

Introduction

The Contradictions of Colombian Development

[Latin America's] crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable . . . It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.

(Gabriel García Márquez, Nobel Address (1982))

Drugs, violence, mafias, death squads, guerrilla armies, authoritarianism, corruption, crisis, death. These are the images conjured when I tell people about my research on labor regime dynamics in rural Colombia. Sensationalized in popular films and mass media, Colombian society is often likened to its most valued export, cocaine, its politics a dysfunctional banana republic, and its population poor and powerless victims. To many consumers of these media images, people living predominantly in core centers of global capitalism, these depictions of Colombian everyday life might appear chaotic and surreal in comparison to the routinized, orderly, and lawful realities of their own social and economic livelihoods. Indeed, the juxtaposition of stereotypes of violent oppression and chaos in Colombia, and Latin America more generally, to the democratic orderliness and stability of the countries in the global north, sparked the ire of Colombia's Nobel prizewinner author, Gabriel García Márquez. In his 1982 Nobel address, García Márquez lambasted the hypocrisy of such sensationalized depictions and made an impassioned plea to international observers to critically reexamine the capitalist West's own arduous and bloody history and to analyze Latin American development using its own conceptual yardstick. This book is, in large part, an attempt to create such a yardstick.

Unfortunately, these sensational, albeit stereotypical, accounts of the violence and crisis of everyday life in Colombia are rooted in actual historical realities. Rural Colombians have experienced endemic low-intensity warfare from the country's

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early experiences with laissez-faire liberalism at the turn to the twentieth century, through the years of state-directed developmentalism in the decades following World War II, and into the present era of twenty-first-century neoliberal globalization. During the nineteenth century, partisan conflict between Conservative and Liberal parties resulted in at least nine full-scale civil wars. These hostilities climaxed at the turn of the century with the deadly “Thousand Day War” (1899–1902), which led to nearly three decades of uneasy Conservative party domination marked by labor-repressive state measures meant to open the economy to foreign investment. Another wave of political violence resurfaced in the late 1940s following the assassination of populist Liberal candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on the streets of Bogotá in 1948. A period of violent urban unrest known as *El Bogotazo* spread to the countryside, where it morphed into a decade of intense rural partisan warfare known simply as *La Violencia* (1948–57) that pitted dissident Liberal and Communist insurgency groups against Conservative security forces and paramilitaries. This spiral of violence was initially constrained by a 1953 military coup headed by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, an independent initially backed by Liberal and Conservative party leaders. But Pinilla’s incipient populism soon threatened the established class order, pressuring Colombia’s political elites to put their squabbles aside and join forces to oust Rojas Pinilla. In the wake of Pinilla’s ouster, they formed what became known as the National Front government (1958–74), a bipartisan power-sharing “gentleman’s agreement” that rotated executive positions between parties, suppressed antiestablishment political participation by outlawing third-party candidates, and instituted “state of siege” measures to quell social unrest. The authoritarianism of the National Front regime, combined with its promotion of disruptive state-directed industrial development measures, fanned the flames of Colombian political violence again as a number of Marxist and left-populist armed insurgency groups including the National Liberation Army (ELN), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and April 19th Movement (M-19) established bases of support among disaffected peasant communities, agricultural workers, urban proletarians, and radicalized students.

By the 1980s, hopes for a lasting solution to Colombia’s endemic violence arose once again with the election of Belisario Betancur (1982–86), a liberal reformer who entered into peace negotiations with guerrilla groups and instituted a series of political democratization measures that dismantled the National Front system. His successors, Virgilio Barco (1986–90) and César Gaviria (1991–94), continued the democratization process that culminated in the writing of a new, more inclusive constitution in 1991 and the demobilization of some guerrilla groups. Despite these efforts, Colombian society became embroiled in ever deeper and more complex forms of violence. Narco-trafficking mafia groups like the Medellín

