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Review

Empire's Island in a Sea of Struggle

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In this text numbers in normal brackets refer to page numbers in the book. Numbers in square brackets are end notes.

On May 28, 2006 Álvaro Uribe Vélez was re-elected as President of Colombia for a second term, to the dismay of the Colombian, Latin American, and international Left. The victory was met with unmitigated glee by the US state and other imperialist powers, who, in their Manichean worldview of good and evil, see in Uribe an Angel of State Terror with which to smash the skulls of those devils-in-human flesh, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. Together with Felipe Calderón in Mexico, Uribe represents, for foreign imperialists and domestic capitalists alike, a hope for reactionary counter-measures against the rising tide of popular struggle in Latin America.

In Forrest Hylton's excellent book, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, we learn that prior to becoming President, Uribe passed two fruitful years as governor of the department of Antioquia. Under his guardianship, the anti-guerrilla militias, known as Convivirs (Rural Vigilance Cooperatives), displaced approximately 200,000 peasants (p.93). In the banana export-enclaves of the same department, the homicide rate took suggestive turns corresponding to Uribe's presence as governor: "in 1995, it doubled to 800; in 1996, 1,200; and in 1997, 700. In 1998, the year after Uribe's departure, it dipped to 300" (p.94).

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/colombia_poor.jpg]

Life for Colombia's poor majority is a million miles from that of the affluent minority...

In her brutally compelling summary of Uribe's meaning for contemporary Colombia, sociologist Jasmin Hristov writes: "Uribe's re-election signifies: 1) The continuation of a system characterized by unequal, exploitative, alienating and exclusionary social relations; 2) The aggravation of the country's subordinate position in the global capitalist hierarchy; 3) The consolidation of US imperial (military and economic) presence; 4) The legalization of illegality, a fusion of the legal and the illegal in such a creative way, that the government can claim the paramilitary no longer exists, when in reality it has profoundly penetrated the very fabric of state institutions and the national economy; 5) The initiation of a new phase of the model: the unified Colombian para-narco-state; 6) The invigoration of social struggles." [1]

Contemporary Colombia clearly ranks as one of the most difficult settings in which to wage resistance for social justice. At the same time, the abundance of injustice demands such resistance. It is widely known, for example, that Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. In its 2006 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reports, "Colombia as usual ensured that the death toll was highest in the Americas, with 70 deaths, a significant reduction compared to last year's total of 99, but still an appalling indictment of the government's failure or lack of good will to protect its workers." [2] Since 1991, more than 2,000 labour leaders have been killed. Ninety-seven percent of the homicides against unionists have been perpetrated by military and paramilitary actors, with three percent being carried out by guerrillas and other armed actors. [3]

Terror and Displacement

According to Hylton, three million people have been displaced in the twenty-first century in Colombia (4). Two million of those were displaced from mining regions, dominated by transnational capital intent on dispossessing Colombians of their natural resource wealth. [4] The size of the internally displaced population - to adopt the common euphemism - is second only to Sudan, with Afro-Colombians constituting a majority of the displaced, and the indigenous

population disproportionately featured amongst these internal refugees (6). The overlapping paramilitaries and official armed forces have meted out state terror, political violence, and massacres, taking 3,000 to 4,000 lives annually during the 1990s. According to William Avilés, “Human rights activists, political leaders on the left, trade unionists and the peasants perceived to be supporting the guerrilla insurgency represented the vast majority of these victims.” [5] The central guerrilla actors, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the, much smaller, National Liberation Army (ELN), have contributed atrocities of their own. But these pale in comparison to the brutality of imperially-backed Colombian state, and para-state terror. (Table I helps in understanding this dynamic).

Table I. Share of Responsibility for Non-Combatant Deaths and Forced Disappearances

	1993	1997	2000
Guerrillas	28%	23.5%	16.3%
Security Forces	54%	7.4%	4.6%
Paramilitary	18%	69%	79.2%

Source: William Avilés. 2003. “Paramilitarism and Colombia’s Low Intensity Democracy,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38: 403. Derived from the Colombian Commission of Jurists.

Sixty four percent of the population lives below the poverty line, 23 percent in absolute poverty. Just under 2 percent of the population owns roughly 53 percent of the land. [6] Eleven million of the country’s 43,593,000 citizens do not meet their basic food requirements. [7] Adequate health care, education, and employment are the exclusive perks of the privileged elite.

