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Territorial Masquerades: Frontier State Formations in Northwest Colombia

By

Teófilo Ballvé

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

Graduate Division

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Committee in charge:

Professor Michael J. Watts, Chair
Professor Gillian P. Hart
Professor Donald S. Moore
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Abstract

Territorial Masquerades: Frontier State Formations in Northwest Colombia

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Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

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Professor Michael J. Watts, Chair

How are the limits of state power imagined and acted upon in a place where the state supposedly does not exist? This dissertation explores the kinds of political formations that emerge at the real-and-imagined limits, or frontiers, of the state in a region of northwest Colombia called Urabá. For the last 50 years, Urabá has been one of the most violent hotspots of the country's civil war. Both locals and outside observers almost unanimously explain the region's violent history and its unruly contemporary condition by pointing to "*la ausencia del estado*," the absence of the state. But, as an even cursory review of its history shows, Urabá has in fact been a persistent site of state-building projects, raising a second question: How did this region become understood as stateless in the first place?

In short, this dissertation is about how "statelessness" became and remains a powerful ideological and material force in Urabá, beginning in the early 1900s and into the contemporary moment. It follows the accumulated weight of violent contradictions arising from recursive waves of statecraft in Urabá: from the United Fruit Company, to insurgent guerrilla groups; from paramilitaries, to technocratic planners. My aim, in other words, is to understand "the absence of the state" historically and ethnographically, not to debunk it as a bizarre case of collective false consciousness. Indeed, rather than analyzing the region as a case of state absence or failure, I argue that Urabá's violent political-economic conflicts have produced surprisingly resilient, though by no means benevolent, regimes of accumulation and rule.

Contents

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Hamilton, New York, October 21, 2015

Abbreviations

ACCU	*Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (Campesino Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá)
AGC	*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)
AUC	*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)
BEC	*Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (Elmer Cárdenas Bloc)
CGSB	*Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar* (Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Committee)
ELN	*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army)
EPL	*Ejército Popular de Liberación* (Popular Liberation Army)
FARC	*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
JAC	*Junta de Acción Comunal* (Juntas for Community Action)
M-19	*Movimiento 19 de Abril* (April 19 Movement)
PASO	*Proyecto de Alternatividad Social* (Project for a Social Alternative)
PCC	*Partido Comunista Colombiano* (Colombian Communist Party)
PEUD	*Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién* (Urabá-Darién Strategic Plan)
UP	*Unión Patriótica* (Patriotic Union)
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Preface

On any other morning, the plaza in front of Medellín's courthouse would have been just another drab bureaucratic venue. But on June 5, 2007, the trial of Freddy Rendón was about to begin. Better known as "El Alemán" (The German), Rendón had led one of Colombia's bloodiest paramilitary groups. For ten years, he had relentlessly terrorized the people of Urabá, a region wedged into the far northwest corner of the country near Panama. Hours before El Alemán's trial a crowd of about 300 people streamed into the plaza along with performers in colorful costumes and a live band blasting *vallenato* music. Showers of confetti and reams of red and white carnations completed the impromptu carnival. Amid the festivities, revelers waved professionally printed banners expressing support for the mass murderer. "We want peace, bring back Freddy to Urabá," read one sign. "The people of Urabá are free thanks to you," claimed another.[1]

Playing on his *nom de guerre* (El Alemán), the media had tagged him, "The *Führer* of Urabá." But his supporters dancing in the plaza described him in heroic terms. They said he had "liberated" Urabá from the grip of the leftist insurgencies and celebrated his "social work" in the region.[2] The right-wing paramilitary movement—borne from a complex alliance between agrarian elites, drug traffickers, and the military—had indeed waged a brutally successful counterinsurgency nationwide against the guerrillas. But the scorched earth they left in their wake in the name of fighting "*la subversión*" was just as much fueled by plunder and illicit enrichment, especially via their most lucrative business: drug trafficking. Although the paramilitary war machine ran on all kinds of criminal enterprises, it was never devoid of counterinsurgent aims.

Brought in by officers from the national prison authority, El Alemán entered the courtroom wearing a velvety navy blazer, jeans, and a pink dress shirt unbuttoned down to the middle of his chest. He had slicked back his shoulder-length hair into a tight ponytail. Moments before the hearing began he leaned out of the building's sixth-story window and saluted his mass of supporters below. The crowd went wild. At this point, a group of protesting human rights activists, who had been protectively huddled in a corner of the square, finally gave up their solemn attempt at reading the names of people killed or disappeared by El Alemán and his troops. Paramilitaries had systematically decimated Colombia's human rights community, so when one of El Alemán's supporters began snapping pictures of the protestors, the threat was clearly understood. Intimidated, the activists physically ceded the plaza to the revelry, a move

[1] Ingrid María Cruz Riaño, "'El Alemán: Entre amores y odios," *El Mundo*, June 6, 2007. Equipo Nizkor, "Flores para los criminales, impunidad e indolencia para las víctimas," press release, June 7, 2007.
[2] "El 'Führer' de Urabá," *Semana*, July 29, 2006.

that symbolically reenacted another mainstay of paramilitary violence: forced displacement. Between 1996 and 2012, Colombia's armed conflict forcibly displaced nearly five million people from their homes, most of them by paramilitaries.[3]

Freddy Rendón, alias "El Alemán," on the first day of his trial, June 5, 2007. (*Photo by Semana*)

When asked about the show of support for El Alemán, one of the human rights workers reluctantly leaving the plaza responded, "We know this isn't a spontaneous demonstration by the people of [Urabá]. It's a product of the control that these paramilitary chiefs still have in the region."[4] But El Alemán's civilian spokesman denied the crowd was a farce. "They aren't circus clowns or mourners-for-hire [*plañideras*]," he said. "They are men and women who genuinely love Rendón; they respect him, and they see him as a leader."[5] On both sides, each performance was an attempt to cast the past in a particular light, a way of setting the stage for the politics of the present. "The past is never dead," wrote William Faulkner. "It's not even past." And, in this case, it was playing out right in front of me.

It was June 2007, and I was working as a journalist, covering the event for an investigative piece I was working on about the links between palm oil companies and paramilitary land-grabbing in Urabá. Watching the scene, I largely dismissed the throng of support for El Alemán as a public relations stunt, an attempt to whitewash a gruesome history. Much later, however, during the two years of research for this book (2012-2013), I began wondering whether paramilitaries had actually managed to cultivate a base of grassroots support—or, as its known in the armed conflict, "*una base*

[3] According to the official Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH), between 1996 and 2012, the conflict was responsible for the internal displacement of 4,744,046 people and about a million more if the time range is pushed back to 1985.
[4] Glemis Mogollón Vergara, "El Alemán contradijo versión de Mancuso," *El Colombiano*, June 6, 2007.
[5] "No más festejos en la versión libre de ex Auc," *El Colombiano*, June 8, 2007.

social." It turns out El Alemán was something of an expert went it came to building *una base social*.

At the courthouse in Medellín, his opening testimony began with some personal history.[6] His family had suffered the same political violence and forced displacement endured by most Colombians of humble rural origins. During the country's previous civil war, appropriately called "*La Violencia*," gunmen forced El Alemán's father, Hernán Rendón, to flee his family farm. *La Violencia* was a decade of ruthless partisan warfare beginning in the late 1940s between Colombia's dynastic Liberal and Conservative parties. The farm Hernán Rendón left behind was in Amalfi, a town in the department (province) of Antioquia and a hotspot of *La Violencia* (Roldán 2002). In 1953, a government security report from Amalfi noted, "Everyone has abandoned their farms and all agricultural activities have ceased because of *bandolerismo*."[7]

The radical fringe of the Liberal guerrillas, which Conservatives pejoratively dismissed as "*bandoleros*" (bandits), eventually morphed into one of the world's longest-living rebel organizations, the communist-inspired *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). *La Violencia* evolved in slow motion into the contemporary conflict, which most accounts say began in 1964. Midway through that year, the military launched a U.S.-supported bombing raid against the rural communist enclaves established by former rebels of the Liberal Party's most radical wing. The surviving ragtag group of ex-guerrillas and peasant leaders became the FARC's founding commanders. In the decades that followed, guerrilla movements multiplied across the country, and the Rendón family was uprooted two more times, on both occasions by the FARC.

El Alemán situated his family tragedies within the context of a state that was incapable of protecting their "life, honor, and property." As he repeatedly declared throughout his trial, "The state shone by its absence" (*brillaba por su ausencia*). Following a well-worn narrative, he accused "the state" of having abandoned places like Amalfi and Urabá to the mercy of the communist insurgencies. Since their early days, paramilitaries have always cited the "absence of the state" as their main self-justification, their entire reason for being. As El Alemán insisted, "Our interest as a politico-military organization in arms was not only to win the war against Colombian society's number one enemy—the guerrillas—it was also for the state to gain a presence in those areas." But paramilitary state-building was by no means a selfless public service; it formed an integral part of their criminal economy.

As a reporter, I grew frustrated with the limitations of journalism for investigating the deeper dynamics driving the armed conflict. I ended up trading my brief reporting visits to Urabá for the more extended sojourns of scholarly fieldwork. As

[6] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Unidad de Justicia y Paz, June 5, 2007.
[7] Letter on "Orden Público," February 3, 1953; Archivo Histórico de Antioquia (AHA), Ministerio de Gobierno, 1945/1953, D.G. 079, p. 553.

a journalist, I had dismissed paramilitary gestures toward state-building as a complete political façade, a way of giving their self-serving interests a veneer of laudable political purpose. But through sustained ethnographic fieldwork, I gained a different perspective. Paramilitary statecraft was indeed a show of smoke and mirrors, but, like the crowd cheering for El Alemán outside the Medellín courthouse, it was also more than pure political theatre. Paramilitary state-building was a political masquerade; its outward caricatured appearance had at least some basis in genuine fact. Indeed, the power of these murderous militias was in no small part tied to the way in which they positioned themselves—and were hailed—as state-makers in places where its institutional presence and authority had supposedly lapsed or never existed.

As I spent more time in Urabá, narratives like El Alemán's about the long-standing need for "the state to gain a presence in the area" became inescapable. Almost without fail, regardless of whom I spoke with, the one thing everyone seemed to agree on—from ex-guerrillas to former paramilitaries, displaced peasants to agribusiness executives, even mayors and military officers—was that the problem at the root of the region's violent history and unruly contemporary condition was "*la ausencia del estado*" (the absence of the state). It became clear to me that this discourse about "the absence of the state" was not just recurrent and pervasive; it was also powerful and productive.

The central question that drove the research for this book is: How are the limits of state power imagined and acted upon in a place where the state supposedly does not exist?[8] By exploring the kinds of political formations that emerge at the real-and-imagined limits, or frontiers, of the state, this question implied a second line of investigation asking: How did this region become understood as stateless in the first place? Because, as an even cursory review of its history shows, Urabá has in fact been a persistent site of state-building projects. Although these projects may have failed in achieving some of their narrow programmatic aims, they have by no means been absent, nor have their collateral effects been inconsequential.[9] In short, this book is about how "statelessness" became and remains a powerful ideological and material force in Urabá.

I follow the accumulated weight of violent contradictions arising from recursive waves of state-making in Urabá. But in telling this story, I take a critical stance towards the discourses of statelessness; otherwise, I would risk glossing over the persistence of governmental structures, their role in organized violence, and how the abstraction of "the state" lies at the heart of political contention. Nonetheless, I take common-sense notions about "the absence of the state" seriously, recognizing their powerful ability to shape situated political imaginaries, practices, institutions, and relationships. The point is to explore the work accomplished by discourses of statelessness and the kinds of

[8] In trying to neatly formulate this question, I was aided by and have borrowed mercilessly from a footnote in Gupta (2012, 300, fn. 3) in which he's referencing an article by Nielsen (2007).

[9] Ferguson (1985) has deftly shown the productive nature—i.e. the consequential "side effects"—of development "failures"; I propose to understand them additionally as failures in "state-building."

political formations produced in their name. My aim, in other words, is to understand "the absence of the state" historically and ethnographically, not to debunk it as a bizarre case of collective false consciousness. Rather than analyzing the region as a case of state absence or failure, I argue that Urabá's violent political-economic conflicts have produced surprisingly resilient, which is not to say benevolent, regimes of accumulation and rule.

For paramilitaries, more than for anyone else in Urabá, state-building was a key part of their strategic vision—especially for the faction led by El Alemán. For years, my letters to him for interview requests went unanswered. But after making extensive contacts with his former troops through fieldwork in Urabá, he finally agreed to sit down with me for an interview. In September 2012, I arrived to the jail on the outskirts of Medellín where he was serving out his eight-year sentence. He hosted me in the Warden's office, a luxury surely not afforded to most inmates. We spoke for almost three hours. At one point, I asked about a contradiction I had heard him repeat throughout his trial. He sometimes described Urabá as a place where "the state shone for its absence" and at other times flatly claimed it had been a "guerrilla state." So I asked, "Well, which was it? The absence of the state or a guerrilla state?"

"It's the same thing," he instantly replied. "One is the result of the other." With a confused look, I prompted him for elaboration. "Look," he began, "the police may have had control of an area here or there without any problems, but the economic, social, political, and military power really belonged to the guerrillas." He paused for dramatic effect to let it sink in: power, in every possible sense of the word, belonged to the guerrillas. And then he cracked a smile: "So what did we do? We took that power away and replaced it with our own, *bit by bit*."[10]

After my visit to the jail, I thought back to my first interview with Gerardo Vega, a former operative of the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL), an initially Maoist rebel group.[11] In the 1960s and 1970s, the FARC and the EPL gained traction in Urabá through political work and organizing among the human fallout from the arrival of the infamous United Fruit Company, which turned the region into a massive banana-export enclave. The guerrillas helped landless and dispossessed campesinos by organizing land occupations and helping them colonize areas in the forests beyond the agrarian frontier. But rebel groups' growing power in the region stemmed mainly from their work with the labor unions of the exploited rural proletariat working on the banana plantations. Amid all the conflicts around land and labor, the EPL needed a trusted lawyer in the area, so they sent one of their own, Gerardo Vega.

[10] Author interview with Freddy Rendón, alias "El Alemán" paramilitary chief, Itagüí, Antioquia, September 17, 2012.
[11] Author interview with Gerardo Vega, labor lawyer and former EPL operative, in Medellín, Antioquia, March 13, 2012.

Graying and middle-aged, Gerardo is now the director of a scrappy human rights NGO based in Medellín. During my pre-interview chitchat with him, I mentioned something about paramilitaries positioning themselves as state-builders. "Paramilitaries?" he scoffed, clearly offended. "We were the ones who built the state in Urabá!" As examples, he cited guerrilla groups' armed-support for popular struggles over land, labor, and public services in Urabá. He also reminded me that rebel-linked political parties had cleaned up at the ballot box in the late 1980s thanks to the mass support they enjoyed from the combative banana-worker unions. For a time, the insurgencies had brought several of Urabá's most important municipal administrations into their political orbit.

Reciting this history and still annoyed by my characterization of his sworn enemies as state-builders, Gerardo added, "We were the ones who brought the labor code to Urabá. We made it respected and it was thanks to us that there's now an Office of Labor Affairs and Social Security in the region." Again, he was right: guerrilla groups' relationships to formal government structures have indeed been surprisingly direct and oftentimes, if paradoxically, quite generative. And this was precisely what El Alemán had in mind when he described Urabá as a runaway "guerrilla state" that had to be as methodically unmade as it was made—"bit by bit," as he put it.

On the opening day of his trial, with the music of his supporters blasting in the plaza below, El Alemán insisted that without an adequate history of guerrillas' violent stranglehold over Urabá, it would seem as if paramilitaries had suddenly dropped out of the heavens "like armed skydivers parachuting into the Garden of Eden." In his mind, rather than an innocent paradise, Urabá had more closely resembled a hellish state of nature. After again noting the threat guerrillas had posed to "life, honor, and property," he stated, "Our military doctrine was philosophically inspired by the natural right to self-defense." In other words, rather than compounding the sovereign void of Urabá's supposed state of nature—the mythical Hobbesian war of all against all—paramilitaries set out to *decide* its conclusion. As if drawing from Carl Schmitt's reactionary political theory, paramilitary ideologues have always justified their armed struggle as an extra-legal necessity for preserving the juridical-political sovereignty of the state against the existential threat posed by the guerrillas as unjust enemies.[12] But paramilitary state-building was more than a defensive reaction; it was a revanchist and affirmative political project.

Taken together, the comments made by the EPL's Gerardo Vega and El Alemán are symptomatic of contested notions of statehood and violently clashing political projects in Urabá. Their comments—one emphasizing labor exploitation and the other threats to private property—also highlight how violent relations between land, labor,

[12] Carl Schmitt (2005; 2006). For Schmitt, "unjust enemies" were those that posed an existential threat to the established juridical-spatial order, or *nomos*, of the state system. As such, he argued unjust enemies are so far beyond the pale of political recognition or inclusion that they must be indiscriminately annihilated (e.g. insurgents, pirates, "narco-terrorists," "enemy combatants," etc.).

and capital are constitutive of Urabá's historical production as a stateless "frontier" zone. The two men are also representative of how, amid Urabá's economies of violence, the dialectical struggle between insurgency and counterinsurgency became a driving force behind localized state formation.

By "insurgency" and "counterinsurgency," however, I mean a much broader and fluid set of social relationships than those between the armed groups exclusively. Besides guerrillas and paramilitaries, the cast of characters discussed in this book also includes military strategists, drug traffickers, agrarian elites, politicians, peasant communities, and technocratic planners among many others. The other protagonists of this story are the multiply scaled forces intersecting in Urabá: global security paradigms, national development regimes, the compulsions of capital, the cultural politics of Colombian regionalism, and much more. All of these actors and forces have clashed and converged in the making of what I'm calling Urabá's "frontier state formations"—the multiple, unruly, violent, para-legal, and sometimes fleeting political formations collectively produced at the perceived limits of "the state."

Nonetheless, no single group assumed the mantle of state-building with the ferocity and relative "success" of the paramilitaries. During their heyday from the mid-1990s until their demobilization a decade later, paramilitaries helped produce a new cartography of state power in Urabá. And it was on this front of the war that El Alemán claimed an unequivocal victory as he started winding down his opening testimony. "The one thing I know is that I left an Urabá free of guerrillas," he mused. "Today, the region is in the hands of the state, and seeing it able to enjoy liberty and harmony is my greatest satisfaction." In reality, the situation in Urabá was and remains much more complicated.

The FARC still holds almost uncontested control over key pockets of the region. Just a few months before El Alemán entered the courtroom, one of his older brothers, a mid-ranking paramilitary commander known as "Don Mario," abandoned the demobilization program and founded a new paramilitary group called "*Los Urabeños*." Filling the void left by their demobilized comrades, *Los Urabeños* easily consolidated control over their namesake region by repurposing the political and social-institutional relationships—that is, the frontier state formations—left behind by El Alemán. Today, the *Urabeños* make up Colombia's largest drug-trafficking organization and analysts have declared them the gravest threat to the country's national security after the FARC.

The scene playing out in Medellín between El Alemán and his supporters in the plaza personified the way Urabá's frontier state formations mushroom out of the tenuous relationships that combatant groups end up forging with the civilian communities making up their territories. Before El Alemán, it was the FARC and the EPL that engaged in this elaborate courtship of social-spatial hegemony. After him, came *Los Urabeños*. All the armed groups (government included) are in the business of producing territory, meaning that all of them have at one time or another, intentionally or

unintentionally, been complicit in the production of Urabá's frontier state formations. In this sense, the region's long-standing problem is not so much the absence of the state, but rather the proliferation of state-building projects. Over time, the recursive onslaught of frontier state formations in Urabá have turned it into a cauldron of conflicting political spatialities in which distinct territories accumulate and overlap; they converge and, fatefully, collide.

After six long hours of testimony and with his voice growing hoarse, El Alemán was granted a recess until the next day. Outside the courtroom, the boisterous crowd had dispersed. The plaza regained its stately bureaucratic banality: people rushed about, others stood silently in line, all of them holding papers and folders in their hands going about their business with the adjudicating powers of the state. The only evidence of the violence so profoundly inscribed in the law were the torn carnations and trampled confetti littered across the plaza floor, a minor parallel to the material wreckage and dashed utopias of Urabá's frontier state formations.

Contrary to El Alemán's favored assertion that "the state shone for its absence," his opening testimony made clear that Colombia's armed groups in Urabá have been fighting *through* state power as much as they have been fighting *over* state power. Urabá may seem like a provincial case of one state's inability to uphold its claimed monopoly on the legitimate use of force. But it reflects a deeper and more universal reality, which is that the more consequential monopoly of the state is perhaps the one it has on our political imaginations.

Introduction

Territorial Masquerades: Frontier State Formations in Northwest Colombia

> "State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it tells lies too; and this lie crawls out of its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people.' "
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)

> "Violence is inherent to political space, not only as an expression of (political) will to power, but due to a permanent reign of terror separating that which seeks to be unified … and fusing together … that which is differentiated."
>
> —Henri Lefebvre, "The Worldwide and the Planetary" (1973)

Modernity's founding myth is that the state saved humanity from the mythic state of nature, which Hobbes famously described as a life that was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (1987, 186). Beginning with its earliest liberal theorists, the state marked out an imagined frontier with law and order on one side and lawless disorder on the other. To this day, the antithetical nature of statehood and violence remains one of liberal modernity's most enduring political myths. Analysts from political science and the foreign policy establishment have even concocted a menu of terms to account for the unruliness that persists within the shell of the liberal state form: weak, fragile, collapsed, rogue, or failed.[1]

Colombia has often been a prime candidate for these qualified depictions of statehood, often finding itself on the low-end of annual rankings such as the "Failed States Index." Published by the Fund for Peace, a Washington think tank, the recently renamed "*Fragile* States Index" has always come with an accompanying color-coded world map in which Colombia has been consistently splotched in alarmist blood-red tones along with other perennial "failures," such as Congo, Somalia, and Sudan. With only a handful of countries colored in dark green with the highest ranking of "sustainable" statehood, failure seems more the norm than the exception. Nonetheless, the widespread expectation remains that disorder and violence in countries such as Colombia can be overcome through a stronger consolidation of modern liberal statehood (Fukuyama 2004; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). My argument, however, is that violence and disorder are not indicators or products of state *failure* as much as simply the constitutive elements of state *making* at the frontiers of centralized regimes of accumulation and rule.

By advancing this argument, I am not dismissing the structures of feeling around state absence and abandonment so often expressed by Colombians living in conflict-

[1] Sanín (2009) provides an overview of these classificatory schemes.

stricken areas such as Urabá. My intention, rather, is to take these claims of statelessness serious while not presuming a normative or ideal-type vision of "proper" statehood. In doing so, my aim is not a political game of "gotcha," wherein I try to "catch" liberal statehood in its flagrant contradictions. Such an approach would merely pile on yet another critique supposedly "revealing" how violence and illegality form component parts of modern liberal practice. Much more revealing, in my view, is to understand why liberalism and violence proved so intricately compatible in the formations of Colombian statehood that have been collectively made, unmade, and remade over time in Urabá.

If "the state," as so many theorists and scholars have claimed, is something of a fiction, then it is one that has incited particularly violent struggles in Colombia. When subaltern sectors have sought even modest social reforms by attempting to access the abstract structures of the state, dominant classes have consistently responded with crushing repression. As Eric Hobsbawm noted, "Colombia was, and continues to be, proof that gradual reform in the framework of liberal democracy is not the only, or even the most plausible, alternative to social revolutions, including the ones that fail or are aborted." Reflecting on his extended stays in the country during the 1960s and 1970s, Hobsbawm remarked, "I discovered a country in which the failure to make social revolution had made violence the constant, universal, and omnipresent core of public life" (Hobsbawm 2002). Much of this history, he further observed, has turned on a dialectical conflict between the persistence of peasant colonizations and incessant reactionary violence (Molano 2007, 228).

Few places in Colombia exhibit the convergence of these tendencies—primitive accumulation, political violence, and intense conflicts over statehood—with such force and abundance as Urabá. Indeed, since at least since the 1950s, the region has been a privileged staging ground for guerrilla movements and a laboratory of government-led counterinsurgency. Even before the onset of mass political violence, the Gulf already had a well-established reputation as an outlaw frontier zone thanks to its position as a major contraband corridor since colonial times. However, at least within the dominant geopolitical imaginaries of nationhood, the most determinant factor in sealing the region's position as runaway fugitive space in desperate need of incorporation into the body politic was its overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian population (Steiner 2000; Serje 2005).[2] Compounded by racist ideologies, government-led efforts at reining in Urabá have often taken the form of the "reign of terror" that Lefebvre associates with the making of any political space, which he characterizes as occurring through a simultaneous double-movement of differentiation and incorporation (2009, 203).