and Cali Cartels and heavily armed right wing paramilitary groups like the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) engaged in terrorist actions that undermined peace negotiations and democratization efforts, while extant guerrilla groups bolstered their war-making activities through engagement in the illegal drug trade, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. After a failed peace negotiation with the FARC (1998–99), the Colombian government revamped its militarization response through “Plan Colombia.” Ostensibly an institution-building initiative, the Plan became in essence a US-financed military effort that attacked guerrilla strongholds and facilitated the expansion of paramilitarism throughout the countryside. The election of hardline right wing President Álvaro Uribe (2002–10) escalated the militarization process by aligning the Colombian government’s efforts with US President Bush’s “War on Terror” initiatives, giving an implicit greenlight to paramilitaries to terrorize inhabitants of guerrilla strongholds and anyone else presumed to be complicit with them. By 2006, the balance of power shifted so far to the right that the Uribe government was able to oversee the demobilization and social reintegration of the AUC with impunity, offering little in the way of compensation to their victims. Soon thereafter, with guerrilla forces radically diminished, Uribe’s predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos (2010–18) implemented peace talks with the country’s largest group, the FARC, and began negotiations with the ELN. Despite the demobilization of armed groups on the right and left, incidents of rural violence continue into the present, as new, smaller paramilitary groups, drug trafficking cartels (*cartelitos*), and active splinter guerrilla factions now jockey for control of rural territories, resources, and populations.

The impact of this endemic violence in Colombia’s countryside bears out in the numbers. According to Human Rights Watch’s *World Report 2019* (2019:151), violence associated with Colombia’s armed conflict has led to the forced displacement of 8.1 million people since 1985, a shocking number of people in a country of just over 49 million in total.¹ Worse still, over 200,000 more rural residents have been displaced amid ongoing armed conflict since the signing of the Santos peace agreement in 2016, as new armed actors have struggled to fill the “power vacuum” left from the disarmament of the FARC. Predictably, this massive exodus from the countryside has itself compounded systemic problems of over-urbanization, crime, unemployment, and rural poverty. With guerrilla groups like the FARC pushed aside, Colombia has experienced an unprecedented wave of “narco land grabs” driven in large part by elaborate and often illegal land-

¹ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCHR 2018:85) notes that Colombia’s overall number of internally displaced persons since 1985 makes it the country with the largest number of IDPs in the world.

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laundering schemes developed by Colombian elites that have concentrated a shocking 81% of the country's total productive land into the hands of 1% of the population.² And while rural Colombians have borne the brunt of this political violence, the primary targets of directed acts of repression and terror are leftist social activists, including community organizers, human rights workers, journalists, and especially labor leaders and union members. The International Trade Union Confederation's *Global Rights Index* reports (2016, 2018) find Colombia to be "the country with the highest number of [trade unionist] murders of any country. Over 2,500 unionists have been murdered in the past 20 years, more than in the rest of the world combined."

Colombia's protracted and seemingly exceptional tendency for social and political violence has spawned a vast body of scholarly literature that has focused on local conditions that have given rise to armed insurgency groups, drug trafficking mafias, and social unrest. Indeed, much ink has been spilt explaining Colombia's troublesome and endemic history of social and political violence over the past half century. In fact, there is even an informal group of Colombian scholars known as *violentólogos*, or specialists in the study of Colombian violence.³

This focus on violence, however, often overshadows a different, and in comparison paradoxical, side of Colombian social and political history. Most striking here is the fact that Colombia remains Latin America's most long-standing and stable electoral democracy. The country has held regular competitive elections with peaceful transfers of power consistently since the last century with few exceptions.⁴ Of course, party politics in Colombia remains the exclusive affair of elites, corruption continues to permeate the country's political institutions, and voter turnout remains low.⁵ Yet, much to the chagrin of the Colombian left, it is also true that the traditional parties and their recent offshoots continue to retain the loyalty of the vast majority of the country's voters.⁶ Indeed, the hegemony of Colombia's traditional political establishment runs surprisingly deep. Explaining the country's political conservatism, Charles Bergquist (2001:203) argued that the

² Oxfam (2017:11, 14); see also Ballvé (2012); McSweeney et al. (2017).

³ See Bergquist et al. (1992, 2001) for an overview of the work of Colombia's *violentólogos*.

⁴ The 1953 coup of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla as well as the likely electoral fraud of the 1970 presidential election are two notable exceptions.

⁵ Martz (1997); Pérez-Liñán (2001); Fornos et al. (2004); Palacios (2006). For contemporary trends in voter turnout, see IDEA (n.d., accessed December 12, 2020 at www.idea.int/data-tools/question-countries-view/521/82/ctr).