Such a setting is conducive to simplistic explanations which reinforce the interests of the powerful. Hylton points out, “In policy-making circles in Washington and Bogotá, it is often argued that Colombia suffers from a culture of violence, as if Colombians had an innate propensity to shed one another’s blood. As commonly presented, this is an ahistorical and tautological explanation of why, in contrast to neighbors characterized by centre-Left governments and popular mobilization, Colombian politics are characterized by high levels of terror” (8).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/paramils.jpg>]

Uniforms of the right-wing paramilitary death squads look remarkably official...

If we are to attempt to transcend and counter the racist “explanations” on offer from Washington and Bogotá, Evil Hour in Colombia will prove an invaluable guide. Forrest Hylton is one of the most serious, enlightening, and committed commentators on Latin American affairs today. In the interest of full disclosure, he is also a friend and comrade. His new book demonstrates a deep and penetrating understanding of the sociocultural, economic, and political post-Independence history of Colombia. Moreover, it is a powerful indictment of the imperial practices of the US state.

History from Below... and Above

Evil Hour begins in 1848 and takes us to 2006, highlighting historical continuities and novel developments alike. Hylton often compares Colombia’s politics to those of its neighbours, as well as in relation to the impositions of the US state, particularly with the onset of the Cold War and, more recently, Plan Colombia. The aim of the book is to clarify the historical depth of the contemporary civil war against the current trends of official amnesia.

Hylton also aims to provide a social history from below, unlike the existing “historical syntheses,” which, “give short

shrift to radical-popular movements, emphasizing instead actions of elite groups, the two political parties [Liberals and Conservatives] they dominated, and the rise of the nation state" (7). He shows a particular sensitivity to the popular struggles of Afro-Colombian and indigenous movements, as well as the racism and oppression under which they continue to live in the contemporary scenario. In so doing, however, he does not omit class struggle from the story, but instead illustrates the profoundly racialized character of that struggle, as waged from above and below.

Here is one passage, spanning from 1860 to 1950, which captures these dynamics nicely: "As the coffee frontier was settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, sectors of the peasantry identified with whiteness and capitalist progress secured property rights and political incorporation into one of the two parties through networks of patronage and clientelism. The majority of peasants, as well as Afro-Colombian and indigenous reserves, had precarious claims to property rights, limited incorporation into the two parties, and lived under threat of violence and/or dispossession. When reforms from above coincided with mobilization from below in the 1860s, and again in the 1930s, landlords launched reactions in the countryside, mobilizing clients to protect racial-ethnic privileges, political monopoly, and the rule of property. These movements of counter-reform, like the radical-popular movements to which they responded, were locally and regionally organized. This reflected the nature of landed wealth, political power, and authority in Colombia - fractured and mostly rural through the 1950s" (9).

While Hylton therefore spends a significant portion of the text focusing on the processes of social history as seen from the bottom, he does not neglect the interaction between popular struggles from below, the erratic development and shifts of capitalism in Colombia, and the exploitative and oppressive tactics directed from above through the synergies of the state, paramilitary, bourgeoisie, and imperialism. To my mind, Hylton's methodology overcomes the problems of simple histories, written exclusively "from below," identified by the Canadian Marxist historian Bryan D. Palmer [8].

"The central claim of this book," Hylton writes, "is that to understand the Colombian civil war today, it is necessary to appreciate the multiple layers of previous conflicts and the accumulated weight of unresolved contradictions" (7). A good reason for historicizing the current context, too, is the fact that the "culture of violence" thesis becomes so patently absurd in the process. Hylton, points out, for example, that until the close of the nineteenth century, Colombia, rather than standing out for its mass violence, was in fact distinguished by its relative non-violence in comparison to countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina. If we take history seriously, furthermore, we will understand that, while today Colombia stands out as a beacon of reaction in amidst a hopeful - if contradictory - wave of popular struggle in Latin America, between the 1840s and 1870s the relationship between Colombia and the rest of the continent was precisely the inverse. For Hylton, these earlier popular struggles from below constitute part of the popular historical memory which is threatened with erasure by state terror and enforced amnesia. Nineteenth century revolts also help point to alternatives for renewed traditions of social struggle in the bleak contemporary setting.

