

### **Review / Reseña**

Gill, Lesley. *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

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I.

Lesley Gill's powerful ethnography of the rise and fall of workers' movements in the oil enclave of Barrancabermeja advances two provocative, interconnected arguments that make compelling contributions to those studying Colombia in the wake of the 2016 Peace Agreement signed between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The first, that the country's political violence is inextricably linked with the application of neoliberal policies. This is not a new argument; various macro-political critiques of neoliberalism in Colombia have highlighted its relationship to the armed conflict (such as Ahumada 2000, and Rojas 2009), following Harvey's (2003) theory that neoliberal capitalism involves "accumulation by dispossession". But *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia* complements these broader studies by revealing, with sophisticated historical depth and ethnographic specificity, the multiple intersecting forces and transnational networks that allowed the unfolding of this relationship in one location. Barrancabermeja, in the Middle Magdalena valley, is an ideal case for examining these intertwined forces: it is emblematic for its oil production

and exportation, its militant social and political movements, and for the paramilitary reign of terror that made it, in the early 2000s, in a country already infamous as “the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist” (1), one of the single most violent cities in the world.

The second argument is that in the wake of paramilitary and state repression, the way people in Barrancabermeja advanced claims on the state was transformed. Instead of focussing on national sovereignty, worker rights and public services, which they had done earlier, they employed the ideas and discourse of human rights, which consequently diminished their broader, more militant vision of social transformation of inequalities. This complements Tate’s (2007) historical contextualisation of how human rights discourse was increasingly used in Colombia by activists to garner international support for their claims and force the state to respect its citizens. Gill’s searing critique of human rights ideas and discourse as “a form of internationalism that replaced older internationalist utopias, such as anticolonialism and communism” (24) reveals how well-intentioned documentation of human rights violations individualises targeted groups and social movements, depoliticises and de-historicises their struggles, diminishes worker solidarity and class consciousness, and obscures the entanglement of political violence and neoliberalism—including *our* entanglement, as consumers of commodities in the ‘global North’, to violence in Colombia.

These two arguments are key for understanding Colombia’s struggles to come to terms with its violent past, especially regarding the role of class in the violence of neoliberalism, connections woefully undervalued by both Colombianists and anthropologists. They also usefully help complicate the narrative about the locus of power, and the locus of the Colombian state: itself a much more heterogenous and shifting force than popular discourse suggests, as Gill reveals by drawing on the extensive sub-fields of anthropology of the state and sovereignty.

## II.

Gill develops the two arguments through a three-period history of Barrancabermeja, grounded in long-term ethnographic engagement, oral interviews and archival research. The first period charts Barrancabermeja’s development as a foreign-controlled export enclave from 1920-60 under the Tropical Oil Company (TROCO), a subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. The Middle Magdalena valley had been colonised in the mid-nineteenth century, and had been steeped in violence and extraction ever since: the indigenous Yarigués were hunted and killed, or

assimilated forcibly by the Catholic church; and the rural frontier was pushed back for the extraction of forest produce, including rubber, wood and *chinchona* bark (38). Settlements were formed by defeated Liberal soldiers after the Thousand Days War (1899-1902), and the discovery of oil attracted migrants looking for work from all over the country in the 1920s. Barrancabermeja became the city with the largest concentration of wage labourers in Colombia (12).

While other export commodities also contributing to the modernisation of Colombia's economy, such as coffee, sugar and banana, Barrancabermeja became the centre of the country's oil industry. Powerful corporations with headquarters in USA and Europe sought out the newly precious commodity of oil, and worldwide they "leveraged states for territory, often in sparsely settled, weakly regulated frontier regions with vulnerable populations" (30). TROCO worked with the Colombian state, influencing the designation of mayors and using the police and the military to keep order. Barrancabermeja, therefore, also became one of the most militarised towns in Colombia (37).

Various left-wing political discourses circulating in the region at the time—socialism, anarchism and communism—resonated with the *barranqueño* workers, for whom the narrative of "US imperialism" mapped tangibly onto the presence of a foreign company, and the various practices of exclusion they experienced under it. A wave of strikes and repressive responses by governments occurred in the 1920s, including the 1928 banana strike and massacre on the Atlantic coast, made famous by Gabriel García Márquez. This consolidated an anti-imperialist national sentiment, shared by workers across the country. Unlike elsewhere in Colombia, the uprisings in Barrancabermeja were promoted by peasant-worker alliances, differing from the more typically agrarian movements of the time (51). This counters a simplistic reading of Colombia's conflict as predominantly rural, and reminds us how violence has evolved over two centuries through an urban-rural dialectic.

