

Popular Struggles and the Space of the State in Colombia/ Luchas populares y el espacio del estado in Colombia

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After a spate of predictions that forecast the demise of the state by the inexorable forces of neoliberal capitalism, more recent studies argue that global, national, and popular pressures are transforming and reconfiguring states (e.g., Brenner 2004; Gupta and Sharma 2006). Several scholars have also suggested that state formation does not always occur as a centralized, top-down process (e.g., Nugent 1997; Das and Poole 2004). They note that the capacity of states—especially those of the former third world—to claim effective control over a territory in the name of the nation and its citizens has always been limited. State power, they suggest, is more typically fragmented and distributed among various kinds of “informal sovereignties” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006), “state proxies” (Krupa 2010), “parastates” (Gill 2009), “proto-states” (Bejarano and Pizzarro 2004), and “shadow powers” (Gledhill 1999; Nordstrom 2000). Furthermore, the long arm of imperial states and associated institutions (e.g., militaries, International Monetary Fund, transnational corporations) has typically constrained the political and economic sovereignty of subordinate nation states (Ferguson 2005; Gill 2004).

State formation is thus an ongoing process that produces and must contend with differently organized forms of territorial control in which groups that wield sovereign power (i.e., the ability to dictate the terms of social life) may operate alongside, with, or against state representatives and institutions (Nordstrom 2000; Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Such complex geographies of power are not static. They are formed and reformed within broader relational networks in which place-specific forms of power arise (Carbonella 2005). The research raises questions about how particular social and political geographies are constructed historically, how rights are defined and distributed to different groups, and how working people adopt strategies to press their claims on state institutions and local power holders at particular moments.

This paper addresses these issues by focusing on Colombia’s Middle Magdalena region, particularly the oil-refining center of Barrancabermeja. It is organized around an overview of three periods in the history of the city in which a transnational oil company, guerrilla insurgencies, and right-wing paramilitaries regulated social life at particular moments in the areas under their control. It argues that shifting political geographies and local forms of sovereignty turned on the control of resources and the making, unmaking, and remaking of a working class through

processes of dispossession, disorganization, and incorporation. The protests, organizational forms, and political cultures of a heterogeneous working class created opportunities for maneuver and advanced projects for change that constantly unsettled dominant configurations of power.

In the Time of the TROCO

In Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, the conception of the state as a “container” of political and economic processes has been less tenable than in Europe and the United States because of the long reach of the U.S. imperial state and the corporations tied to it. After the Tropical Oil Company (TROCO)—a subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey—received a territorial concession in 1919 to create an enclave of oil extraction, it operated only nominally under the jurisdiction of the Colombian state, which arrogated virtual sovereignty to it to extract oil, mobilize a labor force, and organize social life in and around Barrancabermeja. The TROCO filled a void left by the central state in a remote frontier region, where the growth of the enclave economy was integrated more tightly with the corporation’s North American headquarters than with Colombia (Vega 2009a).

The development of the oil enclave hinged on the creation and concentration of a labor force, and, by the late 1920s, Barrancabermeja contained the largest population of urban proletarians of any Colombian city. The formation of an oil proletariat took place through the extermination of indigenous peoples and the dispossession of peasants who claimed land in the Middle Magdalena region, on the one hand, and the promise of relatively high wages, which drew workers to Barrancabermeja from other regions, on the other hand. It was shaped by a continuous history of violent labor struggles that molded a working class political culture that was anti-imperialist from birth. Unlike U.S.-based firms whose employers could call upon nationalism to rally community and worker loyalty, nationalism in Barrancabermeja pulled in the opposite direction. Major labor struggles of the 1920s were rooted in a strong sense of anti-imperialism, and labor organizers in the Middle Magdalena region extolled the oil workers as the defenders of Colombia’s national sovereignty (Vega et al 2009a).

Anti-imperialist nationalism was tied to the obvious links between an abusive foreign company and state authorities, and the stark class divisions between the emergent working class and the foreign managers of “El TROCO” fueled worker militancy. These divisions were most visible in a pattern of segregated residential housing. U.S. and Canadian managers and technicians

lived in the “barrio staff,” which contained shaded, North American-style houses surrounded by spacious, well-tended lawns. Foreign residents enjoyed an array of services, including a hospital and a golf course for their exclusive use. A fence separated this gilded ghetto from the impoverished working class neighborhoods and encampments, where housing was rudimentary, basic services were nonexistent, and diseases, such as malaria, yellow fever, and intestinal disorders, were pervasive.

