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## **MODERNISATION, CLEARANCE AND THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA**

Eric B. Ross

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AND THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the historical and structural conditions that have given rise to the prevalence of rural violence that has characterised Colombia through most of the twentieth century and which continues today. It considers the nature and consequences of such violence as an intrinsic feature of the development process in a country that has long been of major strategic interest to foreign capital. Emphasising the particular contradictions that have defined Colombia's drive toward 'modernisation' and its increasing integration into the world economy, the paper examines the specific role of violence as part of a process of rural clearance. It pays special attention to the relationship of such violence and clearance to the production of coffee (of which Colombia has long been the world's second major exporter) and, more recently, to the extraction of petroleum.



*'Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.'*

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I

*A [Paul] Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Colombia has been characterised by rural violence on an exceptional scale through much of the previous and present century. Yet, in spite of this—and the profound social and economic consequences it has had for Colombia—there has been a tendency to portray this continuum of violence as something apart from the development process and its contradictions.<sup>1</sup>

Rural violence in Colombia dates from the nineteenth century, but it accelerated during the nineteen-thirties and reached a level in the decade after the Second World War that was so high, even by previous Colombian standards—one writer estimates that over 300,000 people were killed in the decade after 1948

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<sup>1</sup> Sandilands, for example, attributes the ‘continuing mass migration from village to town’ in Colombia to the fact that urban workers are ‘more productive than their rural counterparts in terms of the value of what they can produce.’ ‘Of course,’ he notes, ‘rural violence is another factor, but this is nothing new in Colombia.’ (Sandilands 2002: 69) Thus rural violence is dismissed as a constant which seems to have an independent existence.

(Molano 2000)—that this period became known simply as *la violencia* (Hobsbawm 2002: 372-373; cf. Griffin 1981:125). That it has attracted the attention of many writers is, therefore, neither surprising nor unjustified, not only because of the level of mortality but because of its impact on national life, which included a dramatically high rate of population movement out of the rural areas. For example, in the department of Tolima, one of the most severely affected regions, some 42 percent of its three-quarters of a million inhabitants had to flee from their home communities in the ten years up to 1958 (Williamson 1965:39).<sup>2</sup> As a result of such movements, the decline in the ratio of rural to urban population between 1938 and 1951 alone was one of the highest in the world (Dix 1968: 32).

Yet, the origins of such violence have rarely been viewed in terms of the *general* development process that characterised Colombia during these years. On the contrary, violence was more often attributed to vague psycho-social features that were said to characterise the Colombian character. Typical was the work of Williamson who, while appreciating the role of socio-economic inequality, nevertheless gave primacy to cultural factors and especially to what he called the strong ‘aggression need’ of Colombians (Williamson 1965:42).<sup>3</sup>

While such characterisations are no longer in vogue, the resurgence of violence since the early nineteen-nineties—which has perhaps exceeded that of the years of *la violencia* (Hobsbawm 2002: 372) and has certainly produced one of the highest levels of population displacement anywhere in the world (Levy 2000: 11)—has given rise to a new generation of equally problematical generalisations. In the post-modern spirit, these typically regard violence as so complex that

No single coherent intellectual or political framework or category is able to explain [it], even less to make any sense of it (Pécant 1999a: 142; cf. Pécant 1999b).

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<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that south Tolima was ‘the old stronghold of communist agrarian agitation and self-defence.’ (Hobsbawm 2002:375) The import of this will become clearer in the course of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> There were other theories. Weinert (1966), for example, specifically refuted Williamson’s position, holding that *la violencia* ‘pitted peasant against peasant’ and ‘thus cannot be understood as generated by social deprivation or anomie.’ For Weinert, it was ‘a feudal or premodern conflict, generated by modernization.’ But, by modernization, he meant a process of secularisation which threatened ‘traditional values.’ (Weinert 1966) There was no sense of how Colombia was being shaped by the forces of capitalist development.

In attempting to transcend the view that violence in Colombia possesses some kind of ‘mythic reality’ that continuously lurks below the surface of national life, writers such as Pécant (1999b) unfortunately shy away from the idea that there might be an historical continuity between the roots of past and contemporary conflict in the Colombian countryside. This paper takes a different approach in trying to understand the role of violence as an integral part of the process of so-called ‘modernisation’, one of the salient features of which has been the unrelenting marginalisation of the peasantry.<sup>4</sup> I want to suggest that rural violence has endured chiefly because it has been such an effective means of inducing large-scale population movement out of the countryside in the interest of certain political and economic groups. Such clearance has been a perpetual feature of capitalist development since the early sixteenth century (Dobb 1963: 123-15), but the process—in the past and again today—has been exceptionally brutal and protracted in Colombia, where the tension between capitalist accumulation on the part of a few and subsistence security among the masses of people has been—and remains—profound.

## **2      *LA VIOLENCIA, POPULATION AND THE COFFEE REGIME***

In order to clarify the nature of contemporary violence, the era of *la violencia* must be seen within the context of a process of capitalist intensification that had its beginnings early in the twentieth century, but which really commenced in earnest between the two world wars. It was a process fraught with contradictions, of which violence was not only a product but, for some, a potential solution, as a part of the national elite sought not only to ‘modernise’ the Colombian economy, but to intensify and control the process of accumulation within the country (Gonzalez 1990: 54-57).

This came at a time when the largest single source of national revenue derived from the export of coffee, which, by then, was principally cultivated by small producers. As a result, certain tensions inevitably arose because of the special role that coffee occupied simultaneously at the level of the peasant household and in the national economy, and these were reflected in a clear association of *la violencia* with

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<sup>4</sup> I do not use the term ‘modernisation’ to imply improvement, but, rather, a certain view of what was believed, in development and policy circles, to be both a prerequisite and a characteristic of a country’s participation in the world economy.

the coffee-producing zones. We will consider this more fully in the next section; but it is important first to note that, because this relationship was not straightforward, the fact that the coffee areas were ‘densely populated’ almost inevitably led to the Malthusian conclusion that ‘over-population’ was the main source of both rural poverty and conflict. After the Second World War, this was, in fact, a fairly widespread assumption among Western policy-makers who tended to view rural areas in developing countries as suffering from a ‘surplus’ population that was better employed in urban industry (cf. Ross 1998a *passim*). This rather convenient view came to prominence in Colombia during that period and can be glimpsed in the report of the World Bank mission—which led to its first-ever comprehensive national economic survey—to the country in 1949 (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1950; The World Bank 2001; Escobar 1995: 24; Knox 1985: vi).<sup>5</sup>

The Bank report set the tone for many years to come. While it recognised the issue of unequal land ownership, there was a strong Malthusian undercurrent. ‘In the more heavily populated portion of the country’ it noted,

land use follows an unusual pattern. As a rule, the fertile, level valleys are used mainly for grazing, while the steep mountain slopes are cultivated. The poorer lands in the mountains are overpopulated in relation to land resources, and much of the level land (except for areas planted in rice, sugar cane, and cotton) is in pasture, a use in which a given acreage furnishes a living to comparatively few families (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1950: 62-63).

The Bank tended to the view that ‘the fundamental problem was not a maldistribution of land but rather a maldistribution of people’ (Hayter and Watson 1985: 183), which was reflected in what it regarded as a labour surplus in the agricultural sector.<sup>6</sup> Writing against the background of a rising tide of rural violence (to which it gave surprisingly little notice), the Bank, in the words of a UN report,

stressed, not the injustice or political explosiveness of the land situation, but the economic irrationality of an agrarian system which allowed cattle to graze on big estates in the rich plains, while the food crops were grown on the much less fertile hillsides...(UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1966: 18).

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<sup>5</sup> At the instigation of the Bank itself, Colombia asked it to help draw up a development plan. The Bank mission team was headed by the New Deal economist Lauchlin Currie and its report was submitted to a committee of Colombians, for it to endorse and thus to give the appearance of being a national programme. The Bank then ‘offered to help the Colombian government establish a National Planning Council to over-see its new development program. Colombia agreed and—at the Bank’s suggestion—hired Currie and the American economist Albert Hirschman as advisors to the council. (Caufield 1996: 59).

<sup>6</sup> Much the same argument was being made elsewhere, not least in India (Ross 1998: 155-160).

But, it was not particularly concerned about whether food could be more productively grown if peasants had access to the superior bottom land.

Lauchlin Currie, the Canadian-born former New Deal economist who led the Bank mission (Frankman 1977), was himself impressed by the apparent role of population. In the southern department of Nariño, which happened to be characterised by gross disparities in land distribution (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1966: 18),

he commented that he had never seen such rich-looking land inhabited by such miserably poor, superstition-bound and wretchedly educated people. Every young woman carried a small child on her back and another inside her. Currie was to persuade the public health expert on his team, Dr. Joseph Mountin, assistant surgeon-general of the U.S. Public Health Service, to change his views on birth control. Later Dr. Mountin initiated work in the National Health Service in Washington that led eventually to the pill (Sandilands 1990: 162-163).

As the years went by, Currie's views became more intense on this subject. His later observation in an essay in the *Population Bulletin*, that the 'population bomb' was the greatest threat facing contemporary humanity (Sandilands 1990: 213, 413), is, however, hard to separate from the fact that, by then, he himself had settled on a cattle ranch in Colombia, taken Colombian nationality, allied himself with its modernising elite and became one of the principal advocates of the depopulation and commercialisation of the Colombian countryside (Sandilands 1990: 164).<sup>7</sup> Currie would later note that his own approach was 'explicitly not concerned with labour-intensive techniques to meet existing demands' (quoted in Frankman 1977), a view that certainly did not bode well for the fate of the rural poor. But, most importantly, his influential work, *Operación Colombia*, written in 1961, betrayed a severe urban bias that was characteristic of much developing thinking during this period (Lipton 1977). 'Colombia's real rural problem', he wrote,

was an excess rural population...This excess should be transferred, forcibly if need be, to the large cities and employed in public works in order to create increased consumer demand, which in turn would be met by increased industrialisation. Colombian agriculture would, meanwhile, be intensively mechanised, and the remaining rural population would be employed by these large, mechanised farming operations (quoted in Hayter and Watson 1985: 183).

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<sup>7</sup> Currie's influence was quite pervasive. See *Colombia. Reorganización de la Rama Ejecutiva del Gobierno de Colombia. Informe de Una Misión Dirigida por Lauchlin Currie*. Bogotá, Imprenta Nacional, 1952.