In this period, alternative political visions grew across the country, opposing the deep social inequalities. In Barrancabermeja, popular struggles drawing on multiple influences, from liberalism to communism, blurred and converged into a "heterogeneous, contentious working-class political culture that was nationalist, anti-imperialist, and infused with socialist notions of the common good" (58). But violence and exclusion also grew. The bipartisan civil war of *La Violencia* (1948-58), inadequately resolved with the National Front power sharing agreement (Karl 2017), perpetuated the exclusion of political alternatives.

The second period spans 1960-1990. Following the growth of nationalism, resistance to 'US imperialism' and economic development, TROCO relinquished control of the oil industry. Following the creation of the national oil company ECOPETROL in 1948, the refinery became nationalised fully in 1961, and the oil workers became public workers. The public sector expanded nationally and so did unionisation—including teachers, healthcare workers, telecommunications employees as well as ECOPETROL employees—going from 5.5% to 13.4% of the economically active population between 1959-65 (62). Barrancabermeja became a state-run company town, and cross-sector trade unionists found common cause in demanding better rights.

Gill underlines the diversity of struggles and forms of organisation that united in solidarity—unions, neighbourhood associations, church groups, student organisations, workers, peasants and leftist political parties mobilised a powerful series of civic strikes, nurtured by a vibrant vision of popular democracy, which were capable of bringing the city to a standstill. As left-wing revolutionary ideals swept Latin America, in Barrancabermeja liberation theology and Marxism fed these visions, both emphasising structural injustice and the need for social transformations. As one of Gill's interlocutors said, "I came to Barrancabermeja in 1971 because I thought that the revolution was going to happen here" (81). The FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgencies were also present in Barrancabermeja, and coexisted with civilian organisations, often, but not always, finding convergence in their demands. Gill depicts the complex, unequal, but generally peaceful coexistence in this period, drawing on the recollections of local residents. One said, "people more or less wanted the same things. This is not to say that everyone always agreed with the guerrillas, but...they saw the insurgents as a political alternative" (91). Others resisted the insurgents, accusing them of trying to use popular organisations as "echo chambers" for their views, instead of recognising their autonomy.

The National Front outlawed strikes and responded with repression, refusing to see protests as expressions of valid concerns. Increasingly, the government interpreted local political dynamics through the lens of the Cold War, resorting to anticommunism to discredit unionists and framing strikes as "communist manipulation" (75). Anticommunism has been a powerful driving force and organising concept for Colombian elites throughout history. Borda (2012) has shown how successive Colombian governments have framed the internal conflict through "shared cosmovisions" with Washington in order to win US political, military and financial support to suppress their internal disorder, and Gómez-Suárez (2019, forthcoming)

charts the use of this discourse nationally as a cohesive identity for the right and justification for violence against the left throughout the twentieth century. Building on her previous research on the School of the Americas (Gill 2004), Gill's ethnographic study adds depth to these national stories: in 1971, 36 workers, including the entire directorate of the Syndicated Worker Union (USO), were tried and jailed by a secret military court. What is so crucial about this is that it shows what was destroyed was not just a viable political left—it was a whole social and cultural ecosystem of multi-sector organisation and solidarity.

The third period charts the evolution of the dirty war and paramilitarism, and the advent of neoliberalism, from the 1980s to just before the signing of the 2016 peace accord. A crucial factor was political decentralisation, begun in 1985 by President Belisario Betancur as a concession to the FARC in his failed peace process; then the 1991 Constitution devolved administrative and fiscal functions to municipalities. Decentralisation was consistent with “the free-market policy reforms endorsed by the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank that, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, drove more and more working people into poverty around Latin America and the world,” writes Gill (100). César Gaviria's government in 1990 passed a series of laws which legalised temporary labour contracts and made it easier for employers to hire and fire workers, created a private pension system, expanded private healthcare and social security, deregulated trade, lowered tariff barriers, liberalised financial institutions, and decentralised public spending, in parallel to mass privatisation of public enterprises between 1989-1994 (p101).

This intensified regional tensions, but protest was violently suppressed by the expansion of paramilitarism, which as Gill writes, was “the midwife of neoliberalism” (102). In the 1980s and 1990s paramilitary violence swept the country, connected through a fluid “perpetrator bloc” (Gómez-Suárez 2015) comprising the military, politicians, drug-traffickers and land-owners. Journalists, trade unionists, social movement leaders and left-wing politicians were assassinated, including three presidential candidates and 5000 members of the Patriotic Union (UP) party, which emerged as a political alternative from the peace talks with Betancur. In the early 2000s, Barrancabermeja lived through a full-scale invasion and occupation by one of the most powerful paramilitary groups, the Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB).