Hylton demonstrates how during the "Age of Capital" (1848-75), "oppressed racial/ethnic groups and classes fought to claim places in the new republic," forging "political traditions that challenged slavery and ongoing processes of conquest." In bringing life to these struggles, Hylton helps to steer "us away from static, ahistorical images of a united, all-powerful landed oligarchy, ruling over a hapless, dependent peasantry, revealing more complex local and regional dynamics" (15). Again, according to Hylton, in "any search for a more peaceful, democratic, and equitable future, Colombians can look back to a political culture that featured ample channels for subaltern participation, from the 1850s through the 1870s" (22).

Coffee Capitalism, Reaction and Rebellion

Chapter 2 discusses the rise of coffee capitalism in the late nineteenth century, and the role of clientelism and repression as elite tactics for controlling would-be insurgents from below. Beginning in 1880, "the Regeneration initiated five decades of reaction" turning back the tide of "radical-popular democratic participation that a heterogeneous coalition of rural workers, provincial middle-class lawyers (*tinterillos*), and urban artisans opened up

after mid-century." Hylton discusses the origins and implications of the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1903), and the geography of the rise of coffee capitalism, centred in Antioquia. Conservative power meant reactionary rule, but forces of opposition also began to flourish.

The growth of urban labour was a product of capitalist development, and ideologies of socialism and anarcho-syndicalism were taking root. In 1926, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) was formed, breaking the political monopoly of the Liberals and Conservatives. The PSR helped organize "proletarian struggle in the multinational export enclaves of the Caribbean and along coffee frontiers" (29). 1928 featured the November-December banana workers' strike against United Fruit near Santa Marta, immortalized in Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In 1929, "the PSR's 'Bolsheviks of Llanobato' rose up in a failed insurrection in northern Tolima; the first explicitly socialist rebellion in Colombia..." Traditions of revolutionary party formation and mass action were being formed: "Indian peasant rebellion spread after 1914, organized labor struck the capitalist enclaves in oil and bananas after 1925, and a wave of multiethnic peasant land takeovers swept across the coffee frontiers from 1928. Radical-popular movements achieved greater independence and autonomy from the two parties than in the past, through direct action and the formation of revolutionary left parties" (30).

Liberal Politics, 1930-1946

Hylton then charts the "Liberal Pause" from 1930 to 1946. In particular, he brings out the character of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, and the social forces inspired by his "cross-class, multi-ethnic, and anti-elitist" nationalism (31). Gaitán was a figure brimming in contradiction. On the one hand, there was the "importance of gaitanismo's message of class struggle for rural proletarians, tenants, and sharecroppers excluded from property ownership... and the majority of urban workers outside the sphere of organized labour..." (35). On the other hand, Gaitán was wedded to the Liberal Party, and because he persisted in this ugly marriage he was unable to meet the demands of his constituency.

Gaitán was assassinated in 1948. While populism was taking off in much of the rest of Latin America in the 1940s, "In Colombia, it saw an aggressive Catholic counterrevolutionary assault on organized labour and radical peasant movements" (38). Said counterrevolution took the form of *la Violencia*, a period of "concentrated terror" in which some "300,000 people, 80 percent men, most of them illiterate peasants" were killed, while 2 million more were forcibly displaced (39). *La Violencia* (1946-1957), annihilated the legacy of Gaitán's nationalist populism and closed the door on "the chance of mass-based independent class politics beyond it" (48). In place of populism, traditions of wider, bolder, and indiscriminate state terror were introduced: "It was during *la Violencia* that the precedent for the bloody resolution of the agrarian question, through terror, expropriation, and dispossession, was established. Forms of cruelty that became widespread in late twentieth-century Colombia were institutionalized in Latin America's most regressive historical development at mid-century. They persisted as part of the cold war counterinsurgent repertoire, helping prepare the ground for endemic Left insurgency" (49).

The National Front

The National Front (1957-1982), was spawned from an agreement between the Liberals and Conservatives to share power at all levels of government while alternating the presidency between them. The Left was locked out, and coffee capitalism rebuilt out of the ashes of *la Violencia*. Anti-communism was the domestic doctrine unifying Liberals and Conservatives in Colombia, reinforced by the Cold War internationally. Protest from popular movements was effectively criminalized through state of siege legislation.

