

Gutiérrez Sanín, Francisco. 2019. *Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitaries and the State in Colombia (1982-2007)*. Oxford: Peter Lang [480 pp.]

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CW is the most ambitious study to date of the Colombian paramilitaries, by one of the leading analysts of Colombian politics. While the literature on this subject is for the most part based on journalistic sources and reports by human rights organizations, *CW* combines these with in-depth interviews, survey data, and official statistics, as well as—arguably the book’s greatest strength—an original textual data set compiled from the mass of judicial confessions that were elicited as part of the demobilization agreement. Alongside new data, *CW* brings a distinctly analytic perspective to this dark episode of Colombian history. In contrast, an ungenerous observer might characterize the existing literature as more descriptive and argumentative than truly analytic. There are, to be sure, many excellent monographs on paramilitary experiences in specific Colombian regions or towns, but they are typically tacked onto one of two (highly politicized) interpretations:

- A. The “rotten-apple” theory, according to which the collusion between the paramilitaries and the state must be blamed on a few crooked or opportunistic politicians and militaries.
- B. “Evil functionalism”, which assumes a fully symbiotic relationship between the paramilitaries and a secretly authoritarian state.

CW avoids both extremes, without falling into the sort of relativistic “nuance” that insists on the broad-ranging local variations of the phenomenon. The book shows that, despite these variations, virtually all paramilitary groups followed comparable, “boom and bust” trajectories, because they occupied structurally equivalent positions within *local patronage networks*. Initially, violent specialists were brought into specific territories by coalitions of cattle ranchers, politicians, and military commanders to provide armed security against insurgent groups. But they gradually alienated these allies by 1) engaging in predatory violence to finance their own expansion, and 2) claiming a more direct role for themselves in the institutional arena (e.g., demanding a seat at the negotiations between the government and the guerrillas, appropriating local public services, and even running in national legislative elections). All paramilitary formations thus faced a similar strategic dilemma: expand at the cost of losing social support; or risk defeat at the hand of rivals (especially other, more aggressive paramilitary groups) if they did not.

The argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to paramilitary organizations small and large, north and south of the country. True, there is no paramilitary “essence”: branching as they did onto local patronage networks, the paramilitaries were “by design” parochially variegated. Yet, they shared more than a mere family resemblance, precisely because of their social embeddedness in cross-cutting networks of political, economic, and military

elites, which connected the rural localities where the paramilitaries operated to the urban power centers from which they initially took money, arms, legal protection, strategic information, and ideological justification.

Contrary to what both the “rotten-apple” theory and “evil functionalism” assume, the relationship between the paramilitaries and the state mostly occurred *outside* formal bureaucracies, at the level of cross-cutting patronage networks. One of the author’s central assumptions is that these networks are the core infrastructure (in M. Mann’s sense) of the Colombian state—not since forever, by the way, but rather since the Liberal Republic (1930-1946), which introduced a complex system of discretionary appointments for a host of municipal and regional positions, effectively nationalizing patronage for local elites (pp. 56-57; 308-309).¹ Far from being a remnant of 19th century feudalism, then, this is a fairly modern development. The Colombian paramilitaries, in turn, emerged roughly at the time when this whole infrastructure was being dramatically reshaped by the decentralizing reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. In a context of intense wrangling between members of these patronage networks over the new attributions and opportunities each was hoping to obtain within a more decentralized infrastructure, paramilitaries got enormous leeway for murdering civilians, land grabbing, and misappropriation of public funds and services.

CW completes this structuralist analysis with a more interpretive argument about the elective affinity between the spirit of paramilitarism and the ethos of Liberal Democracy. Counter-intuitively, the paramilitaries were not authoritarian. They embraced electoral competition, the political pluralism ushered in by the 1991 Constitution, and understood themselves to be defending democratic institutions against communist insurgencies. This certainly did not stop them from being extremely violent; but this orientation towards ruthless coercion was something they shared with elected and landed elites (and not just ideologically). In the end, just as Weber famously argued that capitalism, once jumpstarted, can go on indefinitely without the motivational reinforcement initially provided by religious anguishes, so too, Colombian elites, once settled into a more decentralized infrastructure, eventually discovered that they could dispense with the costly and unreliable services provided by the paramilitaries. And so, they negotiated the latter’s demobilization, while they themselves remained in place.

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¹ See *La Destrucción de una República* for the full argument.