There was certainly no hope here for the landless rural poor. Currie's observations seemed almost callously oblivious to the fact that *la violencia*—which his student, Sandilands (who worked with him at the Colombian National Planning Office), simply described as an 'expulsion factor' (Sandilands 2002: 69)—had already impelled a large part of the rural population into the cities. Thus, the process of agricultural change which he advocated was already well under way. By the early nineteen-sixties, if there was still any 'excess' population in the rural areas, it was surely because just 874 properties accounted for almost 30 percent of all farm land in the country (Adams 1970: 135) and three and a half percent of large land-owners held two-thirds of agricultural land (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1972: 9). But, just as the World Bank report had largely minimised the import of such agrarian realities in arguing for the rationalisation of Colombian agriculture, the so-called 'Currie plan', with similar goals in mind, signified that, even if *la violencia* had more or less subsided, efforts to legitimise the continuing clearance of the countryside—to which it had so forcefully contributed—had not.

### **3 THE ORIGINS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF COFFEE PRODUCTION**

By the nineteen-forties, coffee had become the embodiment of the most critical contradictions in the process of Colombian modernisation. But, to understand why, it is necessary to comprehend the origins of coffee cultivation and its eventual effects on the economy of post-war Colombia. That, in turn, requires some consideration of the unusual productive features of the complex regional ecosystem of highland Colombia and the nature of the articulation of the Colombian economy with the world market through the production and export of coffee. Of especial interest is how the particular affinity of coffee-growing for small-holdings on otherwise marginal lands ultimately came into conflict with the emergence of the kind of diversified export economy that many within Colombia and certainly the World Bank and, by the early nineteen-sixties, USAID were urging (Galli 1981: 41).

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, coffee production in the Americas had been centred on slave plantations in the Caribbean where the French and Dutch had introduced it. It spread from there into Central and South America and eventually crossed the Venezuelan Andes into Colombia during the 1700's (Blakemore and Smith 1971; Parsons 1949: 136). The first commercial production of coffee in

Colombia probably began early in the nineteenth century (Koffman 1969: 60-61), but it was chiefly the decline of tobacco production in the late nineteenth century that triggered the initial development of coffee as a cash crop. The spread of coffee cultivation, in turn, was largely responsible for the expansion of Colombia's export sector, with production initially dominated by large landowners on the edge of the Sabana of Bogotá, in Cundinamarca and on the upland of Antioquia (De Graff 1986: 133; Parsons 1949: 139-400; Jiménez 1995; Koffman 1941: 60-61).

Antioquia, with its capital of Medellin, was circumscribed in all directions except to the south by tropical forest. As a result, by the early nineteenth century, the prevailing pattern of land concentration had begun to impel a southward movement of landless peasants (Parsons 1949: 7).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, settlers from the Antioquia region had moved into new areas such as Tolima, Caldas and the Cauca River basin. Initially, they cleared the forest frontier by slash-and-burn and cultivated maize; but 'only three or four harvests of maize were expected from a clearing, after which it was rested in native grass for ten or more years before being planted again' (Parsons 1949: 89). During those years, grazing on the steep slopes also led to appreciable erosion; a continuous pattern of land degradation engendered a relatively impermanent pattern of settlement and a constantly moving frontier (Parsons 1949: 89; cf. Margolis 1973).

It was during the last quarter of the nineteenth century that coffee really began to play a major role in peasant colonisation of the highlands. The region turned out to be ideally suited to cultivation of *Coffea arabica*, the principal commercial coffee-producing species in the world. *C. arabica*, which originated in the Ethiopian highlands, is naturally an upland species that grows best in a sub-tropical environment. Optimal conditions for its cultivation include an average annual rainfall of 1800-2800mm, an average annual temperature of 19-2.5° C and a minimum and maximum temperature of 16 and 26° C respectively (De Graff 1986: 132). The Central Highlands of Colombia—where altitude and tropical latitude combine to produce what is known as 'tierra templada', a temperate upland ecozone—provided virtually ideal conditions. *C. arabica* would flourish there to such a degree that Colombia eventually became the world's second major coffee producer after Brazil (Parsons 1949:140-41; De Graff 1986:129). Between the 1870's and the turn of the century, coffee rose from 17 to 40 percent of the country's total exports by value (Palacios 1980: 18).

A dramatic expansion of the area of coffee cultivation resulted in part from increasing investment in coffee haciendas by urban merchants (Palacios 1980: 55; Machado 1977: 36) and from a reserve of cheap labour to which land could be rented. But, for those who wanted to farm their own land, coffee also conferred special benefits in a society in which good land was structurally scarce. Palacios notes that coffee cultivation typified the old colonial pattern of production taking place a great distance from the point of consumption (Palacios 1980: 14). But, there was a special reason for this. Smallholders had pushed into such remote regions either because vast parts of central Colombia were inaccessible or because they were excluded for colonisation by peasant households. In the valleys of the Cordillera Oriental, the fertile heartland of pre-European settlement, most land had long before been appropriated by the Spanish recipients of land-grants. As in most of the Andean regions, cattle-grazing tended to monopolise the highly favoured flatlands and, along with commercial agricultural enterprises, the broad river valleys (Griffin 1981: 134). By the nineteen-thirties, Colombia remained a country where only 10-12 percent of arable land was actually cultivated and some 43 percent was in pasture (Escoria 1975: 106-108). As late as 1960, in the Andean region of the country, no more than 5 percent of holdings accounted for 68 percent of agricultural land (Griffin 1981: 134). The implications for land use are extraordinarily significant, since *latifundistas*, who accounted for over 70 percent of the agricultural area (and most of the best land), typically cultivated less than six percent of their land and grazed cattle on two-thirds of it (Griffin 1986: 135). As a result, in 1960, according to Colombia's agricultural census, almost four times as much land was used for extensive raising of livestock as for crop production (Griffin 1986: 134).

In the early part of the century, with this pattern already established, most peasants ended up in the more remote mountainous regions of the country (Vallianatos 1976: 79), where, despite the hardships, they became (and remain) the core of subsistence production in Colombia.<sup>8</sup> But, since most of this land is poor, steep and prone to severe erosion, subsistence production has always been problematic and malnutrition has long been an endemic feature of rural life (cf. Reichel-Dolmatoff and Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961). One of the few things that ensured

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<sup>8</sup> As of 1970, 53 percent of Colombia's rural population still inhabited 429 mountain municipalities which equalled 8 percent of the national territory (Felstehausen 1971: 167).

survival—and even encouraged the settlement of such regions—was the cultivation of coffee, which was especially well suited to the steep slopes of the cordilleras. Its adaptable root systems could deter soil erosion; and it could easily be inter-planted with traditional food crops such as plantains which also provided shade for young coffee plants. Above all, it gave otherwise marginal lands a new commercial potential.

The cost of transport from such remote mountain regions to coastal ports had long been a major constraint on long-term cultivation (Griffin 1981: 132). But, rising world coffee prices overcame this impediment (Parsons 1949: 140-41; Blakemore and Smith 1971: 224) and, soon, the need to market coffee became a major stimulus behind an expansion of Colombian railways. In the eighteen-nineties, the Antioquia Railroad was constructed; while the Pacific Railway, which ran to the port of Buenaventura, was built early in the twentieth century (Koffman 1969: 61, 63). Access to markets, in turn, became a major impetus behind coffee's widespread adoption. By 1900, coffee cultivation had become the principal factor in the establishment of relatively permanent communities southward from Antioquia along the central mountain chains of the Colombian Andes, as it began to be recognised as a means of bringing otherwise marginal land, particularly the steep slopes of the Cordillera Occidental and Central, into commercial production. Through the 1920s and '30s, however, it was large coffee plantations which dominated coffee cultivation, employing peasants—or *colonos*—to clear frontier land and to plant coffee, then to repeat the process when the coffee trees became productive; but usually denying them the right to grow coffee on their own subsistence plots.

It was the fall in world coffee prices in the nineteen-thirties, increasing the financial risks for large growers, that gave rise to a new role for peasants in coffee cultivation. Production actually rose during this period as the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros* (National Federation of Coffee Growers), founded in 1927 by large estate owners and exporters with the backing of the state (Mass 1976: 238), extended credit to small producers to expand coffee production. But, as Colombia became a major coffee grower and as coffee became the primary basis of capital accumulation in the country, most of the profits flowed out of the peasant regions. For advocates of economic modernisation during this period—largely a section of the national elite associated with the Liberal Party—this meant, however, that

[a]ccumulation of capital in the most important sector of the Colombian economy depended on relations of production and exchange that grossly exploited coffee workers and small and medium producers (Bergquist 1986:277).

#### **4      LA VIOLENCIA, COFFEE AND THE PEASANTS**

The preconditions for *la violencia* were established during this period. Although conflict was not new to Colombia, it took on a new dimension in the late nineteen-twenties, as the ruling class became increasingly willing to repress the aspirations of rural (and urban) workers. The most notorious example was during a strike against United Fruit, when hundreds of workers and their families were massacred (Vallianatos 1976: 77; Partridge 1979: 496-497).

But, more generally, it was the fact that coffee had simultaneously become the key to the Colombian economy and a central element in the livelihood strategies of many peasant households, that inevitably brought about a rising tension in the countryside. As Bergquist notes,

Colombia's ability to expand coffee production and to capture a larger share of the depressed world market during the crisis of the 1930's—as well as its capacity to mount an impressive record of import-substituting industrialization during the same period—depended on the willingness of small producers and their families to subject themselves to an ever greater degree of exploitation (Bergquist 1986: 277)

That willingness had its limits. As Galli observes,

The rapid expansion of commercial coffee farms between 1927 and 1932 gave rise to a questioning of land ownership. Peasants known as *colonos* were used by latifundistas to convert their frontier lands into coffee plantations. As the trees bore fruit, the *colono* was expected to deliver the land to the landowner in exchange for another piece of land to plant. Colonos, renters, and sharecroppers alike were forbidden to plant coffee trees on their subsistence plots. In this way they were completely excluded from the coffee market and a chance to accumulate capital of their own (Galli 1981:50).

