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Colombia:

# Peace policy and the reconstruction of politics

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**Land is at the centre of the peace negotiations in Havana between Colombia's Santos government and the FARC guerrilla movement. It is no accident that the first point on the agenda is recognizing the centrality of the land to the Colombian conflict. It should not be forgotten that the FARC arose in the form of the Frente Nacional as a means of peasant self-defence in answer to the despoliation of the land by the big estate owners and against the military offensive of an authoritarian regime that repressed the demands of the peasant masses and which in later decades adapted the institutional system to the demands of international capitalism and neoliberal globalization around the binomial: latifundio - "state terror". Although the subject of land does not alone explain the armed conflict, it expresses in every way the form in which the type of prevailing political regime in Colombia was constituted, and is central to understanding the history and configuration of political domination.**

## The recurrence of the latifundio

As happened in most of the peripheral countries, the development of capitalism in Colombia was based on the political and economic power of the latifundio having opened an endless number of recurrent tensions involving the state, the makeup of the regions and local powers, and the aspirations of the peasant movement. As the accumulation model consolidated around what is known as "import substitution", a contradiction appeared between the extension and deepening of the commodification of the economy and the permanence of the model based on the big latifundio, which has sought to keep to the peasant proprietors in premodern forms of work, particularly in the coffee zones, amidst competition around the international price of the coffee, the construction of infrastructures and the impact of globalization, which have triggered the gigantic increase in land prices. This contradiction underlies the peasant movement and the mobilizations and struggles for recovery of the land, a process that has produced a crisis in the conventional hacienda based model and confronted "hacienda seigneurialism" as Antonio Garc a Nossa calls it.

The government of Lopez Pumarejo, with law 200, introduced in 1936, managed to calm peasant radicalism by reducing adverse possession in estates occupied without opposition of the proprietor for thirty to five years. This concession was granted in a narrow context limited in time to occupations taking place before 1935, and did not recognise inequality in access to rural property and the appropriation of uncultivated land in the border zones. The same law established the loss of the capacity of proprietor in the absence of exploitation of one's estates for a period of 10 years; nevertheless, the provision did not have significant consequences.

Law 200 had as its corollary the expulsion of settlers, renters and tenant farmers in the zones of conflict and the reduction of the cultivated area to avoid clashes with the renters, a situation that forced food imports. In 1994 law 100 closed the possibilities of challenging the ownership of the haciendas while normalizing sharecropping. This historical process embodies the configuration of the Colombian state once the cycle of the capitalist modernization was consolidated. The modernized state basically preserved the skeleton and spirit of the hacendista-authoritarian and clerical system that legitimized the "Regeneration" of Rafael N  ez in 1886.

## The corporate state form

Designed under the political weight of an elitist bipartisanism that defined the political-military action of the classes in power and within the framework of a modernization that took impulse under conservative hegemony (1886-1930), the Colombian version of the modern state appeared marked by a precarious institutionality, incapable of integrating the population under the assumptions of liberal philosophy; and forced to compensate this deficit, the Catholic church worked to guarantee its privileges and to give continuity to the Concordat with the Vatican.

However, these political and ideological, historical and institutional rationales were sustained in a pattern of accumulation of capital, whose basis has been, in the first instance, the export of coffee, controlled by the National Coffee Federation, making it possible to obtain significant foreign currencies that determined a form of development and a type of industrialization. This specific weight at the economic level was projected at the political plane preventing the Colombian state from appropriating the profits from foreign trade and making public decisions outside of the private interests of fractions of capital. The ominous consequence of this process was the crystallization of a certain model of corporate state, whose patrimonialist characteristics weakened the modern meaning of the public and democracy. The formation of the business associations that represented these fractions of capital formalized this corporatism. In certain way, this “capture of the State” on the part of private groups has in the long run led to the dominion of the mafias, corruption and the clientelist regime.