As drug-trafficking surged, infusing the paramilitaries, insurgencies, and the state, and degraded the conflict, the anticommunist counterinsurgency agenda fused with the US war on drugs. Borda's conceptualisation of this as the construction a

“shared cosmovision” with Washington is helpful here: the Pastrana government (1998-2002) framed the Colombian conflict as part of the Cold War and the war on drugs. In 2000, Plan Colombia was approved, which saw Colombia becoming the third largest recipient of American military aid, after Israel and Egypt, for a total of 1043.7 million dollars, 68% of which was dedicated to the military and the police (Borda Guzmán 2012, 71). Borda suggests Pastrana’s “real objective” was “obtaining American military resources to combat the internal opposition and implant a clearly anti-democratic Conservative regime” (2012, 58-9). The systematic discursive connection between insurgency and drug-trafficking was followed, after 9/11, by another successful discursive linkage of the Colombian insurgencies as part of a new dimension of global terrorism (Borda Guzmán 2012, 59).

The BCB took over Barrancabermeja in 2003, and decentralisation allowed them to capture municipal, provincial and national elected offices. Clientelism had existed before—the National Front co-opted the poor through promises of resources and new public services—but under paramilitary control, “threats and intimidation played a more important role in getting out the vote” (163). Paramilitarism became deeply embedded in the life of the city’s inhabitants. Here Gill joins other ethnographic accounts of everyday culture under regimes of paramilitary control such as Taussig (2003), Madariaga (2006), and the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH 2012), and reveals their influence over the hiring practices of employers, their creation of crippling debt dependencies, protection rackets, and the use of *normas de convivencia*, norms of coexistence. These included curfews, the regulation of clothing (no earrings or long hair on men; no miniskirts on women), and the outlawing of drug consumption, prostitution and homosexuality. This was underwritten by the threat of brutal and often public violence, effectively creating a *de facto* sovereignty with the monopoly of force and the power to let people live, or kill those they considered subversive, especially connected to the left, like trade unionists or people engaging in social protest, all under a veil of impunity.

This destroyed the already weakened social fabric. Cynicism, disillusionment and social fragmentation spread, as well as extreme mistrust between neighbours, as people betrayed their friends and family under pressure and threat. New generations came of age in a context of reduced employment opportunities, deepening economic insecurities, new forms of consumption, lack of political alternatives, and the booming cocaine economy dangling ‘easy money’ and pathways to wealth and status before them, facilitating paramilitary recruitment (111).

Coca-Cola, which had a bottling factory in Barrancabermeja, cut the number of full-time unionised workers by 74%, and increased subcontracted workers. Corporate bullying was used to get people to accept buy-out deals. A new sector of dispossessed workers emerged, expanding the informal economy; many ended up as temp workers, in conditions of extreme vulnerability and insecurity, and forcing people to compete with each other for unstable, low-paid work. Workers who spoke out were murdered. Coca-Cola dismissed this as product of Colombia's civil war. But several multinational companies in Colombia were linked to paramilitarism: Coca-Cola, Drummond Corporation, British Petroleum, Occidental Petroleum, and of course Chiquita Brands, which was found responsible in 2007 in US courts for financing paramilitary groups. This was the crystallisation of what Gill convincingly terms "armed neoliberalism" (19).

In 2005, following the paramilitaries' demobilisation, "a newly sanitized institutional state reemerged in defense of a neoliberal social order that had been created by paramilitary violence and counterinsurgency and that was undemocratic to the core" (182). With the crushing of all the left-wing alternatives, human rights emerged as the only option left for people in Barrancabermeja to articulate their claims on the state. Gill tells us that many local activists would not have chosen to frame their struggles in terms of human rights, "if the ferocious repression had not shattered their world, torn individuals from relationships of solidarity, and forced them to build new alliances and support networks" (186).