⁶ The exception of Colombia's political landscape are mayoral elections in Bogotá and Medellín, which has recently elected leftist and center-left candidates.

leftist politics espoused by Colombia's guerrilla groups "[have] had limited appeal for the vast majority of the people. Throughout the twentieth century, in fact, Colombia has had the weakest left of all the major Latin American countries." And while most of Latin America shifted leftward during the years of the "pink tide" in the early twenty-first century, the Colombian government locked step with the United States and became a stalwart of neoliberal policy initiatives pushed by global multilateral agencies.⁷ It is this enduring political conservatism that twice elected hardliner Álvaro Uribe (2002–10), then his former Minister of Defense and hand-picked successor, Juan Manuel Santos (2010), and most recently another Uribe successor, Iván Duque Márquez (2018–22), to the presidency.

The country's historically vibrant national economy and stable economic growth also contrast sharply with its endemic violence. In comparison to the development histories of other Latin American countries, wherein capitalist transformation triggered powerful anticapitalist movements that led to experiments in populism, economic nationalism, and socialism, Colombian politicians and economic policymakers have been described as predominantly "risk-averse" and "pragmatic technocrats," shielded from mass politics by the hegemony of the traditional political establishment.⁸ Moreover, this pragmatic economic liberalism actually delivered on its promise of sustained economic growth over the course of the 20th century, making Colombia a developmental lodestar showcased by the United States and the global multilateral agencies as a progressive alternative to economic nationalism and communism. For example, in 1949 Colombia became the first site of the World Bank's new "economic missions" meant to extend Franklin Roosevelt's "Fair Deal" developmental vision to the Third World. New Deal economist, Lauchlin Currie, headed the mission and came to view Colombia as a beacon of "accelerated economic development."⁹ Three years later, eminent economist Albert Hirschman also moved to Bogotá, becoming a founding member of Colombia's new National Planning Board and an economic counselor to Colombian President, Carlos Lleras Restrepo, to whom he later dedicated his classic *Journeys toward Progress: Studies of Economy Policy-Making in Latin America* (1963).¹⁰ Both Currie and Hirschman saw in Colombia's exceptional growth a universal template of national development and modernization for the Third World. In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, when guerrilla insurgencies

⁷ Hershberg and Rosen (2006); Prashad and Ballvé (2006).

⁸ Urrutia (1991).

⁹ Brittain (2005).

¹⁰ Sandilands (2017).

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were spreading across the countryside of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Colombia became a key testing ground of the Kennedy Administration's "Alliance for Progress" and the World Bank's rural development initiatives, both designed to thwart rural radicalism by bolstering economic productivity and social stability in the countryside. In the 1970s, the vibrancy of Colombia's economy granted its policymakers the privilege of sidestepping the debt incurred by many developing countries to finance large-scale development projects and promote domestic industrialization. Combined with the influx of capital from illegal drug trafficking in the 1980s, this allowed Colombia to essentially elude the crushing debt crisis of the 1980s and therefore sidestep the imposition of virulent structural-adjustment loans and austerity measures advocated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in the 1990s.¹¹

To be clear, contemporary scholars have challenged "the developmentalist illusion" linking economic growth and industrialization to social welfare in the global south, showing it to be only loosely correlated at best and antithetical at worst.¹² In Colombia, economic growth brought with it fabulous wealth for a small segment of the population and some of the worst levels of economic inequality in the region. A 2018 World Bank report on economic mobility in Latin American middle class, for example, describes Colombian inequality as "stubbornly high," with 10% of income earners garnering 40% of the country's wealth and its Gini co-efficient (50.8) the second worst in Latin America (only Brazil scored higher).¹³ Rural Colombians have been particularly affected by this inequality, as Colombia ranks highest in Latin America for its extreme concentration of land ownership and sizable population of precarious rural migrants.¹⁴ This said, Colombia's economic growth has also produced a sizable and durable middle economic strata that stands out in the region.¹⁵ And this middle class is not only urban. Colombia's countryside has also been the home of one of Latin America's few "middle class peasant" populations – coffee-producing, or *cafetero*, farmers – who have been largely impervious to the revolutionary politics of Marxist guerrilla insurgency groups, the pull of the illegal narcotics economy, and the social and political violence that has taken root in other rural regions of the country.

¹¹ Urrutia (1991).

¹² Arrighi and Piselli (1987); Arrighi et al. (2003); Arrighi et al. (2010); Ferguson (2015); Harris (2017); Bair et al. (2019).

¹³ World Bank (2012); Ferreira et al. (2013).

¹⁴ Oxfam (2017); Ballvé (2012).