The *colonos* began to refuse to surrender the lands they had improved and renters stopped paying their quotas. Backing them was the popular Liberal congressman, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who formed the *Unión Nacional de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (UNIR) to fight the large landowners around Cundinamarca (Galli 1981: 51), whose response was to escalate:

Whole families were evacuated, their houses burned, their subsistence crops destroyed. This was the first phase of violence—or *violencia*—on the local level (Galli 1981:51).

Such developments were a major catalyst for further resistance by peasants, whose claims to lands that they had improved were the basis of widespread struggle (cf. Gaitán 1984: 36-48). By 1939, more than 150 peasant leagues had been formed, many of which were affiliated with the Communist party (Galli 1981: 51) and numbers of which persisted as guerrilla groups into the early nineteen-sixties and beyond. Gaitán—by then a candidate for the presidency—supported the leagues in Congress until his assassination in 1948, an event which precipitated a maelstrom of riot and protest in Bogotá, known as the *Bogotazo*, which, in turn, is conveniently cited as the beginning of the era of *la violencia* (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967: 275-76; World Bank 2001).<sup>9</sup>

Gaitán's death must be put in context, for it was more an effect of prevailing conditions than their actual cause. As I have noted, violence was already a well-established feature of rural Colombia and on the rise for reasons that must be attributed to the aspirations of the country's elite. Gaitán's assassination --to the extent that he was a defender of the peasant organisations (including those associated with the Liberals) which the Conservative Party was trying to suppress-- coincided with a general effort to draw Colombia more forcefully into the world economy, an effort that, as Currie himself would make clear, had little time or compassion for a 'surplus' peasantry.

More specifically, U.S. capital, which had long regarded the Colombia as one of the most strategic countries in South America (Rippy 1931), was now intensifying its interest. As if to underscore this, Gaitán's assassination had occurred precisely as U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall was in Bogotá to address the ninth Pan-American Conference (Bailey and Nasatir 1960: 662; Beals 1963: 227). Shortly afterward there arrived the World Bank mission whose 1950 report recommended the intensification of land-use patterns, but, without any significant change in land ownership (Reinhardt 1988:137ff.). The priority in the eyes of the U.S. and of the Bank was the rationalisation of the Colombian economy, which was regarded as far too dependent on peasant cultivators and their production of coffee.

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<sup>9</sup> Even Eric Hobsbawm, a otherwise perceptive student of Colombian conditions, writes of the 'state of disorganization, civil war and local anarchy' into which Colombia had fallen since the implosion of what had been, in effect, a potential social revolution by spontaneous combustion set off, in 1948, by the assassination of a nationally famous tribune of the people, Jorge Eliezer Gaitan. (Hobsbawm 2002: 371).

It must always be recalled, however, that Colombian peasants had not become coffee cultivators entirely by preference. As it happened, the slopes of the Central Highlands provided some of the best conditions in the world for coffee growing and they were not conducive to anything but small units of production (McGreevey 1971: 231). But, it was the need to secure a livelihood in these zones that created the Colombian peasant coffee system. The World Bank was precisely right when it noted that, as a result of the prevalence of cattle ranching in Colombia—‘crops occupied about 2 1/3 million hectares while 43 million hectares were devoted to pasture’—it was ‘the mountain ranges and their intervening valleys...[that] furnish the homes and livelihood for 96 percent or more of the population (International Bank 1950: 62). It was coffee’s affinity for such terrain that had even made the colonisation of such zones possible and that, in the end, had made it so central to the livelihood strategies of small farmers. As a result, by the mid-1950s, less than seven percent of all coffee production in Colombia came from holdings larger than 50 hectares, even though coffee represented almost 80 percent of the country’s principal exports (McGreevey 1971: 207; Koffman 1969: 56).

There were other factors as well which reinforced the role of small-holders in the coffee sector. The volatility of the world coffee market made it extremely difficult for local producers to match output to global demand and so imposed great risks on large holdings. As De Graff observes:

As a perennial crop only bearing after a few years and fully productive after 5-6 years, the price elasticity of supply is low. This is particularly so for countries whose economy depends on it and where production is mainly from smallholders (who continue to pick when prices are low). However, the demand for coffee, growing slowly in some importing countries, is stagnant in many countries. Income (expenditure) elasticity and price elasticity of demand in the major consumer countries are low...

Under such circumstances, small changes in supply result in large fluctuations in price and in cyclical price movements (1986:58; cf. Griffin 1981 :152).

Up until the Second World War, Brazil had dominated the world coffee trade, producing almost two-thirds of all coffee exports (De Graff 1986: 63), largely on big estates. During the war, however, the coffee trade world-wide was severely constrained, and, in the aftermath of hostilities, with production still low, demand on the rise and wartime coffee stocks rapidly being depleted, world prices soared (De Graff 1986: 64; UNFAO 1960: 10). In many areas, such as Colombia, coffee planting

took place on an unprecedented scale (UNFAO 1960: 10). But, prices did not remain high for very long. They peaked in 1954 and fell thereafter (Griffin 1981: 155). World production continued to rise, however, much as De Graff implied. Part of the explanation is that trees planted at the beginning of the boom were just reaching maturity as prices began to fall. By then, there was often little option, particularly for small-holders, except to continue producing. As Griffin observes:

Once new trees have been planted and the capacity of the industry has thereby increased, a fall in price will have little effect on the volume of production...since coffee trees have a productive life of twenty-five years or longer, the adjustment to unremunerative prices may be prolonged almost indefinitely. Thus the asymmetry in the reaction of producers to price changes tends to perpetuate conditions of low prices and chronic excess supply (1981: 154).

As a result, according to the FAO,

[The] period from 1955 witnessed a sharp increase in production in world supplies far above demand. In 1959/60, world output reached the maximum of 4.7 million metric tons. Heavy stocks accumulated in producing countries, amounting to about a full year's world import requirement. Under this pressure, prices declined steadily to 53 percent below the 1953-55 average in 1962 (1964: II-58).

This had severe consequences for most coffee-producing countries, but especially for those such as Colombia where coffee overwhelmingly dominated the economy, not only in terms of peasant production, but foreign exchange (cf. Griffin 1981: 141). The response to this problem varied among different classes. Thus, as far as Colombian peasants were concerned, limited access to more productive lands left them with few practical options. So, the decline in prices did not inhibit the preceding decade's increase in cultivation and the decade following 1955 saw the number of coffee-producing holdings actually increase by 41 percent. The area under cultivation, however, only rose by 4 percent (Griffin 1981: 147), underscoring the fact that much of the increase in coffee holdings was due to the parcellisation of land holdings, associated with a rise in fertility as a source of human capital (Fluharty 1976: 213-14).

The rise in population was inevitable. One of the principal costs of coffee production is labour, at least half of which is required for harvesting (De Graff 1986: 79). While moderate- and large-sized estates depended upon seasonal waged labour (Koffman 1969: 67), recruited from among the landless and those whose own holdings were too small to provide an adequate income, small coffee producers, who depended largely on extremely labour-intensive techniques to make an adequate

living on steep, rugged terrain, relied exclusively on family labour with ‘an opportunity cost of near zero’ (Griffin 1981: 148). As Bergquist observes:

The cultivation of coffee trees and their harvesting involved huge labor demands and tapped the resources of all family members. Men and older male children did the heavy labor involved in clearing, planting, and weeding the groves. Women and children of both sexes played an important role in the harvest (Bergquist 1986: 320).

Many of these families also grew sugar cane, which they processed into molasses and *panela*, cakes of crude brown sugar, and engaged in petty manufacturing, including the so-called Panama hats made of local plant fibres (Bergquist 1986: 321-322). Their standard of living was usually marginal, characterised by endemic disease and low dietary intake (Koffman 1969: 70; Fluharty 1976: 213; Bergquist 1986: 277-278), and it was only the capacity to provide labour for their own holdings, especially for coffee cultivation, and for work on the latifundias, that ensured their survival and obviated the need to migrate to the cities where unemployment was endemic (Griffin 1981: 148). Griffin has highlighted the fact that ‘the minifundia are much more labour intensive than the latifundia...the man-land ratio is 1084 times larger on the smallest than on the largest properties’ (Griffin 1979: 100-101). Thus, fertility was directly related to the central role of labour as a factor of production. There was nothing Malthusian here. On the contrary,

The vigorous demographic growth of the coffee zones reflected the domestic social imperatives of family-centered, labor-intensive coffee production. Astronomical birth-rates offset shocking indices of mortality and disease to produce the celebrated population growth of the coffee regions (Bergquist 1986:277).

Another important factor that tended to confine coffee production to small peasant holdings was the element of risk created by the instability of world prices. In contrast to the situation that had prevailed up until the nineteen-twenties, large enterprises were now too problematical. To maximise profits from coffee while minimising the risk associated with the vagaries of the international market, the solution was no longer to cultivate coffee, but rather to control its distribution and export.

One means through which this was achieved was The National Federation of Coffee-Growers (Font 1990: 271). The Federation was not only instrumental in expanding small-holder cultivation of coffee. By buying either directly from

producers or through intermediaries, it eventually acquired as much as four-fifths of the country's coffee crop and was the largest single exporter (Koffman 1969: 52-53). As a result, it was not the producers, but 'Colombian capitalists [who] managed to capture profits generated in the production, processing, and transport of coffee' (Bergquist 1986: 295-304). In the end, as much as 70 percent of the profit from coffee production was concentrated in the hands of fewer than 100 persons (Gerassi 1963: 306).

Yet, this did not obviate the fact that, in the long-run, the creation of the kind of export-directed commercial agriculture that was regarded as the hallmark of modern economies, required the freeing of many of the productive resources that were contained within the coffee sector and the creation of new incentives for large commercial farmers—including the transformation of many peasant cultivators into a reserve of low-wage workers. Any movement in that direction was impractical, however, until the transformation of the chronic rural violence of the twenties and thirties into *la violencia* (Reinhardt 1988: 139).

## **5 THE RETURN OF 'NORMALCY' AND THE PLIGHT OF THE PEASANTS**

A dramatic escalation in homicides in the Colombian countryside which began in 1949 not only coincided more or less with rising coffee prices, but was concentrated, in—though not limited to—coffee-producing districts. Even more interesting, perhaps, is that, when world prices fell around 1955, rural violence did not merely continue but actually heightened. The average annual homicide rate per 100,000 between 1950 and 1954 was 31.3, while it was 39.9 between 1955 and 1960. If *la violencia* was associated with the process and pattern of coffee production, the likely explanation lies in the fact that—until significant diversification began to occur in the late sixties (Hagen 1997: 6)—coffee remained at the heart of Colombia's economy. Declining prices simply increased the need to extract surplus from a sector that was still dominated by smallholders.