It was out of this poisonous environment that Left insurgencies were born in the 1960s and 1970s. The FARC, the most important guerrilla group, was officially named in 1966. Its "early success was the subordination of insurgent

organizational goals to demands and movements of frontier smallholders, tenants, and rural labourers" (57). The ELN also emerged in this period, devoted to the foco theory of Argentine revolutionary, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. According to Hylton, the ELN's middle-class, university-based leadership, "was convinced that, given the size of Colombia's peasantry, and its recent history of armed popular mobilization during la Violencia a small band of mobile guerrillas - in place of the working class and the peasantry - could trigger an insurrection that would lead to socialist revolution" (57). Finally, in 1967, the Maoist People's Liberation Army (EPL) was formed, believing that "in rural 'Third World' countries like Colombia, the peasantry, led by a vanguard party, would play the leading role in making socialist revolution" (58).

In urban Colombia, where a majority of Colombians lived by this stage, a new group, M-19, was formed in 1974. For M-19, the "goal was not the overthrow of capitalism or the Colombian state, but the opening up of the existing political system to electoral competition; in this, M-19 was similar to Castro's M-26 movement in pre-revolutionary Cuba" (62). In the cities of this period, activism and protest emerged centred around demands for basic services in the urban peripheral slums. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the crushing of these forms of dissent, under the iron-fisted reign of Liberal President, César Turbay Ayala. State-sanctioned death squads proliferated. Left insurgencies began to thrive as other forms of opposition were shutdown.

Important changes in the structure of the economy provided the material basis for these developments: "A major economic shift toward rent, speculation in land and urban real estate, and cocaine exports heralded the death of the coffee republic. By moving the productive base away from manufacturing and coffee exports, toward extractive export enclaves and coca frontiers, the multinational corporations, the narco-bourgeoisie, and technocratic politicians in charge of 'modernizing' and 'reforming' the Colombian state created the necessary conditions for guerrilla resurgence. Accelerating state and parastate repression provided sufficient conditions" (66).

The Electoral Left and Paramilitary Repression

In 1982, Conservative President Belisario Betancur opened a peace process with the Left insurgencies, "out of which a broad electoral Left, tied to the largest guerrilla insurgency, emerged as the first national-popular expression since gaitanismo" (67). Toward the end of 1985, the Patriotic Union (UP) was formed by the FARC, with the PCC as a "civilian front designed to help consolidate a power base within the formal political system prior to laying arms down" (72). The UP attracted supporters from a broader pool than the FARC. Its active militants, "worked for peace, social justice, and 'revolutionary change' through the electoral arena. In their commitment to finding a democratic path to revolution, they were similar to the Chilean UP of the 1960s and 1970s - and, if anything, more doomed" (72).

The Cattle Rancher's Association (FEDEGAN) played a leading role in orchestrating the paramilitary destruction of popular forces which were raising new demands during this period. "This meant," Hylton points out, "death to landless peasants, indebted smallholders, rural proletarians, and the urban movements for homes, services, and public education" (71). By 1987-1988, when the paramilitary forces had come into their own, homicide had become the leading cause of male deaths (75). In this context of official peace processes and political opening, accompanied all the while by paramilitary terror, the fate of the UP was predetermined: "... two years after its foundation, 500 UP militants, including presidential candidate Jaime Pardo Leal - who had won more than any Left candidate in Colombian history in 1986 - had been assassinated" (73).

In a late-twentieth-century, Colombian version of the processes of "primitive accumulation" that defined the bloody rise of capitalism in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, in the late 1980s, "paramilitaries erased the broad Left from the electoral map, reinforced clientelist political controls, and began to acquire vast landholdings, chiefly through massacre and expropriation" (78). Paramilitaries became increasingly integrated into the cocaine economy, and successfully penetrated the Liberal and Conservative parties, the various institutions of the state - including the military and police -, as well as legal sectors of the national economy.

The 1990s - Paramilitaries, Imperialism, and Neoliberalism

The 1990s brought with it growth in the numbers of and geographic territory controlled by the Left insurgencies, even greater growth in paramilitaries, imperial hubris in the form of the US “war on drugs,” and brutal neoliberal economic restructuring, which fueled all these developments.

César Gaviria was elected President in 1990. Educated at Harvard, Gaviria launched a fierce neoliberal assault on the popular economy. He “slashed the public sector workforce and set about privatizing health care and social security, establishing the autonomy of the Central Bank, liberalizing the currency and financial sector, reducing tariffs and import quotas, increasing turnover taxes, and flexibilizing labor. Oil exploration contracts were signed with the multinationals on even softer terms than before” (82). The concomitant collapse in traditional agricultural crops in the face of incredible rises in food and other imports made the narcotics industry an attractive choice for many dispossessed, unemployed peasants.

