilization, it would be useful to discern which types of agreements and relationships various PSGs have developed with local and regional elites.

None of the reviewed books delves deeply into dimensions of social inequality not related to social class. As Donny Meertens and various GMH and CNMH works have documented, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identification, and sexuality all played important roles in the paramilitary's composition, probability and type of victimization, and post-demobilization outcomes, including land restitution.¹²

Another limitation is that the Idler and Daly books conflate PSGs with other types of armed criminal groups, such as continuously active guerrilla groups or remobilized rebels. Despite their common criminality and illegality, it is important to distinguish among the disparate types of armed criminal groups. These multifarious groups have distinct backgrounds and trajectories; histories of deep-seated animosities, especially between PSGs' paramilitary predecessors and guerrilla groups such as the FARC; and varied relationships with local residents.

A final shortcoming is that, except for Grajales, the authors based in the United States or Europe largely ignore the rich body of Colombian scholarship about the paramilitaries and PSGs. Even when they do cite Colombian academic works, they do not substantively engage in dialogue with them. In contrast, the Colombia-based authors substantively deliberate the academic literature about paramilitaries and PSGs both from within and outside the country. Unfortunately, this one-way street of intellectual interchange between Latin Americans and academics in the United States or Europe has a lengthy history in academia. If the authors based outside Colombia had more substantively incorporated Colombian scholarship, they would have been able to address substantive critiques about the theoretical literatures that they draw on (e.g., Gutiérrez Sanín's discussion about the civil wars literature and its limitations, such as its depoliticization, lack of contextualization, atomization, and under conceptualization of the state); deepen their insights into and examinations of the broader societal, historical, and institutional

¹² Donny Meertens, *Elusive Justice: Women, Land Rights, and Colombia's Transition to Peace* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019); CNMH, GMH, *¡Basta ya!*.

factors related to their findings (e.g., the implications of Colombians' long-standing studies about regionalism for Daly's and Idler's work); examine more deeply the state's role and selective involvement in post-demobilization trajectories; and make their substantial contributions to scholarship about the paramilitaries and PSGs even more valuable.

Despite these limitations, the six reviewed books collectively broaden previous theoretical approaches to the paramilitaries and PSGs and point to new possibilities for future research. Given the enormous amount of original information these books contain, they have unmistakably contributed to knowledge about the Colombian conflict and post-demobilization period. Although one may disagree with their conclusions or theoretical frameworks, the books give scholars interested in the Colombian conflict, its pro-government armed criminal groups, and peace projects valuable data to ponder, interpret, build on, or challenge.

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