[2] As is the case in most Latin American countries, Colombia remains under the powerful sway of *mestizaje* as a reigning ideology of national identity. The racist exclusion of *mestizaje* works by acknowledging (and even celebrating) racial mixture as a source of national homogeneity, thereby erasing difference and excluding alternative identities (Stutzman 1981; P. Wade 1995; Hale 1996). As the title of one article calls it, *mestizaje* is "an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion" (Stutzman 1981).

Ultimately, the reign of terror in Urabá became all the more pronounced in the 1980s and early 1990s by virtue of guerrilla group's powerful territorial hold over the region. Beyond armed combat, rebel organizations consolidated their territories through their deep involvement in labor disputes, land struggles, social organizations, and electoral politics, creating solid relations of mutual support with civilian communities. The blowback against insurgents' territorial supremacy came in the form of counterinsurgent paramilitary groups, which became the proxy forces of government-backed statecraft, turning Urabá into a cauldron of swirling political spatialities competing for hegemony.

Conceptual Bearings: Territory, Frontier, State

Wars tend to make geography obvious. They not only make the intimate ties between people and space self-evident, the conduct of warfare—particularly, so-called irregular warfare—is in many ways premised on a conflation of people and space. Indeed, when Colombia's combatant groups talk about "enemy territory," they have in mind something similar to Henri Lefebvre's understanding of social space (1991). For Lefebvre, space is a social product collectively made through the material and discursive practices of everyday life. In other words, spaces are at once a physical materiality, a mental construct, and a lived experience—they are both real *and* imagined.[3] Most importantly, Lefebvre helps us conceptualize space as both a medium and an outcome of social conflicts, rather than as some inert plane upon which these unfold. Colombia's armed groups are keenly aware of this sociality of space. They know civilian populations are what makes and breaks territorial control; combatants know a territory really only exists in any meaningful sense in so far as it's constantly and collectively produced as such. For these reasons, it is civilians that face the disproportionate brunt of the violence when an armed group attacks enemy territory—all of which makes irregular wars particularly nasty and brutish affairs.

Territory

I define territory as a social space laid claim over or staked out by some kind of political authority. The political authority in question, however, does not necessarily have to be what we commonsensically call "a state."[4] In a sweeping work of conceptual

[3] Although I draw on Lefebvre's triadic (or unitary) theory of space, I have abstained from his stilted conceptual vocabulary of spatial practices (perceived), representations of space (conceived), and spaces of representation (lived). Besides the narrative clunkiness this would introduce, the whole point of his triad was that these elements had to be considered in unison. Nonetheless, I draw out these distinctions when emphasizing them adds analytical insight.

[4] I reject the terminological-conceptual equivalence of "state space" and "territory" that is often either suggested or implied by many scholars (Gottmann 1973; M. Anderson 1996; Storey 2001; Delaney 2005;

history, Stuart Elden defines territory as a political technology, a particular means of social-spatial governance—usually by "a state"—that combines legal, economic, strategic, and technical dimensions (Elden 2013). From a political ecology perspective, Peluso and Vandergeest (1995; 2011), meanwhile, have shown that resource control and the creation of property regimes are constitutive elements for the territorialization of state power. However, the abiding state-centrism of these accounts means they largely analyze territory as a "top-down" process in which extant sources of political authority "deploy" some combination of legal, calculative, cartographic, and classificatory techniques in the process of staking out social-spatial control over an area. The analysis of territory presented in these accounts verges on "bringing the state back in" while leaving the people out (Joseph and Nugent 1994, 11).

In contrast, my more social and ethnographic analysis focuses on how territories are made and unmade in the tumultuous flux of human relationships. I am not arguing for a "bottom-up" as opposed to a "top-down" analysis. A key implication of Lefebvre's theories about the social production of space is that they enable an analysis of territory that eschews the vertical topology of spatial metaphors in which people and communities are somewhere "down below" on the ground while abstract and supposedly more powerful forces and institutions are somewhere "up above."[5] As Brenner and Elden have suggested (2009), Lefebvre provides an insightful framework for analyzing territory as a socially produced space. But the terminological-conceptual equivalence they repeatedly endorse of "state space *as* territory" analytically reifies precisely what they mean to deconstruct: the state. They deconstruct one "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994)—the naturalized assumption of national territory as the key unit of international affairs—only to reconstruct it anew in the form of territory *as* the given spatiality of "the state."[6]

Territories are also subject to what Lefebvre described as the hypercomplexity of social spaces; by this, he meant the tendency of spatialities to overlap, interpenetrate, and superimpose. Each fragment of space, he wrote, "masks not just one social relationship but a host of them that analysis can potentially disclose" (1991, 88). Again, the state-centrism of scholarly debates about territory and their attendant emphasis on borders and boundedness has obscured from view the way that territories are often shot through in these ways (cf. M. Anderson 1996). Although I recognize the crucial

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Brenner and Elden 2009). The equivalence, moreover, runs against how territory as a term and a concept is used in the Spanish-speaking world. Elden's work (2010; 2013) has deeply influenced my thinking on territory, but his project is decidedly one of conceptual history. Unlike him, I see no problem with the idea that spaces can be "territorialized" or with the notion that things, processes, people, or animals can have a "territoriality." Two very useful debates help clarify the different positions: the debate between Elden (2010) and Antonsich (2010) and the forum in *Geopolitics* (Agnew 2010) revisiting Agnew's influential article, "The Territorial Trap" (Agnew 1994).

[5] While my claims here borrow from Gupta and Ferguson (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ferguson 2006), I later explain why my arguments run directly against some of their—especially Ferguson's (2006)—claims. Geographers have had much to say about the politics of spatial metaphors (Smith and Katz 1993).

[6] For more on these debates, readers should see footnote 12 above.

importance of processes of demarcation and boundedness, my conceptualization of territory as a social process in which political authority emerges in and through the production of space considers a broader set of practices and relationships.

A key implication of this line of thinking is that the politico-juridically defined space of the nation-state is only one territory among others and not necessarily the hegemonic one.[7] Hegemony, as developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971), refers to a fluid process of struggle through which particular social relations are naturalized *and* enforced. Departing from influential and problematic readings of Gramsci's work, William Roseberry proposed hegemony "be used *not* to understand consent but to understand struggle" (Roseberry 1994, 360).[8] It is through such hegemonic struggles that processes of rule—in all their inevitable contingency and incompleteness—are actually produced in practice (Hall 1977; Williams 1977). For my purposes, hegemony provides a nuanced and socially relational framework for unpacking and picking apart Urabá's territorial hypercomplexity.

The more fulsome theorization of territory I'm proposing can help enrich our understanding of civil wars through more careful attention to the relationship between combatants and civilians.[9] Indeed, even in violent contexts such as Urabá, territories are never maintained by force alone; they are permanent choreographies of coercion and consent. In other words, territories always maintain their dimensionality as social-spatial processes through the workings of hegemony. Studies of civil wars unanimously point to territorial control as a defining dynamic and characteristic of irregular warfare, but this scholarship never subjects "territory" itself to theoretical scrutiny. For combatant groups, territory is both tactical and strategic: both an objective of their overarching aims and what gives them the basic—social, political, and economic—wherewithal for waging war. Kalyvas argues that the territorial imperative of civil wars gives them a tremendous capacity for fragmenting space (2006, 88). In his authoritative study, he shows civil wars are at their most violent where (and when) the territories of competing armed groups overlap or converge into blurred intersections (Kalyvas 2006).

My research, in contrast, asks a prior question, which is: How are these territories produced in the first place? By revealing the intricate social-spatial relations through which combatants produce territory, I provide a complimentary territorial explanation for Kalyvas' provocative claim that "civil war is, at its core, a process of integration and state-building" (2006, 14). Beyond the creation of social orders, states-

[7] Borrowing the contradictory idea of "parcelized sovereignties" from Perry Anderson's work (1974; 1979), Hylton (2006, 12) adapts it to describe the various sources of political authority claiming territorial control over entire swaths of the country in both rural and poor urban areas.

[8] Peter Thomas thoroughly and, in my view, decisively dispels the influential readings of Gramsci made by Anderson (1976) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as have the chorus of scholars represented in a recent volume (Ekers et al. 2012) to name only a few.

[9] Ana Arjona's work not only provides useful reviews of this literature, but makes its own path-breaking contributions with its focus on "war time institutions" (Arjona 2009; 2010; 2014). Other key works on these issues include Wickham-Crowley 1992; Wood 2003; Weinstein 2007.

in-waiting, or alternative forms of "stateness" (McColl 1969; Arjona 2008), I show how the frontier state formations springing forth from combatant group's territories do not exist outside of formally recognized ensembles of government—from elections and public services, to development projects and other "more traditional" state practices. Nonetheless, the idea of "state absence" remains a generative one for the production of territories in Colombia's frontier zones.

Frontier

Frontiers are not spaces of pristine wilderness with innate democratic proclivities (Turner 1893), though that's how they are often imagined. Nor do they delineate the start of untouched preserves beyond the reach of capitalist modernity.[10] Instead, I use "frontier" as a way of critically conjuring the historical-spatial production of Urabá as a barbarous space devoid of civilization.[11] Drawing on deep-seated colonial conceptions of race and nature, Colombia's metropolitan elites have typically cast "faraway" places such as Urabá into the role of a dystopian Eden: a stateless, violent, and ungoverned space harboring an exuberant cornucopia of untapped natural riches that is inhabited (if at all) by problematic populations.[12]

As a spatial rendering of the "state effect" (Mitchell 1991), frontiers imply the same Manichaean spatial bifurcation Frantz Fanon identified under colonialism: civilization "over here" versus barbarism "over there" (Fanon 2004; 2008). With similar implications, frontiers project the state effect by bifurcating space into "insides" and "outsides" of statehood. Lying beyond the civilized aura of statehood, development, and modernity, frontiers are sites of internal colonialism in which subject population are

[10] Urabá, in fact, has a long history with the Black Atlantic and the making of modernity in Colombia and beyond (Gilroy 1993; Steiner 2000). Darién, as Urabá was known for centuries, was the site of Spain's first permanent settlement on the mainland of the Americas. I was also the site of the spectacular failure of Scotland's only attempt to secure an overseas colony: New Caledonia. The seventeenth century campaign led by the joint-stock Company of Scotland fueled a huge speculative bubble in the country. By one estimate, as much as one-fifth of Scotland's entire population bought into the company, and the accumulated capital was four-times the kingdom's annual revenue (Watt 2007, 82). Besides the 2,000 Scotts who lost their life in the "Darién Scheme," Scotland itself was bankrupted, weakened, and then integrated into the kingdom of England through a bailout deal. The Darien Scheme was still fresh in the mind of intellectuals during the time of the Scottish Enlightenment. Could it be that Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is another story of universal history similar to the one traced by Susan Buck-Morss in *Hegel and Haiti* (2009)?

[11] Though not always expressing the same idea with the term "frontier," Colombian scholars have made similar arguments regarding Urabá and other regions of the country (García 1996; 2003; Steiner 2000; Múnera 2005; Serje 2005; M. C. Ramírez 2011). As will become evident, I am also not using "frontiers" in the politico-juridical sense of "border" or boundaries (Paasi 1998; Raffestin 1986).

[12] Several authors have established the nuanced entanglements between race and nature (Neumann 1998; Pratt 1992; D. Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Kosek 2006), while Alonso (1995) and Redclift (2006) tie this connection more directly to frontier spaces, as does Alfonso Múnera (2005) in his history of "imagined frontiers" and the construction of race in nineteenth century Colombia.

rendered as disposable life, mere sources of labor-power (González Casanova 1965; Stavenhagen 1965). Frontier life is a condition where, in Walter Benjamin's words, the "state of emergency" is "not the exception but the rule" (1968, 257). The permanence of this state of exception, however, stems not from frontiers existing completely "outside" the law, but rather because they are zones where the "insides" and "outsides" of the juridical order are utterly blurred and indecipherable (Agamben 2005, 23).

The metropolitan gaze sees the frontier as a space that has yet to be made—a place lying just beyond the reach of reigning regimes of accumulation and rule. As Anna Tsing observes, "A frontier is an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned. Frontiers aren't just discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experience" (2005, 28–29). In Lefebvre's terms, they exhibit the symbolic, material, and lived qualities of socially produced spaces in particularly dramatic relief.

The material conditions for those living in frontier spaces are typically defined by brutally violent economic relations between land, labor, and capital (Alonso 1995; Steiner 2000; Markoff 2006; Coronil and Skurski 2006; Baretta and Markoff 2006). The social relations of property are particularly contested and in flux meaning that ongoing forms of primitive accumulation are woven into the very fabric of social and political struggles in such areas (Banner 2005; Redclift 2006). As fragmented spaces of parcelized sovereignties, frontiers are composed of multiple, overlapping, and conflicting territorialities that make for particularly combustible "governable spaces" of rule and unruliness (Watts 2006; Rose 1999).

Although the spatial organization of violence and the violent organization of space are certainly not limited to frontier zones, it is in such places where their brutal alignments and misalignments are perhaps most palpable. But we should not categorize Urabá's parcelized sovereignties and its economies of violence as indices of state failure or political collapse; they are the typical symptoms of everyday state formation in frontier zones. Though cast by dominant geopolitical imaginaries as aberrant peripheral spaces, frontiers are central to the consolidation of national identities, capitalist development, military projects, and political authority.[13] A major reason for this is that frontier societies bring openly into question the otherwise naturalized norms, forms, practices, and institutions of everyday governance. In short, frontiers are spaces where we can see statecraft in, as it were, "real time."

State

[13] Hecht and Cockburn (1989); García (2003); Das and Poole (2004); Serje (2005); Tsing (2005); Watts (2012a); Skurski and Coronil (2006).

It has become scholarly commonplace to point out "the state" is not a unitary sovereign entity with functional desires.[14] If not a complete fiction and an utterly violent abstraction, the state, most scholars would agree, lacks the coherency and mindfulness so often attributed to it. Gramsci had a word for our fetishized reification of the state; he called it, "statolatry" (1971, 268). He argued the state is a "phantasm of the mind, a fetish," something we imagine existing "over and above individuals, a phantasmagorical being, the abstraction of the collective organism, a kind of autonomous divinity, which does not think with any concrete brain but still thinks, which does not move with specific human legs but still moves" (1971, 187, fn. 83).

The widespread perception of the state's absence in Urabá thus makes it a paradoxical site for studying the state. On the one hand, Urabá is a testament to the power of reification in which claims about the absence of "the state" constantly hail a monolithic entity that "does this" and "does that." It gives "the state" the personified capability of willful neglect, but it is also a plaintive claim. The complaint of absence is as much a grievance as a demand for its redress. Indeed, Urabá exhibits the same pervasive "longing for the state" found in other war-torn parts of Colombia (Bocarejo 2012). On countless occasions, all kinds of informants during my fieldwork assured me "the state has never arrived" to the region and sometimes even further personified it as a "he."[15]

On the other hand, the discourse of state absence also exposes how "the hegemony of the state is also what is most fragile about the state, precisely because it depends on people living what they much of the time know to be a lie" (Sayer 1994, 377). In this regard, campesinos relished the stories they told me about their minor victories against what they know to be something of a fiction. Their stories were, in my words, examples of how they managed to turn the disaggregated complexity and internal contradictions of "the state" to their advantage. Campesinos wielded "the state" as a kind of strategic essentialism, a calculated fiction, leveraged toward precise and usually material ends—things like getting a road built, brining a health clinic, or securing a development project. Even the most socially vulnerable people I met in Urabá repeatedly proved they were not the unwitting victims of an elaborate conjuring trick by the most violent of abstractions.

At the same time, however, the abstract idea of "the state" in Urabá retains tremendous power through the long ghostly shadow it casts over the region. Even amid its purported material absence, the state still structures and remains the dominant

[14] Similar arguments can be found in key works from the Marxist tradition, which is where I situate myself, beginning with the essays, "The German Ideology" and "On the Jewish Question." The more recent scholarship proposing some version of this thesis is vast, but some key works are: Abrams (1988), Corrigan and Sayer (1985), Sayer (1987), Mitchell (1991), Taussig (1992), Bayart (1993), Joseph and Nugent (1994), Brown (1995), Coronil (1997), Aretxaga (2003), Hansen and Stepputat (2001), Das and Poole (2004), Moore (2005), Ferguson (2006), and Gupta (2012).

[15] The male pronoun makes sense in light of Wendy Brown's feminist critique of the state (Brown 1995).

referent for collective political relationships, practices, discourses, and institutional formations. As a result, all kinds of actors are constantly trying to give concrete coherence to the inherently unwieldy idea of the state in a place supposedly afflicted by its absence. All of which makes Urabá a particularly revealing site for studying the state, because state *formation* is an explicit part of what the region's political struggles are all about. As mentioned before, at times it seems as if everyone is in the business of state building. In the chapters that follow, I show how guerrillas, paramilitaries, politicians, bureaucrats, regional planners, military strategists, activists, drug traffickers, and campesinos have all played a role in producing the unruly political assemblages I'm calling "frontier state formations."

For tracing the social-spatial contours of these political formations, I draw on Gramsci's conceptualization of the "integral state." By this, Gramsci meant that political society and civil society were two parts of an integral whole, rather than autonomous spheres that clash and bump up against each other. His understanding of the integral state insists that political society—meaning governmental institutions and political structures broadly construed—and the social relations of civil society are inseparable, co-constituted, and mutually transforming moments of a dialectical unity that can nonetheless be distinguished analytically (Gramsci 1971; Thomas 2009; Morton 2013).

Part of what makes Gramsci so appropriate for Urabá is that his insistence about the necessary relationship between civil and political society closely approximates how powerful groups in the region think about and enact state *building*. El Alemán, for instance, talked about the "construction" and "formation" of the state as a process that involved thickening the relations between (in Gramsci's terms) civil and political societies. Reports and assessments from development projects, involving local and national government agencies as well as international aid organizations, similarly described their goals in terms of strengthening civil society groups and local government institutions, along with, most importantly, the linkages between them. Another benefit to Gramsci's approach is that it leaves itself sufficiently open to what are inevitably subjective political imaginaries of the state and, by doing so, does not predetermine what "counts" as statehood or state-building.

Drawing from Marx, Gramsci critiqued both Hegelian idealism and bourgeois liberalism through his reinterpretation of civil society and political society. In one of his typical analytical moves, Gramsci appropriated these two keywords of political theory into a dialectical reformulation as a way of simultaneously critiquing liberalism's constitutive dualisms—private vs. public, state vs. society, politics vs. economics—while still acknowledging the ideological power exercised by these dichotomies over existing political relations (Thomas 2009, 159–196). Against conventional thinking, Gramsci explained, "One might say State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion" (1971, 263). He would repeatedly clarify that struggles over hegemony traverse the fields of civil and political society and, as such, are what determine the precise and always-situated configuration of the

integral state—a configuration ultimately resting on violent force (the armor of coercion). From Gramsci's perspective, the state is a real or concrete abstraction, which simply means an abstraction that in and through practice becomes "true" to the extent it structures collective social life in very real and concrete ways.[16]

Frontier state formations (in the plural), as a concept, tries to capture the dialectical relations between civil and political society constantly being configured and disfigured through Urabá's territorial struggles without falling into teleological, reified, or ideal-typical understandings of statehood.[17] My processual, spatial, historical, and ethnographic account of frontier state formations reveals the inadequacy of Weberian definitions of statehood (Weber 1978, 54), which serve as the theoretical support for misleading notions of state "failure" and related narratives of statelessness. Writing about Colombia, Kent Eaton, for instance, claims that "guerrillas and paramilitaries have been able to use decentralized resources to destabilize the state, limiting even further its monopoly over the use of force and creating what are in effect parallel states" (Eaton 2006, 533). My conceptual framework, however, leads to the opposite conclusion. I am able to demonstrate how the territorial strategies of both guerrillas and paramilitaries are not necessarily anathema to formal projects of liberal statecraft. In fact, as mentioned before, the power of paramilitaries partly rested on the way they positioned themselves as state-builders in places where its institutional presence and authority had supposedly lapsed or never existed.

Methodologies and Organization of the Book

Over a two-year period, from January 2012 to December 2013, I split my time between Bogotá, Medellín, and the gulf region of Urabá, based on a research design organized along three lines of inquiry, which form the three sections of the book: first, I sought to track historical production of Urabá as a frontier and the related rise of paramilitaries; second, I wanted to gain a fine-grained understanding of the localized state-building strategies of the paramilitary movement; and, third, I wanted to explore the living legacies of these processes in the context of Urabá's post-paramilitary present. In addition to archival and ethnographic research, I conducted 74 audio-recorded interviews with a range of local actors: demobilized combatants (guerrillas and paramilitaries), military officers, government officials, human rights activists, displaced campesinos, peasant leaders, unionists, politicians, ranchers, banana plantation owners,

[16] For Gramsci, see Thomas (2009, 159–196) and for Lefebvre see the volume edited by Brenner and Elden (Lefebvre 2009). My understanding of "concrete-abstraction" is derived from the explanations offered by Stanek (2008), McCormack (2012), and Loftus (Loftus 2015).

[17] A single line from an article by Francis Fukuyama, titled "The Imperative of State Building," illustrates the kind of conceptual and culturally laden assumptions my use of frontier state formation takes aim at: "The modernity of the liberal West is difficult to achieve for many societies around the world" (Fukuyama 2004, 19).

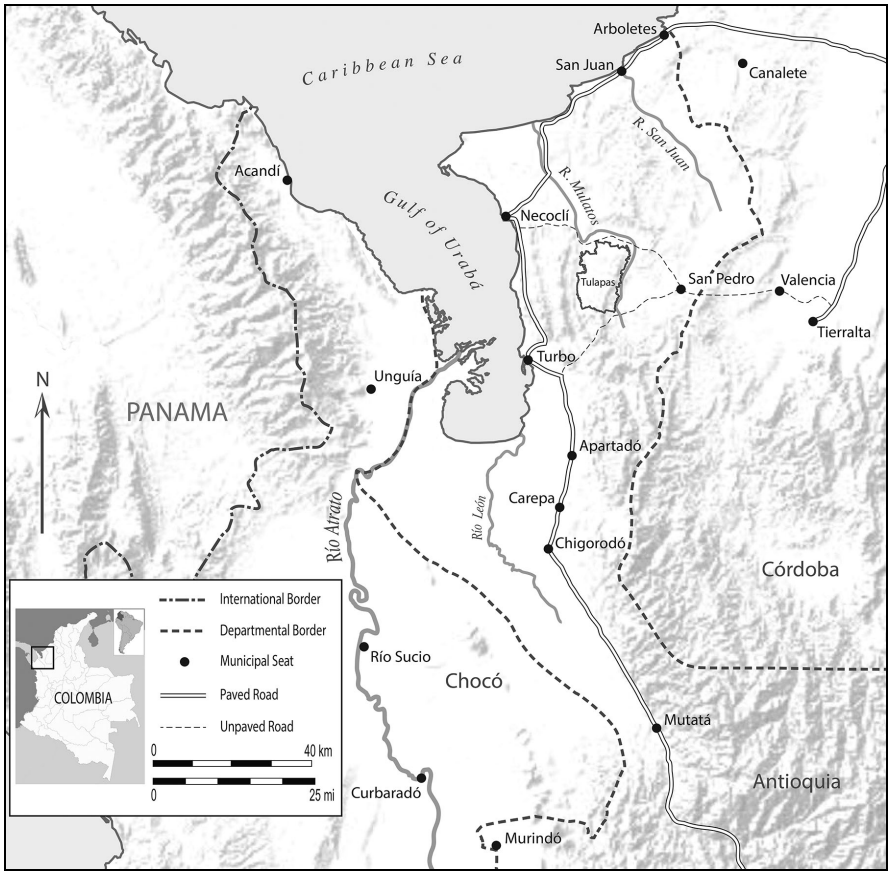
and agribusiness executives. Most of these conversations lasted about an hour, but longer interviews and oral histories extended as long as four or five hours.

From 2012 to 2013, I split my time between Bogotá, Medellín, and Urabá.

The first section of the book traces Urabá's geohistorical production as a stateless frontier zone and explains why it became a crucial forging house for the consolidation of the paramilitary movement. Chapter One focuses on the construction of the Highway to the Sea, which linked Medellín to the Gulf of Urabá in 1954, and the subsequent conversion of the region into a banana-export enclave at the hands of the United Fruit Company in the decades that followed. It also illustrates the violent intersection of guerrilla insurgencies with Urabá's extractive model of export agribusiness. The chapter tells the story of how Medellín-based elites brought Urabá into a classic metropole-satellite relation with the city. Bankrolled by surplus capital from Medellín, the Highway and the banana plantations induced waves of dispossession that turned on the violent cultural politics of a civilizing mission. As key exemplars and foundational moments of Urabá's frontier state formations, these high-modernist capitalist fixations intensified the region's already violent relations between land, labor, and capital. Urabá's economies of violence became all the more entrenched with the arrival of the communist insurgencies shortly thereafter. By the 1980s, the dream of capitalist development had turned into a nationally recognized nightmare of political and economic violence, consummating the area's frontier status. I collected most of the material from this chapter from the *Archivo Histórico de Antioquia* in Medellín, digital

newspaper databases, and oral histories with banana industry pioneers, former guerrillas, banana workers, and peasant settlers.