As violence continued at high levels through the nineteen-fifties, the role of the Liberal and Conservative parties, whose rivalries had played an important role in the prevailing pattern of rural conflict, began to change, as the class nature of rural conflict forced the contending factions of the Colombian elite to resolve their differences and to forge a consensual policy for modernisation (Reinhardt 1988: 137).

The coup which brought General Rojas Pinilla to power in 1953 was invited by the leadership of the two parties (Gonzalez 1990: 57; Galli 1978: 75), with apparent backing from the U.S. (Molano 2000), as they found common cause as a ‘superparty of order’ (Escorcia 1975: 56) in the face of growing peasant insurgency.

But, beyond an amnesty for armed insurgents that he combined with an escalation of force directed against those guerrilla groups that held out in various highland zones, forcing them to retreat eastward into the lower montane forests (Molano 2000), the Rojas regime was unable to resolve the contradictions of modernisation. On the contrary,

Rojas Pinilla also promoted the capitalist development of agriculture and intensified its mechanisation, helped by a massive peasant migration to the cities - -accelerated by la violencia-- and which increased the concentration of land ownership in many areas of the country (Gonzalez 1990: 57).

The fifties were also a time when state policy opened up the economy more than ever before to foreign capital. As Reinhardt observes:

In 1949 the Conservative government of Ospina Pérez had already signed an agreement with the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States for the development of agricultural research in Colombia. This led to the establishment of several research stations in the mid 1950s and to the creation of the Agricultural research Department (Departamento de Investigaciones Agropecuarias) in 1955. In 1955 an extension program was established with U.S. assistance...Financial institutions serving the agricultural sector were created or expanded: the Banco Cafetero and Banco Ganadero were created in the mid 1950s and the government agricultural bank (Caja Agraria) was given large increases in financing, from \$13.4 million in 1945 to \$45.2 million in 1950 and to \$142.7 in 1960 (Reinhardt 1988: 138).

In 1958, the overthrow of Rojas restored a semblance of ‘normalcy’, as the Liberals and Conservatives established a more democratic guise for their common interests, in the form of a power-sharing agreement known as the *Frente Nacional* (National Front). Again, it was primarily a strategy to ensure the hegemony of the propertied class and to effectuate a mutually advantageous process of commercial development which mobilised the resources of the Colombian state in collaboration with international capital.

Two years after the end of the Rojas regime, the Colombian census indicated that farms under five hectares—almost 63 percent of all farms—only accounted for a mere 4.5 percent of the total agricultural area, while the 0.5 percent that were over 500 hectares represented 40 percent of the total area. Very little of such large holdings

was devoted to the cultivation of food crops rather than pasture (World Bank 1972: 235). Under such circumstances, the countryside continued to be highly polarised and, in the face of growing land concentration, witnessed an increase in peasant land invasions (Molano 2000). As a result, many of the rural development programmes during this period were specifically designed to subdue peasant unrest. Under U.S. influence, by the early sixties, 'Every Colombian guerrilla was regarded as a potential Cuban sympathizer by U.S. and Colombian military planners' (Galli 1978: 75). In turn, many of the peasant self-defense groups that had arisen during the era of *la violencia* began to be transformed into insurgency movements, as the modernisation agenda continued to exacerbate the poverty of the rural population. Between 1964 and '66, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or the FARC, under the influence of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC), and the Army of National Liberation (ELN) were formed (Jimeno and Volk 1983: 24-25; Jenning 1999: 13).

## **6 THE MODERNISATION OF VALLE**

Nowhere had the process of modernisation—or the reaction against it—during the nineteen-fifties been more noticeable than in the sugar-growing zone of Valle de Cauca. While it did not suffer the most fatalities during this period, the Cauca Valley witnessed an extraordinary intensity of aggressive behaviour which exceeded that of most other regions. As a result, no department lost more *minifundistas* to migration as a result of *la violencia* (Oquist 1980: 227). Between 1951 and 1969, the rural percentage of its population declined dramatically from 50.5 to 24 percent. This, in turn, reflected the fact that, as one of the country's—if not the world's—most fertile regions (Reinhardt 1988: 140; Echavarria 2002: 1), it was targeted for modernisation more than almost any other.

By the late nineteen-forties, Valle had already become one of the most industrialised departments in Colombia (Reinhardt 1988: 140). Despite this, however, even a decade later its land-use pattern remained extremely traditional:

A United Nations study estimated that in 1954, 42 percent of the valley area was in pasturelands; only 14 percent was devoted to crops; and the remaining 44 percent consisted of rivers, lakes, swamps, roads and urban areas. (Another study in 1956 concluded that 65 percent of the flat portion of the valley was devoted to cattle raising). The pattern of *latifundio* and *minifundio* still prevailed: 4 percent of farms which accounted for 60 percent of the land were larger than 100 hectares. Farms larger than 1,000 hectares accounted for 11 percent of the valley. Sixty-

eight percent of the farms covering 10 percent of the valley were small than 10 hectares (Jackson 1972: 77).

While the mountain slopes of Valle were a major zone of peasant production, much of basic crop production in the flat lands was carried out by tenant farmers (Reinhardt 1988: 140). Constrained by such problems as river flooding and lack of irrigation, commercial farming was limited. But, the chief estate crop, sugar cane cultivation, was realised to have enormous potential. The Cauca Valley was one of the few places in the world where sugar cane could be cultivated year round (a fact that substantially reduced the total costs of production). In the early nineteen-sixties, when landlords would seek to cash in on the U.S. embargo on Cuban sugar (Taussig 1982: 186), sugar cane production expanded so dramatically that, some twenty-five years later, Colombia ranked sixth among all the sugar-producing countries in the world (Suarez 1995).<sup>10</sup>

In the late forties and early fifties, many national and international agencies had eyed the Cauca Valley region as a prime zone for rapid and intensive modernisation. A key element in this transformation was the creation of the *Corporación Autónoma Regional del Cauca* (The Autonomous Regional Corporation of the Cauca Valley or CVC), which was explicitly modelled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the south-eastern United States (Echavarria 2002:3). The TVA model had enormous appeal in the post-war era as the epitome of rational large-scale management for agricultural modernisation. It had been applied in Mexico since the late nineteen-forties, in particular in the Papaloapan River Basin (Barkin and King 1970; Lilienthal 1953: 265-266). But, in the case of Colombia, the influence was even more direct. Early in 1954, Rojas Pinilla invited David Lilienthal, the former chairman (1941-46) of the TVA, to tour Colombia, to survey opportunities for new development initiatives (Jackson 1972:97).<sup>11</sup> By then, Lilienthal was a consultant for the international investment bankers, Lazard Frères (Brooks 1974:160).

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<sup>10</sup> It is also possible that the U.S. encouraged the development of sugar production in the Cauca Valley as a part of its general policy of undermining the Cuba economy. Sugar was its principal source of foreign exchange. In the end, Cuban sugar production had be sustained through sales at premium prices to the Soviet Union and other COMECON countries (Pollitt 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Lilienthal had also served as chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, 1946-50 (Brooks 1975: 161).

The report submitted by Lilienthal to the president in June 1954 recommended the Cauca Valley as ‘the most admirably suited’ for a program of ‘regional development of Colombia’s great natural resources, along TVA lines...He recommended that the president permit ‘the group of leading individuals in the Cauca Valley with whom I consulted on my recent trip be given the opportunity to take the initiative to secure the necessary charter and other authority from the Central Government, and secure the cooperation of the World Bank and of private financial institutions if considered desirable...He noted that World Bank officials he had contacted were in accord with his proposals for an agency in the Cauca Valley and would be prepared to assist such a program ‘in concrete and practical ways’ (Jackson 1972: 98-99).

These promises were amply fulfilled. Shortly after the Corporation was formally established in late 1954, by a decree that explicitly acknowledged Lilienthal’s recommendations (República de Colombia 1954), the World Bank, at the invitation of the Colombian government and the Corporation, sent a mission to the Upper Cauca. Over the next 17 years, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and USAID loaned the corporation some \$50 million (Jackson 1972:109-110). Most of the CVC’s projects were, as an official with the land reform agency, INCORA noted, ‘oriented towards large sophisticated agricultural production’ (quoted in Jackson 1972: 175), with little regard for peasant farmers.

Yet, most writers on the subject of the CVC have preferred to describe it—and the general process of modernisation in Colombia—in rather more neutral terms. Antonio Posada, an agricultural economist who served as Director General of the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture in the government of Rojas’ successor, Lleras Camargo, and was former Dean of the School of Economics of the University of Valle and an economic consultant to the CVC (1958-63), is an excellent example. First, it is important to note that he regarded the issue of *la violencia* as primarily ‘caused by peasant bands who took to the mountains during the dictatorship’, as if it were wholly unconnected with the development processes which he advocated. The World Bank report had assumed a similar posture when it noted that the decline in rural population in the department was significantly greater than the national average (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1955), but made no effort to understand why. But, this was par for the course. When the Bank issued its report, *Economic Growth of Colombia: Problems and Prospects* in 1972, it made note of the ‘massive exodus from agriculture’ that had taken place during the fifties and early sixties, but it only attributed this to ‘poor living conditions for much of the rural population’ (1972: 9).

More importantly, Posada viewed the essential problem of development in terms proposed in the early sixties by David McClelland, in his book, *The Achieving Society* (1961). In Posada's words,

The peoples of the developing nations, among them Colombia,...must now be aided in altering, modifying, or abandoning some of their traditional attitudes toward change, work and achievement. As McClelland suggests, the best way to aid these developing nations may be to seek out those adaptable, progressive, 'achievement-oriented' elements of the populations, and concentrate any foreign financial and technological aid that is given, toward supporting those persons and institutions that have already demonstrated their ability to utilise them efficiently (Posada and Posada 1966:3 6).