Patrolled by company guards from within the TROCO compound and monitored by the national police from without, the fence symbolized the hardening class and national boundaries that were dividing Barrancabermeja. Over the course of the 1920s, the installation of an army base and local, departmental, and national police forces reinforced these divisions, intensified the presence of the repressive arm of the Colombian state, and laid the basis for the continued militarization of the city over the course of the 20th century (Vega 2002:208). Working class anti-imperialism arose, too, from the 1903 loss of Panama to the United States, which promoted fears that the company would steal Barrancabermeja and claim it as a U.S. possession, and from the 21-year U.S. occupation of Nicaragua (1912-1933). Moreover, a 1918 strike by banana workers and their subsequent massacre in the United Fruit Company-dominated enclave on the Atlantic coast further stoked anti-imperialist sympathies, as the banana zone suffered from many of the same social and economic problems as Barrancabermeja.

To be a worker in Barrancabermeja thus became not just a wage issue; it also acquired a political dimension that fused various demands and united different groups of working people. Oil workers insisted that the Colombian state take back control of its oil resources and provide them with dignified working conditions that included wage increases, improvements in food and hygiene, an 8-hour workday, and Sunday as a day of rest. In addition, they sought to ease the intense control that the TROCO exercised over their lives by asserting the right to read the national press in the work camps and insisting on the distribution of meals in company facilities without the presence of the national police, and they built bonds of solidarity to petty urban merchants and peasants in the surrounding region.

During two major strikes against the TROCO in 1924 and 1927, the oil workers insisted on the right of Colombian merchants to operate on company territory, and they opposed the TROCO’s attempt to monopolize local commerce by excluding merchants from its compound. Merchants, in turn, who depended on workers for business, gave money to support the labor strikes. The TROCO also ran roughshod over peasants, pushing them off recently settled lands in a

bid to control access to the subsoil and to create a supply of laborers for its operations. Not surprisingly, land conflicts between peasants, who lacked legal titles to their plots, and the TROCO intensified during the 1920s, but because many oil workers were themselves semi-proletarianized peasants, or recently dispossessed of their lands, supporting the land claims of rural cultivators blended easily with demands for better working conditions in the oil fields. Peasants, in turn, provided food to sustain protesting workers and helped to operate soup kitchens in Barrancabermeja during the strikes (Vega 2002).

Although the strikes were ultimately suppressed, and workers could not force the TROCO to negotiate with their union until well into the 1930s, the protests underscored the radical political culture and new forms of solidarity that were developing in the city and shaping the Unión Sindical Obrera (USO)—Colombia’s largest and most militant union—, which subsequently became the focal point of leftist and anti-imperialist organizing. This radical political culture erupted again, in 1948, when Barrancabermeja experienced a brief, 10-day period of “popular power,” during which an autonomous local government arose that was based on worker and community support. The uprising followed a strike against the TROCO, which refused to relinquish oil operations to the Colombian government after the expiration of its contract. It was also a reaction to the April 9th murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá, which set off riots between members of the Liberal and Conservative parties in many parts of the country and marked the onset of the prolonged mid-20th century period of bloodletting known as “La Violencia.” Although the Colombian army soon curtailed the fleeting experiment in direct democracy, the labor struggles led to the expansion of the central state in Barrancabermeja through the creation of the state-owned Empresa Colombiana de Petróleos (ECOPETROL), following the nationalization of Colombian oil in 1951, and the subsequent conquest of important health, education, and pension benefits for workers affiliated with the oil company.

The Colombian State and Popular Struggles

By the middle decades of the 20th century, oil workers in Barrancabermeja had achieved strong workplace bargaining power rooted in their location within a strategic, capital intensive industry vulnerable to strikes and disruptions in the flow of oil. Although the oil workers constituted the core of the city’s militant labor movement, the growth of the Colombian state between 1960 and 1990 generated an increase in the number of public sector employees, including

teachers, civil servants, and health care and telecommunications workers, who became part of the labor movement as well. At the same time, Barrancabermeja was changing from an oil enclave to an urban center in which the accumulation of surplus workers posed a problem for the state. Neither ECOPETROL nor other enterprises could provide jobs to the hundreds of dispossessed peasant migrants driven from the countryside by landlord pressure and violence associated with the consolidation of large-scale commercial agriculture. The disparity between a profitable, national oil company and its well-paid workforce, on the one hand, and a municipality unable to respond to the needs of surplus laborers who resided in peripheral neighborhoods declared “illegal,” on the other hand, highlighted the state’s role in the production of inequalities and the differential entitlements of citizenship that flowed from them.