Chapter Two lays out the rise of the insurgencies and what I'm calling the "paramilitary conjuncture," meaning the confluence of multiply scaled forces and temporalities—from contingent events to more structural trends—that spawned the paramilitary movement and turned Urabá into its nerve center. Beyond the territorialization of radical left politics by insurgents' armed support for popular struggles over land, labor, and public services, a series of broader political-economic forces also conspired into making Urabá ground zero for the paramilitary phenomenon: from the cocaine boom, to the rewriting of the country's constitution; from economic liberalization, to the implementation of the U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia. In this chapter, I draw on the vast archive of transcripts, sentences, judicial investigations, and audio-visual recordings I obtained from the trials of paramilitary commanders in Medellín and Bogotá, along with extensive interviews and oral histories with former combatants now living as civilians in Urabá.



Colombia's northwest region of Urabá.

The next three chapters make up the book's second and largest section. The chapters detail the concrete social relationships produced through paramilitaries' self-appointed role of state-builders. For this part of my research, I narrowed my focus to

the region's largest and most influential paramilitary bloc, El Alemán's *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (BEC), named after one of his fallen comrades. I also limited myself geographically to a place called Tulapas in the north of Urabá, which was where the BEC's control had been most consolidated—and, thus, its state-building practices most pronounced. As a case study, Tulapas has the added benefit of being a recurrent geopolitical hotspot for all the parties of the armed conflict, making it somewhat of a representative microcosm of broader dynamics. The loads of information I obtained from the paramilitary trials aided my efforts at reconstructing the BEC's methodical state-building practices. But the court proceedings and my interviews with jailed top- and mid-level paramilitary commanders only give a one-sided account told from the perspective of the paramilitaries themselves. I triangulated this information with ethnographic fieldwork among demobilized rank-and-file fighters and with two sets of campesino groups from Tulapas: the displaced peasants that paramilitaries brutally forced from the area and the campesinos who subsequently settled the abandoned farmlands and became the BEC's ostensible social-territorial base of support. It was among the latter that BEC directed its state-building efforts.

Chapter Three details the BEC's methodical attempts to make (or remake) the state through its territories. It argues that state-building marked a transitional move from a war of maneuver to a war of position, as understood in Gramsci's elaborate sense. The paramilitary war of position—a political-ideological battle pressed into the service of a particular vision of statehood—was a revanchist political project that gained particular intensity in Urabá because of what the rebel's proudly described as its "revolutionary situation." I highlight how paramilitaries carried out their war of position through painstaking community organizing, which they then wired through the circuitry of Colombia's newly decentralized political structures. It helped that they counted on the millions of dollars pouring into their coffers from the drug trade. In the process, state-making and the production of paramilitary territory became socially and spatially isomorphic processes through a heavy dose of populist practices and rhetoric. But the paramilitary war of position was not the mechanical imposition of a premade ideological blueprint; it was also a contingent and negotiated process that proceeded (had to proceed) in dialectical movement, combining coercion and consent, traversing civil and political society.[18]

Chapter Four explores the BEC's entry into formal electoral politics. Building on their extensive community organizing, the BEC scaled out its political work and built a formidable clandestine political machine that installed the bloc's handpicked politicians into municipal councils, mayor's offices, departmental (provincial) legislatures, governor's offices, and both houses of Congress. Although every paramilitary bloc across the country engaged in similar electoral scheming, none managed to capture elected offices at every scale with the smashing success of the BEC. But the "*Proyecto Político*

[18] Paramilitaries war of position was indeed a strategy hatched in the proverbial smoke-filled room, but these chapters demonstrate how contingency was just as important.

Regional Urabá Grande" (the Greater Urabá Regional Political Project), as it was called, was more than a strictly electoral process, it was an intricate articulation of civil and political society and thus an integral part of the bloc' state-oriented war of position. Besides being the BEC's most elaborate frontier state formation, *Urabá Grande* harnessed the negativity of frontier statelessness and the deep-seated cultural politics of Colombian regionalism into an affirmative political project. Indeed, true to its name, the BEC's "Regional Political Project" envisioned the consolidation of regionhood and the construction of statehood as mutually dependent, if not synonymous, affairs.

Chapter Five argues the BEC's state-building strategies formed an integral part of the bloc's criminal economy. I show how paramilitaries and allied agribusinesses put grassroots development discourses of political participation and subsidiarity, environmental conservation, and ethnic and women's empowerment to work in executing and ratifying their massive land grabs. More than a case of "whitewashing" their plunder with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—was not only an integral part of their economies of violence, it was also the operative framework for their frontier state formations. Grassroots development made paramilitaries' economies of violence perversely compatible with formal projects of liberal state-building commonly associated with tropes about institution building, good governance, and the rule of law.

The final section of the book ethnographically explores the legacies of Urabá's frontier state formations in the context of a broader contradiction coursing through Colombia during my fieldwork: the implementation of postconflict initiatives amid ongoing low-intensity conflict and a raging drug war. The country's pre-postconflict moment was configured by two major turning points: the implementation transitional justice initiatives beginning in 2005 after the paramilitary demobilization and the expectation of an imminent peace deal with the FARC since the talks were made public in late 2012. The final two chapters explore how Colombia's pre-postconflict has become the latest crucible of the Urabá's state formations.

Chapter Six delves into the thorny politics of the national land restitution program, one of the key pillars of Colombia's emerging experiment with transitional justice. Introduced in 2011, the land restitution program could be easily interpreted as a reterritorialization of state power via the administration of property rights and its accompanying grids of legibility. But the ethnographic portrait I present of the early stages of the land restitution process in Tulapas makes clear that a thorough and yet subtle negotiation of rule involving a host of actors is underway amid the liminal purgatories of the pre-postconflict. The implementation of the land restitution program in Tulapas is not only being tacitly negotiated with the *Urabeños*, who are the direct successors of the BEC and the new kingpins of Colombia's criminal underworld; it is also coming up against—and in some ways working through—the social-institutional infrastructures left behind by El Alemán. Two sets of campesino factions in Tulapas—

those forced to flee by El Alemán and those who took their place under his watch—are now trying to reconcile the deep antinomies of "community" besetting the pre-postconflict.[19]

Finally, Chapter Seven dissects the anatomy of a new wide-ranging regional planning effort called the "*Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién, 2011-2020*." As a crucial piece of Urabá's pre-postconflict reconstruction, its proponents portray it as a "Marshall Plan" for the region. By the end of my fieldwork in 2013, the Strategic Plan had already spawned a massive regional planning apparatus, enlisting government entities and agencies from all scales working in partnerships with the private sector through contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars for a slew of projects—from the construction of large-scale infrastructures and educational facilities, to microcredit programs and everything in between. Being pushed most forcefully from Medellín, as part of the metropolitan area's strategies for ensuring global competitiveness, the Strategic Plan is in many ways a revival of the high-modernist state fixations (infrastructure, planning, etc.) and frontier imaginaries associated with the Highway to the Sea—a continuity even suggested by the Plan's tagline, "Urabá: A Sea of Opportunities." But the Plan, I argue, also marks a concerted shift toward a more biopolitical modality of government.

Throughout these chapters, my over-arching calim is that Urabá is not a case of state absence or failure. Instead, I argue the region's violent political-economic conflicts have produced surprisingly durable regimes of accumulation and rule. In the case of paramilitaries, for example, plunder, drug-money laundering, and political violence worked right alongside development projects cast in terms of generating social capital, agrarian livelihoods, institution building, good governance, and local political participation. Even initiatives aimed at shoring up the rule of law became functional to paramilitary strategies. Indeed, rather than seeing "civil war as development in reverse," as Paul Collier and his colleagues at the World Bank have claimed (P. Collier et al. 2003), this book shows how development helped operationalize paramilitaries' frontier state formations, making these murderous militias perversely compatible with formal projects of liberal government.[20]

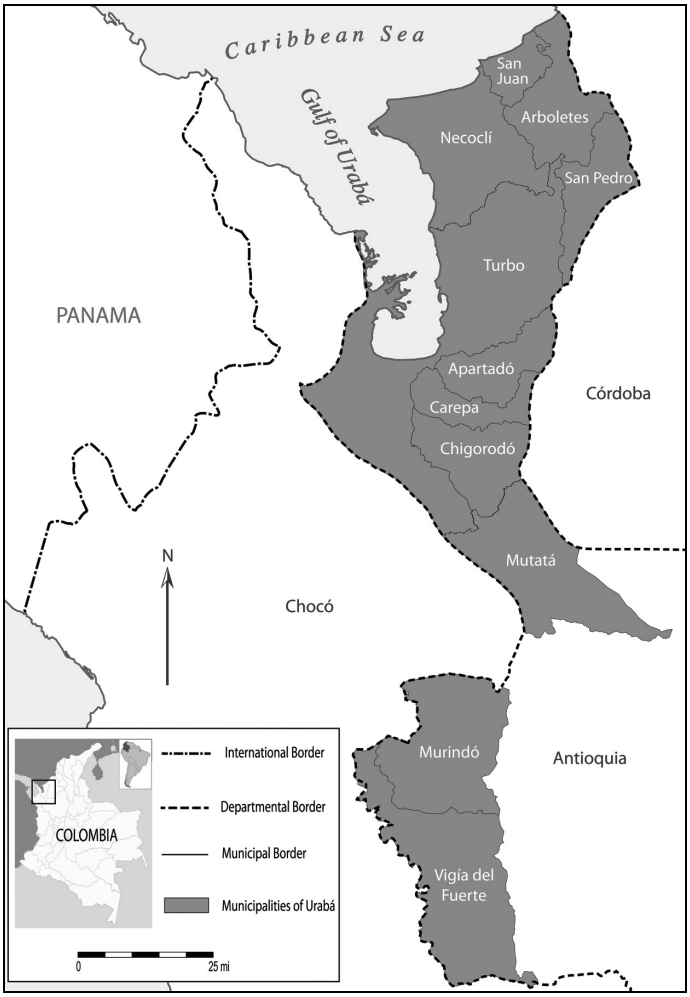
Urabá: Positioning and Being Positioned

Urabá is not an official administrative-territorial division of any kind. It vaguely encompasses portions of three departments in the far northwest corner of Colombia:

[19] I borrow the phrase, "antinomies of community," from Watts' (2006) important work in Nigeria. Kimberly Theidon's (2013) research on "intimate enemies" in Peru is another particularly relevant touchstone.

[20] My argument echoes Chris Cramer's (2006) sweeping account of violence as being potentially conducive to "development" in Third World countries. However, I do not draw the same conclusions about favorable forms of "progress" as the upshot.

the northern tip of Chocó, Antioquia's panhandle, and Córdoba's western fringe. The closest it comes to an official territorial entity is in the form of the 11 municipalities of Antioquia that make up what is widely considered Urabá "proper," also known as "*el Urabá antioqueño*" (Antioquia's Urabá). But the precise regional "borders" of Urabá are diffuse, subjective, and contested—as they are for say, "Appalachia" or "the South" in the U.S. context.



The 11 municipalities of Antioquia making up Urabá "proper," an area almost the size of Connecticut.

Municipalities in Colombia, as territorial divisions, bear closer spatial resemblance to U.S. counties in the sense they cover a relatively expansive area that encompasses rural areas, multiple towns, and even cities. Every municipality has a capital or "Municipal Seat," which serves as the political-administrative hub for the wider county-like municipality. For instance, Apartadó, which is Urabá's most populous municipality with a total of 178,000 inhabitants, has 154,000 residents in its urbanized municipal seat while the remaining 24,000 inhabitants are scattered across the villages and rural areas that make up the broader municipal territory.

An example of Colombia's political-administrative scales.

Surrounded by the banana plantations of its rural zones, Apartadó's municipal seat (above, population 154,000) is more than twice of Turbo's, the region's second-most populous city. (*Photo by Municipio*)

Although the FARC still maintains a strong presence in a few pockets of Urabá, the main clandestine power in the region during my research was *Los Urabeños*, the direct successor group of the BEC. But rampant rumors claimed El Alemán was the real

power behind the throne of the *Urabeños*' local empire. Despite well-known incidents of jailed paramilitary leaders calling the shots from their jail cells, as far as I could tell, the rumors about El Alemán's continued grip over the region had little, if any, basis in fact. What is undeniable, however, is that El Alemán remains a revered figure for both his former troops and for the communities whose support his bloc had actively cultivated. But getting either of these groups to open up to me was difficult.

Many of El Alemán's former troops became self-employed as motorcycle taxi drivers upon their return to civilian life, forming a tight surveillance network in his old stomping grounds. The first time I introduced myself to one of his former soldiers, the guy replied, "Oh, you're the one that's been going around interviewing *desplazados* [displaced people]," and then brushed me off. The peasant communities displaced and victimized by the BEC were relatively open to my overtures; I suppose from the years of experience they had in trying to make their plight visible before the national and international spotlights. But the campesinos that formed the social bases of the BEC's territorial control were as reticent with me as the bloc's former combatants.

During the first six months of my fieldwork, I made slow but noticeable progress. However, it was not until after my first interview with El Alemán in late 2012—almost halfway through my research—that the ex-paramilitaries and their "client" communities really began opening up. Although he never told me so, it was clear El Alemán had opened doors for me. My guess is that the help and leeway I was given was intended to make sure I heard "their side" of the story. Having made clear my interest in his bloc's state-building efforts, I assume El Alemán figured my intention of taking seriously the politics of paramilitaries' armed struggle might help cast him in a more positive light. But incidents such as the ex-paramilitary who already knew I had been "going around interviewing *desplazados*" and the access El Alemán clearly granted me were constant reminders of his lingering sway in the region. They were also reminders that my fieldwork took place in a somewhat "controlled" environment. El Alemán may not have been calling the shots over the totality of Urabá's shadowy underworld, but for the purposes of my research he was still a gatekeeper and, from afar, my handler—a particularly scary one at that. While requiring an all the more critical and skeptical stance on my part towards what I saw and heard, the situation also had its benefits, particularly for my safety and, especially, for that of my informants.

Asking prying questions about land-grabs, political violence, civilian-combatant relations, and a number of other sensitive topics can be a dangerous pursuit in a place like Urabá. People there have their own homegrown adage on the subject. As a former paramilitary advised me, "In Urabá, the less you know, the more you live," while a banana company executive had his own version: "In Urabá, the wisest person is the one that knows the least."[21] Despite being engaged in an endeavor running directly contrary

[21] "En Urabá, el que menos sabe, más vive." And the second one was: "En Urabá, el más sabio es el que menos sabe." Respectively: Author interview with demobilized paramilitary (anonymous) in Necoclí,

to this conventional wisdom, I went to great lengths to avoid creating any risks or problems for my informants. Besides offering all of them anonymity at the beginning of interviews, I have omitted many details to disguise their identity. Even in cases where anonymity can be preserved, I have refrained from publishing incriminating information I was unable to independently verify through publicly available sources.

Above all, I was honest and consistent about the scope of my research. It seemed that quelling any ambiguities about my activities was the most efficient and preemptive way of ensuring, to the best of my ability, everyone's safety, including my own. Beyond El Alemán's tacit approval, I also worked as many channels as I could to secure similar forms of permission from the shadowy powers-that-be. Before making a visit to Tulapas, for instance, I would call as many people there as I could, especially well-connected community leaders, asking if I could go for a visit. Besides publicizing my visit to avoid arriving as an unwanted surprise, my hope was that somewhere along the way the armed groups standing in the wings—in this case, *Los Urabeños*—were consulted and gave their approval. Sometimes, I got vague suggestions to stay away. Point taken. But more often the response was affirmative.

Through means never apparent to me, it worked in the way an anthropologist friend of mine described the nature of access and fieldwork in Colombia's conflict zone: "You're never there *in spite of* the armed groups; you're there *thanks* to the armed groups."[22] Being aware of this fact and exercising humility goes a long way for conducting fieldwork in Urabá, as do a healthy dose of paranoia, common-sense precautions, and (it must be said) a mix of optimism, naïveté, and luck. Fortunately, I never experienced—or was at least unaware of—even the slightest threat against me. While certainly not bulletproof, my position of privilege through the intersections of whiteness, class, and patriarchy certainly helped in addition to being a foreigner (from Argentina and raised in the United States). Though culturally fluent from my seven years of residency in Bogotá, I was sufficiently foreign to be seen as an outsider without a personal stake in and thus above the fray of Urabá's violent polarizations. I made a habit of reinforcing this neutrality whenever I introduced my research to a potential informant by listing all the vehemently opposed camps I was speaking with (landowners, peasants, ex-guerrillas, former paramilitaries, etc.). This tactic had the added plus of inciting people from these opposing camps to make sure I got "their side" of the story.

In this book, I have tried to take all these stories and points of view with the seriousness they deserve. In doing so, I have decided to focus on the one point everyone seems to agree stands at the root of Urabá's violent history: "*la ausencia del estado*"

Antioquia, December 6, 2013. Author interview with Ferndando Devis, banana company executive, in Bogotá, DC, October 17, 2013.

[22] Of course, in some cases requests and expressions of permission for fieldwork from clandestine powers can be completely explicit. The line was said by Diana Bocarejo, an anthropologist at Bogotá's Universidad del Rosario, during her presentation at a workshop in Villa de Leyva, Colombia convened by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) for its Drugs, Security, and Democracy fellows in July 2012.

(the absence of the state). In Gramsci's terms, Urabá exhibits the symptoms of a sustained "crisis of authority," which he defined as "precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State" in which even the total use of force is incapable of securing the stability of rule (1971, 210). It was in reference to this kind of situation that Gramsci wrote: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (1971, 276).

Chapter 1

Urabá: Producing the Frontier

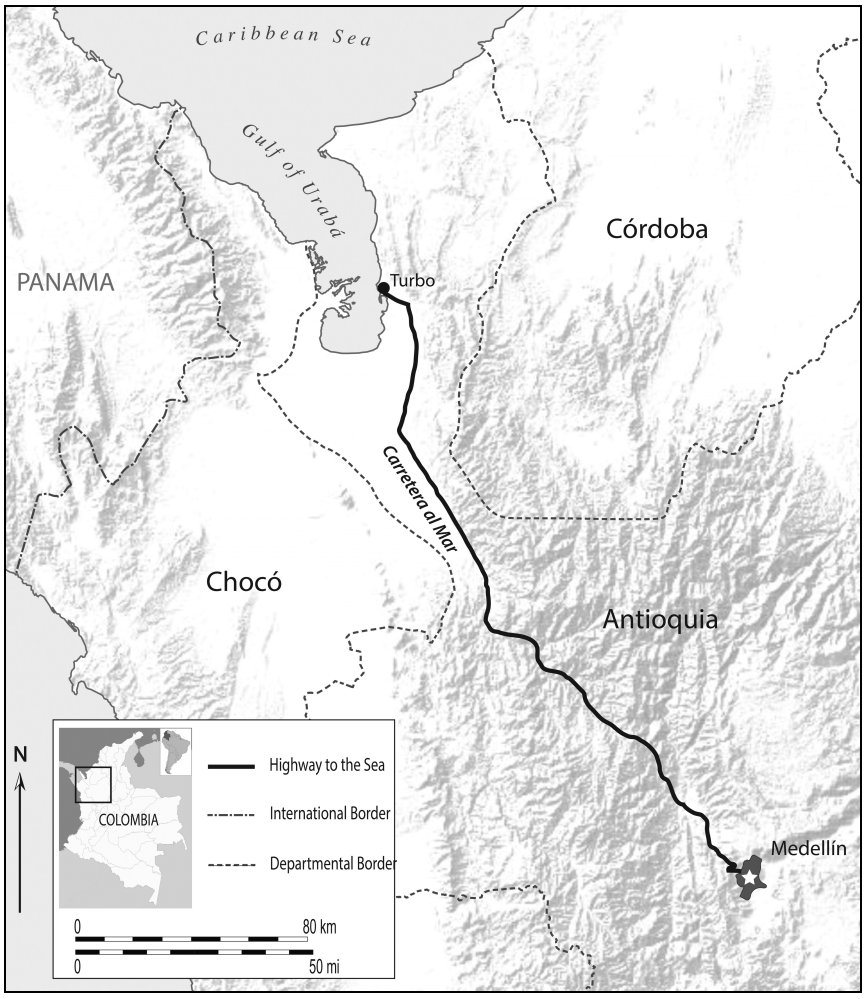
> When the trumpet blared
> everything on earth was prepared
> and Jehovah divvied up the world
> to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,
> Ford Motors, and other entities.
> United Fruit Company Inc.
> reserved the juiciest piece,
> the central coast of my land,
> the sweet waist of America.
>
> —Pablo Neruda, "La United Fruit Co.," *Canto General* (1950)

In preparation for his trial, El Alemán, the jailed paramilitary chief of the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*, wrote a book-length manuscript on Urabá and its place within the broader history of Colombia's armed conflict. One of the first sections of the text bears the title: "Urabá, a land without a state."[1] He begins the section with a story about an engineering mission that set out from Medellín to Urabá in 1927. It took the mission five weeks of travel by car, foot, horseback, and boat to reach the gulf region. Forced to bushwhack much of the way, "[the mission's] only guide for navigating through the treacherous jungles of Urabá," noted El Alemán, was a lonely telegraph line—that leitmotif of civilization's advance.

The person at the head of this bushwhacking mission was Gonzálo Mejía, a larger than life businessman from Medellín, who El Alemán described as a "visionary *antioqueño*." (*Antioqueño* being the name for people from the department of Antioquia.) Mejía helped pioneer so many industries in Colombia—automotive, aviation, cinema—the press in those days called him "the dream maker."[2] Mejía's most ambitious plan of all was the one that had brought him trudging through the swamps of Urabá with a team of engineers: the construction of a highway connecting Medellín, capital of Antioquia, to the department's only outlet to the sea, the Gulf of Urabá. Mejía had spent years whipping up a frenzy of popular support for *la Carretera al Mar*, the Highway to the Sea, and its construction was finally underway.

[1] The 350-page untitled manuscript was submitted to the courts as part of El Alemán's testimony: Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, November 23 to December 4, 2009.
[2] "Gonzálo Mejía Trujillo," ficha biográfica, Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia.

The construction of the 350-kilometer Highway to the Sea dragged on for almost three decades, reaching its terminus in 1954 just two years before Mejia's death. The media called it Antioquia's "*magna obra*," its masterpiece. Colombia's new President, Gen. Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who had recently seized power in a military coup brokered by the country's oligarchy, attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony on the shores of the Gulf—an event recounted in El Alemán's manuscript. "What Colombians' commander in chief could have never imagined at that moment," mused El Alemán, "is that more than 80 years later our celebrated highway is nothing more than an impassible muddied trail during the rainy season. To this day, it's still holding back Urabá's genuine progress." For the former paramilitary commander, the civilizing mission Mejía began with the Highway was still very much a work in progress.



The Highway to the Sea, from Medellín to Turbo, was finished in 1954.

History obviously does not begin in Urabá with the Highway to the Sea (Steiner 2000; M. T. Uribe 1992). Besides the indigenous Kuna, Zenú, and Emberá populations that inhabited the area for millennia, Urabá was also the site of the first semi-permanent European settlement on the American mainland (Parsons 1960, 274; Sauer 1966). The region also holds a solid place within the Black Atlantic: over the centuries,

Spain sent loads of enslaved Africans and their children into the gold mines of the Atrato basin. Some of those enslaved managed to escape, finding refuge in the dense jungles surrounding the Gulf. Resistance by these ethnic communities made Urabá a practically autonomous space during the Spanish Empire. In the eyes of the colonial authorities, Urabá was a no-man's land, *terra nullius*, a place ruled by the law of the jungle that was under their possession and protection only in name (Steiner 2000, 2). Contraband smugglers and pirates also found favorable geostrategic terrain in Urabá. Piracy was so rampant the Spanish Crown began prohibiting river traffic on the Atrato River as a tactic against the buccaneers. Any story about Urabá could begin with any of these moments, but it was the Highway to the Sea that definitively clinched the region's reputation as a lawless, fugitive space of wild opportunity—a frontier.

This chapter traces the historical and geographical contours of Urabá's ideological, material, and quotidian production as a social-spatial frontier.[3] The core of this process was Medellín's attempt at bringing the gulf region into the city's social, political, and economic orbit, following in the mold of an uneven metropolis-satellite relation of development and underdevelopment (Frank 1967; Smith 2008). The making of the frontier, however, also turned on a broader set of forces working through a fractal-like pattern of scalar interconnections. Besides the cultural politics of Colombian regionalism, a series of intersecting national political-economic forces helped stoke plans for the Highway. The U.S.-engineered secession of Panama from Colombia in 1903 initiated lasting geopolitical anxieties making the adjacent region of Urabá the subject of national handwringing. After the completion of the Panama Canal, the new road also helped turn Urabá into an attractive site for the United Fruit Company. Labor unrest and plant disease elsewhere in Colombia and Latin America sent the company shopping around for a new banana-export enclave. Finally, the twin arrival of communist insurgencies and U.S.-backed counterinsurgency efforts sucked Urabá into the global geopolitics of the Cold War. In what follows, I analyze these events in sequence, showing the way they collectively converged and culminated in the making of Urabá into a nominally stateless space and thus the site of a contradictory set of frontier state formations.

