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Review/Reseña

Maria Clemencia Ramírez. *Between the Guerrillas and the State: The Cocalero Movement, Citizenship, and Identity in the Colombian Amazon*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Social movements, the FARC, and the State: Contesting Civil Society in Putumayo

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María Clemencia Ramírez's study on the mobilization of coca growers in Colombia's western Amazon is a portrait of a social movement in a region marginalized by geography and history. The study was first published in 2001 as *Entre el estado y la guerrilla: identidad y ciudadanía en el movimiento de los campesinos cocaleros del Putumayo* (Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia: Colciencias) with an online edition available through the Biblioteca Virtual of the Biblioteca Luis Ángel

Arango.¹ This edition, ably translated by Andy Klatt, includes updates on events of the last decade but remains centered on the years between 1995 and 2001. From the peripheral vantage provided by her ethnographic research in Putumayo, and through a wealth of information on quotidian events, Ramírez documents the multi-faceted nature of contemporary Colombian conflict. In this sense the work offers a primer on the workings of national politics.

Putumayo is a part of Colombia's Amazon, a region that has long been viewed as an untamed, perhaps untamable, space. From its emergence into world consciousness as the home of a savage rubber extraction industry, to its role as the destination of the protagonist of the 1924 novel *La Vorágine* by José Eustasio Rivera, to the present, the western Amazon has remained part of the Colombian periphery. This marginalization is both literal, as evidenced in the discussion of the paucity of transportation infrastructure, and symbolic. Referencing this history, Ramírez argues that the state's insistence that cocalero interests in the Putumayo are illegitimate is based as much on the ingrained and widespread understanding that the region is inherently uncivilized as it is on recent developments relating to drug production and trafficking.

The first chapter describes the region and the history of migration to it, the arrival of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the development of coca cultivations since the 1970s, and the more recent arrival of paramilitary groups. Ramírez also sketches the political geography of the Putumayo and the Baja Bota area in the neighboring department of Cauca, where she conducted fieldwork. By tracing the history of migration to the Putumayo back to the early decades of the twentieth century, Ramírez challenges the assertion, used to deny regional claims to active citizenship, that all society there is a product of coca cultivation and the drug trade. Dating the FARC's arrival to the region in the late 1970s, that is, prior to the arrival of coca as an important crop, makes the point that the politics of marginalization have been in play for decades. In this discussion Ramírez documents the ways that the guerrillas

¹(<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/politica/estadoyguerrilla/index.htm>).

drew on the peasant population for recruits and often worked in the general interests of *campesinos*. Only after establishing these points does she discuss the rise of coca cultivation in the 1980s spurring the arrival of more migrants, paramilitaries, and state security forces. The complexity of the resulting alliances, clashes, conflicts of interests, and tactical shifts captures a great deal of what has happened across Colombia over the last several decades. The chapter includes a number of excellent maps, which are very useful for getting a sense of the region.

Chapter two continues in an introductory vein, describing Putumayo's internal heterogeneity, adding new theoretical concerns, and walking the reader through the development of coca cultivation in the area. This last story leads into a description of how coca is grown and processed, as well as a careful description of the related work regimes. The sections describing smallholding patterns, the labor regime of coca growing and harvesting, and the production of coca paste are excellent. Readers who are less enthusiastic about the more theoretical elements of the study may find that these passages alone make the book a worthwhile read. Here the book contributes to the expanding fields of drug scholarship and commodity studies, while maintaining an emphasis on life in Putumayo.

From here Ramírez turns to a discussion of daily violence, posing the question of whether coca farming is inevitably linked to violent practices. This question may seem odd, as it is difficult to consider international drug trafficking as an industry or trade that is not inherently violent. But Ramírez is asking the question within the context of Colombian scholarship, where violence is its own field and *violentólogos* comprise a notable portion of both the academy and public intellectuals. Simply addressing this unanswerable question undermines the received wisdom that efforts to suppress drug production are a logical state response to regional disorder.