## The hacienda-based seigneurial republic and bipartisanism

After the killing of Gaitán in 1948, this system of political domination entered into serious contradictions and acquired the face of a “hacienda-based seigneurial republic” that generated institutional chaos, “autonomization” and confrontation of local powers, with an incapacity of the state to exert the monopoly of armed force, so that the elites and the conservative government, in particular, would use the police and the first paramilitary groups, then called “chulavitas” or “pájaros”, to maintain power and control. In the countryside, again in the coffee growing zones and in a conjuncture of favourable international prices for coffee, the violence was concentrated and produced peasant displacement on a great scale.

Beyond noting this historical process, we should stress the fact that the degraded mass violence destroyed values of collective reference and social ties, opening a recurrent phase of despoliation in the countryside that is not yet finished, with indiscriminate robbery of land, massive displacement from the countryside to the city, promoted and executed both by paramilitarism and neoliberal policies. What history confirms is that the political-institutional operation is sustained in the binomial: latifundio-state terror.

It should not be forgotten, for example, that the Rojas Pinilla dictatorship (1953-57) was born from a bipartisan agreement in which the then Liberal leadership committed the Liberal guerrillas to a demobilization. In the end, their main leaders were assassinated. The Frente Nacional arose from another bipartisan agreement in which the people responsible for the violence of the previous years enjoyed impunity and the despoliation of the land was legalized. The association between agrarian latifundistas and capitalists deepened the industrialization of the countryside in some regions in accordance with the requirements of the import substitution model imposed at the end of the 1970s.

Nevertheless, from the initial years of the Frente Nacional it was evident the unproductive latifundio had consolidated in the structure of rural ownership, precisely in the most fertile regions. Technical reports from international bodies (Currie and Lebret) emphasized this situation and argued it was irrational before the necessities of capitalist development, where extensive cattle ranching was located in the fertile plains and most of the peasants were crowded onto the mountain slopes in conditions of poverty and precariousness. In this same period, once the triumph of the Cuban revolution was consolidated, United States government reoriented their policies towards “subversive containment”, opening a space of agrarian reforming policy and combining repression and social aid in the region.

# Counter-insurgent agrarian reform

Against this background the Liberal Party led by Carlos Lleras Restrepo advocated a policy of development of capitalism in the countryside based on small ownership which was considered more socially integratory. Law 135 of 1961 created the National Institute of Agrarian Reform, INCORA. Agrarian policies during the 1960s continued along this course, to the point that it was under the government of Lleras Restrepo that one of the most authentic peasant movements developed under the slogan “the land to those who work it”. The government’s idea was to integrate the peasant movement into the state, creating a small farmers’ organisation, the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesino, ANUC. The measures taken by Lleras included means for combating rural migration to the cities, promoting and strengthening smallholdings.

The “Pact of Chicoral” signed in 1972 between Colombia’s then president, Misael Pastrana, and Alfonso López Michelsen, leader of the Liberal Party, signalled the closing of the cycle of attempts at reform in the countryside, which in reality had little lasting effect. For the rest, the official policy of Pastrana’s government expressed in the “Four Strategies” development underestimated the question of rural migration to the cities, offering the construction of similar housing and economic zones not requiring high professional qualifications as an alternative to unemployment.

In this complex scenario, the most deplorable para-militarism flourished as a weapon against the democratic peasant movement for land, with killings and displacement which contributed to strengthening the position of the dominant landowners, consolidating the agrarian counter-reform through the violent appropriation of more than 7 million hectares and the strengthening of paramilitary power in the regions. This counter-reform served as an instrument of accumulation through the laundering of financial assets while dispossessing more than 4 million peasants and other inhabitants of the rural areas.

The growth of self-defence groups organised by the paramilitaries took place in the context of the policy of state terror, with official authorization (Decree 3398 of 1968), and operating with the support of sectors of the military high command. In this sense, this process led to the configuration of the Colombian army as a shock force for internal confrontation and for violent imposition to maintain the social order. This army was modelled precisely to confront workers’ revolts of the 1920s and consolidated as a counter-insurgency body post 1945 with US military aid, around the doctrine of anti-Communism. Subordination to the Pentagon has been a structural factor in its structuring, training and ideological training. At the same time, this dependency has determined the unconditional nature of Colombian diplomacy towards the US empire. During the Frente Nacional and under the state of emergency known for a long time as the “State of Siege”, the bipartisan institutions gave the army the legal power to deal with the political rebellion and social struggles through the imposition of military criminal.