Such a position not only obscured any sense of class interest; it excluded peasants as agents of change, since they were 'traditionalists.' That they did not seem to possess a capacity to use assistance efficiently because they usually never received it was ignored. In contrast, however, it was taken for granted that the proponents and leaders of the CVC had created 'one of those institutions...that merits all possible support, since it is a modernising, apolitical, and efficient agency' (Posada and Posada 1966: 36). This doubtless reflected the view of the members of the provisional board of the Corporation with whom the World Bank mission had worked most closely to develop its report. But, far from being apolitical, the board included some of the most powerful regional interests.

The provisional board included Governor Diego Garcés Giraldo, who owned commercial buildings and farms, Manuel Carvajal Sinisterra, an industrialist and owner of one of the country's largest printing, stationery, and publishing firms, Harold Eder, owner of extensive sugar cane fields and of one of the largest sugar refineries in the country, José Castro Borrero, businessman and civic leader from a landowning family, and Luis Sanclemente Crespo, then Secretary of Housing in the department. Bernardo Garcés Cordoba, who has cattle and farming interests, was named the first executive director of the new organization (Jackson 1972: 101).

Thus, in the end and typically for this period, the leadership of the CVC represented the prevailing mood of compromise between the region's urban-industrial elite and large landowners, all of whom benefited from changes in land use which helped create a labour reserve that served the expansionist interests of commercial agriculture (Taussig 1982: 186ff). Cali, the regional centre, as the recipient of many rural migrants, consolidated its position as one of Colombia's principal industrial zones, while large numbers of tenant farmers became rural labourers when their lands were appropriated for the expanding production of cash crops, such as sugar cane,

cotton, sorghum and irrigated rice (Reinhardt 1988: 142). Far from being an unconnected issue, ascribable to marginal banditry, *la violencia* contributed to all of these ends.

The Posadas also saw the CVC as the regional product of the particular genius of the *Antioqueño*—in particular, the *Antioqueño* of the industrial class. Here they explicitly echoed the work of Everett Hagen, one of the economists and social scientists associated with CENIS, The MIT/Harvard Centre for International Studies, a Ford Foundation and CIA-financed institute where much of the dominant theory on modernisation was elaborated during the nineteen-fifties and early sixties.<sup>12</sup> Hagen would become the director of CENIS, succeeding the economist and ex-CIA assistant director, Max Millikan, in 1969. But, before that, his book, *On the Theory of Social Change* (1962), he had devoted an entire chapter to Colombia, underscoring the country's strategic importance during this period.

In it, Hagen described the *Antioqueño* as possessing the ‘personality traits associated with the entrepreneurial, energetic, risk-taking business man.’ (Posada and Posada 1966: 38) As the Posadas admit, ‘no *Antioqueños* were involved in the founding of the CVC.’ But, they suggest that ‘their example of energy and enterprise must have been a factor in arousing other Colombians to a faith in the possibility of control over their own destinies.’ (Posada and Posada 1966: 38) Such is the power of the myth of *Antioqueño* business prowess in Colombia. But, the argument also reflects the lengths to which one might go to give universal credibility to the CENIS view that gradual—as opposed to radical change—depended on identifying entrepreneurial groups who, in the words of anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, in a chapter in Hagen’s book, possessed an

uncommon ability to operate at once in the traditional world of established custom and in the modern world of systematic economic rationality which is the chief resource of the economic innovators ... (Geertz 1962: 406-407).

In this view, only they could ensure that customary or traditional societies would be integrated peacefully into the global capitalist economy. The CVC, in turn,

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<sup>12</sup> Beside McClelland and Hagen, prominent CENIS figures included the economist, Walt Rostow, author of *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* and the political scientists, Ithiel De Sola Pool, whose work helped to inspire Project Camelot, an abortive U.S. government project to study the insurgency potential of selected Latin American countries in the early nineteen-sixties (Horowitz 1977), and Lucian Pye, author of a notable study of British counter-insurgency efforts in Malaya (Pye 1956). For more on CENIS, see Ross (1998b: 488-492, Cumings 1997 *passim*).

was one of the ways to bolster the position of such an entrepreneurial group that had been targeted because of its sympathy with the goals of international capital. The relative success of this strategy is indicated by the fact that the process of commercialisation continued in Valle well past the end of *la violencia* in the early nineteen-sixties, and that it was not confined to sugar:

By the 1970s only 25-33 percent of the valley land was still being used for cattle grazing, while most of the rest was under crops grown on large--scale units using the latest in imported agricultural technology...In 1974 Valle produced 21 percent of the nation's cotton, 26.5 percent of the sorghum, 100 percent of the soy, and 55 percent of the sugar cane (Reinhardt 1988: 142).

From the viewpoint of large commercial farmers, the consequences of *la violencia* had been lucrative indeed.

And while violence per se waned (Guzman and Luna 1994), there were new institutional forms of pressure, often coming from the land reform agencies—INCORA and the Instituto Colombiano de Agropecuario (ICA)—themselves. In the early 1970s, for example, the ICA developed a project in the Norte del Cauca. While the large sugar estates continued to impel peasants to sell their lands, the ICA tried to pressure peasants to convert to commercial crops such as soya by providing credit (but, not land) with which to obtain access to new technology. In the end, this was meant primarily to curb the frequency of land invasions. But, it did little to make the process of agricultural commercialisation equitable.

## 7 THE ROAD TO NEO-LIBERALISM

The emergence in 1954 of the Cauca Valley Corporation was just one symptom of how Colombia was being drawn, by a combination of national and international capital, into the world market—a process that had been signalled five years earlier, in 1949, with the World Bank commission led by Lauchlin Currie.

Colombia was one of the first developing countries to apply for a loan from the Bank, and the first to host a World Bank economic mission (Sandilands 1990:159; Knox 1985:vi).<sup>13</sup> The mission arrived in Colombia in the aftermath of Gaitán's death, but its report made virtually no reference to the escalating violence or to its impact on the rural population. This gives a certain bitter irony to one of Currie's central

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<sup>13</sup> It was also the subject of the first World Bank Economic Report in 1952 and of the first country report which the Bank published in book form, in 1972 (Knox 1985: vi).

convictions that one of the country's paramount needs was 'to plan for and create the conditions that would effect a rapid expansion in Colombia's urban population relative to the rural,' an outcome that was one of the principal Western measures of a modern economy (Sandilands 1990: 164; cf. Zamosc 1986: 21). That expansion was already taking place as a result of *la violencia*.

It was also in 1949 that Colombia signed an agreement with the Rockefeller Foundation to develop a programme of agricultural research (paralleling its research work in Mexico. See Ross 1998:170-171). An indication of international interest in modernising Colombian agriculture, at the time of the onset of *la violencia*, it was to lead to the establishment of CIAT (Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical) at Cali, under Ford and Rockefeller auspices, some twenty years later. It also reflected the growing interest in Colombia of the Rockefellers whose IBEC (International Basic Economy Corporation), from the early 1950's, had pursued varied commercial possibilities there and eventually had spearheaded the creation of the Colombian Finance Corporation (Colby and Dennett 1995: 380). It was no accident that, a few years after his visit to Colombia, David Lilienthal had become a director of IBEC (Colby and Dennett 1995: 669).

Meanwhile, Colombia continued to be a favourite recipient of World Bank largesse. As Caufield notes, 'Between 1950 and 1963, the Bank lent Colombia more than \$300 million, more money per capita than any of its other borrowers.' (Caufield 1996: 59) This would be remarkable by any standards, but, it is especially notable that most of this money went to autonomous agencies such as the CVC, thus undermining the authority of the national government (Caufield 1996: 60) in a country which had long suffered from weak central control over a highly fragmented physical and social landscape (Morris 1963: 177-178).

Above all, such funding reflected what would become the prevailing view among U.S. policy-makers during the Kennedy years, that Colombia should become a model for capitalist development in Latin America and, in the words of a U.S. Senate study, 'an anchor point of stability in the unsettled Caribbean.' and the 'showcase' of the Alliance for Progress (quoted in Galli 1975: 37), which was conceived in Bogotá in 1960, at a meeting of the Organisation of American States and came into being a year later at Punta del Este, Uruguay (USAID 2003).

The Alliance was a major U.S. policy tool, and, as such, Colombia became a special recipient of a wide assortment of U.S. initiatives, including food aid, family

planning and logistical support for counter-insurgency efforts directed against zones that were still under the control of left-wing guerrillas. Within a week of Kennedy's departure from Bogotá, an explosion in the town of Buga, north of Cali, became the necessary pretext for the U.S. to send experts from the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, under General William Yarborough (Colby and Dennett 1995: 391-394). In April, 1961, Colombia and the United States signed a treaty that made Colombia one of the first countries in Latin America to buy equipment for counter-insurgency as part of its U.S. aid package (Galli 1978: 75).

Such activities were not simply ideological; they coincided with the years during which Colombia became a major field for capital investment and the country's national development plan was regularly submitted to the World Bank, the Committee of Nine of the Alliance for Progress and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for approval (Departamento de Caldas 1963: viii). It reflected how, in the aftermath of *la violencia*, not only did agricultural commercialisation, which had already played a crucial role in the stimulation of *la violencia*, begin to accelerate, but did so along with the growing influence of foreign capital, and especially of U.S. agro-industry.

Yet, from the U.S. point of view, by the late 1960's Colombia still did not import enough. This was a situation that, once more, was blamed on a continuing failure 'to develop exports other than coffee, in sufficient volume.' (United States Comptroller General, quoted in Galli 1981: 41). In other words, despite the wholesale population displacement caused by *la violencia* during the nineteen-fifties, a decade later Colombia still remained 'the most "cafetero" [country] in the world'. (Palacios 1983) A World Bank report in the early seventies noted that, while 'the overwhelming reliance on coffee' had been reduced, it still was the country's major export and represented 75 per cent of all agriculture. Most importantly, coffee still brought in about one tenth of all central government current revenues (IBRD 1972: 227, 259). From the Bank's viewpoint, the central question for Colombia's economic development remained how to channel resources into non-coffee production (*Ibid*: 11), which meant the continuing transformation of small coffee-growing peasants into a cheap workforce for commercial agricultural enterprises and/or urban industry.

This view pervaded all considerations of development at every level in Colombia from the sixties onward. Thus, in Caldas, one of the most important coffee-

producing regions and a key region for ‘modernisation’, even after the decline of *la violencia*, the authors of the department’s development plan had noted in 1963:

The country’s great dependence on a single product, coffee, for balance of payment and general economic development purposes, a product currently in serious difficulty on the world market and which no longer provides the impetus to Colombia’s economic growth, demands the assignment of the highest priority to export and production diversification. The economic re-structuring of the coffee growing regions themselves, must form an essential part of such a process if the problem is to be attacked at its very roots (Department of Caldas 1963: ix).