¹⁵ This is adjusted for purchasing power parity at constant 2005 prices (Ferreira et al. 2013; World Bank 2012).

How can we explain the coexistence of these complex and contradictory dynamics of Colombian development? Why has capitalist development in Colombia produced both bastions of support for an entrenched class of elites and endemic social crises and violence? And what does an analysis of development in Colombia teach us about the broader prospects for social well-being and stability for those living at the margins of the world market?

This book answers these questions through a comparative and world historical analysis of the labor regime dynamics of rural Colombia's most important global commodity-producing regions: the coffee region of Viejo Caldas, the banana region of Urabá, and the coca (base ingredient of cocaine) region of the Caguán. Analyzing development trajectories through the lens of labor regimes is uncommon. Indeed, since its origins in the 1940s and 1950s when development economists likened national economic growth and industrialization with the high mass consumption culture associated with North American and European livelihoods, the concept of national development has undergone significant definitional reiterations and major conceptual unlearning. In this book, I use the term "development" in its most generic formulation as the set of policy initiatives and practices implemented by states to promote economic growth through the production of commodities for the global market. Such initiatives are "capitalist" because the production of these commodities becomes ensconced in a market logic that gives priority to the ceaseless accumulation of capital above all else. Analyzing development from the perspective of labor regimes analysis thus reorients the discussion away from abstract thinking about the relationship between economic growth and social welfare toward concrete analysis of the social contradictions, unintended social consequences, and labor control strategies that arise when developmental processes seek to transform marginalized regions into sites of capitalist growth and production.

Focusing on the labor and development dynamics of Colombia's coffee, banana, and coca regimes is especially useful because each of these commodities has played a central role linking rural land, labor, and capital to the world market while also expressing the broad diversity of development dynamics that have taken root in the country.¹⁶ In different ways and to varying degrees, coffee, banana, and coca production have both absorbed rural labor and expelled it through violent processes

¹⁶ Colombia's economy is the fourth largest in Latin America as measured by gross domestic product. It also specializes in the production of numerous export commodities and industrial products, including coal and petroleum, gold and other precious minerals, electronics and appliances, shipbuilding, automobiles, natural gases, cut flowers, in addition to having vibrant tourism, financial services, and construction industries.

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of rural land dispossession. They have generated foreign exchange, regional economic growth and development as well as highly exploitative and dangerous working conditions, underdevelopment, labor repression, and economic marginalization.¹⁷ They have expanded the territorial presence of the state to frontier regions of the country, producing both bulwarks of conservative electoral support and state legitimacy as well as radical political opposition that has challenged the interests of capital and brought the state to the brink of collapse.

Taken collectively, the dynamics of these three commodities paint a picture of Colombia's highly varied and contentious development trajectory from the country's early experiences with laissez-faire liberalism at the turn of the twentieth century, through the years of state-directed developmentalism in the decades following World War II, and into the present era of twenty-first-century neoliberal globalization. Coffee and bananas, for instance, were the main commodities (along with oil) that first propelled Colombia's insertion into the world economy. As such, they helped transform the largely stagnant and "inward-looking" economy inherited from the era of Spanish colonialism in the nineteenth century into a liberal growth economy by the early decades of the twentieth century. Both generated the foreign investment and foreign exchange needed to finance the developmental goals of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and "high mass consumption" that had become Colombia's national growth model throughout the postwar decades. Yet, they differed significantly in terms of their ability to generate local social and economic stability.

Colombia's coffee sector was bolstered by what has been called the "Pacto cafetero," a developmentalist social compact instituted by the parastatal National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia (Fedecafé) that regulated the domestic coffee market and generated what I describe as a *hegemonic labor regime* characterized by the active participation of cafetero farmers in the expansion of the sector. Under this social compact, Colombia's coffee farms transformed into highly rationalized "factories in the fields" while its producers transformed from coffee-producing campesino peasants into market-dependent cafetero farmers. And while Colombia continues to churn out some of the world's most highly valued mild Arabica coffee beans, the economic and social viability of the *Pacto cafetero* has been crushed by the weight of macro-structural transformations in the world coffee economy. Since the early 1990s, Colombia's coffee regime has erupted in

¹⁷ In 2013, the total value of unroasted coffee and banana exports was over US\$19 billion and US\$9.7 billion, respectively (FAOSTAT n.d., accessed July 26, 2019 at www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home). Cocaine exports were estimated to be some US\$84 billion (UNODC 2011:5).

waves of cafetero militancy that have thrown Fedecafé's hegemonic control into deep crisis. The continued vibrancy of the coffee sector has become, in many ways, a gauge of Colombia's ability to continue its developmental successes of the past into an uncertain future of twenty-first-century global market turbulence.