## The desertion of Colombian liberalism

Any explanation of the specific political power of the latifundio should look at the role of liberalism. The government of López Pumarejo (1934-38 and 1942-45) showed its capacity to adapt a liberal modernizing project, and the so-called “revolution on the march” led to some transformations in state functioning, particularly in employment and taxation policy; however, their scope was meagre enough. For example the confrontation with the latifundio never took place, despite the ringing declarations preceding the introduction of law 200. The precarious configuration of an industrial bourgeoisie prevented the consolidation of a material force which would contribute to dissolving the latifundista regime. The defeat of the peasant movement prevented the concretisation of this possibility, while para-militarism became the force destroying the democratic peasant movement. The project of modernity ended having only a diffuse echo inside the “late modernization” of globalised and transnational capital and of social and political violence.

The incomprehension of the reactionary character of the Colombian bourgeoisie and its intimate articulation with the Empire has generated much political confusion and equivocation. There is a certain mythology on the Colombian left concerning the supposed progressive role of the López Pumarejo government; however, this mythology only served to justify a strategy of class conciliation with the government of López Pumarejo as promoted by the recently founded Communist Party, and which the reformist left has maintained time and again to validate its alliance with a supposed “national bourgeoisie”.

The Colombian liberal bourgeoisie has been extremely conservative. “Centenarismo” lasted only one, insignificant, liberal generation, which renounced the ideas of democratic and social liberalism. What followed immediately at the end of the 1940s was the attempt by the sector of Eduardo Santos (Liberal president from 1938-42) to consolidate the agreements with Conservatism and the Catholic church against the spectre of Communism and any structural reform of the Colombian state. After the defeat of the second government of López Pumarejo, there came the presidency of Mariano Ospina Pérez, one of the Conservative figures most opposed to reform, who manoeuvred in favour of institutional continuity after the assassination of the popular caudillo, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

Subsequent historic events led to the abandonment of liberalism in the process of the construction of modernization. In the initial years of the period of Conservative terror known as the “Violencia”, the Liberal Party went along with the decision of the Liberal guerrillas to rebel. Once they had succeeded in winning support from the masses, they urged them to support the pact of reconciliation without guarantees, abandoning them to their fate. Shortly afterwards their leaders were assassinated with the complicity of their former mentors. These sectors would support the bipartisan pact as an oligarchic and authoritarian model; they would continue a sort of modernization based on the latifundio and would maintain intact the “seigneurial republic”. They would then become advocates of the dogmatic application of neoliberal globalization. The historic note of the backward character of Colombian liberalism is obvious. However, an illusion continues of a supposed reforming liberalism with the vain idea of “democratic development” and the formation of a supposed progressive political front to put an end to the systematic violence into which Colombia has been plunged, as well as to backwardness, state terror and the anti-democratic system. This strategy is obviously erroneous and has only served to undermine the capacity for rebellion and resistance of the masses.

## 2. The insurgency: resistance and territorial power

The FARC emerged as a peasant self-defence group of Liberal peasants against the Conservative regime and the private groups who had unleashed the “state terror”. Its form of social cohesion was articulated on the model of familial traditions and neighbourhood. When the guerrillas of the plains were demobilised with the fatal consequences that followed they abandoned this option and in confrontation with Rojas Pinilla and the Frente Nacional evolved towards a Communist position, fusing in the so called “Bloque sur”. From 1957-1964 they passed from the struggle between parties to peasant resistance against the state, which cemented its ideological nature, established in the platform which gave birth to the FARC in 1964. The government of Guillermo León Valencia then reacted with a vast military plan called “operation Marquetalia”, one of the military actions of greatest scope carried out across the region in this epoch, advised and directed directly by the US. The FARC survived, consolidating its political-military structure, while initiating a process of implantation in the south east of the country.