From the peasants’ viewpoint, the main agrarian problem in Caldas in the early nineteen-sixties was that 47 percent of the land area was occupied by just 2 percent of holdings, while 48 percent of agricultural units possessed only 4 percent of the surface area (Department of Caldas 1963: 8). But, the thrust of the Department’s development plan in 1963 was to diversify and intensify production on larger units, so that they could ‘provide employment for manual labourers on the *minifundias* which occupy their immediate environs.’ (Department of Caldas 1963: 8).

This was the general thrust of Colombian land reform. The so-called agrarian reform of the *Frente Nacional* offered small-holders almost nothing, and probably was never intended to (González 1990: 64). In his survey of Latin American land reform programmes, Thiesenhusen describes it as ‘minimalist’ (Thiesenhusen 1995: 87). While Griffin notes that, a ‘successful land reform in Colombia should begin by expropriating the best of the latifundia lands’ and ‘efforts should be focused on the densely populated regions where the problem of underemployment is most intense’, resistance from large landowners meant that INCORA’s strategy ‘located its projects in sparsely populated areas, in poor zones, on abandoned land,’ where, not only was there no threat to established patterns of land use (Griffin 1981: 140), but INCORA’s activities could be closely co-ordinated with a general policy of rural pacification (Galli 1978: 76-77; cf. Felstehausen 1971).

This is, perhaps, not surprising when one considers that one of the principal authors of the much-heralded Social Agrarian Reform Law of 1961 was the economist, Carlos Llera Restrepo, whose family was one of the pillars of the Liberal Party and who himself, having been a director of INCORA (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1966: 20), became president in 1966 (Hilton 2001) as the candidate of the *Frente Nacional*. The bill was clearly never intended to threaten

the interests of the ruling elite and, in 1964, Llera's successor as president, Leon Valencia, made this point unambiguously when he observed:

Its primary objective is not so much to change the number of land-owners as to increase the national production in order to bring down the cost and prices of food through a more intensive, more scientific and more diversified exploitation of land (quoted in UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: 21).

So it was that INCORA's efforts emphasised improved output and commercial exports, a policy that favoured large holdings and that was eagerly supported by outside sponsors such as the World Bank, USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank.

All three were pouring loans into the development of the capitalist subsector for the purpose of increasing export agriculture. Between 1961 and 1972, over U.S. \$300 million financed credit facilities for mechanization, agricultural inputs, irrigation, etc., for large estates. The INCORA projects were the peasant counterparts in this commercialization process—at least as far as the international agencies were concerned (Galli 1978: 78).

This also reflected the fact that, by the early nineteen-seventies, the development policy of the Pastrana government was more or less what Currie had prescribed in 1961 in his book, *Operación Colombia*.

For Currie, small- and medium-size landowners cannot compete with commercial agriculture; thus agrarian reforms are anachronistic solutions dating back to pre-mechanisation agriculture. The solution is to create massive urban employment in order to absorb the surplus population from the countryside; the corresponding increase in consumption would impel further productivity on the land (González 1990: 69).

Even a World Bank report in 1972 had to concede, with regard to INCORA, that, almost a decade after it had been founded, 'The number of farmers helped directly is still very small' (1972: 238).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hopkins (2001: 16) estimates Colombian land reform as one of the least widely beneficial of all the Latin American reforms. There is good reason, in a global perspective, to agree with the generalisation by Bello and de Guzman that reformist land distribution, as one had in Colombia, tends to be a dead-end for the peasantry and that effective land reform today will only occur in the framework of a larger radical project of social/economic transformation (Bello and de Guzman 2000).

## 8 CONTINUING TO MAKE PEASANTS ‘SURPLUS’

While rural production was increasingly focused on the export of cash crops—which now include flowers and coca—Colombia never effectively diversified its way out of coffee production. However, from the early nineteen-seventies onward, the classic crop of Colombian small-holders was radically transformed in favour of more commercial farmers, as the sector employed new varieties and technologies which typically were more suited to uptake by large units. Moreover, the new varieties also eliminated inter-cropping with staple crops such as beans and maize, so that food production declined and the import of basic foods increased (Ridler 1983: 5980).

Although coffee continued to be a major crop, still representing almost 23 percent of total exports by the mid-nineties (Wolfe 1999), many small cultivators migrated to urban centres where high unemployment (Isaza Castro 2001) ensured that they became—and remained—a reserve of cheap, unskilled labour. Those who remained in the rural areas struggled to find an alternative to coffee. Some participated in INCORA’s limited colonisation projects. But, many more migrated to lowland frontier regions such as Putumayo (Global Exchange 2001), where they found some security and began to cultivate, first, marijuana (Ridler 1983: 598) and, later, coca, much as occurred in lowland Bolivia in the 1980’s (Sanabria 1993). More recently, as a result of a world-wide depression in coffee prices, coca has even begun to displace coffee in its mountainous heartland (Wilson 2001).

As we shall see below, the security that peasants found in coca would not last. In the name of eradicating coca production—a policy that was forcefully backed by Washington—their children would become the victims of new clearances in the late nineties (Partridge 1979: 504). But, before then, Colombia’s rural poor would face other pressures. From the mid-nineteen-sixties onward, for example, in the wake of *la violencia*, Colombia became ‘the target country for some of the earliest and most extensive pilot programs in the field of population control’ (Casselman and Acton 1976: 235; cf. Mass 1976). In 1965, PROFAMILIA, the Colombian Association for Family Welfare, was established. Within the next decade, with support from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and USAID, it became the main source of contraceptive services in the country. Most importantly, perhaps, when it began to extend its services into rural areas, it did so in close collaboration with the National Federation of Coffee-Growers (Mass 1976:n253), with its class bias against peasant producers. Between 1960-64 and 1972-73, the total fertility rate for Colombia fell dramati-

cally from 7.04 births per woman to 4.6. It continued declining to 3.2 by 1985 (Flórez 1996: 254; Merrick 1990: 147). Although the decline was somewhat earlier in urban areas, it was clearly a rural trend as well (Flórez 1996: 254). But, it is doubtful whether it was solely the result of an increased availability or awareness of contraceptives. In the countryside, at least, just as previously one of the main incentives for high fertility had been the demand for labour on small family coffee-producing farms, the decline of such units and the devastating rupture of community life during the period *of la violencia* (and the death of so many men of reproductive age) played a major role in rural fertility decline.

Even so, by the late nineteen-eighties, despite the fact that three per cent of landowners now owned over 70 percent of agricultural land (CIIR 1992: 11) and an estimated 40 percent of Colombians still lived in absolute poverty, in spite of a demographic clearance of the Colombian countryside produced by *la violencia* and the subsequent fall in rural fertility, many parts of the countryside remained 'over-populated' in the eyes of the advocates of further 'modernisation'. Thus, powerful interests would inevitably begin to push once more into areas where marginalised peasants sought to eke out an existence in the years after *la violencia* and violence would once again become the principal means by which lands were appropriated from the poor and vulnerable (Amnesty International 1997).

## **9 ‘APERTURA’, THE DECLINE OF COFFEE AND THE RISE OF COCA**

By the early 1980's, the activities of guerrilla groups such as the ELN and FARC, left-wing political groups such as the Communist Party, trade unions and most forms of popular dissent had come to be viewed as a threat to the government's strategy of creating secure conditions to attract foreign capital investment. Toward that end, in 1982, despite resistance from big business and the rural elite (Romero 2001), the Conservative government of Belisario Betancur had begun peace talks with the guerrillas and even proposed an amnesty that eventually brought the FARC and another group, the M-19, into the mainstream political arena.

But, the attempt to normalise Colombian politics in the absence of any significant structural change was bound to fail. In the first place, the process only posed a new threat for the ruling elite because of the tremendous popular appeal of the

Patriotic Union (UP) which was formed in 1985, primarily by members of the CP, its sympathisers and former FARC members.

The UP participated in the 1986 presidential election, winning what was then the biggest vote in the history of the left (4.5 per cent of the total cast). Fifteen UP candidates were elected to Congress and in 1988 the UP won 16 municipalities, forming coalitions in many more (CIIR 1992: 15).

By then, the government—certainly the Army—had already begun to encourage the formation of paramilitary groups—known as ‘self-defense groups’ (Carrigan 2001a) that eventually may have murdered as many as 3,000 UP activists, leaders and supporters, including trade unionists and peasants in areas of rural conflict. The United Confederation of Workers (CUT), founded in 1986, saw 600 of its members assassinated by the end of 1991 (CIIR: 21; Romero Medina 1992: 7; Romero 2001; Jenning 1999: 13). Even the U.S. Department of State (2002) acknowledges that it was this violence that led the FARC to end its truce in 1990.

The upsurge in violence during the eighties—a period in which the homicide rate in Colombia rose from 20.5 to 89.5 per 100,000 (Weyland 2003:1)—coincided with the increasing liberalisation of the Colombian economy which would take formal shape during the Barco administration in early 1990 (Ocampo, Sanchez and Tovar 2002; Lozano 2001). One of its products was the country's new constitution, promulgated in 1991. The outcome of what seemed an exceptionally democratic process (in which even some former guerrillas were included), it was, in fact, a reflection of general political and economic tendencies. Deeply influenced by neo-liberal thinking (Ahumada 1996: 175-218), it gave the country's president new powers to implement the policy of *apertura*, the ‘opening up’ of Colombia to foreign investment, a process that would seriously erode the country's capacity to create jobs (Ocampo, Sanchez and Tovar 2002) and would exacerbate its stark inequalities.

Having bumped up and down in the latter half of the eighties, never exceeding 600 US\$ million per year, direct foreign investment suddenly shot up from 433 US\$ million in 1991 to 679 in 1992, reaching 4,894 by 1997 (SELA 2000). But, *apertura*, by creating what the Colombian government, a decade later, would describe as ‘one of the most open markets in Latin America’, (Republic of Colombia 2001: 3), proved to be far better for imports than domestic exports. The shelves of Bogotá's middle-class supermarkets reflected just how good Colombia's embracing of neo-liberalism was for the U.S. and other developed economies.