As Carbonella and Kasmir note, scholarly studies that juxtapose a so-called labor aristocracy to “the poor” or the “informal sector,” rather than the un- or the underemployed, complicate our understanding of the historical processes and relationships that created such hierarchies and how working people themselves have sought to build solidarity (Carbonella and Kasmir 2008 & 2010). In Barrancabermeja, the USO downplayed the differences between the oil workers of ECOPETROL and the growing population of surplus workers; indeed, it created unity through a political program that supported peasants affected by oil exploration, contributed to the infrastructural development of poor neighborhoods, backed the civic struggles of the urban population, and continued to defend the oil industry and national sovereignty against foreign capital (Delgado 2006). This practice enabled the USO to forge alliances with various groups, including peasants, students, teachers, women, and marginalized urbanites, and to mobilize them. Many oil workers, in fact, lived side-by-side with recent immigrants in neighborhoods where dusty, unpaved roads turned to quagmires in the rain and went dark at night, streams of black sewage flowed through open ditches; and mosquito-infested marshes were the only source of drinking water.

Popular struggles of the 1960s and 1970s turned less on strictly labor demands than on the widely experienced need for public services. Barrancabermeja was a hotbed of political ideas and projects of the Left, and the political effervescence was reflected in the Coordinadora Popular, in which the USO played a leading part. The Coordinadora brought together unions, political parties, church groups, and community organizations. It, in turn, was tied to working class districts through a series of neighborhood committees, which elected representatives in popular assemblies (Vega et al 2009b). Catholic clerics influenced by liberation theology also nurtured progressive

political sensibilities through the formation of Christian base communities in immigrant neighborhoods, where the political thinking and practice of a generation of activists were forged. Although leftist insurgencies never won broad popular backing in Colombia, as they did in Nicaragua and El Salvador, they did develop regional and urban support bases, particularly in Barrancabermeja where guerrilla militias controlled the northeast and southeast sectors of the city for several years. Even though the relationship between the various insurgent groups and the urban popular organizations was not seamless, many residents of Barrancabermeja's working class neighborhoods wanted what the guerrillas claimed to be fighting for (e.g., control of Colombia's national resources, public services, and better working conditions) and looked to the insurgents for protection against state security forces.

The solidarity among the disparate groups that composed the Coordinadora was evident in a number of "civic strikes" that extended over a period of several decades. Two major civic strikes in 1975 and 1977 organized around the issue of water. Through a series of marches, assemblies, and roadblocks, the Coordinadora pressured the local government to provide better services and negotiated with it on behalf of urban residents. For many people in the city, the experience of solidarity through involvement with a dense network of interconnected organizations provided a sense of dignity and a refuge from the daily humiliations that they experienced at work and in their neighborhoods. Progressive politics gave rise to what Grandin describes as "insurgent individualism," an individual sense of belonging to a larger social collectivity and a way of engaging the state and linking personal aspirations to larger national and international movements, while remaining connected to others in Barrancabermeja (Grandin 2004:180-181). Many people saw hope for change in the upsurge of the revolutionary left in Colombia, the 1979 victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the possibility of an FMLN victory in El Salvador.

All of this began to change in the 1980s, when a wave of violence crashed over the Middle Magdalena region. Right-wing paramilitaries, tied to drug traffickers, regional power holders, and the Colombian military, unleashed a dirty war against Barrancabermeja's popular organizations, unions, and civic groups. The violence intensified between 1998 and 2002, when a branch of the now defunct Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia took control of the city. Broad demands that the state protect its natural resources and take care of its citizens through the provision of decent wages, working conditions, and social services were eclipsed by more limited demands for "human rights," which gradually became disarticulated from a broader, collective vision of political and economic transformation and focused on the preservation of individual life.

Labor and the Space of the Neoliberal State

Given the strength, militancy and dynamism of Barrancabermeja's social movement and the broad claims that it made for change—even revolutionary change—, it should come as no surprise that disorganizing unions and popular organizations became a key objective of the state, especially as it moved to adopt neoliberal policies in the 1990s. The paramilitary take over of Barrancabermeja in 2002 took place with the complicity of state security force, which had assigned the disreputable acts of fighting a dirty war to private armies whose existence the state denied. The terror unleashed in Barrancabermeja mirrored the violence targeted against working people in other parts of the country, where over three thousand trade unionists had died—mostly at the hands of the paramilitaries—by the end of the 20th century, as a decades-long civil war in heated up. The country acquired the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist.

Paramilitary rule became intertwined with the politics of neoliberalism.¹ Paramilitaries re-territorialized power in the city through a campaign of bloodshed that expelled the guerrilla militias from working class neighborhoods and murdered and displaced thousands of people. Survivors became susceptible to incorporation into new, authoritarian relationships of power under paramilitary control, as labor subcontracting intensified and the privatization of public enterprises generated more unemployment and raised the price of services. Paramilitaries took over labor subcontracting to ECOPETROL and other businesses and then determined who worked and who remained unemployed. They wove exploitative relationships of credit and debt out of the vulnerabilities of residents—vulnerabilities, which to a considerable degree, they themselves had created—and these relationships allowed them to launder drug profits and siphon wealth out of the local economy. Protests against deteriorating working conditions and the privatization of public services were brutally repressed (Gill 2009).