Under pressure from the US state's cynical foreign policy shift to “democracy promotion,” [9] according to William Avilés, “Colombia's transnational elite exerted greater efforts to limit the state's direct participation in repression in exchange for a more subdued and indirect role. What actually occurred in Colombia was the privatization of repression, whereby the responsibility for persecuting individuals and communities with suspected sympathies for the guerrilla movement was in large part shifted to private groups of armed civilians.” [10] On this score, Avilés's account seems more plausible than Hylton's.

Hylton suggests, “The US and Colombian governments turned a blind eye to the increasing reach of the paramilitaries, focusing instead on eliminating Left insurgencies by strengthening the Colombian military and police” (96) [11]. Stressing the confluence of low-intensity democracy promotion, neoliberal restructuring, and paramilitary and military terror, Hristov persuasively contends: “It is not a mere coincidence that the implementation of the neoliberal project has been accompanied by: enhancement in the capacity of the state's security apparatus and paramilitary groups; expansion of violence and human rights; and subjection of social movements to various extermination tactics.” [12] Paramilitary numbers doubled between 1997 and 2000 (95). Their terror tactics built upon preexisting high levels of political violence. Almost unfathomably, “In 1991, nearly 4,000 homicides were the cause of 42 percent of all deaths in Medellín, which had a rate of 325 per 100,000, more than five times higher than non-Colombian competitors like Rio, and eight times higher than São Paulo” (81-82). Increasingly, paramilitaries were responsible for waging violence against the Left, broadly conceived, as Table I illustrates.

If they couldn't match the paramilitary expansion rate, the central guerrilla insurgencies nonetheless grew in size in the 1990s. In 1978, the FARC held only 17 fronts in peripheral regions. By 1994, on the contrary, “it had 105 fronts and operated in 60 percent of Colombia's 1071 municipalities” (89). Two years later, the ELN could boast “4,000 and 5,000 combatants, extensive urban militias and support networks, and a presence in 350 municipalities. Protection rents, extortion, bank robbing, and kidnapping provided their chief sources of income” (89).

The Guerrillas

Hylton argues that the type of growth enjoyed by the FARC and ELN during this period was paradoxical: “During the 1990s, the two remaining insurgencies, the FARC and the ELN, exhibited the fundamental paradox of an increasing political delegitimation, accompanied by startling organizational growth” (86). Uncharacteristically, Hylton does not probe this paradox sufficiently. While we learn anecdotally about sectors of middle-class Left intellectuals distancing themselves from the guerrillas, such as Gabriel García Márquez, who along with others invited the FARC and the ELN to lay down their arms in 1992, the extent to which the “political legitimacy” of the guerrillas amongst the peasantry is at odds with peasant expansion in guerrilla numbers is not sufficiently explained with supporting

evidence.

Hylton is an incisive and fierce, but also realistic, critic of the FARC. The following passages are representative:

- “Until recently, FARC violence unfolded according to predictable, if ruthless, rules that could guarantee ‘order’ and ‘stability’ on the frontier, whereas narco-terror led to ‘chaos’ and ‘unpredictability,’ particularly where coca paste prices were concerned. In those frontier regions of the south and southeast colonized by peasants fleeing political violence and agrarian crisis in the highlands, the FARC took up tasks the state had failed to perform” (88),
- “As they expanded [in the 1990s], the FARC and the ELN underwent processes of bureaucratic rationalization - the principal aim of each organization was to consolidate and project itself” (89).
- “The FARC's ideology would be best described as ossified, militaristic Marxism mixed with progressive creole liberalism. It was the authoritarian social democracy proper to a tributary statelet based in the countryside and small towns” (98).
- “... by raising kidnapping, extortion, and selective assassination to new, atrocious proportions, in 2001-2, the FARC - and, to a much lesser extent, the ELN - helped the rise of a ‘strong-hand’ ruler like Uribe” (100).
- “The FARC's tactics, represented for many by the cylinder bombing of a church in Bojayá, Antioquia, in April 2002 - which incinerated 119 Afro-Colombian men, women, and children - made them far more disreputable than they had ever been before” (100) [13].
- “Compared to the Nasa in Cauca, the Peace Community of San José, or Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in the Chocó, the FARC and the counterinsurgency have impoverished, militarist visions of democracy, security, autonomy, and sovereignty” (136).