But, in contrast, as in other parts of Latin America, the ‘declining terms of trade had, not unexpectedly, a negative impact on peasant production and income’ (Sanabria 1993: 54). Combined with the end of the international coffee agreement, it managed, as no policy previously had, to reduce the centrality of coffee. Harvests fell almost by half during the nineties and, according to Lozano,

Coffee production and its contribution to the total value of exports decreased significantly (from 50% in 1985 to 21% in 1998). In 1997, the real income of coffee producers was 33% lower than in 1991 (Lozano 2001:14).

It was not just coffee that suffered. The entire agricultural sector struggled against cheap imports to such an extent that some observers have recently concluded that ‘Colombian agriculture will not be able to survive’ (Universidad Sergio Arboleda 2003; cf. Lozano 2001). By the end of the century, Colombia had lost a million rural jobs (Carrigan 2001c), while the official unemployment rate nationally was nearly 20 percent (Republic of Colombia 2001: 2).

Yet, millions still lived in the countryside. And it was the pressures created by liberalisation that drove more and more peasants into the cultivation of coca (Mondragon 2000), the one crop whose price was not being undermined by the rising tide of imports. But, while peasant producers struggled just to secure a livelihood based on coca, it was a relatively small number of drug traffickers,-often linked to powerful economic and political interests in the country, who made huge fortunes from revenues from a trade that, by 1998, were ‘almost twice as large as the income received by coffee producers’ (Steiner and Corchuelo 1999: 5). Inevitably, this money moved into the formal economy, into new urban ventures and especially into ranching, where they generated conflict on a scale not seen for decades.

The pattern was set in the nineteen-eighties, when, as Carrigan observes,

Pablo Escobar and his associates bought vast tracts of land in the Magdalena Medio...drug money flowed to the ‘MAS’, [‘*Muerte a Secuestradores*—Death to Kidnappers’, the name of one of the most prominent paramilitary forces] the death squads flourished, and by 1986, some 1,000 Magdalena Medio peasants had been killed and tens of thousands forcibly displaced to clear the land for the traffickers (Carrigan 2001a).

The Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) has observed that the violence which has escalated in recent years in such frontier regions as Urabá and the eastern *llanos* has continued to be directly related to the expansion of (drugs-financed) cattle ranching into areas of peasant colonisation:

The opening up of previously unsettled lands through improved communications has, over the last three decades, stimulated mass migrations of peasants from other areas where land pressure has grown. Typically, peasant colonisers, with little or no state aid, clear the land for subsistence agriculture. Behind them come cattle ranchers, ready to seize land when harvests fail or peasants find themselves too indebted to sustain production, or simply to drive them off with the help of hired guns and paramilitary squads (CIIR 1992: 11).

As a result of the alliance of paramilitaries with drug-dealers and ranchers, according to a recent report by RAND Corporation, 'of 23,184 persons murdered by illegal armed organizations between 1988 and 1997, 3532 were killed by [leftist] guerrillas and 19,652 by other organizations, which include illegal self-defense organisations, the drug cartels, and "private justice" groups' (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 56). Paramilitary activity has also led to

almost three times as many casualties among non-combatants as among the guerrillas, and has created a refugee population of 600,000 internally displaced peasant families... (NACLA 1995; cf. Romero Medina 1992: 10).

As a result, before the end of the century, according to the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA 1995), 'drug traffickers have acquired 21% of the country's arable land.' The figure may be much higher (e.g., Prashad 2002: 167). But, the salient point is that, in a country where peasants were already pushed to the edge of survival, this was bound to deepen the polarisation between the armies of the (old and new) rich and the defenders of the poor.

Nor was ranching the only reason that peasants were being forced off the land. As a recent Amnesty International report has noted:

The department of Chocó in the west of Colombia is an area of significant economic interest given its rich mineral deposits, its wealth in biodiversity, wood and land. The northern area of Chocó is the area chosen for a possible canal linking the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea and is also the site chosen for several other large-scale economic development projects. The area's potential economic wealth is fueling the desire to control tracts of land which will be strategically placed close to the proposed inter-oceanic canal and other proposed communication routes. The paramilitary offensive, to a large extent, corresponds to an effort by powerful economic interests to secure possession of rich land in the region in advance of the construction of the canal and other communication systems (Amnesty International 1997).

In a similar vein, leaders of the Embira Indians in the northern department of Cordoba have been killed by paramilitaries because they resisted the construction of the URRA I dam (partially financed by Canada's Export Development Corporation (Colombia Labor Monitor 2001). Members of the human rights organisation

NOMADESC have, in a like manner, received death threats from paramilitaries because, among others, they have denounced their strategy of threatening and killing trade unionists in Valle del Cauca and massacring civilians living along the River Naya, in that department and the neighbouring one of Cauca (Colombia Labour Monitor 2001b).

## **10 REPRESSION IN THE 1990'S AND THE ANTI-NARCOTICS PARADIGM**

Although the nineteen-eighties were widely known as a 'lost decade' for most of Latin America, the Colombian economy was outwardly fairly strong during this period (Global Exchange 2001; Hagen 1997: 11). But, by 1990, it was also forced to undertake the same kinds of structural reforms that had been imposed on its neighbours (Escuela Nacional Sindical 2002). This commitment to the new neo-liberal order that was formalised in 1991 with the new constitution ensured that the repressive environment which had emerged in the late eighties would continue, in order to enforce the requisite measure of social stability on which foreign investment—one of the main objectives of *apertura*—depended. Colombia became what was arguably the paramount example in South America of a country where the

way to maintain a favorable investment climate is to create a society with formal democracy, but equipped with devices to ensure that it doesn't function to impede what really matters: enriching the wealthy (Chomsky 1997).

The opening up of the economy brought such competition from imports that the country suffered a dramatic decline in its own industries and a commensurate rise in unemployment rate, from 10.8 percent in late 1991 to 20.4 percent by the summer of 2000. More and more workers sought jobs in the informal sector (Escuela Nacional Sindical 2002). And there was an inevitable rise in dissent.

It was to defend the neo-liberal state against the forces of protest and resistance that military expenditure tripled in the four years from 1991 to 1995 (SIPRI 1997). This was possible only because the United States supplied financial and logistical support to the Colombian military—and, indirectly, to the paramilitary forces linked to them. What it managed to achieve was the concentration of enormous

police power in the hands of the Colombian army—which eventually received almost half of all the military aid that the U.S. disbursed in the Americas (Chomsky 1997).<sup>15</sup>

While it is now widely recognised that such funds were – and are – used chiefly for counter-insurgency and to repress political dissent (WOLA 1991; Romero Medina 1992: 4), they were, until recently, formally described as being for so-called counter-narcotics efforts. Despite the fact that, in the early nineteen-eighties, in the course of its long campaign against left-wing guerrillas, it was the Colombian army itself that had developed associations with the drug cartels, it was typically the guerrilla groups that were said to be working with (or as) drugs traffickers. This rather expedient view (Ferrer 1997) was first articulated in 1984 by the then U.S. Ambassador, Lewis Tambs, a Reagan appointee who had been the principal editor in 1980 of the so-called ‘Santa Fe Document’ (*A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*), which had advocated a strong interventionist role in the region (Romero 2001).<sup>16</sup> It was a view that effectively obscured the origins of coca cultivation in the recent agrarian history of the country (Vargas and Barragán 1966)—not least, the central role of neo-liberal policies that forced small, marginal farmers out of the normal agricultural market. It avoided serious consideration of the complex relationship between the drugs industry, the armed forces and the state (Romero Medina 1992:4). And it sustained a climate in which the political impact of state and paramilitary repression was generally overlooked.

The result, according to The Andean Commission of Jurists in 1995, was that of almost 25,500 non-combatant civilians who had been assassinated, who died in a massacre or who disappeared and were presumed killed, almost 70% seem to have died at the hands of the army or police. The Commission also estimated that ‘4 of the

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<sup>15</sup> As one small example of the escalation of military expenditure and assistance that came in the wake of the liberalisation of the Colombian economy, Montero and Whalen (2002) note that, ‘Under Plan Colombia, the U.S. military has provided the Colombian national police and the Colombian air force with more than 40 Huey II helicopters, at a cost of more than \$130 million. Bell also does business with the Colombian government. Between 1998 and 2001, [Bell’s parent company] Textron’s direct sales of helicopters and other military equipment to the Colombian military more than doubled, from \$7.9 million to \$18.7 million. Colombia has requested 12 additional helicopters to patrol Occidental Petroleum’s Pipeline.’ As noted below, oil is now one of the fiercest points of contention between the Colombian government, with its open attitude toward foreign petroleum interests, and the guerrilla movements (Hodgson 2002).

<sup>16</sup> The ‘Santa Fe Document’ was the product of The Council for Inter-American Security (CIS), an extreme right-wing think-tank which counted among its members Patrick Buchanan, Reagan’s former communications director, and retired general John Singlaub of the World Anti-Communist League (Burghardt 1998). As ambassador to Costa Rica, Tambs would play a significant role in the drugs-related financing of the CIA-Contra war against Nicaragua.

10 victims murdered each day were targeted for their involvement with political, labor, or social causes' (Osio 1996: 3). Since then, such extra-judicial killings by the military or by the police, who are controlled by the Ministry of Defense (WOLA 1991), have declined. But, this has merely signified a shift in the division of labour of the forces of repression, as 'extrajudicial killings by paramilitary groups have increased significantly, often with the alleged complicity of individual soldiers or of entire military units' (Osio 1996: 4).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, to a much greater extent than in the early eighties, the paramilitaries have become an accessory of the local and regional elites, with the latter as concerned to resist any reformist policies of the state as they are to protect their property and privilege against rural insurgents (Romero 2001).

## **11 PLAN COLOMBIA, COCA AND PETROLEUM**

In 1999, mounting concerns about the course of events in Colombia—in particular, the growing influence of the FARC and the possibility of its eventual victory (cf. Petras 1999)—led Washington and Bogotá to devise the so-called Plan Colombia. A 'broad menu of proposals to deal with the economic, social, political and military aspects' of the current crisis (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 61), its main, publicly professed aim was, according to LeoGrande and Sharpe (2000), to enable 'a push into southern Colombia' by the Colombian armed forces, in order to destroy coca cultivation in areas controlled by the FARC, chiefly the provinces of Putumayo and Caqueta in the south-eastern part of the country (Isacson and Vaicius 2001). That it targeted such zones, while largely ignoring the far more ominous role of right-wing paramilitaries in the drugs trade (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 58-59), reflected the primary concern of the U.S. to contain an insurgency movement which threatens its strategic interests.