Human rights defence centred on the *denuncia*, the public denouncement of paramilitary threats, assassinations and alliances with government, to demand that the state implement its own promises; but human rights activists of course also became targeted, and they turned to new strategies of protection such as international accompaniment (Mahony and Eguren 1997). As human rights discourse expanded globally, diverse groups of social justice advocates in Colombia appealed to international courts and networks, and international aid flowed to organisations in Colombia that articulated their agendas through these terms. But in order for *denuncias* to be credible, activists had to "separate themselves from any appearance of being 'political'" (193). In Barrancabermeja, class-based forms of political protest were destroyed, and older utopian visions of socialism discredited (189), as social groups drew on the idea and practice of human rights "as they maneuvered to stay alive amid the ferocious repression targeted against them" (188).

## III.

Gill's stunning book ends with a final chapter that reflects on the impact of human rights discourse in Colombia in terms of restricting "the range of interpretations through which the dirty war, past and present, was understood", by creating a simplistic polarity between armed actors—the perpetrators of violence—and an amorphous civil society—the passive, individualised victims of political violence. She writes:

This nomenclature obscured histories of class conflict and mobilization...[and] did a disservice to the history of insurgent-pueblo relationships that were in fact supportive of the broad-based labor and civic demands of the progressive movement. The silencing of past forms of contentious politics complicated discussions about the social, political and economic cleavages and diverse forms of political mobilization that continued to drive the conflict. (196)

This powerful critique, which she lobbies even at the 2013 *Basta Ya!* report by the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH 2013), is a thought-provoking reflection which signals one of the key fault-lines that continues to divide Colombian society today: the competing historical narratives about the conflict. Some sectors of society see the insurgencies as having mobilised around legitimate political demands, which echoed and co-existed in complex ways with the demands of popular organisations across the country. This historical interpretation allows for the possibility of a negotiated peace, and for the FARC's participation in politics. Other sectors of society reject that possibility, because they cannot see the armed left in the country as having any historical legitimacy: a historical narrative closer to the Washington-Bogotá 'shared cosmovision' in which the FARC are depicted as narco-terrorists.

Gill's argument that even though the discourse of human rights is anchored in international solidarity, it actually obscures this fault-line, poses a challenging question to the future of social organisation in Colombia: what next? Many social movements today, as the Duque administration increasingly fails to deliver on the promises enshrined in the 2016 peace accord, are mobilising around the organising concept of protecting the peace process. Yet hundreds of social leaders have been killed, including in the Middle Magdalena valley, and perpetrators, presumed to be inheritors of the paramilitary groups, largely go unpunished. International scholarship on Colombia today must straddle different scales of historical analysis: maintaining the complexity so skilfully rendered by Gill on one hand, while simultaneously zooming out to a simpler master narrative, and asking: are we witnessing the repetition of history again, with this new cycle of violence?



Gill, summarising the contributions of anthropological scholarship on the state and on sovereignty to her depiction of Barrancabermeja, writes, “the formal fiction of nation-state sovereignty and national control” in Colombia masks “the imperial power of the United States by maintaining its invisibility, even as its corporations, security forces, diplomats, and aid programs intrude into the ability of client states to control economic activity, regulate social life, and command territory”, problematising the question of what and where the state is located (Gill 2016, 20). We, foreign citizens, are implicated, we are *involved* in Colombia, and what Gill finds in the context of the conflict continues to hold true in the context of the recent peace process. Oil, Coca-Cola, neoliberal policy ideas, military aid, global narratives of anticommunism, cocaine, human rights discourse, international political, intellectual and financial support to the peace process – all these things exist as relationships between Colombia and elsewhere. We cannot conceive of any place as bounded (Ferguson and Gupta 1992), as disconnected from us. This is a trans-local story (Trouillot 2001).

And what of international scholars? What about *our* involvement, and what do we do now? “People in this city always fight back” says one of Gill’s interlocutors (245). I believe this powerful depiction of how political violence and neoliberalism are connected, and the provocative critique of human rights discourse, makes this book required reading for any scholar of Colombia. But I wonder, what does it mean to write publicly about the failure of social movements, to depict this grim history in terms of decline, failure and fall? Would any of Gill’s courageous, still-fighting interlocutors talk about the failures of their own struggles?

Today, as killings increase weekly, I worry about condemning as ‘failed’ those who are putting their lives on the line to stand strong for what they believe in. International academics working on Colombia today need to ask ourselves difficult questions: if human rights discourse watered down the demands of Colombian activists and the dreams of real social transformation, how and in what terms can we best communicate our critical analysis of their struggles to a wider public? What are the implications of the terms that we choose? And how can our scholarship resound beyond the ivory tower, and contribute to policy-making and to social debate within Colombia, while maintaining a nuanced analysis of the multiple workings of power that oppress and undermine those who, across Colombia’s different regions and realities, are working for peace?

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