Colombia 'Loses' Panama, Antioquia 'Wins' Urabá

The loss of Panama in 1903 was the result of a snowballing and multidimensional crisis in Colombia. By the 1880s, the country's once-booming export-oriented agricultural economy unraveled into a tailspin from growing competition in the global tobacco and quinine markets. Making matters worse, the price of coffee—then emerging as Colombia's darling new export—fell by more than half in international

[3] Again, my conceptual bearings draw on Lefebvre's theories about the social production of space. Redclift (2006) similarly cites Lefebvre's utility for conceptualizing frontiers but does not thread the conceptual framework through his empirical material—though Lefebvre clearly informs it.

markets from 1875 to 1884. The only steady source of foreign exchange for the country was the gold being pulled from Antioquia's mines, turning Medellín into Bogotá's banker—a continued source of tension and rivalry between the two cities (Bergquist 1978, 8–10, 15, 41). The economic crisis deepened longstanding political schisms between the Liberal and Conservative parties, plunging the country into the sea of bloodshed known as the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902).

Though equally elite at the echelons of leadership and mixed in their class composition at the base, the Liberal and Conservative parties have historically been on opposing sides of some key issues—albeit, loosely and inconsistently. Liberals have generally been more lay-minded, more accommodating of decentralized government, and friendlier toward the interests of commercial-merchant elites. Conservatives, in contrast, have been fiercely pro-Church, more inclined toward centralized government, and inward looking in their economic policies (Bergquist 1978; Hylton 2006). Towards the end of the war Liberals and Conservatives began smoothing out their differences over the contradictions of export agriculture amid the growing consolidation of the coffee industry—in part, thanks to favorable international conditions—but not before the conflict took an estimated 100,000 lives among a population of barely four million.

The war also fanned separatist sentiments in the department of Panama, site of the stalled interoceanic canal project. The turmoil in Colombia gave Washington the opening it had been looking for. Buckling under the duress civil war, Bogotá offered the United States sovereign rights in perpetuity over the Canal Zone. But the deal flopped on the floor of Colombia's legislature, which rejected the treaty as a violation of the nation's territorial integrity. With Washington's support, Panama immediately responded by declaring its Independence. For many diplomatic observers, it was a tragedy foretold. Almost a year before Panama's secession, one of Colombia's ambassadors predicted, "The Isthmus is lost for Colombia; it is painful to say it, but it is true. Here Yankee influence predominates, and all Panamanians, with a few exceptions, are capable of selling the Canal, the Isthmus, and even their own mother."[4]

Colombia's loss of Panama left a deeply wounded sense of nationhood along with an understandable case of geopolitical paranoia. After the Panama debacle, the country's new President—Rafael Reyes, a Conservative—sought to rein in any further dismemberment of the nation by centralizing power in Bogotá and by divvying up the country's departments into smaller, more-manageable administrative units. Before the new territorial divisions were a done deal, the city council of Medellín implored Congress, with the loss of Panama as the subtext, to put Urabá under Antioquia's domain: "Not only as just compensation for the loss of its southern parishes to the newly proposed department," argued the council, "but to return territory that has always properly belonged to Antioquia, thus placing the area on the road to progress and helping defend our national integrity" (quoted in Parsons 1967, 28). The territorial

[4] The quote was said by Miguel Abadía Méndez while in Panama on his way to Chile as Colombia's ambassador (quoted in Bergquist 1978, 214)

reshuffle enacted in 1905 separated from Antioquia what today is the department of Caldas—the "southern parishes" mentioned above by the city council. In compensation, the reform gave landlocked Antioquia jurisdiction over most of Urabá, an outlet to the sea that the department had lost several decades before.

Colombia's departmental divisions, with a landlocked Antioquia (in yellow), before the war.

In the minds of Medellín elites, Urabá had naturally belonged to Antioquia all along; it was "their" corridor to the sea and only *antioqueños* had the requisite wherewithal for ensuring the region's progress and defense. It was *antioqueños*, after all, who had colonized the high plateau lands to the south of Medellín that became the epicenter of the coffee boom. The success of the colonization and the smallholder-driven coffee bonanza that followed meant *antioqueños*, or "*paisas*" as they refer to themselves, had a proven track record of spearheading a successful civilizing mission, or so the argument went (Steiner 2000). The coffee colonization is one of the key founding myths of *paisas*' self-ascribed exceptionalism. A play on the word "*paisano*" (countryman), "*paisa*" is at its worst a chauvinist regional-cultural identity assumed by *antioqueños* in which they see themselves as Colombia's most enterprising, pious, hardworking, light-skinned, and macho people (Appelbaum 2003). From the lens of *paisa* exceptionalism, the return of Urabá to Antioquia was a matter of manifest destiny. All they needed was a way to get there.

The *paisa* dream of linking Medellín and Urabá by road or rail was a longstanding one. In 1885, two decades before Antioquia's definitive repossession of the Gulf, a former Governor of the department wrote:

> It is an extraordinary fact that the part of Antioquia first touched by the Spaniards is today the most abandoned. But matched against this regrettable truth is Urabá's high promise. In this area is to be found a solid basis for Antioquia's future growth and aggrandizement, for a road will one day be built here that will take the *antioqueños* to the shores of the Atlantic and from there to all parts of the world. When the stimulus of the inevitable canal of Panama reaches us, when the justice and practical good sense of Colombians reestablishes the proper limits of this state, extending its jurisdiction to the Gulf of Darién [i.e. Urabá], and when the vigorous spirit of our enterprising people abandons the routine of its traditional life, then this area will take wings and rise to the true grandeur to which it has been destined by Providence.[5]

As in the former Governor's diagnosis, *antioqueños* at the turn of the century expressed ideas about Urabá's statelessness through the idioms of "abandonment," "progress," "modernity," and "civilization versus barbarism." As one newspaper columnist screeched: "Let's open up the tangled jungles of the aborigines to make way for the triumphant carriage of commerce and the patriotic defense our national integrity." Based on his sense of *paisa* superiority, the columnist saw the advance of *antioqueño* civilization as a racio-cultural and economic imperative as much as a geopolitical one. "Yes," he continued, "we're heading west to both civilize and civilize ourselves; to repel barbarism and attract healthier elements of morality and work… Let's finish what those audacious Spanish conquistadors were unable to do: subjugate and exploit that promised land" (quoted in Steiner 2000, 9).

Between plaintive laments about the region's "abandonment," local officials in Urabá, made incessant appeals to Antioquia's Governor for the construction of a road linking the Gulf to the interior of the department.[6] In 1911, the local prefect sent Antioquia's Governor an extensive report on the region. With his thumb on the pulse of the nation's geopolitical anxiousness toward U.S. imperialism, the prefect called the road a "strategic" necessity "in case of a war with some nation of the North."[7] Only Antioquia, he insisted, could prevent Urabá's seduction by the "welcoming shade of the colossus." But for Antioquia to keep the Gulf in its fold, the department would have to wage an all-out ethico-political battle in the region:

> If we want to not so much as maintain but rather foster the true moral hegemony of Antioquia over this region, then it's indispensible to make sure public instruction here is in the hands of Antioquia's most experienced

[5] Manuel Uribe Angel, *Geografía de Antioquia* (Medellín, 1885), quoted in Parsons (1967, 36–37).
[6] Prefect's letter to Antioquia's Secretario de Gobierno, June 12, 1911. Archivo Histórico de Antioquia (AHA), Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 143, Carpeta 1 (e.g. pp. 195, 238, and many more).
[7] Ibid, p. 241.

> teachers… We need them to come and radically resolve the moral chaos afflicting the region. In this case, it is not so much my regionalism that leads me to speak in this way; it's my firsthand view of the barbarous life being led by the inhabitants of the region. The teachers of Antioquia must save this agonizing society… [which is] one of the most morally and intellectually backwards of Colombia.[8]

Antioqueño racism towards Urabá's overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian population ran deep, underwriting the "othering" of the entire region. The racist ideological production of the frontier worked though what Edward Said might have called creole orientalism (Said 2001). In the Manichean world of Colombia's internal colonialisms (Fanon 2004; González Casanova 1965), the insides and outsides of civilization cum statehood had a consistent racial makeup. For the case of Urabá, as Claudia Steiner has shown (2000), the civilizing mission of the colonial encounter was one in which *paisa* superiority and ingenuity would definitively "*antioquianize*" a runaway space and its racialized population.

At the turn of the century, Urabá's multiracial make up had formed via three recent streams of migration: blacks arrived from Chocó in the south and from Cartagena in the east, while mestizos crossed westward from the neighboring Sinú river basin in what is present-day Córdoba (Parsons 1967; M. T. Uribe 1992; García 1996).[9] In a report from 1930, the local head of the Catholic Church inventoried the region's racial demography: "The prefect has whites, blacks, mulatos, mestizos, and indians. Proper whites are very few and live to the south of the mission. The blacks who are the majority are descended from the African slaves brought in colonial times who substituted the indians laboring in the mines."[10]

In actual fact, however, most of these groups had been gravitating in and out of the region for decades amid the extractive booms and busts of Urabá's commodity cycles: rubber, tropical woods, ipecac, and ivory palm (*tagua*).[11] From the *paisa* gaze, perched as they were in Antioquia's Andean highlands, Urabá's backwardness was an entwined problem of both race and climate. It was only "natural" that the people who inhabit such steamy tropical lowlands would be both lazy and morally degraded.[12] The fact that *antioqueños* could even live in the lowlands came as a surprise to a visiting government inspector from Medellín: "*La raza antioqueña* has acclimated to the region,

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[88] Ibid, p. 243-244. María Teresa Uribe specifically couches the *antioqueño* colonization as a cultural-ethical political project (M. T. Uribe 1992, 22; Steiner 2000).

[9] For more, readers can consult several sources for more detailed historical accounts on Urabá (M. T. Uribe 1992; García 1996; W. Ramírez 1997; Ortíz 1999; 2007; Steiner 2000).

[10] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 43.

[11] Ipecac is a medicinal plant used as an emetic and to make cough syrup. Ivory palm (Phytelephas *aequatorialis*) was a major bonanza in the region. The palm tree produces a nut almost identical to ivory; the ivory nut, as its known, was a favorite raw material for button manufacturers in North America and Europe until it lost favor through the popularization of plastic after World War I.

[12] In Colombia, the racist associations with nature, climate, and altitude run deep (Pratt 1992; Appelbaum 2003; Koopman 2015).

living with normal conditions and robustness."[13] Even today, it is not altogether unheard of for ultra-conservative *paisas* to proudly describe themselves as "*la raza antioqueña*." The racist associations between climate, altitude, and race are tightly linked in Colombia. In the case of *paisas*' colonial encounter with Urabá, notes Steiner, "Concepts such as bringing 'the spirit of the mountain', 'homogenizing the race,' and '*antioquianizing*' Urabá became the clarion calls of a colonization that beyond the physical riches of the region sought to establish an '*antioqueño* culture' " (2000, ix).

Having officially regained "their" corridor to the sea on April 11, 1905, Medellín elites wasted no time in making that control mean more than a few redrawn lines on the map. That same day, a U.S.-based entrepreneur Henry Granger secured a 99-year contract for the construction of a railroad that would connect the Gulf of Urabá to Medellín. Under the terms of the contract, Granger gained title over tens of thousands of hectares of unowned lands (*tierras baldías*), promising to "foment European and American immigration."[14] The proposed crown jewel of the railroad project was the city it would build at the terminus of the tracks on the shores of the Gulf. The city was to be called "Ciudad Reyes" after President Rafael Reyes, the man responsible for Urabá's return to Antioquia. A judge from Medellín could barely contain his excitement over the imagined metropolis:

> The movement is just beginning. I can already imagine the future Ciudad Reyes flowering populously with its artistically decorated buildings, its skyscrapers, and its towering streetlights, surrounded by gardens—a portrait of Naples on the shores of the Atlantic slumbering to the cadence of the Gulf's lapping waves.[15]

As part of the dealt, the railroad company agreed to exact no more than a three-cent levy on every stem of bananas shipped on its line.[16] The nascent banana industry was shaping up as a major new boon to the economy thanks to the vigorous personal backing of President Reyes. He hoped bananas would diversify Colombia's agricultural export portfolio and ward against an economic pitfall like the one that helped spark the War of a Thousand Days (Parsons 1967, 48; Bergquist 1978, 238). The three-cent levy and the turn toward bananas would ricochet many decades later in Urabá. But the U.S. financial panic of 1907 doomed Granger's company; neither the railroad nor Ciudad Reyes ever materialized. Physically, the railroad left little more than a paper trail of blueprints and plans, but it nonetheless set the ideological terrain for a new wave "*fiebre colonizadora*" (colonizing fever) in Antioquia.

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[13] "Carretera al mar: La salvación de antioquia," December 1929, Imprenta Oficial, Medellín.

[14] "Contrato celebrado con el señor Henry G. Granger," July 14, 1909, Imprenta Nacional, Banco de la República, Bogotá.

[15] Speech by Tomás María Silva at the ceremony transferring jurisdiction over Urabá to Antioquia (quoted in Steiner 2000, 12)

[16] The Gros Michel variety of bananas being grown at the time could be shipped in stems, rather than being broken down into "hands" and boxed in cardboard, as with today's most common varieties.

In 1913, still holding out the hope of a railroad, Antioquia's Departmental Assembly passed a slew of bills promoting the peasant colonization of Urabá. One law stated, "Colonization is of the utmost urgency [*urgentísimo*]… bringing with it the advance of culture and civilization."[17] The plan was *paisas*' version of the maxim made famous by Argentine statesman Juan Alberdi: *gobernar es poblar* (to populate is to govern). The Assembly offered colonizing campesinos—that is, homesteaders, or *colonos*—to pay for their voyage to Urabá, where they would then receive a six-month living stipend, tools, and a 100-hectare lot. In exchange, the law required *colonos* to build a house ("with an independent kitchen"), plant at least one hectare with crops, and clear at least 10 hectares of jungle by the end of their second year. As long as they complied with these stipulations and remained in good standing with the local government engineer, they would get formal title over 10 hectares for every hectare planted with crops. The government's only caveat was that *colonos* could not oppose the passage of the still-longed-for railroad through their lands.

Despite the incentives, the stream of arriving *colonos* was never more than a trickle. The coffee highlands to the south of Medellín were still a much stronger magnet when compared to the as-yet unknown fortunes of rain-drenched Urabá. Politics and racism may have been further deterrents: campesinos from the interior of Antioquia tended to be Conservatives, while Urabá, with its overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian population, was a solid Liberal Party stronghold (Parsons 1967, 43–44). Despite some notable distributions of unclaimed lands, the colonization program never measured up to the high expectations of its authors. Informal and slower patterns of land colonization composed a much larger portion peasant settlement during these years (Villegas 1998).

The expansion of the agrarian frontier in Urabá followed the same two-stage pattern that occurred in other Colombian hinterlands at the turn of the century: homesteading peasant families cleared the forest and planted the land, increasing its value, but well-heeled entrepreneurs with more political connections then moved in and asserted ownership (often violently), gained formal title, and concentrated the properties into large estates (LeGrand 1986; Villegas 1998). In her meticulous reconstruction of these dynamics, historian Catherine LeGrande concludes, "This basic conflict of interests between self-provisioning settler families and elite investors intent on controlling the settlers' land and labor was intrinsic to the Colombian frontier experience" (1986, xvi). In the case of Urabá, a national law passed in 1900 exacerbated the primitive accumulation of informally held peasant lands. The law turned wide swaths of the region into inalienable government-owned woodlands. National and international logging firms, particularly the Emery Company of Boston, monopolized the resulting government-issued forest concessions. The rezoning meant peasants who had long ago settled these forest spaces lost all legal rights, becoming a captive workforce compelled to sell its labor and products at the rock-bottom prices dictated by the companies (LeGrand 1986, 60).

[17] "Ordenanza No. 49 – April 29, 1913," Asamblea Departamental de Antioquia, pp. 101-104.

The railroad, Ciudad Reyes, and the colonization schemes all failed according to their stated aims, but in their collective failures they confirmed Urabá's reputation as an indomitable frontier zone. The geopolitical vulnerability of the region to the talons of U.S. imperialism made its "confirmed status" as a savage space of irreconcilable alterity all the more problematic—not only for Antioquia but for the nation as a whole. At this point in Urabá's frontier narrative, barbarism had repelled civilization. It would take more than colonization-by-decree and railroad concessions to beat back the enemies—both foreign and domestic—of *antioqueño* civilization. In the press and plazas of Medellín, a homegrown version of Horace Greely's "go west, young man, go west" was beginning to sound. *¡Hacia Urabá! ¡Al Mar!*[18] To Urabá! To the Sea! And one voice, in particular, echoed the loudest: Gonzálo Mejía's, the larger than life *antioqueño* businessman some called "the dream maker."

"To the Sea! The Highway to the Sea," the February 1927 cover story of *Progreso* magazine.

To the Sea

Mejía convinced some of Medellín's most elite families to join him in creating the *Junta Propulsadora para la Carretera al Mar*, a booster committee tasked with making sure a road materialized between Urabá and Antioquia's capital. With the help of key figures from Medellín's fiercely tightknit high-society, the *Junta* began lobbying at all scales of government and launched an all-out marketing campaign replete with mass rallies and propaganda. The *Junta* even installed an enormous map in downtown

[18] "¡Hacia Urabá!" was the headline of an op-ed in Medellín's paper of record, *El Colombiano*, November 13, 1913.

Medellín showing the road's proposed route. For some, the route for the Highway was as natural as it was obvious: "Anyone who looks at the map of Colombia," began the above-pictured cover story of a local magazine in 1927, "will notice Medellín and in their imagination will immediately draw a line from our [*antioqueños*'] capital to the Gulf."[19]

The renowned patriarch of one Medellín's elite families told a reporter: "In my opinion, [Urabá] is where the immediate future fortunes of the *raza antioqueña* will be found."[20] In the minds of elites, the region's racial degeneracy made the Highway both a work of moral redemption and a geopolitical necessity for bringing Urabá's residents into Antioquia's cultural-political hegemony. Expressing the racist ethos driving these assumptions, the Catholic Church's top priest for Urabá stated:

> Besides the remnants of the indigenous tribes, which in truth are few, there is still another *pueblo* [people] to redeem: the descendants of the hapless slaves brought from Africa … who spread throughout Urabá after Independence. They have been languishing there in unhappy hamlets, vegetating in indolence and carelessness. They have no any ideals or love for work, no aspirations for education and have no ties to Antioquia other than our public officials there.

Drawing on one of the key tropes of statelessness from those days, he continued by describing the people of Urabá as "abandoned." The priest concluded declaring "Urabá is a sick patient" in dire need of being "injected with the boiling, moral, and progressive blood of the *pueblo antioqueño*." Only then, he argued, "will you see the sick patient rise to all the benefits the Colombian nation has to offer."[21]

Mejía and his fellow boosters couched the Highway as Antioquia's "*obra redentora*" (redemptive project).[22] Playing emotively on *paisas*' regional chauvinism, his public relations campaign instigated a genuine groundswell of support for Antioquia's march to the sea. Elites fervently hailed the Highway to the Sea as the spearhead of *antioqueño* civilization's definitive triumph over barbarism in an area they explicitly claimed—in Imperial Roman terms—as "*mare nostrum.*"[23] Celebrating the widespread fanatical popular support for the Highway, Medellín's press observed, "Every *antioqueño* backed the project with crazy enthusiasm: women offered their jewelry, men offered their work or their money. It was a beautiful moment of our history."[24] By producing Urabá as a frontier within the popular geographical imagination, the Highway project created its own material and ideological conditions of possibility. But broader material and economic forces were just as crucial.

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[19] "¡Al Mar!," *Progreso*, Issue No. 9, February 8, 1927, p. 1.
[20] "¡Al Mar!," *Progreso*, Issue No. 9, February 8, 1927, p. 135.
[21] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 2 (blockquote) and 18.
[22] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 43.
[23] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 90.
[24] "¡Al Mar!," *Progreso*, Issue No. 9, February 8, 1927, p. 137.

Medellín's economy boomed after the global slump of World War I. Antioquia's mining tradition and its role in the coffee boom had already positioned the city as a major financial-commercial hub. The coffee boom, which was well consolidated by the war's end, further strengthened the city's merchant bankers through their control of the credit, pricing, distribution, and transportation of the crop (Hylton 2007). *Paisa* financiers had also started redirecting their windfall coffee remittances toward local industrial development, particularly textile manufacturing (Parsons 1967, 55). The Highway, they predicted, would turn Urabá into a major cotton supplier for the city's mills. Flush as they were with surplus capital, Medellín's industrial-financial looked to Urabá for lucrative opportunities in agribusiness and real estate. The boom had also brought renewed attention to the city's over-reliance on the Magdalena River, Colombia's main transport and trade corridor since colonial times. When severe droughts paralyzed river transport on the Magdalena in the mid 1920s, city elites' calls for "a modern highway" reached a crescendo.[25]

Proposals for the Highway also came at a time when the country was implementing dramatic economic reforms in the name of "modernization." In 1923, the government contracted Princeton economist Edwin Kemmerer—who later gained notoriety as "the money doctor"—to lead the nation out of its wartime economic hangover. Using Colombia as his proving ground, Kemmerer later led similar "stabilization missions" throughout the Andes, turning him into what one historian described as a "one-man International Monetary Fund" (Drake 1979, 3). In Colombia, as elsewhere, Kemmerer introduced a series of legal and institutional reforms aimed at boosting foreign investment and exports, but he also made a major push for "modernizing" infrastructure projects, which were bankrolled through bonds floated on the U.S. market. "Bankers in the United States, Colombia, and the world over have helped us and had confidence in us, but it's beginning to wane," noted Antioquia's Governor in a speech before the Departmental Assembly. Despite lingering geopolitical anxieties and fiery rhetoric over Washington's designs on the region, the Governor hoped the Highway would turn "Antioquia into the link that reunites the country with American capital."[26]

On June 10, 1926, Antioquia finally began constructing its long sought-after Highway to the Sea. At the height of its construction, the road had 7,000 workers and 43 engineers laboring away on the project.[27] After just a couple years, the flood of capital streaming into the Highway—both foreign and domestic—began drying up with the start of the Great Depression. Construction, which had been distributed across more than 200 kilometers, screeched to a halt at the end of 1929. Interrupted by the global economic crisis, changing political winds in Bogotá, and the onset of another civil war between Liberals and Conservatives, the construction of the Highway dragged on for

[25] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 38-39.
[26] *Album de la carretera al mar*, Fray Máximo de San José (Ed.), 1930, p. 103, 109.
[27] Ibid and Parsons 1967, p. 54.

almost three decades. This next civil war, which was appropriately called "*La Violencia*," helped reinforce Urabá's frontier status—both symbolically and materially.

La Violencia

As happened in much of Latin America during the 1920s, the growth of industrialization and the rush of foreign investment ushered in an era of working-class militancy in Colombia (Hylton 2006, 28–33). After almost 45 years of Conservative control, the populist surge gave the Liberal Party a steady hold on the presidency from 1930 until 1946, a period dubbed the "Liberal Republic." Marginalized, many members of the Liberal Party's most militant factions joined the newly created *Partido Socialista Revolucionario*, which was riding a wave of peasant and proletarian unrest that began in 1926. It would later become the *Partido Comunista Colombiano* (PCC). Campesinos began leading huge land occupations, particularly in the coffee plantation zones closer to Bogotá, while workers in the oil sector and other export enclaves staged massive strikes.

The 1928 banana workers strike against the United Fruit Company near Santa Marta—on the eastern end of the Caribbean coast—was the largest and most famous. At the behest of the United Fruit Company, the Colombian military stepped in and turned its machine guns against the 4,000 striking workers. To this day, no one knows how many unionists died in the massacre, but one cheery cable from the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá noted: "I have the honor to report that the legal advisor of the United Fruit Company here in Bogotá stated yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military authorities during the recent disturbance reached between five and six hundred; while the number of soldiers killed was one."[28] A young Liberal Party congressman named Jorge Eliécer Gaitán catapulted himself into the national spotlight by investigating the massacre and holding congressional debates on the repression.

Drawing on his background as a labor lawyer, Gaitán began cultivating a strong image as a defender of the working class and an enemy of "the oligarchy," which he railed against in his speeches. Though clearly a maverick politician, Gaitán was more reformist than radical and more pragmatic than idealistic (H. Braun 1986). After his stint in the lower house of Congress, he spent the next several years passing through a slew of public offices: Senator, Minister of Labor, Minister of Education, Mayor of Bogotá, Supreme Court Judge, and more. The one constant across these various posts, however, was his strong association with organized labor and the working class more broadly. A charismatic leader and spellbinding orator, Gaitán's public appearances attracted massive crowds to the country's plazas, making him a hated figure across the Liberal-Conservative political spectrum of the Colombian oligarchy.