Hylton does not lose perspective, however: “Insurgent attacks on and intimidation of Afro-Colombian communities and indigenous reserves - however representative of the degradation of Colombia's armed conflict - pale in comparison to the percentage of human rights violations committed by the paramilitary AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)... Though insurgencies depend on terrorist tactics like bombings, kidnapping, selective assassination, and extortion, little is gained in understanding by applying the ‘terrorist’ label. To blame the bulk of the country's problems on the insurgency - fashionable [in] academia and the media - is to put the cart before the horse. It overlooks the fact that throughout modern history, state terror has provided the ‘oxygen’ without which insurgent terror ‘cannot combust for very long’ (3). [14]

Moreover, Hylton provides invaluable insights into some of the reasons underlying FARC's successful recruiting in the 1990s, in a context of neoliberal dispossession and paramilitary and military terror. To this end, one more lengthy quotation is deserved: “Lacking extensive transport and distribution networks, the FARC was in no position to compete with the AUC in international markets. But it offered food, clothing, employment, high-tech weaponry, a cell phone, and a monthly salary to impoverished rural youths who did not want to be government soldiers, peasant soldiers, spies, or paramilitaries. The average age of FARC combatants was nineteen, and they were paid \$90 per month” (89-90). Hylton points out, “Another element contributing to guerrilla growth was the breakdown of the rural family as a cultural-economic unit capable of sustaining and protecting its members. Neoliberalism in the midst of escalating warfare had created a generation of rural youth, without future horizons or personal security: the FARC and the ELN offered the possibility of both. Since options were exceeding limited for young women in the countryside, to a much greater extent than the ELN, the FARC offered opportunities for the exercise of political-military power, especially to those lacking secondary school education. Many uneducated young women in rural areas preferred the guerrillas to

the prospect of displacement, unemployment, or prostitution” (90).

Imperialism and the Uribe Phenomenon

Under the American administrations of Clinton and George W. Bush, the US provided over \$US 4 billion in “aid” over five years to the Colombian state by way of Plan Colombia. The ostensible aim of the mission was to up the anti in the “war on drugs.” However, an imperialist war - “America's Other War” [15] - on guerrillas and innocent civilians, best describes the plan in practice. The fact that 80 percent of this “aid” was explicitly directed to the military and police ensured that this would be the outcome. The US provided helicopters, tanks, planes, radar, satellite communications, and training to the Colombian military, all of which were employed against the FARC (101).

The reality of Colombia as the heartland of reaction in a sea of popular Latin American movements has not escaped American officials. Uribe's plan of “democratic security” in Colombia is seen from Washington as a stabilizing force in an Andean region of failed states, indigenous insurrection, toppled presidents, and radical populism. Colombia, moreover, is the US's third largest source of oil from Latin America after Venezuela and Mexico, and many of its probable reserves remain uncharted. “At stake,” with Plan Colombia, then, “was control of Colombia's future oil reserves - thought to be located in FARC territory - and the containment of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian revolution” (102). For the majority of Colombians on the ground, their geopolitical importance proved a curse: “Along with increasing land concentration, expropriation, and dispossession, aerial fumigation under Plan Colombia has been an enormously costly and destructive endeavor, causing widespread respiratory and skin infections in the civilian population, especially children and the elderly, killing licit and illicit crops, and poisoning rivers and soils” (118).

The last four chapters of *Evil Hour* brilliantly examine the contours of Uribe's Colombia, a brief portrait of which was provided at the outset of this review. While, for Hylton, “The current moment is surely one of Colombia's darkest,” he grounds his hope in Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and peace community resistance: “Surveying the Colombian past, we might draw hope from the fact that, time and again, radical-popular movements have arisen to demand self-determination in a more peaceful, equitable, and just polity” (136).

Ambiguities and Absences

What's missing from *Evil Hour*? On many levels the question is somehow unfair. Hylton has packed an amazing amount into 174 pages already. Nonetheless, in a text rooted in history from below, I would have expected more attention to labour union struggles and the obstacles they face in the contemporary political context. I also would have liked to learn more about multinational corporate complicity surrounding the violence of extractive resource industries, in a country so rich in natural resources. Greater attention to this aspect of capitalist imperialism would have rendered a more complex perspective on the role of imperialism in contemporary Colombia, I expect.