Bananas, in contrast, have a more controversial significance in Colombia's developmental history. Banana production first arose as an export enclave in the Santa Marta region of Colombia's Caribbean coast, where it remained under the dominion of the US-based United Fruit Company (UFC). When banana workers organized a strike for better wages and working conditions in 1928, Colombian military forces were called in, leading to a massacre that tarnished the reputation of the UFC and led to the company's divestment from the region over the ensuing years. In the early 1960s, banana production arose once again, this time through the establishment of domestically owned plantations and exporting firms located in the coastal region of Urabá. Unlike coffee, which incorporated land-owning cafetero farmers into a hegemonic social compact, the banana regime of Urabá developed through the dispossession of local populations from the land and the full-proletarianization of their labor, leading to the consolidation of a wage-dependent and polarized class structure in the region. This modality of commodity production – proletarianized workers in state-backed agro-export centers – became the developmental model promoted by the Colombian state during the postwar decades and a barometer of its economic success. But rather than facilitate local development, Urabá quickly deteriorated into a *despotic labor regime* marked by state and (later) paramilitary violence used to quell labor militancy and avert redistributive demands that threatened the continued economic vibrancy of the sector. While Colombia's banana plantation owner association (*Asociación de Bananeros de Colombia*, Augura) was able to rely upon labor repression to contain worker militancy during Urabá's early decades of production, this strategy itself unraveled in the 1980s and into the 1990s when the region experienced its own deep crisis of labor control.

The cocaine industry is the latest iteration of rural commodity production and development in Colombia, one that is best contextualized historically within the present era of neoliberal globalization. Emerging in the 1980s when the postwar developmental model was becoming exhausted, and consolidating in the 1990s when the Colombian state began to adopt neoliberal policies meant to dismantle its erstwhile developmental institutions, coca and the cocaine economy arose as one of the few commodities capable of absorbing rural surplus labor and providing a relatively stable livelihood for landless migrants. The Caguán region emerged as a key site of coca production in the 1980s, only after its rural inhabitants experienced decades of despotism driven by local landed elites and large-scale cattle ranchers. The region's transformation into a coca-producing regime occurred

through the actions of the revolutionary FARC guerrillas, who instituted their own protective social compact that regulated the domestic coca market, protected coca farmers from land dispossession, and generated what I describe as a *counter-hegemonic labor regime*. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, FARC counter-hegemony ran up against the US' "War on Drugs" and "War on Terror" initiatives, eventually forcing the FARC to give up its territorial control of the region under the 2016 peace negotiations.

Analyzing these diverse experiences of capitalist development that have arisen across Colombia's coffee, banana, and coca regimes raises two sets of questions that guide this book. First, *why do we see such starkly differently local labor regimes in rural Colombia at the same period in time, that is, during the postwar developmental decades? Why did hegemony prevail in the coffee regime and despotism in the banana and cattle-turned-coca regimes?* And second, *why did these stable, albeit contrasting, labor regimes of the postwar developmental decades converge toward crises of labor control and counter-hegemonic social formations in the 1980s and 1990s?*

Conceptual Approach: Labor Regimes, Commodity Chains, and World Hegemonies

To explain the diverse experiences of global commodity production across rural Colombia, I extend insights from three bodies of scholarly literature: labor regimes analysis, global commodity chains, and world historical sociology.

Extending Insights from Labor Regimes

Scholarship on labor regimes arose in the 1970s and 1980s to analyze the social contradictions and production politics that arise from capitalist labor processes. At the core of labor regime scholarship is what might be described as Antonio Gramsci's questions, that is, under what conditions do workers and commodity producers acquiesce to capitalist labor processes and consent to the logic of market imperatives and under what conditions must labor control be obtained through overt expressions of coercion and labor repression? Over the past decades, labor regime scholars have traversed the globe, engaging in rich ethnographic and historical analyses of the varied strategies of labor control deployed by capital and states across distinct industries and national contexts.¹⁸ In their efforts to analyze

¹⁸ See Burawoy (1985, 2003, 2013); Burawoy et al. (2000); Lee (2007); Webster et al. (2008); Anner (2015); Baglioni (2018).