[28] Cable to the Secretary of State from Jefferson Caffery, Legation of the United States of America, Bogotá, December 8, 1928.

His rise polarized the Liberal Party between the old guard and the new *gaitainistas*. With their votes evenly split, Liberals gave Conservatives an easy victory in the 1946 presidential election. Being in the opposition suited Gaitán: it not only gave him more room for maneuver in securing his own popularity, it also helped him consolidate his position as the uncontested leader of the Liberal Party, lining himself up as the likely winner of the next presidential cycle. A genuine national-popular movement was building across class and ethnic divides, but it all ended abruptly and violently.

Localized forms of political violence against radical Liberals and communists had been building for decades. And, in a backlash against the Liberal Republic, the 1946 elections brought the Conservatives' most retrograde faction to power. With increasing recourse to Cold War rhetoric, the new regime intensified political persecution. Even officials at the U.S. Embassy quipped that one Conservative Army General "cannot tell a communist from a Liberal" and "sees a red behind every coffee bush."[29] It was in this combustible context that a lone gunman assassinated Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948.

On April 9, *el nueve de abril*, a date that still rings in Colombia with all the symbolic weight of a "September 11th," the gunman fired three bullets into Gaitán as he left his office for lunch in downtown Bogotá. Witnesses immediately lynched the assassin, so his motivations or fellow conspirators (if any) remain unknown. The news circulated in shouts: "¡*Mataron a Gaitán*!" (They killed Gaitán!) By "they," the seething mobs obviously meant Conservatives. Massive riots erupted in Bogotá and quickly spread nationwide, plunging the country into nine years of vicious partisan warfare named *La Violencia*.[30]

According to the lowball estimates of official census data, Urabá had less than 50,000 inhabitants at the time of Gaitán's murder. With long stretches of the Highway to the Sea still missing, colonization efforts had never gained much ground. Although the Liberal Republic had engaged in a nationwide road-building spree—constructing 20,000 kilometers in 16 years—the projects generally skirted Conservative Party bastions such as Antioquia (Parsons 1967, 57–58). It was not until Conservatives regained the presidency in the run-up to *La Violencia* that the construction of the Highway to the Sea resumed in earnest.

News of Gaitán's assassination reached Urabá by telegram around three o'clock in the afternoon, about two hours after the shooting. Despite being a Liberal stronghold, Conservatives usually controlled the local governments in the region because the Constitution at the time invested Governors with the role of appointing all the municipal mayors in their departments. When the news hit Turbo, Urabá's unofficial capital at the

[29] The quips from the U.S. Embassy are quoted in Henderson (2001, 370).
[30] The assassination and the riots that followed are often referred to as "*El Bogotazo*," but the geographic implication of the name as something circumscribed to the capital is misleading. For related reasons, many Colombians refer to the event by the date "el nueve de abril."

time, Liberal leaders dissolved the municipal government and declared a "Revolutionary Junta."[31] Two days later, a desperate Conservative sympathizer in Turbo telegrammed Medellín: "Rebels took the town… They armed campesinos and are ready to attack… Please tell Governor of Antioquia if country's situation worsens we will be in grave danger."[32] Citing the "national commotion," the President declared a "state of siege" suspending civil liberties across the national territory—a state of exception that persisted more or less uninterrupted until the drafting of the 1991 Constitution.

With onset of the conflict and with both the national government and Antioquia aligned under Conservative rule, government officials in both places began seeing the road as a geostrategic necessity. To begin with, they wanted to bring Urabá, a fiercely Liberal enclave and rebel refuge, to heel. Second, the Gulf was a major corridor for gun smugglers supplying Liberal guerrillas with weapons from Central America.[33] In short, the war meant Urabá's established reputation as a runaway fugitive space needed swift resolution. For *paisa* elites, one of the main problems with Urabá was that locals did not even consider the area part of Antioquia and they were even less likely to identify as *antioqueños*.

As far back as colonial times, the Gulf region's political, economic, social, and even administrative connections to the interior of Antioquia were almost non-existent. Urabá's aquatic national and international networks wedded the region much more closely to the Caribbean basin by sea and to the Chocó by river. In 1954, a *paisa* traveler from Medellín was shocked to find that Urabá was a land of "Negroes, Indians, and even whites who far from considering themselves *antioqueños* heartily dislike them."[34] The fiercely independent locals frequently saw Medellín's directives as illegitmate impositions (M. T. Uribe 1992; García 1996). With the outbreak of the war, Urabá's frontier otherness—both projected and self-identified—in racial, cultural, and political terms had become a pressing geopolitical problem for Medellín that the Highway was supposed to resolve.

Aside from the initial flare up around Gaitán's assassination, Urabá was relatively quiet until the 1949 election season intensified partisan strife and touched off a vicious five-year cycle of violence.[35] Nationwide, the war killed an estimated 200,000 people

[31] Letter from Personería Municipal de Turbo to Governor's office, January 29, 1949, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 549, Carpeta 1.
[32] "Estación de Radio Turbo," April 11, 1948, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 539, Carpeta 3, p. 189.
[33] Letter from Antioquia's Ministerio de Gobierno to Bogotá, August 25, 1950, in AHA, Ministerio de Gobierno, 1945/1953, D.G. 079, p. 201. 1949. "Oficio No. 423: Turbo," August 14, 1948, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 549, Carpeta 1, p. 194.
[34] *El Colombiano*, June 12, 1954, quoted in Parsons (1967, 58).
[35] Mary Roldán (2002) wrote a definitive history of *La Violencia* in Antioquia, including an exhaustive chapter focused on Urabá and western Antioquia. Most scholars would point to the two-volume *La Violencia en Colombia* (Gúzman, Flas Borda, and Umaña 1980) as the most authoritative account of the

and forcibly displaced at least two million others. Antioquia accounted for almost 15 percent of the casualties and six percent of the displacements (Roldán 2002, 5). As a conflict, *La Violencia* took the form of everything from government-sponsored terror and petty rivalries, to brutal political sectarianism and scorched earth campaigns (Sánchez 2006; Hylton 2006). Both the perpetrators and the victims of the violence were primarily illiterate campesinos. The conflict introduced elaborate forms of killing, torture, and public displays of mutilation that live on in the contemporary repertoires of violence. María Victoria Uribe has discussed the semantic procedures of terror during *La Violencia*, highlighting how purposefully public violence tended to invert the geography of the body:

> What belonged inside the body was placed outside it—the fetus in a pregnant woman was extracted and placed on her midriff; men's tongues were exhibited like neckties by pulling them out through a hole cut in the trachea—and insides were replaced with [severed limbs that] belonged outside—the fetus was replaced by a rooster, and men's testicles were stuffed in their mouths. (M. V. Uribe 2004)

She also notes how the war repurposed everyday tasks from peasant life into macabre metaphors of dehumanizing terror. One technique called "*bocachiquiar*" involved exsanguinating victims by cutting multiple slits into their bodies like those made on the bocachico fish before grilling or frying. "*Picando para tamal*" named the chopping of the body into pieces like the meat diced for tamales.

One of the particularities of *La Violencia* in Urabá was the way political and military affairs intersected with the racialized-regionalized differences constituting its frontierness. The unfinished Highway made it too difficult for Antioquia's Governor to send in the mostly white and largely Conservative Army soldiers based in Medellín (Roldán 2002, 176–177). Instead, he had to rely on deployments from Army brigades based in other Caribbean areas—that is, on troops who like the restless locals of Urabá tended to be both black and Liberal. The National Police forces posed only a slightly lesser problem for the Governor: on the upside, police reinforcements arriving to Urabá generally came from historically Conservative parts of the country; on the downside, however, these departments also happened to be heavily indigenous. These imported reinforcements clashed—along racial and political lines—with their local counterparts, which again tended to be both black and Liberal.

Confirming these tensions, a local Police Captain reported to the Governor in 1952: "The hate against the Police is too strong in the region." The Captain explained that he advised his officers against patrolling the streets lest it incite local revolts that

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wider conflict, but there are countless more regionally focused accounts.

could jeopardize "the ongoing construction of the Highway to the Sea, a project of primordial importance for Antioquia."[36]

Beset by this regional, racial, and political minefield, writes historian Mary Roldán, "The Governor generally opted to arm *antioqueño*-born civilians and police rather than official forces in which non-*antioqueños* played an important role, regardless of the tactical needs of these forces" (2002, 177–178). In other words, racial-regional enmities and divisions turned Conservatives toward a greater reliance on unofficially deputized civilian forces—that is, paramilitaries. Against the rebel *chusma* (rabble)—a dismissive moniker for Liberal guerrillas—Conservatives organized private counterinsurgent forces known as the "*contrachusma*." Although the extreme violence of the *contrachusma* forces sometimes even sickened their patrons in the Conservative Party leadership, these concerns rarely got in the way of material support for the paramilitaries. For instance, when Antioquia's Governor purchased 2,000 guns from Smith and Wesson in early 1950 for the Conservative war effort in Urabá, he insisted the .38 Specials only end up in the hands of loyal *antioqueños*—namely, the *contrachusma* and their vetted *paisa* (meaning white) allies in the police.[37]

The ideological schisms of the Cold War also tinted and, in some cases framed, the violence. Although Liberals could be just as virulently anti-communist as Conservatives, only the former were on the receiving end of accusations of communist subversion. For Conservatives, the terms Liberal, guerrilla, and communist were practically synonymous categories. The communist label was supposed to do double duty: delegitimizing Liberals nationally and ingratiating Conservatives internationally with Washington. Alarmist claims about communist conspiracies could serve almost any functional purpose. A Police commander based in Urabá, for example, begged his superiors for reinforcements by conflating contraband and communism: "The contraband of arms of all kinds and calibers continues unabated in the Gulf … [The culprits] are smugglers who draw inspiration and support from the communist ideologies coming from Russia."[38]

The workers toiling away on the Highway to the Sea faced particular suspicions and accusations of subversion. When the Army sent an investigative commission to Urabá in 1950, the resulting report recommended, "Amid the necessity of pacifying the region, it would be advisable to impose a complete change of the highway workers along with the peasant homesteaders [*colonos*] in the region."[39] Conservative

[36] Letter from Luis Millán Vargas to the Governor, March 28, 1952, in AHA, Comando Policía, 1951/1952, D.G. 014, p. 641.
[37] Letter to the Governor from Oswaldo López, February 18, 1950, in AHA, Comando Policía, 1942/1959, D.G. 012, p. 456. An episode also recounted by Roldán (2002, 177).
[38] Letter to the Governor from Major Arturo González, December 5, 1950, in AHA, Orden Público, 1949/1952, D.G. 039, Tomo I, p. 226.
[39] Report from the Fuerzas Militares de Colombia, Ejército Nacional, IV Brigada, December 30, 1950, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 556, Carpeta 3, p. 141.

dispatches from Urabá often included lists of Highway workers with short accusative descriptions next to their names: "unionist and communist."[40] Progress on the Highway was finally bringing in the long sought-after *colonos* to the region. In many cases, the *colonos* were actually former Highway workers who decided to stay put, carving out plots on either side of the road. The influx of people, according to the Mayor of Chigorodó, was making Urabá almost ungovernable: "Once peaceful and easy to govern, the population has turned dangerous because of the increased numbers of hard-drinking workers and wanderers."[41] The Army painted a almost Hobbesian-style portrait of statelessness:

> Apparently, for some time now, the region has been totally abandoned in terms of both services … and authorities in general. … The authorities, from every point of view, are totally deficient and for these reasons, little by little, violence has taken hold of the region, becoming the supreme and absolute law of the land.[42]

Amid such dire assessments, the Army, which was then at the helm of the road's construction efforts, declared in one report that only the Highway could bring about "progress and economic revitalization" in the region. The author of the report, a Colonel sent from Medellín, implored his superiors:

> We must push ahead with the Highway by any means possible…. When the Highway materializes, these faraway and completely isolated settlements will see that Antioquia has not forgotten them… Not only that, but we must take the moral and civic aspects of the *pueblo antioqueño* to all those far off regions, thus ensuring the redemption of the men living there in a primitive state of moral and mental laxity.[43]

Government officials were still touting the Highway as an ethical, economic, cultural, political, and military necessity. Amid the more generalized notion of Urabá being "stuck" in a primitive state of nature, the Highway to the Sea itself had become a frontier state formation: a strategic apparatus that conjoined disparate governmental rationalities and discourses of rule in a context of presumed statelessness. Rebels effective control over Urabá by 1951 further fueled the region's reputation as a lawless no-mans land of suspect cultural-political allegiance.

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[40] Oficio 23, Visitaduría Administrativa, August 31, 1951, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 567, Carpeta 2, p. 181.

[41] Oficio 103, Alcalde de Chigorodó, April 23, 1950, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Chigorodó, Tomo 552, Carpeta 1, p. 109.

[42] Report from the Fuerzas Militares de Colombia, Ejército Nacional, IV Brigada, December 30, 1950, in AHA, Gobernación de Antioquia, Secretaría de Gobierno, Gobierno Municipios, Turbo, Tomo 556, Carpeta 3, p. 140.

[43] "Informe de Comisión Región Urabá, by Ejército Nacional, IV Brigada, October 16, 1950, in AHA, Comando Ejercito, 1950/1951, D.G. 029, p. 319. Also quoted in Roldán (2002, 190).

Paradoxically, the Highway, which was nearing completion and was supposed to help end the conflict, had become the main locus of rebel activity, a corridor where "*bandoleros* … harass workers and private citizens, interrupt transportation, rob settlers, and maintain a climate of terror."[44] The military began controlling traffic on the Highway by issuing official permits (*salvoconductos*) for travel on the road, arresting anyone found traveling without one. Growing desperate, the Governor tried assigning particular parts of the Highway to whatever security force—police or military—enjoyed the greatest approval among the locals surrounding that particular stretch of road. When even this failed to rein in the insecurity, he gave up and handed Urabá over to the military. Abandoned by their governor and suspicious of the military, which tripled its forces in the region, Conservatives beefed up their *contrachusmas*, which in short order turned Urabá into the third-most violent region of the country.

In her brilliant history of *La Violencia* in Antioquia, Mary Roldán traces a subtle yet noticeable transition in Urabá in which economic interests (both legal and illegal) began overshadowing partisan distinctions as the main accelerant of the bloodshed. She cites a government forest inspector, for instance, who found "that local opinion is unanimous in asserting that the [logging] company has fomented, given aid to, and sustained the reigning state of insecurity in the area in order to monopolize control of the forest products which abound in the region" (Roldán 2002, 195). All the parties to the conflict—including moonlighting members of the government security forces—engaged in illegal logging, extortion, and, most of all, cattle rustling. Land-related violence and speculation also became rampant. Indeed, Roldán reveals a foreshadowing pattern in Urabá and western Antioquia: "What all the towns experiencing the most dramatic increases in average local property values had in common was the presence or operation of well-organized paramilitary forces supported by and deployed in cattle-rustling, theft, worker elimination, and land usurpation by sectors of the economically powerful" (2002, 226).

The final completion of the Highway to the Sea in 1954 was another factor in driving up both prices and conflicts toward the end of *La Violencia*. A military coup in 1953 led by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla put the violence on a downward trend. Elites from both parties supported the military's seizure of power, hoping it would end the bloodletting. Despite his Conservative background, the General began emulating other Latin American populists from those days—namely, Juan Perón in Argentina—and decreed an amnesty for any Liberal guerrillas willing to lay down their weapons. The definitive end of *La Violencia*, however, only came when Liberals and Conservatives agreed to a power-sharing deal in 1957. Known as the "National Front," the agreement stipulated the two parties would alternate the presidency and mathematically divide all public offices and bureaucratic posts. Elites newfound bipartisanship in the National Front had the added plus of systematically excluding the *Partido Comunista Colombiano* from any meaningful political participation.

[44] A government telegram quoted by Roldán (2002, 198).

The National Front fit well with the practice enshrined in the 1886 Constitution whereby the President appointed all governors, who in turn appointed all the mayors in their department. The power-sharing agreement did, however, make one notable political reform. The first National Front government, led by the Liberals, introduced a new feature into the country's institutional-political landscape: the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (JACs, Juntas for Community Action). To this day, the *Juntas* are a ubiquitous and surprisingly understudied aspect of Colombian political life.[45] The *Juntas* were established through a decree written by two rising intellectuals from the left: Orlando Fals Borda, who would become revered as the father of Colombian sociology, and Camilo Torres, a progressive priest and future martyr of liberation theology during his short stint as a guerrilla. They hoped the *Juntas* would help assuage some of the root causes of *La Violencia* by promoting social cohesion, political participation, and autonomy at the most localized scale of community. The 1958 decree creating the *Juntas* envisioned them as an institutional structure for community self-management that would also give neglected communities a stronger collective voice before government entities. In practice, however, they were quickly sucked into the clientelist networks of the country's political duopoly. Eventually, the *Juntas* became a primary point of political intervention for the country's nascent guerrilla movements.

Although *La Violencia* was officially over, the most radical ex-guerrillas—that is, the far-left of the Liberal Party and members of the PCC—holed up in a handful of autonomous peasant communities and organized armed self-defense groups against incessant waves of government and paramilitary repression. Calling for the violent elimination of these communist enclaves, Liberals and Conservatives alike in Bogotá began menacingly referring to them as "Independent Republics." It was the U.S.-backed government attack against these communities that instigated the formal creation of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in 1964. The Cuban-inspired *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), more closely associated with urban middle-class intellectuals and liberation theology, followed soon after. The other rebel group founded this same year was the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL), which initially followed a Maoist line. Like the FARC, the EPL's founders came from the peasant ranks of Communist Party and former Liberal guerrillas.

Bananas on a 'Development' Frontier

Colombia's dual status as war-torn nation and a close ally of Washington apparently made it an attractive laboratory for then-emergent ideologies taking shape

[45] To my knowledge, there is no in-depth historical or ethnographic study of the *Junta de Acción Comunal* phenomenon as a whole.

around Third World development.[46] The proliferation of guerrilla groups in the country and the ramping up of the Cold War worldwide made development an all the more urgent geopolitical necessity. In the 1950s, Colombia hosted the first World Bank mission outside of post-war Europe and in the 1960s became a showcase for the Kennedy administration's anti-communist Alliance for Progress (Escobar 1995; L. E. Fajardo 2003).

Although the direct material interventions of these programs in Urabá were relatively thin compared to other parts of the country, they helped define development ideologies and practices nationwide. The more technocratic language of development and underdevelopment began replacing the equally loaded terms of civilization and barbarism. The Manichaean spatiality of the frontier as a dividing line between state presence and absence—i.e. the state effect writ spatial (Mitchell 1991)—projected places such as Urabá as a particularly problematic space but also one packed with untapped potential. Although Highway booster's wildest dreams about spewing oil fields and open pit gold mines never materialized, the completion of the road did attract the interests of one corporate behemoth: the United Fruit Company.

In 1959, the local subsidiary of the United Fruit Company (today, Chiquita Brands) began making moves toward establishing a banana-export enclave in Urabá.[47] The company had been shopping around for a new production site since disease and hurricanes were decimating its Central American operations—of which Urabá had neither. And unlike Santa Marta, site of the 1928 banana workers massacre, the Gulf region on the opposite end of the Caribbean coast provided a clean slate on the labor front. As one company executive reportedly reasoned, "If we don't come in, others will." Enjoying generous tax-breaks and other financial incentives, United Fruit introduced the same out-grower contracting scheme it had pioneered elsewhere.

The company owned no land and employed no workers; it simply offered financing, technical assistance, and infrastructure, thereby outsourcing production to its "associate producers" and releasing itself from the nasty entanglements around land and labor it had faced in the past. Urabá's copious rainfall meant irrigation was unnecessary. The only problem was its lack of a port. Rather than dredging a port on the shoals of the Gulf, United Fruit built a network of roads and canals. To this day, clipped banana stems move through fields via a system of zip lines and trucks. Broken down into "hands," cleaned, and boxed, they are then loaded onto barges, which float their cargo down the canals and out to the big white refrigerated ships anchored in the middle of the Gulf.[48] From field to supermarket shelf in the United States and Europe, the process

[46] Although "Development" certainly has a deeper history rooted in colonialism (Cooper 1997; Hart 2009), the onset of the Cold War was a formative moment that structured its resulting ideological and material interventions in the Third World (Escobar 1995).

[47] Details in this section about the UFC's operations in Urabá are from James Parson's study (1967, 76–88).

[48] United Fruit revolutionized the ocean transport of perishable foods with its introduction of refrigerated vessels in 1903.

takes less than two weeks.

Besides the privately owned infrastructure, United Fruit provided its enlisted "associates" with low-interest loans, seed stock, technical assistance, at-cost fumigations, and guaranteed purchases. For the repayment of the loans, the company took a 25-cent cut from each stem of banana produced. Even after all these expenditures, growers were still reaping $700 to $1,000 in net profits per year for every hectare of bananas. The owners of the biggest plantations were mostly white *paisas* from some of Medellín's most elite families. With coffee on the wane and surplus capital at their disposal, urban elites saw real estate speculation and agribusiness development in Urabá as lucrative investments. In the process, they unleashed a wave of primitive accumulation and a freshly made rural proletariat.

Newspaper reports form those days describe a rampaging land grab and widespread speculation in and around the areas the United Fruit Company had designated as apt for banana plantations.[49] Those displaced by the land grab were by and large *colonos* (homesteaders) living on untitled lands or campesinos with recently acquired titles.[50] In just six years, from 1960 to 1966, land values in Urabá exploded by a factor of ten (Parsons 1967, 80). The vast majority of displaced and landless locals found themselves priced out of the land market. The distribution of unclaimed lands (*baldíos*) perennially promised to campesinos by the government usually proved empty. In fact, the main group getting *baldíos* from the government were private companies posing (on paper) as poor campesinos (García 1996, 43). Forced from their lands, priced out of property markets, and with nothing to lose, many landless campesinos protested by occupying the estates of local plantation owners.[51]

Meanwhile, banana workers, sometimes with whole families in tow, lived onsite in camps amid the banana trees and worked under ghastly exploitative conditions. The workday dragged on for 16 hours or more—sometimes by lantern—sometimes without weekends or holidays, never mind health or social security benefits. Laborers reserved special ire for the abusive plantation bosses (*administradores*) who engaged in sporadic and arbitrary firings just to keep workers in line. Payment sometimes took the form of coupons, which workers could only exchange for basic necessities at overpriced company stores.[52] As is typical of frontier economies, the trinity formula of land-labor-capital took on a particularly brutal form in Urabá.

A clearly racialized division of labor built United Fruit's banana enclave. The mostly white (and absentee) *antioqueño* landowners relied on their fellow *paisas* to oversee the operations. The paisa bosses hired mestizo campesino-migrants from

[49] "Acaparamiento de tierras en Urabá," *El Colombiano*, September 14, 1962.
[50] "Tierras para vivienda comprará la Caja de Crédito en Apartadó," *El Colombiano*, October 18, 1962.
[51] "Invasión de tierras se registra en Chigorodó, *El Colombiano*, September 22, 1962.
[52] These working conditions were recounted in countless interviews with workers, unionists, and former guerrillas.

Córdoba for clear-cutting the forests, while blacks from Chocó and the eastern Caribbean coast dug the canals and ditches (Parsons 1967, 79). The dehumanization of the latter was consummated in the name landowners used for these workers: "black shovels" (García 1996, 39). Several accounts claim the ditch workers were all *chocoanos*, meaning people from the neighboring department of Chocó, where Afro-Colombians compose the largest majority of any other department.[53]

The blanket use of "*chocoano*" for any Afro-Colombian-looking person regardless of their origins is one of the expressions of anti-black racism in Urabá. When used in this monolithic way, *chocoano* is wielded as an epithet that not only implies blacks are undeserving of regional differentiation, it also subtly reifies the Chocó itself as Colombia's very own "dark continent," a place deemed poor, corrupt, savage, and helpless precisely because of its blackness. In a concise exemplar of this racist geopolitical imaginary, an *antioqueño* politician once sneered, "Sending government money to Chocó is like putting perfume on shit."

The same point was illustrated for me when, on a flight to Urabá, I met an elderly white-looking *antioqueño* who had served as Mayor of Turbo in the 1970s. I happily accepted his offer for a personal tour of Turbo's municipal seat (current population, 63,000). The walking-tour was surprisingly uninformative, even in terms of ethnographic insights. At one point, however, we arrived to the central plaza, which has a statue of Gonzálo Mejía, the revered *antioqueño* booster of the Highway to the Sea. In the statue's pose, Mejía has an outstretched arm and a finger pointing toward some vague horizon.

"Do you know why he's pointing?" the former Mayor asked me.

"I suppose to the sea, no?"