## Peasant resistance

Taking this process into account is important given that the global ideological offensive, associating the military with the so called “anti-terrorist struggle”, has established, at the internal level, a false symmetry between guerrilla

struggle and paramilitarism, intended to elude the responsibility of “state terror”, and seeking moreover to eradicate from the collective memory the history of the resistance of the peasant movement. Independently of ideological and political differences, with the political project and actions of FARC, there is the historic fact of their link with the peasant resistance. Not to admit this is to follow the scenario established by the Pentagon and the Colombian oligarchic circles.

During the 1980s when the country became a producer of coca leaves and the crisis of the substitutionist model in the countryside produced a peasant displacement towards the areas where FARC had installed itself, and the latter found economic and population bases to articulate and centralize a hitherto dispersed presence. In the 1990s the confrontation on the ground with the paramilitaries obliged a change of military strategy, leading to control of the territories as a support base for the war economy; also obliging the FARC to impose taxes on the purchase and sale of coca at the point of production, becoming thus the intermediary of the illegal capital which obtained it as a raw material.

The leadership of the FARC also succeeded in positing an alternative discourse which renders the state responsible for the cultivation of coca in these regions because of its long term abandonment of the farmers and poor of the countryside. The coca producing markets in this were valorised according to this orientation. The territorial positioning of FARC explains why a new possibility of peace negotiations has opened since December 5, 2012. In Havana, the FARC have posed the question of the constitucionalization of peasant territories with their own internal political organization, which means a qualitative change in comparative terms in relation to the proposals they have advanced in previous peace negotiations.

## The land in the context of globalization

The period which began with a decision of the US empire during the Nixon presidency to pass from a mode of political domination inside a system of unequal states, defined in the second world war, to the hegemony of the dollar in the international financial system, a decision that produced the termination of the dollar-gold parity with its complementary means (variable exchange rates, deregulation of capital flows), ended in the mid-80s with the control by some of the big financial intermediaries (hedge funds, investment banks, pension funds, insurance companies) of the production and distribution of an ever more concentrated wealth, a control realized through the capital markets. This historic turn determines the generalised rentier character of capitalism in the current phase of the accumulation of capital. Within this framework, the investments of the transnational groups take the form of securities on the financial markets.

This functioning of the capital markets relates to the importance of investments associated with the land, the reason for which the transnational companies located in primary production (agriculture, oil and mining) have made high profits in recent years from the soaring prices of commodities, as the result of a “boom” of securities in the sector, caused by deliberate decisions of the US financial authorities. This is one of the reasons why, in the Colombian case, there is a pressure from international capital on the government of Santos and the rural employers to increase agricultural investment.

However, the significance of the land is not just due to conjunctural reasons but also to structural conditions. Neoliberal globalization produces a new international division of labour. This is articulated around the big transnational corporations which have transformed the majority of international trade into an intra-company trade (transactions between subsidiaries and parent companies). Enrique Arceo sums this crucial transformation up very well: “It is a fundamental change in the centralization of management and the specialisation of subsidiaries which makes possible the passage from provision by the subsidiaries of products for the markets where they are implanted, to the production of intermediary goods or spare parts in the context of a global productive process which develops

in the regional or world market (...)We have gone from an international division of labour centred in the exchange of products manufactured by the centre for primary products from the periphery, to one based on the exchange of manufactured products whose production requires different proportions of capital and qualified labour” (“Neoliberalism y Sectores dominantes, CLACSO, Buenos Aires, 2006, p.37).

Arceo adds that the peripheral bourgeoisies in this new transnational productive scenario must insert themselves in conditions of “subcontractors in global networks”. The particularity of unequal geographical development produced by the division of labour in the phase of globalized capital is based on the fact that Latin America, having experienced during the 1980s the debt crisis, has been supplanted by Asia (China, India and the “Asian Tigers” mainly) in the new scenario of transnational productive organization and is condemned to refocus on the primary sector.