The intense violence and the widespread impunity that accompanied it silenced the most dynamic leaders and ruptured the personal and institutional connections that had united working people. The USO lost power as dozens of its leaders were murdered or prosecuted for ties to the insurgency, and other unions ceased to exist. Neighborhood councils fell under paramilitary control and became vehicles to mobilize residents, while social activity was strictly controlled in working class neighborhoods. Contesting the “shadow powers” that metastasized in the city

became a new and frightening challenge that posed two vexing questions: where is the space of the state under neoliberalism, and what sorts of strategies are required to confront it.

For several years, the paramilitaries operated as a virtual parastate in which the private power of paramilitarism merged with the state itself, and organized crime fused with the politics of counterinsurgency. They manipulated elections by openly or tacitly supporting certain candidates, while intimidating others and dictating to people how to vote. Aspiring candidates for political office sought out their support. The paramilitaries tapped into municipal treasuries, dictated who received government contracts and demanded kickbacks. They also monopolized the illegal cocaine traffic and the theft and sale of gasoline from ECOPETROL, and they operated a variety of legal businesses, such as subcontracting agencies, private security firms, and transportation enterprises. And finally, they ran protection rackets that extorted payments from merchants and demanded financial “contributions” from residents to insure their safety (Gill 2009; Hylton 2006).

Not surprisingly, their ability to accumulate wealth and power within the institutional apparatus of the state eventually threatened the state’s control over the exercise of violence. While the paramilitaries and their allies in the state security forces were clearing the Middle Magdalena region of guerrillas and destroying reformist political alternatives, government officials willfully ignored the paramilitary pursuit of private accumulation through the cocaine traffic and the dispossession of small holders. They did so even as they backed a U.S.-financed campaign to wipe out coca leaf cultivation and extradite major drug traffickers. As the paramilitaries outgrew their role as the state’s clandestine enforcers and claimed power for themselves, the presence of mercenary armies that murdered civilians became untenable for the state, which sought to control the violence that it had unleashed to defeat the insurgencies through a government-brokered amnesty program, condemned by national and international human rights groups for institutionalizing impunity.

For working people in Barrancabermeja, the result is what Romero calls a “durable disorder” (Romero 2007) in which security masquerades as peace in a fractured city, where the strike has ceased to be an effective weapon of resistance. Because of the brutal repression, and starting as early as the 1980s, labor leaders and community activists have built national and international alliances to the burgeoning human rights movement in order to provide them with protection and to circumvent the paramilitaries and the official Colombian state. Although the liberal concept of human rights has not been central to leftist traditions in Barrancabermeja, and many activists once criticized it for failing to address the main reasons for social conflicts, the

violent dismantling of the Left has moved most activists to understand human rights as both an immediate concern and a strategy to generate international support.ⁱⁱ Human rights have increasingly become part of what William Roseberry calls the “language of contention” (Roseberry 1994). Rights-based opposition, however, has offered less a vision of a better world than a critique of what is wrong with the present, and it has little to say about what a collective political project might look like. Nevertheless, older concepts—including Marxist concepts—continue to inform analyses of social life, and they are animated by the new power of socialist discourse, specifically Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s articulation of a “socialism for the 21st century.”

Conclusion

Over the last century, the production of a distinctive social geography in and around Barrancabermeja generated various territorially based forms of sovereign power that regulated social life to a considerable degree and operated in complex relationships to state institutions and representatives. Its changing dimensions have been shaped by a transnational oil company, guerrilla insurgencies, and right-wing paramilitaries, as well as the geopolitics of oil production and a particularly violent history of labor and community struggles that continue to unfold in the city. Through these struggles, a heterogeneous working class has been made and remade in constant relations to changing projects of rule. Who wields power and fashions legitimacy in the future will depend on whether working people can rebuild the social, institutional and personal ties to each other. It will also depend on their ability to develop wider coalitions and alliances to provide them with both broad societal credibility and the ability to oppose violent repression and the impunity that accompanies it.

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END NOTES

i. See Chomsky (2008:181-221); Hylton 2007; and Hristov 2009 for more discussion of how paramilitarism and neoliberalism became intertwined in other parts of Colombia.

ii See Tate (2007) and Markarian (2005) for discussion of the emergence of human rights activism in Colombia and among Uruguayan exiles respectively.