Of course, as Hylton points out, the US is the major external player in the country, but many companies based in other core capitalist states are implicated in the exploitation of Colombia's mineral and oil wealth, and they are backed by the imperial strategies of their respective states, as well as by the might of Colombian paramilitary and military forces. This is dramatically so in the case of my own country, Canada, for example. In terms of ambiguities, terms such as “national-popular,” “radical-popular,” “social democratic,” and “populist” are employed too loosely. The particularities of disparate movements, parties, currents, and epochs become somewhat blurred as a result. These criticisms are easy to fire-off, however, and should not take away from the great strengths of the book overall.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Atlantisplaza.jpg>]

Hard Rock cafe at Atlantis Plaza, Bogota - for the rich and middle class only...

A more serious lacuna in *Evil Hour* does need to be addressed, however: that is, the question of strategy. This is not

a book that purports to be an objective, analytical report, by an uninterested and dispassionate observer. The failing strategies of the FARC are clearly rehearsed in its pages. And a preference is made for the traditions of struggle encapsulated in contemporary and historical resistance in the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, as well as, more implicitly, for recurring traditions of urban popular struggle rooted in mass movements and power from below. However, we do not actually learn very much about the ideologies and practices of the contemporary Afro-Colombian and indigenous struggles, and even less about their limitations in the current setting. The problem manifests itself, as I see it, in the last quotation offered above, in which Hylton relies on drawing hope that “time and again, radical-popular movements have arisen” and therefore that they might do so again, rather than rising more decisively to the pro-active challenge set by French Marxist philosopher Daniel Bensaïd in an important recent essay: “We need to be specific about what the ‘possible’ world is and, above all, to explore how to get there.”

After the defensiveness of social resistance and class struggle throughout much of the world in the 1980s in the face of neoliberal advance, the current upturn in struggle in Latin America has witnessed a “return of politics.” Bensaïd notes, “Witness the polemics around the books of Holloway, Negri and Michael Albert, and the differing appraisals of the Venezuelan process and of Lula's administration in Brazil.”

He goes on to distinguish between “models” and “strategic hypotheses”: “Models are something to be copied; they are instructions for use. A hypothesis is a guide to action that starts from the past experience but is open and can be modified in the light of new experience or unexpected circumstances. Our concern therefore is not to speculate but to see what we can take from past experience, the only material at our disposal. But we always have to recognise that it is necessarily poorer than the present and the future if revolutionaries are to avoid the risk of doing what the generals are said to do - always fight the last war.”

Very few observers based outside Colombia know the dynamics of the country's last wars and popular struggles, as well as its current conjuncture, better than Hylton. Even fewer are revolutionaries, as Hylton is. Many would benefit from his strategic hypothesizing.

Evil Hour is a vital contribution to our understanding of Colombia in a comparative and historical perspective. Activists and scholars alike are indebted to its insights.

[1] Jasmin Hristov. 2006. “Uribe and the Paramilitarization of the Colombian State,” *New Socialist* 59 (Winter): 14-15

[2] ICFTU. 2006. Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights. Available at: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223986&Language=EN>. (Accessed on January 19, 2007).

[3] Francisco Ramírez Cuellar. 2005. *The Profits of Extermination: How U.S. Corporate Power is Destroying Colombia*. Translated by Aviva Chomsky. Monroe, Main: Common Courage Press: 86-87.

[4] *The Profits of Extermination*: 84-85.

[5] William Avilés. 2006. “Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38: 380

[6] *The Profits of Extermination*: 82-83

[7] “Uribe and the Paramilitarization...”: 14.

[8] Bryan D. Palmer. 2003. “On Peter Linbaugh's and Marcus Redicker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary*

Atlantic," *Historical Materialism* 11,4 (December).

[9] See William I. Robinson. 1996. *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[10] "Paramilitaries and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy": 381.

[11] Emphasis added

[12] "Uribe and the Paramilitarization of the Colombian State": 14. Emphasis added.

[13] This point lacks citation in the text. It would have been useful for readers to be directed to further material.

[14] The internal quotations refer to an interview with Mike Davis. Jon Wiener. 2003. "Mike Davis talks about the 'Heroes of Hell,'" *Radical History Review* 85: 227-237.

[15] Doug Stokes. 2005. *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia*. London: Zed Books.