Chapters three and four narrate the history of social movements in Putumayo. Chapter three takes the story back to the 1970s. Here the study moves from examining themes that might be explored in any region of Latin America, such as the emergence of civic organizations contesting systematic marginalization, to those operating across Colombia, such as the

impact of constitutional reforms on these movements or the rise of human rights as an organizing principal, or those specific to a coca producing region. One table in particular (Table 7, 88-89) illustrates the complex range of social actions taking place between 1980 and 1996. It documents a chronology where campesinos, residents, teachers, and Indigenous people used strikes, takeovers, and other mobilizations to press the municipal, departmental, and national governments on a range of concerns. However, by the mid-1990s concerns over the impact of fumigation programs intended to eradicate coca became the focus of most such movements.

The emergence of a *cocalero* movement from this wide range of organizations is presented as a logical outcome. In setting out this story, Ramírez articulates a central point of the study, “the notion of citizenship mediates the paradoxes within the cocalero movement, which derives its identity not from its opposition to the state but from the social and political exclusion of its members *by* that state” (111). Here the story follows a narrative that weaves in the role of the military in the late 1990s, the division between rural and urban spaces in the region, the role of the FARC, and the emergence of a new collective identity, which found expression in the Civic Movement. For foreign readers, especially those in the U.S., the relationships that existed between cocalero leaders and the FARC may stand out as one of the most important points of the chapter. But for Ramírez the more important point is how those relationships fed the growth of this social movement evident in cocaleros’ successfully mounting of public marches in order to pressure the government on a variety of issues.

Chapter five examines how the marches initiated a continual process of cocalero engagement with the state. In the middle of 1996, for example, the marches turned into a strike involving tens of thousands of demonstrators in the municipality of Puerto Asís. Negotiations between the Civic Movement and the National Government ran for several months, ultimately producing the “Comprehensive Emergency Development Plan for a Coca-free Putumayo Sustained in an Economy of Solidarity,” with both sides claiming that the agreement represented a victory. Ramírez points to the agreement as the moment the movement succeeded in

claiming the “right to have rights,” a significant achievement considering that denying the residents of Putumayo merit the gifts of civilization, and by extension that their human rights merit defending, has long been a part of the region’s marginalization.” This scope of this new claim is tempered by the fact that, “In this conflict-ridden region, the right to life and the right to peace had to be explicitly fought for” (166).

Chapter six “Competing States or Competing Governments?” addresses some of the particulars of how the state fails to maintain a functional presence in this region. After considering state fragmentation and differentiation, particularly between the national and local state, the chapter considers the various ways that the FARC claimed and used its authority, while simultaneously supporting local efforts to hold the national state accountable for delivering services. Ramírez examines the particulars of FARC authority, the Civic Movement’s use of the FARC even as it sought greater autonomy, and the policies of the central government to argue that local state power is best understood as a complex process. This argument, though somewhat buried, is one of the guiding points of the study. If the stakes of the conflicted nature of state authority were not so high, some of the practices produced by the state’s absence would be comic. For example, when seeking to control the local population and prevent paramilitary infiltration, the FARC required coca producers to join Community Action Committees while also demanding that those joining present an official, government issued, *cédula*. The elliptical narrative that explains these moments of overlap and fragmentation produced by the strategies of competing institutional actors, confusing though it may be, provides an accurate and insightful, description of Colombian politics.

Chapter seven examines the Civic Movement in Putumayo in the late 1990s, when it worked to establish increased autonomy from the FARC even as, after 1997, paramilitaries began to operate with increasing visibility and violence. Chapter eight examines these dynamics in light of Plan Colombia and charts the decline of the Civic Movement from the mid-1990s, partially due to increased violence. The specifics of the narrative, particularly the points involving distinct towns or organizations, remain relatively dense as the chronology of the study ends. However, even readers

unable to follow the onslaught of acronyms or the way that policy initiatives coming out of both Bogotá and Washington D.C. interact, will understand how these force shaped life in the region. In a sense Plan Colombia fits with the long history of ideas about what to do with the Colombian Amazon, it was conceived with very little reference to on the ground reality.

The book is a superb documentation of regional life, local agency, and national politics. At times one of its greatest strengths, the encyclopedic detailing of life in Putumayo, makes it daunting for uninitiated readers to track all of the actors involved. The sections covering events after 2001 are not as fully realized as the earlier chapters, and at times chronological descriptions are spread across separate chapters. These, however, are minor critiques of an excellent, theoretically rich, and fully realized study of life in a region rarely considered as a place of legitimate politics and interests, about people whose labor centers on a commodity deemed illegitimate.