### 3. The game of power and the negotiations table

These considerations explain why the Santos government and the rural entrepreneurs claim that political negotiations with the FARC offer the opportunity to adapt to the requirements of globalized capital. The first step to doing this is to formalize land ownership after decades of dispossession. That requires legitimating internally, and before the international community, the theme of the displaced. Law 1448 of 2011 adopted by Congress at the request of the President before the beginning of the Havana negotiations, limits the use of land returned to the victims, respects the mining and agro-industrial mega-projects by excluding them from restitution and defines an indemnification by means of public debt securities for displaced people who do not wish to return to their lands.

A normative instrument of these characteristics has limitations for negotiating with a guerrilla force which claims to represent thousands of peasants involved in production over four million hectares. This reality obliges a negotiation that includes the theme of territorial organization. At the negotiations table, the governmental proposal turns around this regional theme towards focalization in the areas where the guerrillas are present, avoiding confrontation with the latifundistas in the rest of the country. At the same time the government claims to ensure political order in these territories so as guarantee to big capital the same corporatist control it enjoys in other regions.

Corporatist control of the territories allows the territorial integration of the rural population, to the extent that one of the specificities defining globalized capital is the geographical or spatial accumulation by which it appropriates and organizes under its logic of functioning the regional economic circuit as a whole (production, distribution and consumption). In the case of agriculture this type of accumulation takes the form of productive chains which can function through associative alliances independently of the size or type of property. Multiple reports by international institutions on this theme can be cited. According to the FAO, “Productive alliances involve different actors in the productive processes. These actors, associating in a voluntary form to exchange resources, generating commitments in the pursuit of a common objective, whose main virtue is to aggregate value...” (Pineros Vargas Silva, Acosta Avila Luis Alejandro, Tartanal Florence, “Alianzas Productivas en agronegocios experiencias de la FAO en America Latina y El Caribe”, FAO, Santiago de Chile, 2012). Capturing this added value becomes a decisive question given that the major part of this value is currently obtained outside of the big estates.

Rafael Mejía-a, President of the farming organisation the SAC, echoes these orientations of the spokespersons of global capital. “Therefore, rural development with a territorial focus is an integral concept that includes aspects like the promotion of agricultural production, initiatives which promote food safety, education, infrastructure, health and the development of the rural capacities of citizens, the strengthening of rural institutions and the protection of vulnerable groups, all this in the context of a rural space...”. On this basis the concept of associative alliances that includes rural entrepreneurs as well as small and medium proprietors, the indigenous and Afro-descendant population is formulated for the execution of the productive chain.

In the context of the spatial accumulation of capital the peasant economy of small owners should not only be respected, but promoted. Former minister Rudolf Hommes, basing himself on the research of José Leibovich according to which land productivity in the minifundios (measured according to the indicated of weight and annual yield per hectare) is 40 times greater than in the big estates, 28 times greater than that of medium producers and six time greater than that of small proprietors; Hommes concludes that with the ceding of “10 per cent of the land to cultivators in minifundios or small holdings, agricultural production could increase by 16 per cent if productivity were maintained. And if 20 per cent were transferred, it would increase agro-industrial production by around 32 per cent...” (“La productividad de los campesinos”, *El Tiempo*, January 18, 2013). He adds however that the lands to be divided among the minifundistas should be taken from the National Drugs Fund.

In this proposal there is an implicit aspect which should be uncovered. The forms of production and the technological processes that accompany them will be those of a predatory capital using fertilizers based on petrol chemicals and which will encourage production using GMOs. There will be expropriation of the right to soil use of the peasants, and an end to the familial economy based on ancestral knowledge. In a word, it will officially sanction the passage from the minifundista and smallholder to the capitalist rural micro-entrepreneur, integrated in the commodification of the land, the technical assistance and credit system of financial capital. In regions of settlement under the influence of the FARC, this proposal of integration would be accompanied by a process of transition through the substitution of illicit cultivation to that of crops with a market value.