These interests are partly revealed by the fact that the Plan Colombia is not

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<sup>17</sup> According to a recent Reuters report: 'At a camp just outside Puerto Asis, a paramilitary chieftain known by the alias Commander Yair told Reuters in an interview that his men, members of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), backed Plan Colombia. He said the AUC may even spearhead the U.S.-backed offensive, flushing out rebel strongholds and then ceding the territory to the Colombian army, which appears to have little stomach for a ground war with the guerrillas.'

'As a former sergeant in Colombia's special forces, he was trained by elite U.S. Ranger and Navy SEAL units. Now he and his fighters transit freely in and out of Puerto Asis under the nose of the army's 24th brigade and a heavy police detachment' (Reuters 2000).

simply about its most widely publicised feature—coca eradication in guerrilla territories—but is also about promoting ‘free trade’ and instituting adjustment measures to build on the *apertura* (Rabasa and Chalk 2001:58-59; Mondragon 2000b). Its inception coincided with a major loan from the International Monetary Fund that initiated a period of austerity which deeply affected public services and brought about a wave of strikes and demonstrations which, in turn, led the state to adopt an ever more authoritarian posture (Global Exchange 2001). In this process, the activities of the paramilitary forces, as agents of clearance and repression, were not merely tolerated but encouraged.

The pattern is familiar. What has changed are the resources that are being contested. The main interest of a certain element of the Colombian elite and of new drug wealth may still be land, but the overwhelming preoccupation of international capital today is oil. Petroleum was already Colombia’s second most important export by the late nineteen-twenties (Prensa Latina 1964; IBRD 1950: 311), but, with the shift toward a neo-liberal model during the eighties (Hagen 1997) and the increasing influence of foreign interests, its importance has grown enormously over the past decade. Today, oil is Colombia’s major earner of foreign currency (Hodgson 2002), while, in contrast, although Colombia remains the world’s second coffee exporter, coffee’s share of the country’s export earnings dramatically declined between 1964 and 1998 from 71.9 percent to 17.5 (Hagen 1997: 6; Universidad Sergio Arboleda 2002).

Until quite recently, the significance of Colombia’s oil reserves could not compare in absolute terms with those of neighbouring Venezuela. Nevertheless, today, ‘Colombia is Latin America’s fifth-largest oil exporter, and sends 85 percent of its crude to the U.S’ (Hull 2001). The strategic importance of the region was explicitly noted in 1998 by General Charles Wilhelm, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Southern Command, when he testified before a House Committee: ‘No one questions the strategic importance of the Middle East’, he observed,

but Venezuela alone provides the same amount of oil to the U.S. as do all the Persian Gulf states combined. The discovery of major oil reserves in Colombia...further increases the strategic importance of this region’s energy resources (Federal News Service 1998).

The significance of Latin American oil reserves generally and those of Colombia in particular—however large they may turn out to be—can only be

understood by reference to some basic facts about the U.S. economy. Perhaps surprisingly, agriculture remains one of the prime movers of that economy; agro-exports, which totalled \$54 billion in 1995, 'help offset the nation's chronic overall trade deficit' (DiGiacomo 1996: 1), which provides a tremendous incentive for the U.S., not only to increase domestic production through 'an intensification of existing farmland and an increase in cropping area' (Bell 1997), but also to use a wide variety of mechanisms (from domestic subsidies to the WTO) to increase the market for its agricultural products, especially in Third World countries.

Such exports depend, however, on surpluses that long ago ceased to be contingent on natural regeneration of soil fertility. On the contrary, of the vast gains in output that took place during the twentieth century—between 1920 and 1980 maize yields alone rose 333 percent—'half the increase can be attributed to improved plant varieties and half to fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanization' [which new hybrid varieties required] (Union of Concerned Scientists 2001). This means that U.S. agriculture—with all its potential economic and political benefits to policy-makers in Washington—is highly dependent on fossil fuels, not only as a source of energy to run farm machinery and to manufacture pesticides and fertilisers, but most importantly to obtain the nitrogen (an essential component of fertilisers such as ammonium nitrate and ammonium sulphate) which, in 1997, was overwhelmingly the single largest energy input per hectare of U.S. maize (Pimental, Pimental and Karpenstein-Machan 1998: 26).

Given the strategic importance of U.S. agricultural surpluses in maintaining its dominant role in the world economy, the fact that its farm output relies on importing 60 percent of its oil (Pimental, Pimental and Karpenstein-Machan 1998: 13) means that the U.S, which presently consumes just over a quarter of the oil used globally each year (Montero 2002), is bound to expand its control over much of the world's remaining oil reserves and to ensure access to its traditional supplies. Thus, it was of major significance when the progressive, former Army colonel, Hugo Chavez, was elected president of Venezuela. It not only signalled the demise of that country's long oligarchic rule, but also seemed to presage a particular threat to the U.S. economy (cf. Gott 2000), for which Venezuela was the major source of imported oil. How real that threat is still remains unclear. But, Chavez's election also came at a time when both U.S. government analysts and progressive thinkers alike (cf. Petras et al. 1999) were beginning to forecast that the FARC might soon take power. The fact that FARC-

controlled territories were probably rich in untapped oil reserves made a solution to the problem of the FARC assume an exceptional urgency.

At present, the oil sector is one of the major sources of foreign investment in Colombia (U.S. Department of State 2002). Some 80 foreign oil companies currently operate in the country (Hull 2001) and the government in Bogotá is especially eager to offer them attractive terms. Speaking recently to a meeting of oil company executives, sponsored by the Inter-American Chamber of Commerce, the Colombian Ambassador to the U.S. noted that

President Andres Pastrana's administration has already increased foreign investment by upping the return energy companies get from exploration and production activities...Previously, foreign operators had to give the government, via Colombian state oil firm Ecopetrol, half of their production. The new contracts, 28 years in length, lower the state's cut to 30 percent (Hull 2001).

The consequences for the level of tensions in rural areas where peasant communities tenaciously seek to sustain a living—whether raising coca or not—are profound. But, the battle to control oil has also brought an escalation in violence elsewhere in the country as well. One focus has been the river port town of Barrancabermeja in the Magdalena Medio, which developed as the country's leading oil-refining centre for Standard Oil of New Jersey's subsidiary, the Tropical Oil Company, in the early nineteen-twenties (Randall 1977: 91; Prensa Latina 1964), and has long been a centre of trade union activities and political opposition to the governing elite. Not surprisingly, the city became a major target of the right-wing forces led by the most prominent paramilitary figure, Carlos Castaño (Carrigan 2003; cf. Wellstone 2001).

## **12 A STORM CALLED 'PROGRESS': FINAL OBSERVATIONS**

Given the increasing importance of commanding the country's existing and potential oil reserves, an end to violence in Colombia hardly seems susceptible to a negotiated solution that would ensure the well-being of the poor. So, as long as powerful interests (both foreign and national) pursue a policy of clearance of the countryside in order to secure either land or oil, the rhetoric of the national government in Bogotá about 'negotiations' with guerrillas is fairly meaningless. Besides the fact that the FARC is unlikely to repeat the tragic events of the late eighties, there is really not much to negotiate when the conflict of interests between

private profits and subsistence livelihoods is so fundamental—and growing.<sup>18</sup> The most recent request by Colombia to the IMF (International Monetary Fund 2002) underscores the former's commitment to international economic policies that have already done so much damage to the poor; while the victory in the last presidential election of the far-right candidate, Alvaro Uribe Velez, the Harvard-trained, former governor of Antioquia, who supports the ranching interests and the paramilitaries (Carrigan 2001b), suggests that Colombia is entering the most uncompromising phase of its brutal route to modernisation—one in which the paramilitaries will not only be the agents of the Colombian Army, but the storm-troopers of international capital.

It is not surprising then that there is evidence of a new 'realism' on the part of many policy-makers and strategists in Washington. It is readily apparent in a recent work (Rabasa and Chalk 2001) undertaken by the establishment think-tank, the RAND corporation, for the U.S. Airforce.<sup>19</sup> RAND clearly regards the priority accorded drugs in Colombia as a failure to see that the main problem is the revolutionary threat posed by the FARC. This, of course, not only ignores the fact that the drugs issue was always a cover for other interests, but that it remains useful to Washington and the government in Bogotá to portray the FARC as a movement that has abandoned any political principles for the sake of drugs profits.<sup>20</sup> Still, the fact that organisations such as RAND now insist that such a cover is actually counter-productive is a disturbing measure of the directness and impunity with which U.S. interests are being asserted around the world.

In Colombia, now as much as half a century ago, the salient fact remains, as Eric Hobsbawm has recently noted, that violence is inescapably the result of 'the failure to make a social revolution' (Hobsbawm 2002: 373). In a country where livelihood insecurity is not only widespread and profound, but worsening under the

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<sup>18</sup> The FARC would also have drawn obvious lessons from a country such as Guatemala, where an end to decades of genocidal conflict (Black 1984; Berger 1992) has yielded neither peace nor the structural change that would enfranchise a deeply impoverished peasantry.

<sup>19</sup> Aside from the interest one would expect the U.S. Airforce to have in strategic developments in Latin America, one also needs to recall that RAND was originally established in 1946 by Douglas Aircraft, with Ford Foundation support, as a center for policy analysis for the U.S. Airforce (then still called the Army Airforce) (Ross 1998: 96).

<sup>20</sup> Thus, the late conservative U.S. senator, Paul Coverdell, proclaimed in a speech in the Senate that Colombia was being torn apart by 'an insurgency driven by narcotics—not ideology, narcotics' (Center for International Policy 2000).

impact of changes brought about by neo-liberal policies, the need for such a revolution may be greater than ever before—just as opposition to such a possibility has never been fiercer. As a result, the children of the peasant communities that were uprooted in the era of *la violencia*, whose resistance gave birth to the guerrilla movements, once again stand in the way of the process of capitalist development. There may be nothing but the FARC—or its successors—standing between them and oblivion.

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