"No, he's pointing to Chocó, telling all the blacks: 'Go back where you came from'." For him, Urabá is a birthright of the *raza antioqueña*, which is by definition white.[54]

Though by no means the norm, I heard similar opinions from some banana executives based in Medellín. One former high-level executive told me that when he first visited his plantation in Urabá he approached "one those *negras* [black women]" from the area. He said he made "chitchat" by asking if all the kids that were running about "like chickens" were hers. She replied affirmatively.

"And who's the father?" he supposedly followed up.

[53] For instance, both Parsons and García relay informants describing these workers as *chocoanos* (Parsons 1967, 79; García 1996, 39). Peter Wade offers much more detail on the complex racial-political and economic relationship between Antioquia, Urabá, and Chocó (P. Wade 1995).
[54] Author interview with former Mayor of Turbo (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, April 7, 2012.

According to the executive, the woman began pointing around to all the kids and men making up the scene and replied in broken Spanish: "Dis one belong to dis one; dis one belongs to dis one; dis one…"[55]

He finished the anecdote by telling me his whole reason for being there was to install a toilet on the plantation that he had brought with him from Medellín. Laughing, he said the same woman was "so ignorant" that when went to defecate using the new toilet she sat on the water tank instead of the toilet seat.

Though obviously fabricated, the anecdote sums up the colonial encounter of the white *antioqueño* bringing the material benefits of civilization (the toilet) to the dirty locals who are not only mentally deficient, but also morally and sexually depraved. *Antioqueños* colonial discourses around sexuality and gender have a long history in the "othering" of Urabá, as Claudia Steiner has shown (2000). Indeed, the anecdote is a stark reminder that the intersections of class, gender, sexuality, and race in the making of colonial control can be just as important within national borders as they are across them. In an essay about Sumatra, Ann Stoler writes: "The point should be obvious: colonial control and profits depended on a continual readjustment of the parameters of European membership, limiting who had access to property and privilege and who did not" (Stoler 2002, 39). *Antioqueño* membership worked in much the same way.

In sum, subaltern communities in Urabá had no shortage of grievances by the time the rebel groups began sending their envoys into the region with the consolidation of the banana industry in the 1970s. As discussed in the next chapter, the region's history as a bastion for the Liberal guerrillas of *La Violencia* along with all the land-grabbing and labor exploitation meant that Urabá already had a thriving presence of the Communist Party by the time the rebels came on the scene.

Producing the Frontier

Frontiers display the socially produced nature of space in particularly bold relief. In this chapter, for example, I have traced the various forces that converged in the making of Urabá as a social space, understood as simultaneously a physical materiality, a mental construct, and a lived experience (Lefebvre 1991). One of the reasons Lefebvre described his ideas as a "unitary theory of space" was because he recognized that these three dimensions—the perceived, conceived, and lived—are always interacting and being mutually transformed by each other as distinct and yet inseparable moments of a broader totality.[56] Understanding these mutual transformations, he hoped, would help us unpack all the different ways in which space is both a medium and a result of our

[55] "Ete e de ete, ete e de ete, ete e de…" Author interview with retired banana company executive (anonymous) in Bogotá, D.C., October 25, 2013.
[56] His comments about "unitary theory" come at the beginning of the book (Lefebvre 1991, e.g. 11–20).

collective (and often conflictual) social relations. A frontier, however, is a particular kind of produced space. The most basic defining characteristic of frontiers is their intrinsic bifurcation of space.

Power-laden geopolitical bifurcations are what makes and maintains a frontier. In turn, the frontier makes those bifurcations seem natural, given, and self-evident. Whether cast through the binary terms of state and statelessness, civilization and barbarism, or development and underdevelopment, frontiers mark out a space that dominant groups can "justifiably" subject to a near-permanent state of exception.[57] But rather than the total suspension of the law envisioned by Schmitt or the complete absence of law imagined in Hobbes' state of nature, the frontier represents a liminal juridical order in which the boundaries between the legal and the illegal are blurred and fluid. Without at least a modicum of a juridical order, the law would not be able to operate, as it so often does in Urabá, by, as one paramilitary described it, "constantly legalizing the illegal."[58] The legal alchemy of frontier spaces means they could be understood as more geographically and historically rooted versions of what Giorgio Agamben has called a "zone of indistinction" (1998; 2005).

The legal indistinction of frontier zones is contradictory: it is a modality for the exercise of state power as well as the main reason that the abstract notion of the state itself is so openly in question. Despite this contradiction, the frontier becomes a device through which the state as a structural effect (Mitchell 1991) gets "mapped onto" two spaces aligned in a metropole-satellite relationship. By this, I simply mean that the production of a frontier is always and already the production of statelessness. Urabá is a revealing example of how this multifaceted process can happen in practice.

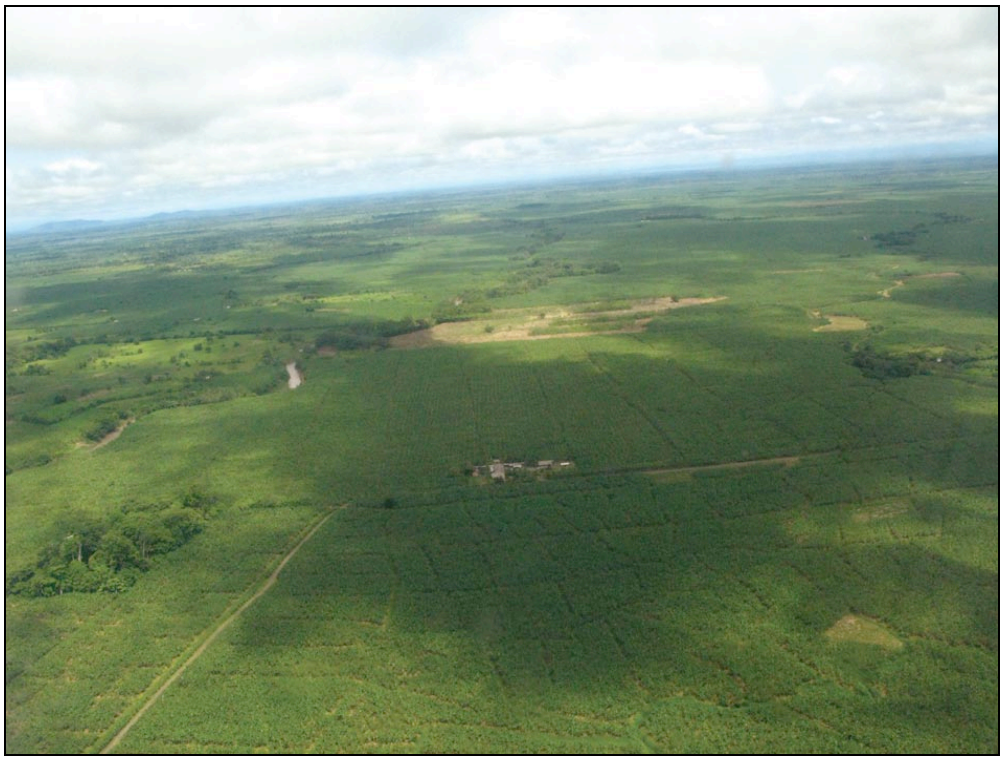
In the ideological field, Urabá emerged from the racist projections of internal colonialism and Colombia's unique forms of regional chauvinism. The geopolitical anxieties left behind by the loss of Panama also helped make Urabá into something of a national and departmental obsession—and even more so with the onset of *La Violencia*. In the process, Urabá became an iterative site *antioqueños*' regionalized state-building projects. These initiatives left a long paper trail maps, laws, surveys, plans, and engineering reports that could be read through the lens of representations of space, which Lefebvre described as "space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers" (Lefebvre 1991, 38). However, one could read the same paper trail as well-documented list of iterative failures that nonetheless had formative collateral effects. Among many other things, for example, they helped mentally construct the region called "Urabá."

In the material field, the physical production of Urabá is dramatically imprinted

[57] As mentioned in the introduction, the relationship between frontiers and the law draws from several thinkers (Fanon 2004; Schmitt 2005; Benjamin 1968; Agamben 2005).

[58] Author interview with Elkin Castañeda, paramilitary commander, alias "Hermogenes Masa," Itagüí, Antioquia, September 17, 2012.

onto the landscape in the form of the verdant banana plantations that carpet the land all the way to the horizon. The scope of this physicality becomes clearer from the god-trick when leaving the region by air. It takes several minutes of flight time before the plane clears the massive tracts and tracts of banana plantations. The only thing interrupting geometrical layout of the banana trees, which look like tiny green asterisks from the air, is the two-lane Highway to the Sea that bisects the plantations down the middle. Seeing the road from the air, it's hard to imagine this rail-thin strip of asphalt aroused such passions and mopped up so much capital over the course of almost 30 years. At intermittent points along the road, come large splotches of urbanized settlements. Apartadó, by far the largest with 130,000 urban residents, is in the heart of the banana enclave and almost entirely self-built by banana workers. Most of the other dozen or so urbanized agglomerations along the Highway in Urabá rarely have more 15,000 residents.



Even from the air, Urabá's banana plantations stretch toward the horizon. (*Photo by Carlos Villalón*)

In the quotidian field, any attempt to distill a single collectively lived experience of Urabá as a socially produced space would be inevitably reductive. But the undeniable common denominator of everyday life across all social differences and the one most closely related to the region's material and ideological spatialities are all the intersecting forms of violence that infuse localized political struggles and economic relations between land, labor, and capital. I am not saying that violence is the only or the most salient feature of everyday life in Urabá. I am arguing, however, that violence was a crucial and constitutive force that was experienced across all social differences in the making of this Colombian frontier zone.

As in the concrete spatiality of the region itself, the thread running through this story was the Highway to the Sea. Neither the history of Urabá nor the roots of its position as a frontier begin with the Highway, even though it is often mythologized as such in certain (particularly, *antioqueño*) narratives about the "genesis" of the region. As with any founding myth, the power of the narrative bears unnecessary connection to things "as they really were." Nonetheless, the Highway became a material and symbolic structuring axis for a disparate set of governmental projects in a stateless frontier zone. The production of the frontier, in short, was a process in which material constructions like the Highway and the banana enclave emerged in mutual constitution with the social constructions underwriting Medellín's neocolonial relations with Urabá.

Chapter 2

The Furies: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency on the Frontier

All of the key elements fuelling the production of Urabá as a frontier space also made it an attractive site for the country's communist insurgencies. The multiform injustices of internal colonialism and its accompanying economies of violence had helped create a thriving local scene for the Communist Party and a politically receptive population. The Gulf region's geographic position, its sparsely populated jungles, and its histories of insurgency also made it ideal terrain for guerrilla warfare. But what most attracted the rebels was the defining characteristic of frontier politics itself: the perceived absence of the state.

Although reports about the presence of armed communists date back to the 1960s (W. Ramírez 1997, 103), it was not until the following decade with the banana industry in full swing that guerrilla groups made a concerted push into the area.[1] In short order, insurgents became the muscle behind popular struggles around land, labor, and public services, cultivating a relatively solid social base of territorial support. In addition to the resulting labor strikes and campesino land occupations, landowners experienced insurgents' politico-military offensive in the form of widespread kidnappings, extortions, death threats, and selective assassinations. Regional elites and government security forces responded with increasing repression, not only against the guerrilla forces themselves, but also against their presumed civilian supporters—namely, unionists, political activists, and campesinos communities. The clash of the insurgencies with Urabá's vicious model of export-agriculture made political violence from all sides an increasingly pervasive feature of the frontier as an everyday lived experience.

Even before paramilitaries arrived on the scene in the late 1980s, the cyclonic dialectic of insurgency and counterinsurgency had been set in motion. The opposed forces of revolution and counterrevolution, which Arno Mayer dubbed "the furies," raged into an escalating spiral of political violence. "Just as there is no revolution without violence and terror," writes Mayer, "so there is none without popular furies on both sides of the growing friend-enemy divide" (Mayer 2000, 116). In the process, Urabá shattered into a mosaic of competing, overlapping, and clashing territorialities, a process compounded by a fratricidal rivalry between the region's two-largest rebel organizations: the EPL and the FARC. Using the ultimate trope of frontier orientalism,

[1] According to Ortíz (2007) and Martin (1986), by 1969, Urabá's ten-year-old banana export-enclave covered a spread of 18,950 hectares, an area that stayed relatively steady until the 1990s when it increased by 5,000 more hectares. In 2013, officials from the National Association of Banana Growers (Augura) told me Urabá currently has 35,000 hectares of bananas and about the same acreage in plantains.

national newspapers decried the "barbarism" that had seized this "faraway" land, remarking, "The violence affecting Urabá has exposed something fundamental: the deep vacuum of the State and the total absence of governmental authority in the region."[2]

The commentary by the newspapers reflects the widespread perception that political violence is an index of state breakdown or failure, but the furies are also productive forces. In the case of Urabá, they became drivers of a mushrooming ensemble of frontier state formations. Even guerillas' territorial imperative meant that their relationships to official government structures were often quite direct, contradictory, and—if unintentionally—generative. In fact, as this chapter details, the success of guerrillas' localized forms of state-building is what turned Urabá into such a violent epicenter of the paramilitary movement in the 1990s. The region's economies of violence incited a violent dialectic between insurgency and counterinsurgency—one that paramilitaries resolved squarely in favor of the latter.

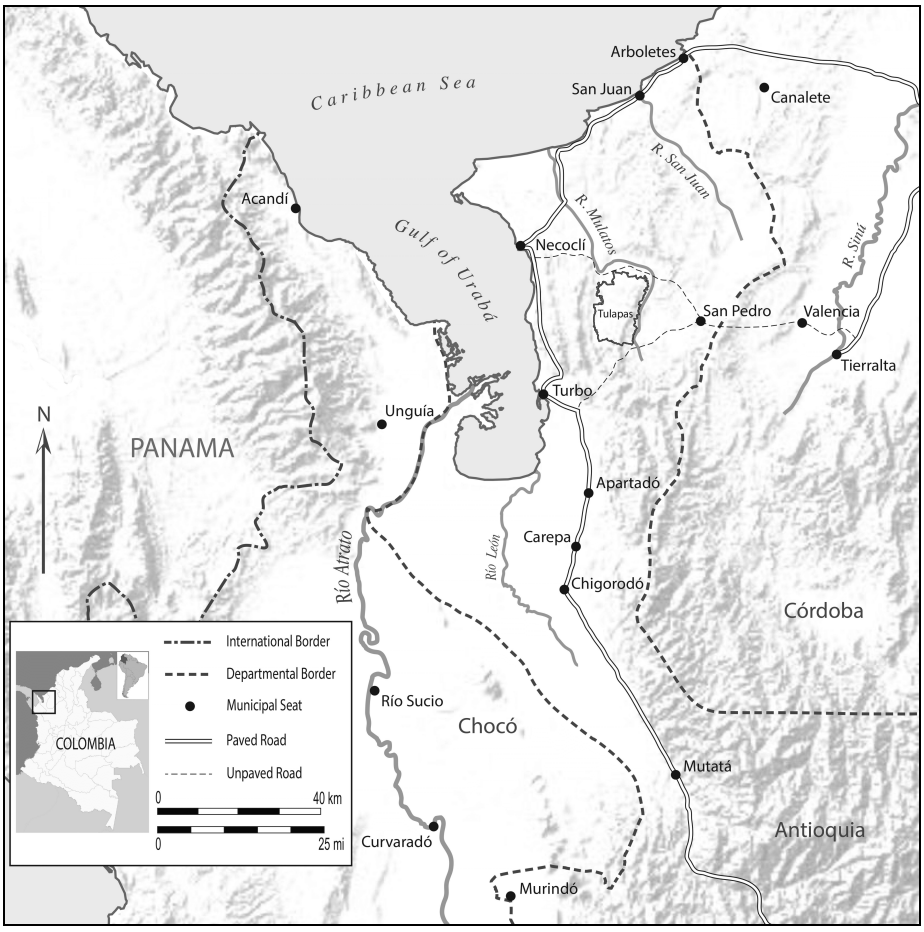
In what follows, I take a page from recent Latin American scholarship (Grandin and Joseph 2010), which draws on Arno Mayer's work in taking revolution and counterrevolution as inseparable tandem forces. (Mayer 2000). The first half of this chapter reconstructs the guerrillas' growing hegemony in Urabá along with their fierce internecine battles, while also examining their relationships to formal structures of government. The second-half of the chapter contends the paramilitary movement was in all senses of the term a reactionary phenomenon, but one that emerged from a complex and precise intersection of forces across time and space.

My focus on the interaction between the politics of insurgency and the politics of the conjuncture helps explain the peculiar and contradictory nature of the paramilitary movement as an uneasy class alliance driven by counterinsurgency, drug-trafficking, plunder, and right-wing agrarian populism. Attentive to both history and geography, my conjunctural analysis also helps elucidates why the nationwide paramilitary phenomenon condensed with particular intensity and fury in Urabá. "Unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of *a* cause singular," wrote Italian poet and novelist Carlo Emilio Gadda. "They are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed."[3]

***Guerra Caliente*: The Armed-Left Vanguards**

[2] "Ola de violencia sólo busca la intimidación," *El Colombiano*, August 27, 1992. Barbarism was a recurring term in newspapers from these days, for example: "Sólo la barbarie pudo cometer el crimen: Gaviria," *El Tiempo*, October 28, 1992, or "Los actores en el conflicto armado," *El Colombiano*, March 21, 1993.
[3] The quote is from Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* ([1957] 2007), p. 5.

The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which acted for many years as the official armed wing of the pro-Soviet *Partido Comunista Colombiano* (PCC), was the first rebel group with a presence in Urabá. In the late 1960s, the FARC's secretariat decided it was time to expand beyond its traditional territories in southern and central Colombia. It sent a tiny detachment of rebels to begin working in and around the small village of San José de Apartadó, a stronghold of the PCC. From there, the FARC established another social base of support in the south of Urabá near Mutatá, where the PCC had a similar pre-existing presence. Both places also had many one-time refugees who settled in Urabá after fleeing Conservative violence in Córdoba and other parts of Antioquia during *La Violencia*. Another common denominator between the two places was the extreme repression—harassment, arrests, torture, and extrajudicial executions—by the security forces that came with being a Communist enclave. Fearing for their lives, many militants fled.[4]



San José de Apartadó is just east of its namesake municipal seat.

[4] Author interview with Elda Neyis Mosquera, former FARC commander (alias "Karina"), in Carepa, Antioquia, December 10, 2013. I am also relying heavily on Clara Inés García's exemplary historical work, which set the bar for research in Urabá (1996, 48–55), and on "Frente 5 de las FARC, protagonist de la guerra," *Verdad Abierta*, Novermber 12, 2012.

With Mutatá and San José de Apartadó as its base, the FARC began terraforming new territorial bastions by sponsoring peasant land colonizations that pushed into the jungle just beyond the property frontiers on both sides of the Highway. In an interview with Clara Inés García, one of Urabá's most distinguished scholars, a local leader of the PCC recalled, "The Party decided to take those lands and begin giving them out to people looking for land there and to those who were coming back [after fleeing government repression]. And people started coming… from Córdoba, from Chocó, and even from here in Antioquia" (García 1996, 51). Party leaders parceled out a few dozen hectares for every family; the only stipulations were that recipients had to build a house, participate in communal work brigades, and agree to a three-year embargo on land sales.

Meanwhile, the banana industry was quickly transforming the small settlement outposts along the Highway to the Sea into rowdy and bustling frontier towns. Before United Fruit's arrival, Apartadó was not much more than a few rows of roadside shacks; today, it is Urabá's largest city (population, 150,000). From his research in the mid 1960s, geographer James Parsons gave a vivid firsthand account of Apartadó's incipient transformation (1967, 97–98):

> It is a vast swollen slum of muddy streets and rough, palm-thatched houses without running water, or latrines. But Apartadó has three banks, a bull-ring, a radio station ("Voz de Uraba"), a newspaper (*Vanguardia de Urabá*), a modern "subdivision," and dozens of noisy *cantinas* (taverns)…. Its main street, the Carretera al Mar, bristles with activity and is usually clogged with brightly painted buses and banana trucks whose drivers make the town their headquarters. In the last year or two a dozen substantial buildings have sprung up along the thoroughfare. Unable to find lodging, newcomers have squatted illegally on adjacent "private" lands reaching well back into the *selva* [jungle].

Beyond the influx of people and government indifference, another reason for this haphazard, self-directed urbanization was that Urabá defied the narrow rural-urban dichotomies presupposed by legislation related to land, zoning, and public housing. As García, describes it, the rural land management agency and the public urban housing authority simply gave up trying to parse the issue, so Urabá's urbanization fell through a gaping legal and institutional crack (1996, 69).

The teeming proletariat produced and attracted by the banana industry created the region's first banana workers' union in the 1960s. In practice, the new union, called "Sintrabano," was an unofficial subsidiary of the local PCC. Amid firings, black lists, and incessant repression at the hands of landowners' hired thugs and government security forces, Sintrabanano barely survived the decade.[5] Luckily for the FARC, it was able to apply the same political work it had perfected in the countryside to the novel context of an urbanizing rural proletariat. A close observer from those years explained the FARC

[5] A fuller account of the early days of banana unionism can be found in several sources (Martin 1986; Ortíz 2007, 97; M. T. Uribe 1992, 196–197)

worked closely with the sub-municipal *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, the institutions of localized community governance created after *La Violencia*:

> Besides the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, [the FARC] put a lot of importance on cooperatives and community self-management [*autogestión*]. In fact, they had been doing a lot of political and electoral work through the municipal councils—institutional work—around very specific grievances. I remember that in 1978 there was a general strike over the lack of public services and they used those type of grievances to work with the people.[6]

Irregular armed groups of every political persuasion in Colombia describe their attempts to win social and political support among the civilian population as social or political "work." For the FARC, the "*trabajo de masas*" (work with the masses) that they had used in the production of their rural territories—especially, the quasi-governmental *Juntas de Acción Comunal*—made a surprisingly seamless transition into Urabá's urban barrios.

Legislation allows any rural or urban community to create a *Junta* where one does not already exist. While the *Juntas* are government-recognized and democratically elected organizations, they are legally defined as "civil society organizations." Communities mainly use the *Juntas* as vehicles for resolving internal disputes, organizing local improvement projects, and maintaining basic infrastructures (especially, roads). As the country's most subsidiary form of local governance, they are especially prevalent in "underserved" areas—namely, urban slums and impoverished rural areas such as Urabá. More than any other guerrilla group, the FARC took full advantage of the *Juntas* as a readymade institutional instrument for political organizing. During a general strike in 1984, a watershed year ushering in an era of popular militancy in Urabá, a reporter asked one participant whether the protestors supported the guerrillas. "What do you think?" came the response, "that branches can grow without roots"[7] For the rebels, the *Juntas* were the primary institutional linkage for connecting root and branch.

While the FARC engaged in this painstaking political work, their comrades in the Maoist-inspired *Ejército de Liberación Popular* (EPL) came close to total annihilation. Of all the guerrilla organizations that bubbled up in Colombia in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the EPL was the most doctrinaire. As a Maoist offshoot of Colombia's pro-Soviet *Partido Comunista Colombiano*, the EPL's founders sought out some of the country's most "stateless" and hardest to reach rural hinterlands.[8] By the late 1970s, almost all of their guerrilla fronts had failed miserably. The EPL's only holdout (barely) was in the northwest of Colombia around the steep jungle headwaters of the San Jorge

[6] The narrator here is Mario Agudelo, as quoted in Andrés Suárez's brilliant book (Suárez 2007, 110).
[7] Quoted by Calvo (1987, 120).
[8] The EPL followed the Maoist line of its party, the Partido Comunista Colombiano, Marxista-Leninista (PCC-ML).

and Sinú Rivers in western Córdoba, bordering Urabá.[9]

A fierce government offensive had reduced the organization down to a few dozen ragtag rebels. Regrouping, the EPL focused all its efforts on this area of Córdoba, which they affectionately called "*el noro*"—for *noroccidente*, the northwest. From their base in *el noro*, they planned to build revolutionary momentum among the "rural masses" creating "liberated zones" until they could "surround the cities" in their final march to victory. Forced to recite their recipe for revolution, Mario Agudelo, a long-since demobilized EPL commander, chuckled over almost every word of their heady vocabulary. "It wasn't just schematic. It was a total caricature and we believed it for a lot of years."[10] After a slew of failures, the EPL eventually dropped—or, as they put it, "corrected"—their hardline Maoism, denouncing it as a "deviation."

I had just met Mario, our first of many conversations during my fieldwork. We were sitting in a leafy outdoor café in downtown Medellín next to the plaza where the crowds had cheered on El Alemán the day of his courtroom debut several years before. I had never met a high-ranking former guerrilla before, so I remember being a little surprised when he turned out to be a somewhat balding, middle-aged man with a slightly protruding belly. Looking a lot like the government bureaucrats buzzing around the café, Mario wore glasses, khakis, and a pale-colored oxford shirt with short sleeves. I laughed to myself for expecting anything different. But his appearance also said something about the distance he had taken from his days of toting rifles in *el monte*—in the bush, as guerrillas say.