The same logic of spatial functioning also applies in the reserved peasant areas. The state recognises them to articulate the commodified space. Juan Manuel Ospina, ex-director of the INCODER, has noted “The reserved peasant areas will be assimilated to indigenous reservations and the Afro-descendant collectives, combining collective ownership and housing and familial plots; scenarios for an active community life which is the motor of progress and democracy; [they will] be opened up in an organised manner to the markets, and to the productive chains articulated with the agro-industrial sector...”.

The FARC has made other proposals for the peasant reserved areas, associated with the concept of peasant collective territories which will have different standards of functioning to those of market transactions and with political autonomy in their decisions as is the case with the indigenous reservations.

Consolidating a project with these characteristics requires acting in terms of spatial resistance. A plural political unity needs to be built between all the oppressed of the countryside in the perspective of alternative regional political powers that can articulate with time with the urban rebellions to produced social transformation. This spatial resistance also implies the need to implement collectively forms of economic exchange different from those of the capitalist market. In a word, it is about affirming a process of “partial delinking” from globalization. Hence the importance of peace and the sense of social and political transformation.

## 4. The historic meaning of peace and the construction of the Common Good

The peace negotiations in Havana represent a historic event for Colombia to be able to undertake processes of democratic transformation. Aware of the enormous difficulty and the fierce opposition of reactionary sectors, this peace process has the advantage of posing strategic questions for the construction of new possibilities for political and social change. Transnational capital will insist on the logic of “real subsumption” and will wish to limit its scope to commodification, capitalization and entrepreneurialization, without taking account of social links, ancestral knowledge and popular cultures. The élites will seek to minimize its projection and reduce their objectives to the anticipated failure of the peace process. The government and the oligarchy refuse systematically any changed in the macroeconomic and political order. The will for peace of the various actors also has its limits. The government,



harassed by the offensive of the project of the “democratic centre” paramilitary led by former president Uribe, the outbreak of social protest before the resurgence of neoliberal policies and the proximity of the presidential elections, will continue to experience turbulence. For all parties it will be a complex challenge. Different kinds of pact could emerge. They could benefit all the participants, without definitive strategic results. Also they could lead to a transitional agreement which could encourage a democratic movement in favor of large scale transformations. But this could also be one of those peace processes that Colombia has already experienced and that history will record as a temporary armistice prior to new conflicts and new peace processes.

Obviously some of the weaknesses of the current peace process encourage the oligarchy. In particular, the absence of a vigorous social, civil and democratic movement for peace which supports the agenda of negotiations has created the impression that it amounts to an agreement between warriors. The precarity of citizen participation and the absence of public enthusiasm sow doubt and malaise. But the major weakness lies in the dispersal of the left, in its deep division and lack of strategic thinking. In particular, the predominance of an instrumentalist approach has hindered the understanding of the historic dimensions of the current peace process. In this context, the projection of the peace negotiations requires a left totally committed to a political solution to the armed conflict. For this, it would be necessary to adopt another logic, reinventing politics. The corporatist and instrumentalist vision should be replaced by a politics of the “common good”. In the same way, the social movements, regional resistances, mobilizations and solidarity require the construction of a national project for democratic change. In this complex scenario the construction of the “common good” is not a sum of demands, but a project of multiple interpellations and collective creations on the basis of the ideas of democracy, wellbeing and peace. It is necessary to insist on the need to change the structure of the latifundista state, change the regime of the big landowners and go beyond the “seigneurial republic”.

On this basis, the peace process must be supported by the convening of a National Constituent Assembly. No peace will be possible without the popular will. The fear of some sectors that this Assembly will be a leap in the dark benefiting the opponents of the 1991 Constitution is without political, moral and social basis. On the contrary, it will be the historic scenario to create a “route map” to big democratic transformations and the space to consolidate alternative social, regional and popular aspirations. It is then about rethinking peace as a historic process of democratic change. On this horizon rests the construction of the common good and of Colombia as a democratic country.