Mario reflected critically—though not apologetically—on the EPL's early experiences. Most cartoonish of all, in his eyes, were what they called, "*Juntas Patrióticas*." The *Juntas Patrióticas* were supposed to be "organs of popular power" and "embryos" of the socialist state. "But they were completely quixotic," said Mario. "Sure, we were 'the state,' but the state of what? Of maybe five families; you're not building up the revolutionary masses when you have to trudge almost four hours from one campesino's house to the next." Unlike the FARC, the EPL had a much more abstentionist political culture in which it created its own parallel political structures rather than dirty its hands with the already tainted institutions of "*el estado burgués*," the bourgeois state.

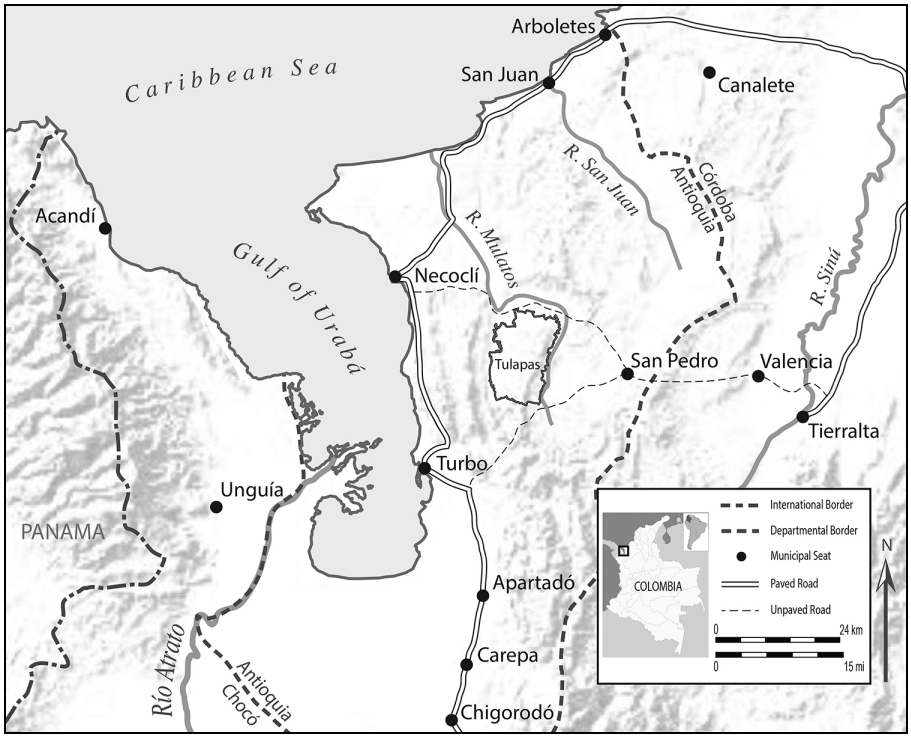
As the first president of a *Junta Patriótica* in *el noro*, the EPL chose Julio Guerra, a veteran of *La Violencia* who had led a famously disciplined and radicalized group of

[9] This section draws on several extended oral histories with some key figures of the EPL and its civilian allies in the unions, peasant organizations, and neighborhood groups. Unfortunately, since the FARC was still actively in combat at the time of my research, I was not able to compile an equally rich archive—not only because their fighters are still in *el monte*, but also because civilians' association with them is still taboo and potentially "criminal." Villarraga and Plazas (1994) give the definitive insiders' account of the EPL's history, another is Calvo's (1987), while Escobedo (2009) provides a good summary of Córdoba's social dynamics that helped the EPL take root.

[10] Author interview with Mario Agudelo, former EPL commander, in Medellín, Antioquia, April 10, 2012.

Liberal guerrillas. In fact, one of the reasons the EPL had chosen *el noro* was because the area had a good-sized concentration of ex-guerrillas—a handful of which joined the Maoist group in its infancy. The area also had a strong tradition of radical agrarian struggles, a tendency reinforced by the concentration of land ownership induced by *La Violencia*. According to Mario Agudelo, the importance of Julio Guerra and his fellow Liberal veterans was not their military prowess—though that too was welcomed. Their value for the EPL was the rapport and prestige they enjoyed with the local peasantry, allowing the guerrillas to revive the socially produced territoriality that had once sustained their Liberal predecessors. At a time when the EPL was struggling to gain a territorial foothold, the former Liberal insurgents and *el noro*'s sedimented political spatialities became invaluable lifelines.

The EPL, however, was not content to simply survive. For an insurgent group, at least from the lens of political strategy, the production of territory without a critical mass of supporters is indeed, as Mario put it, a quixotic tilting at windmills. Having rebuilt its forces but going nowhere politically with its *Juntas Patrióticas*, the EPL began looking for a more hospitable context for creating a "revolutionary situation." Neighboring Urabá made an obvious and enticing option. The EPL made its move in the late 1970s, settling on a small rural area called Tulapas as their stepping stone, a place of recurring importance throughout this story.



About three-times the size of Manhattan, Tulapas contains some 14 communities (*veredas*) of campesinos most of whom arrived there decades ago from Córdoba—some, as refugees from *La Violencia*. The area is a mix of forests, croplands, and pastures spread over mountainous terrain dotted by small villages; it sits in the

middle of the triangle formed by the roads that connect the municipal seats of Necoclí, Turbo, and San Pedro. Although Tulapas is strategically located midway between the Gulf and the Antioquia-Córdoba border, the EPL chose it as their beachhead for a more fortuitous—and, in many ways, fateful—reason.

At the time, the FARC faced brewing dissent from a local faction of guerillas led by a charismatic commander named Bernardo Gutiérrez, who led the organization's troops in the north of Urabá, an area including Tulapas. Gutiérrez and his faction criticized the FARC's neglect of urban struggles and saw its continued electoral aspirations as a bourgeois trap. They complained the Party had taken priority over the armed struggle. "This obviously fit us like a glove," said Mario.[11] The more orthodox EPL already had an abstentionist tendency, and its failed experiment with the *Juntas Patrióticas* had steered it toward the mass of exploited workers toiling in the banana fields. Urabá's urbanized workforce potentially offered the kind of social-territorial critical mass the EPL had been looking for.

As Mario and his comrades trickled into Urabá, Gutiérrez defected from the FARC and joined the EPL—a betrayal the FARC would never forget or forgive. The number of guerrillas Gutiérrez brought with him was welcome but negligible. Still, as with Julio Guerra and the ex-guerrillas of *La Violencia*, the social-territorial implications of Gutiérrez's defection far outweighed what the EPL gained militarily. Gutiérrez and his troops had built close ties with the campesinos of Tulapas. According to Mario, when Gutiérrez joined the EPL, he called a community assembly in one of the area's largest villages. "At the assembly, we had a debate and Bernardo publicly announced that he and his group were leaving the FARC. The majority of the campesinos voted in support of the decision," said Mario, adding that some of them faced violent retaliation from the FARC.[12]

With Tulapas as their territorial springboard, the EPL began elbowing its way into Urabá. For the FARC, this was unwelcome trespassing on its turf. The EPL further flamed the animosities by assuming control of an oil palm workers' union called "Sintagro," which it then used to begin its own organizing efforts among the banana workers—again, the FARC's self-assumed turf. With each guerrilla organization backing its own union, the banana enclave turned into a competitive patchwork of territorialized plantations. Everyone knew a particular plantation "belonged" to either the EPL or the FARC, depending on the union-affiliation of its workers. For plantation owners, it mattered little which of the two guerrilla groups was agitating their employees and stifling their profits. Beyond concerns about their bottom line, landowners and their local administrators faced intimidation, kidnappings, extortion, and worse from the unions' armed backers. During a brief tour of the region in 1976, a national labor

[11] "Nos calló como un anillo al dedo."

[12] Author interview with Mario Agudelo, former EPL commander, in Medellín, Antioquia, May 23, 2013. Suárez gives more details and some interesting observations about Gutiérrez's break with the FARC (Suárez 2007, 102–104).

inspector counted nine spontaneous strikes or work stoppages in just 17 days.[13]

In the late 1970s, intensifying worker militancy took place amid a nationwide climate of brutal military repression in response to growing unrest in the cities brought on by deindustrialization, the lack of public services, and the spectacular actions of a new urban guerrilla movement, the nationalist M-19 (Hylton 2006, 62–64). From 1978 to 1982, within the broader context of U.S.-backed National Security doctrines, the administration of President Julio Cesar Turbay ruled the country under a decreed "state of siege," suspending civil liberties and giving the military legal jurisdiction over the prosecution of political dissent. Since the EPL's presence in the region was still in its incipient stages, the fury of repression that came with the state of siege exacted a much heavier toll on the FARC. With their opponents on the left debilitated, the EPL edged its way into the FARC's territory in the banana heartland by backing a wave of worker strikes, massive land occupations, and a raft of popular protests.[14]

Despite the repression, popular movements remained a formidable force. Mass mobilization for public services and housing in urban centers were particularly common during the Turbay administration. In 1980, at a time when the region's population was well over 200,000, Urabá did not have a single electrical hook up, sewage line, or water pipe. Popular protests in the form of marches, general strikes, and the occupation of government buildings helped spur a flurry of public infrastructure construction in the 1980s (Botero 1990, 55–69). Though, as García notes (1996, 94), pressure on Medellín and Bogotá by the plantation owners was probably the decisive factor.

The region's seven-fold population explosion in just two decades—from 40,000 in 1964 to 180,000 in 1985—induced a housing deficit that sparked mass land occupations of urban and "peri-urban" properties.[15] Political parties of all stripes sponsored land invasions, sometimes with the aid of acting public officials. The municipal council of Apartadó, for instance, was sufficiently supportive of a land occupation by 1,200 families that the neighborhood, to this day, is called "El Concejo." When I asked former EPL how they managed such large occupations, I got the same answer on multiple occasions: "Oh, that was the easiest thing in the world."[16]

With 1,500 families in tow, the Communist Party helped occupy a hacienda on the edge of the city. The sprawling barrio, whose residents named it Policarpa Salavarrieta in honor of a heroine of national Independence, gained formal status and services connections through a joint-program between the national government's National Rehabilitation Plan for conflict zones and the UN Development Programme. As an experimental pilot project designed for replication, the rationale behind the initiative

[13] The inspector is quoted by García (1996, 114).
[14] Author interview with Mario Agudelo, former EPL commander, in Medellín, Antioquia, May 23, 2012; also see Suárez (2007, 106)
[15] According to DANE, the government institute that conducts the national census: http://bit.ly/1Fy6L0j
[16] Author interview with Guillermo Correa, former EPL, in Apartadó, Antioquia, May 28, 2013.

explicitly sought "the creation of a state presence in critically isolated regions and the promotion of new kinds of relationships between the State and civil society."[17] Public services and housing resulted directly from guerrillas' armed support for these struggles with national and departmental governments acquiescing to both quell the unrest and undermine support for the insurgencies. The furies from both sides each played their part in these frontier state formations.

In 1982, the general malaise and repression of the Turbay years helped bring to power a surprisingly progressive-minded Conservative into the presidency, Belisario Betancur. He began his term by decreeing an amnesty for the political activists and guerrillas imprisoned by his predecessor's draconian state of siege as way of laying the groundwork for peace negotiations with the country's guerrilla groups. The EPL, the FARC, and the M-19 all accepted his invitation to the negotiating table. As part of the 1984 peace talks, the Betancur administration agreed to a ceasefire and offered the guerrillas an "*apertura política*" (political opening). During negotiations, the EPL floated the idea of a Constituent Assembly for rewriting the country's Constitution. The proposal went nowhere, but it would reemerge years later.

In Urabá, the ceasefire and the talks allowed the guerrillas to redouble their unionizing campaign in the banana plantations. Union membership snowballed. The association representing Urabá's plantation owners observed the unionizing campaign with alarm: "In a brief period close to 85 percent of workers became affiliated with the unions and 87 percent of the 20,400 hectares cultivated in bananas are now under collectively bargained contracts."[18] The EPL also initiated a massive land occupation effort, securing more than 1,000 hectares in the heart of the banana enclave for its base.[19] The success of the labor organizing effort, however, further polarized the guerrilla groups' two competing unions. Amid territorial disputes over the plantations, the EPL and FARC began a series of tit-for-tat assassinations of the opposing group's union membership, ushering in the 1984-1985 "*guerra sindical*" (union war).[20]

Betancur's peace negotiations ultimately failed. The security forces and most elites were never onboard with the talks, while the Reagan administration's Cold War obsessions and the growing geopolitical pretexts of the drug issue made for a particularly unfavorable international climate. Despite the scuttled agreement, Betancurt introduced two key concessions as part of his proclaimed *apertura política*: he reformed electoral laws so that mayors would be subject to popular election, rather being appointed by the governors; he also allowed the guerrillas to establish legal

[17] "Policarpa: Construyendo sueños solidarios," a joint UNDP-PNR publication from 1992 quoted by García (García 1996, 97).
[18] *Revista* Augura, No. 2 1987, quoated by Ramírez (1997, 53).
[19] Mario Agudelo quoted in "Frente 5 de las FARC, protagonist de la guerra," *Verdad Abierta*, Novermber 12, 2012.
[20] Andrés Suárez (2007) in his acclaimed and aptly titled book *Indentidades políticas y exterminio recíproco* gives the fullest account of the EPL-FARC rivalry.

political parties without first laying down their weapons. The FARC created the *Unión Patriótica* (UP) party in 1985, while the more electorally reticent EPL followed up with its own party, the *Frente Popular*, a year later. Betancurt hoped the parties would encourage the rebels to disarm and begin a transition into civilian political life.

In the years after the peace talks, the rebel groups reached the zenith of their power in Urabá. The unions now represented almost the entirety of the banana workforce and land invasions proliferated. In just two years, between 1984 and 1986, the rebels backed 49 union actions and 36 land invasions—most of these under the auspices of the EPL (García 1996; Suárez 2007, 107–108). On the electoral front, Urabá became a stronghold of the FARC's *Unión Patriótica* party, which proved far more successful than the EPL's *Frente Popular*.

In his path breaking book, Suárez (2007) shows how the different political cultures of the two guerrilla groups produced a paradoxical division of political labor in which a formerly Maoist movement (the EPL) was the predominant force among the urbanized proletariat, while the pro-Soviet FARC became the dominant electoral force and had a much stronger following among the peasantry (Suárez 2007, 108–113). The EPL was always more abstentionist, so it came late to the electoral game. Its aversion to any relation with formal government structures meant the EPL never counted on the tight social-institutional networks the FARC had forged through its meticulous political work with community organizations (cooperatives, *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, etc.). In other words, the FARC had much more experience with government-mediated institutional formations.

In response to the *apertura política* and just time for the 1988 elections, the EPL and the FARC temporarily set aside their bloody rivalry and forged an alliance between their legalized political arms. The rapprochement stemmed from the creation of the Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Committee (CGSB), a fleeting umbrella organization between the country's six main insurgent organizations based on the example of the unified guerrilla coalition of El Salvador's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).[21] Colombia's rebel leaders hoped the CGSB would help them resolve internal differences, coordinate strategy, and present a more united front—both on the battlefield and, potentially, at the negotiating table.

Economically, these were flush times for the rebel forces. They had always subjected landowners, entrepreneurs, and corporate executives to systematic extortion payments, called "*vacunas*" (vaccines)—simply, a cost of doing business in rural Colombia. Cattle rustling was another key stream of cash. After the failed peace talks, however, the guerrillas dramatically stepped up kidnappings against rural elites, making

[21] The CGSB included the ELN, EPL, FARC, M-19, the Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRT), and the indigenous Quintín Lame Armed Movement.

ransom payments a major new source of income.[22] Finally, the global cocaine boom during these years gave them a newfound and bottomless source of funds, as guerrillas began overseeing the initial links of the production chain. The rebels protected and taxed the campesinos producing the illicit crops and charged the drug-traffickers who actually moved and commercialized the drugs a tax on the foreign-bound shipments.[23]

In Urabá, the newfound unity between the EPL and the FARC translated into case-by-case electoral alliances and spectacular joint-military operations. The rebels' most famous military victory was the sacking of Saiza, a police and military stronghold just across the border in Córdoba, where the security forces had started training civilians in counterinsurgency tactics. The CGSB also led to an alliance between Urabá's two banana worker unions, which secured unprecedented concessions from the banana companies, including wage increases, an eight-hour workday, and social benefits over and above those required by law. "Most of these were not revolutionary victories," a former EPL operative told me. "Can you imagine having to negotiate an eight-hour workday? What we did was simply enforce the laws that already existed but were never respected."[24]

When it came to labor protections, the guerrillas were emphatically on the side of law and order. Building on these victories, the two rival unions united into a single organization—Sintrainagro—and pressured the banana companies into an industry-wide collective contract, making Urabá's banana proletariat the best-remunerated agricultural workforce in the country. "We were the ones who brought the labor code to Urabá," the same EPL operative told me. "We made it respected and it was thanks to us that there's now an Office of Labor Affairs and Social Security in the region." Indeed, although many scholars have classified guerrillas as "anti-state" forces (Avila 2010), the insurgencies' contributions to Urabá's frontier state formations often routinized, stabilized, and even initiated the everyday operations of the law and basic government institutions.

The guerrillas' social, economic, and military success on multiple fronts meant that by the time they began their formal entry into electoral politics Urabá was a bastion of rebel power. The *Unión Patriótica* (UP) party, which emerged from the peace talks as a coalition of radical leftists groups, including the FARC, the PCC, unionists, and social activists nationwide, had gained dozens of municipal council seats across Urabá by the time it won the mayor's office of Apartadó, the region's most populous city and unofficial capital. The UP embodied the FARC's support for the "combination of all forms of struggle," a fusion of arms, electoral politics, and grassroots organizing. The combination of all forms of struggle meant that, as the UP surged in the polls between

[22] The 2013 report *Una verdad secuestrada* by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica shows the number of kidnappings shoots up dramatically after 1984.
[23] Nazih Richani's (2002) work paints the most robust portrait of this war economy.
[24] Author interview with Gerardo Vega, labor lawyer and former EPL operative, in Medellín, Antioquia, March 13, 2012.

1984 and 1988, the FARC doubled in size, establishing 14 new Fronts (Dudley 2004, 79). During the same period, instances of combat between guerrillas and the Army multiplied by a factor of five (Ronderos 2014, 175). After the 1986 general elections, the UP's leader at the time gave an approving assessment regarding the rebels' combination of bullets and ballots: "I think the FARC's presence has given credibility to the electoral process and made people feel secure about electing whom they want."[25]

Instantly, Urabá became a UP stronghold and, accordingly, an epicenter for the counterinsurgent furies that began systematically wiping out the partly. The military and the national intelligence services alongside the first inklings of the paramilitary movement launched a vicious dirty war against the party that killed 525 militants nationwide in just three years; over the course of the UP's lifetime, close to 5,000 of its members were murdered, including mayors, city councilors, members of congress, and two presidential candidates.[26] In its heyday, however, the UP turned Urabá into one of the few places in Colombia where radical politics were both hegemonic and openly practiced. The insurgencies were mainstream in the region.

Gloria Cuartas, who was a social worker in those days, witnessed the UP's rise and fall firsthand. If a single word could define this tiny *antioqueño* woman, it would be "grit." In the mid 1990s, Urabá's violently opposed political forces pulled her from job as a social worker when they needed an independent consensus candidate to fill the mayor's seat of Apartadó as a way of mitigating the bloodshed. She held this office during one of the region's most violent periods. When we met, like me, she was in the thick of completing her PhD in geography. Holding down the full-time job of tireless social worker and embarking on a PhD in her fifties seemed to me just one more sign of her grit. As fellow geographers, we had a lot to talk about when we met at a Bogotá café in 2013.

Riffing on Lefebvre (1991), she began: "The life of the UP [1985-1994] was critical in opening up an alternative production of space in the region—alternative to the territorial ordering of the hegemonic capitalist model that had existed until that moment."[27]

"You think they opened a breach in the spatiality of the state?" I asked.

Gloria replied, "I mean that they created and left behind a whole infrastructure that fortified popular organizations through cooperatives, clinics, schools, and *Juntas de*

[25] UP leader Bernardo Jaramillo made the comment in a *Washington Post* article cited by Dudley (2004, 110).

[26] Steven Dudley provides an eye-opening account of the rise and fall of the party (Dudley 2004). The July 11, 2013, editorial "Renace la Unión Patriótica" in *El Tiempo*, Colombia's newspaper of record, gave the gruesome tally: "Around 5,000 of its militants died, including two presidential candidates, Jaime Pardo Leal in 1987 and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa in 1990, along with eight members of congress, 13 deputies, 70 councilors, and 11 mayors."

[27] Author interview with Gloria Cuartas, former Mayor of Apartadó, in Bogotá, DC, May 14, 2013.

Acción Comunal."

"And the UP's power geometries," she continued, referencing Doreen Massey (2009), "were coordinated through the Urabá Association of Municipalities, MADU."

The UP built upon the foundations that had been lain by a series of foreign assistance programs introduced in the 1970s and 1980s during Colombia's turn toward "integrated rural development" strategies (Restrepo et al. 2010). As a stronghold of radical agrarian politics and thriving insurgencies, Urabá became a key site for these projects. Aparicio (2012) provides a genealogy of these development interventions in the region, noting the importance of a 1978 development plan called the "Darién Project" drafted by the Organization of American States (OAS 1978). The plan became the basis of a series of integrated rural development initiatives led by an infusion of Dutch aid and technical assistance. Working alongside the Urabá's regional development corporation (Corpourabá), which was itself a product of the Kennedy administration's Alliance for Progress, Dutch aid workers helped produce an alphabet soup of programs during the 1970s and 1980s: Integrated Agrarian Assistance Program (PAAI), Integrated Rural Agricultural Development Program (DIAR), Campesino Economy Project (PEC), and the Urabá Rural Development Program (DRU) (Aparicio 2012).

One of the more successful and lasting outcomes of these foreign-backed development programs was the Balsamar Cooperative in the village of San Jose de Apartadó, the Communist Party stronghold where the FARC's gained it first foothold in Urabá. According to Gloria, when the growing paramilitary movement began attacking the UP and moving on Urabá, it physically and symbolically destroyed the spatiality the party was producing by, for instance, burning down Blasamar's storehouses or murdering party militants at the doorstep of the UP's radio station.

On top of the incessant assassinations against UP activists, the paramilitaries' opening salvos came in the form of a spate of massacres at the beginning of 1988. Between February and April, paramilitaries under the command of an *antioqueño* landowner and drug-trafficker named Fidel Castaño went on a bloody rampage: they slaughtered 20 banana workers on the plantations of La Negra and Honduras, 16 campesinos outside of San Pedro, 26 more peasants near the hamlet of Punta Coquitos, and 20 UP militants in Turbo.[28] Terrified locals heard Fidel Castaño, the mysterious paramilitary chief responsible for the killing spree, was calling himself "Rambo."

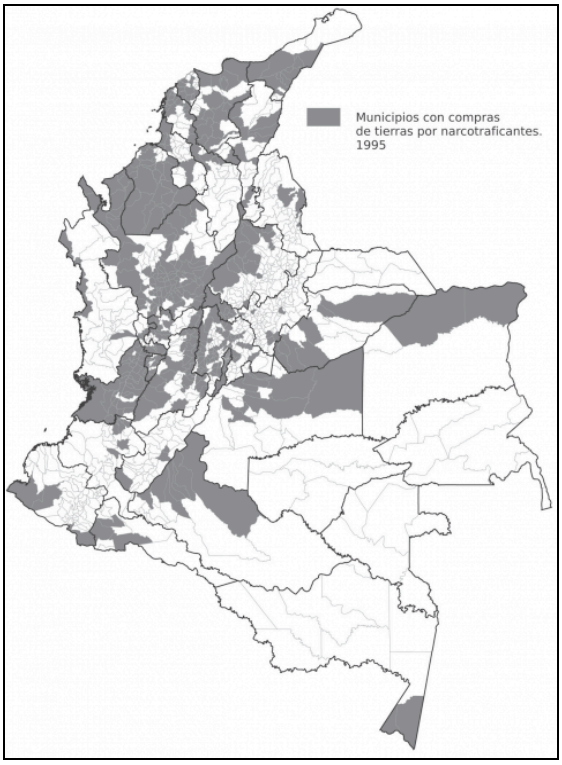
By the time of the paramilitary onslaught, the guerrillas had a tightly crafted interlocking network of power in Urabá—socially, militarily, economically, and politically. Far from creating states-in-waiting or parallel state structures—as in the EPL's quixotic *Juntas Patrióticas*—localized government structures and civil society organizations made and fortified by the rebels themselves were the constitutive parts of

[28] The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica has an online database of massacres called, "Rutas del Conflicto": http://rutasdelconflicto.com/

what made Urabá a guerrilla stronghold. For the landowners and former military officers building the paramilitary movement, Urabá was a full-fledged "guerrilla state," a designation they repeated often. As El Alemán assured me when we first met: "The police may have had control of an area here or there without any problems, but the economic, social, political, and military power really belonged to the guerrillas. So what did we do? We took that power away and replaced it with our own, *bit by bit*."[29]

The Counterinsurgent Blowback

Beginning in the 1980s, drug trafficking fueled the further concentration of rural land ownership in Colombia—yet another of Colombia's recurring "agrarian counter-reforms."[30] As the cocaine boom exploded, narcos began investing and laundering their windfall drug profits through rural real estate deals and agribusiness, especially in Urabá (Reyes 1997; 2009). For the narcos, the gulf region had the added plus of being a long-standing drug-trafficking corridor since at least the 1950s, when it had served as a weigh station for illicit drugs destined to pre-Revolutionary Cuba (Arango and Child 1990, 162–164).



By the mid 1990s, the narco land-rush had affected 42 percent of Colombia's 1,040 municipalities. Note the splotch in Urabá, Córdoba, and the route along the Highway to the Sea. (Reyes 2009)

[29] Author interview with Freddy Rendón, alias "El Alemán" paramilitary chief, Itagüí, Antioquia, September 17, 2012.
[30] The term "contra-reforma agrarian" has been used by many local scholars.

Among those who understood the region's logistical advantages was a scrappy young smuggler from Medellín named Pablo Escobar. In the 1970s, working for a contraband kingpin called "El Padrino" (The Godfather), Escobar got his start by moving everything from stolen cars to gravestones between Turbo and his native Medellín (Salazar 2001). By the time of Escobar's demise in 1993, drug traffickers had shunted their over-accumulated capital into the lands of more than 40 percent of the country's municipalities and northwest Colombia was hotspot for these investments (Reyes 1997, 339). In Cordobá, narcos snapped up 480,000 hectares—that is, almost two-thirds of the department's agriculturally viable land (Reyes 1997, 307). Urabá presented equally alarming trends (Ortíz 2007, 33–40).

Landed elites responded uneasily to this newly ascendant class of narco estate-owners, grudgingly dubbed the "*clase emergente*" by their blue-blooded counterparts. But agrarian crises in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gave the *clase emergente* a fortuitous entrée into agrarian society. Under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the national government began cutting back its support for agriculture, exposing previously cushioned producers. In 1985, Colombia's tariff barriers averaged 83%, giving it the highest tariff rates in Latin America, but by 1992 they had plummeted to 6.7%, the second-lowest in the region (Urrutia 1994, 286).

The economic restructuring caused "the massive redistribution of income between the city and countryside. The biggest winners were high-income sectors in urban areas, while the biggest losers were high-income sectors in rural areas" (Ocampo 1994, 115). The high-income agrarian sectors in Urabá—namely, cattle ranchers and banana plantation owners—were also additionally hard-hit by the liberalization of foreign exchange controls (another stricture of the Washington Consensus) and sharp drops in commodity prices. Bananas lost a third of their value by 1994, marking a 25-year low, while beef prices also crashed, losing nearly half their value from 1993 to 1995. In Urabá, all of this came on the heels of a guerrilla offensive, massive labor strikes, and peasant land occupations. The rural oligarchy complained they had been "totally abandoned by the state," which they said had left them at the mercy of guerrillas, restless peasants, and the vagaries of the global economy.[31]

One old-guard landowner from the ranchlands of Córdoba, which would soon become the epicenter of the paramilitary movement, recalled that the narcos arrived with "unlimited ambition" (Romero 2000, 59). The situation echoes the shifts identified by E.P. Thompson in early eighteenth-century England: "We appear to glimpse a declining gentry and yeoman class confronted by incomers with greater command of money and influence, and with a ruthlessness in the use of both" (1975, 108). Money laundering via land purchases and agribusiness—namely, cattle ranching—was not just about enrichment and the justification of ill-gotten wealth; it was also about social

[31] Author interview with Carlos Alberto Mejía, plantation owner, in Medellín, Antioquia, May 11, 2012. Romero (2000) provides the most insightful analysis of elites dwindling fortunes and the cultural politics underlying the shift.

status (Salama 2000). Money laundering is a form of social alchemy aimed at turning illegitimate money into legitimate social status.

Elite fragmentation—between narcos and the landed elites—may have continued apace were it not, paradoxically, for the threat posed by the insurgents. According to one landowner, "Beginning in 1982, *la subversión* spilled like a maleficent ooze across the entire territory of Córdoba, bringing with it death, terror, and desolation with the support of a campesino population forgotten and impoverished by the oblivion of the state" (quoted in Caycedo 1996, 169). As the newly minted agrarian elite, the narcos became subject to the same extortive guerrilla kidnappings once reserved for the rural oligarchy. Another factor consolidating intra-elite solidarity was that the rebels, as already discussed in the previous section, were driving peasant and rural worker militancy, while also flexing the electoral muscle of their political arms. The agrarian sectors' economic decline coupled with what was perceived—real and imagined—as a joint peasant-guerrilla advance made natural allies out of the *clase emergente* and the reticent rural oligarchy. In Raymond Williams' words, the "overreachers" and the "wellborn" in rural Colombia made common cause (1973, 61).

Barrington Moore noted that viciously reactionary combinations are often formed by "a coalition between older landed elites and the rising commercial and industrial ones, directed against the lower classes in town and countryside" (B. Moore 1967, 437). Another parallel is Gramsci's essay on the "Southern Question," detailing how Italy's northern-urban industrialists united with southern estate owners to form fascism's core political alloy (1994, 313–338). The variation in Colombia was that the narcos served as the connective political-economic tissue between commercial-industrial and landed elites (Hylton 2006). Paramilitaries, or "*paras*" as most Colombians call them, straddled the urban and the rural, the new and the old; they were the conjunctural product of this unique socio-spatial constellation of forces.

The *paras* emerged in the 1980s, a decade of profound political crisis in Colombia. The most spectacularly shocking incident was the M-19's storming of the Palace of Justice, where the guerrillas took the entire Supreme Court bench hostage. On television, millions of Colombians watched in disbelief as the military laid siege to the building with troops, rockets, and tanks, killing all 35 guerrillas and more than 100 innocent bystanders including 12 Supreme Court justices. The building burned for two days. After the *Palacio de Justicia*, the M-19 lost the public romanticism it had so shrewdly cultivated through its elaborate propaganda coups.[32] When the country's new President reinitiated peace negotiations, the debilitated M-19 was the first guerrilla group to sign a deal in 1989. The EPL along with two other guerrilla groups—the *Partido Revolucionario Trabajador* and Quintín Lame—soon followed suit, leaving only the ELN and the FARC as the main rebel forces still in *el monte* (the bush). The fall of the Soviet Union was a major factor in pushing the EPL toward a peace agreement, as was the

[32] Alex Fattal's (2014) award-winning work examines the use of propaganda and advertising as mediums of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Colombia.

flight of banana capital from Urabá toward safer and less restless shores in Costa Rica—a trend that seriously weakened the rebels' standing with their social base in the banana plantations (Suárez 2007, 125–129).

In 1991, the EPL demobilized and organized a political party with the same initials— *Esperanza, Paz y Libertad* (Hope, Peace, and Liberty)—but a small dissident faction dissatisfied with the demobilization program almost immediately returned to *el monte*. Together with the FARC, this dissident faction began slaughtering the demobilized members of the EPL labeling them "traitors to the revolution." Over the next few years, the dissident guerrillas and the FARC killed hundreds of EPL-party militants. One of the more infamous events was the massacre of La Chinita, a self-built barrio in Apartadó that began as a land occupation of 5,000 families backed by *Esperanza, Paz y Libertad*. The FARC machine-gunned a community event in the neighborhood, killing 35 innocent civilians.[33]

In response, some demobilized members of the EPL organized a "self-defense" group, which responded in kind against the social sectors linked to the FARC—especially, the UP militants. This "self-defense" group also began working with the military and the nascent paramilitary movement against their collective enemy: the FARC. The left-on-left violence erupted into a wave of tit-for-tat massacres that dwarfed anything previously seen in the region. Mario Agudelo, the former EPL commander who I met with regularly during my fieldwork, still bears the scars on his body of the FARC's violent retaliations in the 1990s. As the leader of the EPL's political party, he suffered injuries from a grenade attack at a bar where he was meeting with constituents. Mario's most painful experience, however, was the loss of his 15-year-old son, who died opening a book sent to his father by post in which the FARC had planted a small bomb.

As part of the EPL's 1991 demobilization, the group had managed to make Fidel Castaño ("Rambo") part of the peace settlement. As long as the EPL complied with the demobilization, Fidel promised to disband his own paramilitary forces. As a show of goodwill, Fidel took thousands of hectares of his own personal estate called "Las Tangas"—a huge spread he had cobbled together in the 1980s with properties stolen at gunpoint—and parceled them out to hundreds of poor campesino, including some demobilized EPL fighters. Castaño billed it an "agrarian reform" and assigned the management of the land distribution project to his family's newly created NGO, the Foundation for Peace in Cordobá, or Funpazcor.[34] To lead the NGO Fidel chose a close family friend: Sor Teresa Gómez, named after Mother Teresa of Calcutta ("Sor" being

[33] Suárez (2007) gives a blow-by-blow account and incisive analysis of this bloody conflict.

[34] Its formal name was Fundación para la Paz de Córdoba (Funpazcor). Fidel was following the model first established by Acdegam, a rancher's organization of the Middle Magdalena River, which spawned the first generation of paramilitary groups in the 1980s. The Castaños, as part of the second wave of paramilitary groups, however, perfected the politico-military model. Ronderos (2014) provides a full account of these "generations" of *paras* and the early role of Acdegam.

the title for nuns in Spanish). Despite her pious name, Sor Teresa—or "Doña Tere," as most knew her—became one of the paramilitaries' shadiest operatives.

As the head of Funpazcor, Doña Tere, a stout woman with graying hair, freckles, and tanned skin was the unofficial treasurer of the Castaño families' growing paramilitary empire. From drug proceeds alone, Funpazcor was receiving $5 million dollars *every month*, according to documents seized by police in a Medellín safe house.[35] Apparently, the innocuous institutional structure of the non-profit NGO, which enjoy minimal government oversight, made an attractive front for warehousing windfall narco-dollars. With Doña Tere at the helm, Funpazcor also handled the legal machinations ratifying the Castaño family's ill-gotten landholdings—often, by leaving them in the NGOs name. The organization also bankrolled philanthropic projects (e.g. schools, roads, and clinics) when it suited the Castaños as a way of building support among campesino communities in geostrategic areas.

Although his enemies in the EPL had mostly demobilized, Fidel Castaño's respite from counterinsurgency was a brief one. He was back on the warpath a few years later. But the break gave him time to focus on his main business: cocaine trafficking. With Pablo Escobar on the run, the drug world was in flux. Fidel joined the alliance of strange bedfellows trying to hunt down Escobar. The collective effort behind the police-led manhunt included: the Cali Cartel, ex-members of the Medellín Cartel (like Fidel), the military, along with agents from the anti-drug and intelligence services of both the Colombian and U.S. intelligence services. The manhunt—perhaps the world's largest until 9/11—finally brought down Escobar in December 1993. He died in a hail of bullets as he tried fleeing from authorities on a rooftop in his native Medellín.

Escobar had been a key contributor to the crises wracking Colombia in the 1980s. He had waged an all-out battle against Colombia's acquiescence to the U.S. extradition of drug traffickers. "I prefer a tomb in Colombia, to a jail cell in the United States," went the saying. To this day for the narcos, U.S. extradition remains the ultimate dreaded fate. Escobar made the doomed last stand against the measure. Along with the other capos, Escobar lashed out viciously, blowing passenger planes out of the sky and detonating car bombs in metropolitan heartlands. The assassination of three presidential candidates running in the 1990 elections, including the clear favorite, sunk the country deeper into the political abyss. In rural hinterlands, meanwhile, the FARC was growing with deadly force. Political violence and drug violence grew increasingly entwined. Massive explosions and political assassinations had become expected features of everyday life.

Colombians overwhelmingly recognized the situation had spun far beyond the government's control and doubted anything could be done about it. The country faced a full-fledged crisis of authority, which Gramsci defined as "precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State" in which even the total use of force is

[35] "Quién financió el comienzo de las Accu?," *Verdad Abierta*, July 3, 2014.

incapable of guaranteeing the stability or even recognition of its rule (Gramsci 1971, 210). Or, as then-president, César Gaviria, succinctly put it in a recent television interview: "The country was fucked."[36]

In late 1989, a briefly emboldened student movement based mainly in Bogotá emerged as a lone beacon of hope, publishing a manifesto in the country's main newspaper that rallied readers: "We can still save Colombia." The manifesto proposed a national referendum on whether the country needed a new Constitution—an idea initially floated by the EPL five years before. Stoked by the student movement and the staggering proportions of the crisis, popular sentiment swayed in favor of rewriting the Constitution as the only way out of the crisis (Dugas 2001). The proposal of a Constitutional Assembly is precisely what had helped entice the EPL and the other guerrilla groups into laying down their weapons. Indeed, representatives from the political parties of both the EPL and the M-19 profoundly shaped the outcome of the the Assembly.

When the Assembly ratified the new Constitution in July 1991, some of its most far-reaching reforms came in the form of a new *ordenamiento territorial* (territorial ordering), which subsumed political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization, giving municipalities a protagonistic role in the country's political system.[37] *Ordenamiento territorial*, as defined by government's geography institute, was "a state policy and planning instrument that allows for an appropriate political-administrative organization of the Nation, and the spatial projection of the social development, economic, environmental and cultural policies of [Colombian] society."[38] For rural areas in particular, the *ordenamiento territorial* was supposed to foster local political participation, preserve cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as regulate access to and control over natural resources (Asher 2009, 77–78).

Lawmakers hoped the new constitution would eliminate the roots of the conflict by providing insurgents and other excluded groups—especially peasants and ethnic minorities—with meaningful forms of participation and a viable stake in the nation's political life, or as one motto put it: "decentralize to pacify" (Castro 1998).[39] The framers of the 1991 Constitution reasoned the popular election of mayors granted as a concession to the guerrillas in 1988 needed to be deepened and complimented by administrative and fiscal decentralization. Without new administrative roles such as the provision of public services and their requisite fiscal support, elected local executives would be incapable of attending to the needs of their newly enfranchised constituents. Fiscal decentralization granted more financial leverage to subnational entities, allowing municipal governments to direct the newly available funds toward freshly devolved

[36] "Los tiempos de Pablo Escobar, Parte II," Caracol TV (Colombia), aired July 1, 2012.
[37] For a fuller account of the territorial implications of the decentralization, see Ballvé (2012).
[38] Quoted in Asher and Ojeda (Asher and Ojeda 2009, 293).
[39] The relationship between decentralization and violence is one of rich debates (Eaton 2006; Peluso 2007; Ballvé 2012).

(from the national government) public services—namely, education, water delivery and sewage, and health care. The overarching rationale of the Constitution's framers was to make the state a meaningful social presence in the lives of all Colombians, particularly for those living in historically conflictive areas, from the jungles of Urabá to the hillside slums of Medellín.

Regional agrarian elites balked at the reforms. The *apertura política* that had allowed the guerrillas to employ the combination of all forms of struggles had been bad enough. Now, the country had passed a new Constitution, which these conservative elites derided as a series of undue concessions to rebel groups that had been at their throats for decades (Romero, 2000; 2003). Adding insult to injury, the new Constitution included a provision recognizing rural Afro-Colombian communities as an "ethnic group" with inalienable collective property rights in the riverine regions of the Pacific Coast. Besides being an affront to centuries of entrenched racism and discrimination in the region—and Colombia more broadly—the law's stipulations also threatened to put the breaks on the further expansion of Urabá's agricultural frontier toward Chocó.[40] As one landowner told me, "For years, the state had abandoned us; now, it was betraying us."[41]

Across the country, the formal organization of paramilitary groups despite some geographic variations brought together a consistent ensemble cast of characters: drug traffickers, wealthy landowners, business owners, regional politicians, and members of the state security forces. Together, they set up training schools and flew in foreign mercenaries from the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and South Africa as instructors.[42] Fidel Castaño received his counterinsurgency instruction at one of these training camps in Puerto Boyacá, a town that until recent years proudly greeted visitors with a huge roadside billboard that read: "Puerto Boyacá: Land of Peace and Progress, Anti-Subversive Capital of Colombia."

When Fidel returned to Córdoba, he revived his paramilitary group; this time, it became a full-fledge army, which he commanded with the help of his two brothers, Carlos and Vicente. They named it the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU).[43] The Castaños were a stereotypical *antioqueño* family—large, religious, and conservative. By the time the FARC kidnapped the family patriarch sometime around

[40] I discussed these regional-race relations in Chapter 1.

[41] Author interview with retired banana company executive (anonymous) in Bogotá, D.C., October 25, 2013.

[42] My history of paramilitaries emergence is admittedly brief and incomplete. Whole books could be written about the intricate history of the paramilitary movement in Colombia and, in fact, several excellent studies have indeed been written (Romero 2003; Duncan 2006; Hristov 2009; Zabala 2009; Ronderos 2014). The most recent book by Ronderos (2014) thoroughly reconstructs the role of foreign mercenaries and the broader international context.

[43] Translation: Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá. Although paramilitary leaders were usually from the top economic echelons of agrarian society, the rank-and-file were indeed mostly peasants. The use of "*autodefensa*" and "*campesinas*" is a clear populist gesture, with only a faint bearing on reality, as is the FARC's self-ascribed status as "*ejército del pueblo*" (people's army).

1981, Fidel and his brothers were already well acquainted with the world of organized crime. Flush with drug money, Fidel paid the FARC's ransom twice, but his father died of a heart attack in the rebels' custody. More than Fidel or Vicente, it was Carlos Castaño, the youngest of three brothers, who made it his life's mission to avenge his father's death.

Puerto Boyacá, Boyacá in the Middle Magdalena region. (*Photo by Edgar Amado*)

Around the time of the creation of the ACCU in early 1994, Fidel died by the bullet of an unknown gunman—some say, on the orders of his brother, Carlos (Ronderos 2014, 214–219). Although the events surrounding Fidel's murder remain a mystery, the shooting death of Carlos a decade later on the orders of the third brother, Vicente, is clearer. Carlos had grown dissatisfied with the way many paramilitary commanders were increasingly privileging their drug-trafficking concerns at the expense of counterinsurgency. Looking for a way out, Carlos began seeking out a plea-deal for himself with U.S. authorities over his pending drug charges. Vicente, who saw the move as both a business risk and a betrayal, had his brother executed in 2004. A few years later, amid unknown circumstances, Vicente, too, met a violent death, supposedly at the hands of rival traffickers—though rumors insist he is still alive.[44]

Nonetheless, during the golden age of contemporary paramilitarism from 1994 until 2003, Carlos and Vicente formed a fierce team. When the ACCU began, Carlos handled the military command along with a retired military officer named Carlos Mauricio García, codenamed "Doble Cero"—as in, double zero, James Bond's license to kill. Vicente, meanwhile, handled logistics and the business side of the organization. The

[44] The Castaño fratricides have been the subject of intense media speculation and fodder for a dramatized TV series (*Los tres caines*). The most detailed account is by Ronderos (2014).

public knew the Castaños' paramilitary bloc by its official name and acronym as the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU), but insiders referred to it with the more intimate and regal-sounding title of "*la Casa Castaño*" (the House of Castaño).

Though never devoid of counterinsurgent aims, the *Casa Castaño*'s growing war machine also ran on a diverse set of violent economies. The Castaños gained vast amounts of lands, businesses, and weapons, while eliminating political opponents and protecting their most lucrative activity, drug trafficking. Campesinos in Urabá often describe how in the months before the first paramilitary attacks, rumors coursed through their communities that the "*mochacabezas*" (decapitators) were coming, a reference to the gruesome way the paramilitaries, or *paras*, used machetes—and, in some documented cases, chainsaws—to dismember the bodies of their victims. In 1996, just two years after the Castaños had reactivated their militia, a declassified U.S. intelligence report described the *paras* in Urabá as "a law onto themselves."[45] An Embassy cable from the same year elaborated by noting that growing paramilitary dominion of entire regions—especially, Urabá—had led to the establishment of "quasi-independent states" in a process it likened to the "feudalization of Colombia."[46]

Feudalization aptly describes the nationwide proliferation of the paramilitary movement. The *Casa Castaño*'s initial spread worked by absorbing groups of armed thugs that localized landowners had been using for decades (Ronderos 2014, 214–218). From their headquarters in Córdoba, the Castaños quickly mounted a full-fledge private army of uniformed, well-trained troops armed to the teeth. Their first military objective outside of their home base was Urabá, the crown jewel of the insurgencies. The *paras* followed a brutally simple formula: rather than engaging the guerrillas directly in combat operations, they would more often strike against the civilian population of enemy territories with a wholesale massacre and then force terrified survivors into leaving at gunpoint. In the process, paramilitaries coerced campesinos into signing over their lands with a bone-chilling offer: "Sell us your land or we'll negotiate with your widow."[47] In most cases, paramilitary leaders and their allies in the private sector would then establish large-scale agribusinesses such as cattle, oil palms, bananas, rubber, or teak projects on the abandoned farmlands.

In 1997, when U.S. intelligence officials asked where paramilitaries tend to flourish, their field operatives responded, "Areas where guerrillas are active are likely to

[45] "[Redacted] Colombian Prosecutor Comments on Paramilitaries in Uraba," U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, December 7, 1996.

[46] "Subject: Paramilitaries in Colombia," Embassy Cable, U.S. Department of State, Bogotá, Colombia, November 1996. The declassified U.S. government documents cited in this chapter were obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests by Michael Evans at the National Security Archives, a non-profit research institute in Washington DC, who kindly shared them with me.

[47] The "negotiate with your widow" phrase went viral during the paramilitary expansion—and, with the start of transitional justice initiatives in 2005, even more so in victims' recollections. The phrase has become part of the collective memory of the conflict and shorthand for the widely shared experience and injustice of forced displacement.

attract paramilitaries. Although the presence of large landholdings, particularly those owned by narcotraffickers, seems to be the strongest indicator of paramilitarism."[48] The cable then adds, "Relatively strong economic activity, such as cattle ranching or oil production, also seems to be a target for both guerrillas and paramilitaries." Urabá condensed all these conditions in ample proportions. By then, the Castaños were already turning the region into a bloody laboratory for the model of violent colonization of guerrilla territories they later exported to other regions. "The paramilitaries that flourish in Urabá," noted the same U.S. Embassy cable, "seem more 'professional' or 'specialized,' if such a term can be applied to intimidation and murder, than other, smaller groups around the country." Indeed, as the largest and most professionalized force, the *Casa Castaño* began exporting and sponsoring paramilitary franchises across the country. Although the paramilitary movement spread nationwide in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Urabá would remain its spiritual, neurological, and logistical nerve center.

Alongside the reign of terror unleashed by the *paras* came the progressive professionalization of Colombia's radical human rights community (Tate 2007). Through transnational advocacy networks, human rights groups in the country and their allies abroad denounced the systematic abuses being carried out by the open alliance between the *paras* and the U.S.-backed military. The two, in fact, collaborated so closely in this dirty war that Human Rights Watch described the *paras* as the Army's "Sixth Division" (HRW 2001). The government, in fact, had not officially outlawed private paramilitary militias until 1989. As paramilitary violence emerged *en force* in the late 1980s, Colombia's president at the time overturned a law decreed in 1965 during a state of exception that deputized the entire country against the "subversive action of extremist groups."[49] The Cold War-era decree flatly stated, "All Colombians, men and women, not currently conducting their obligatory military service, can be used by the Government in activities and tasks that contribute to the re-establishment of normalcy."

Five years after overturning this decree, the growing power of the FARC spurred the national government into re-deputizing civilians (again, by decree) through the creation of "Cooperatives of Private Security and Vigilance," known by their acronym Convivir—initials that also spell the Spanish word for convivial coexistence.[50] Active from 1994 until the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in 1997, the Convivir brought ultimately amassed a total of 120,000 civilians into a network of well-equipped "private security cooperatives" that patrolled and gathered intelligence for local security forces.

After being consulted in 1994 by the Ministry of Defense about the idea of creating the Convivir, the U.S. Ambassador in Bogotá cabled Washington with concern:

[48] "Subject: Paramilitary Groups in Colombia," Embassy Cable, U.S. Department of State, Bogotá, Colombia, April 1997.
[49] First issued by as Decreto No. 3398 de 1965, the law was later ratified by Congress as Ley 48 de 1968.
[50] *Cooperativas de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada*, Decreto No. 356 de 1994.

"There has never been an example in Colombia of a para-statal security group that has not ultimately operated with wanton disregard for human rights or been corrupted by local economic interests."[51] Three years later, as predicted, the U.S. Embassy cited "credible allegations" that "the Ministry of Defense office in charge of Convivirs … illegally authorized weapons sales to suspected paramilitaries and narcotraffickers."[52] A court ruling from 2011 explained the crucial role of the Convivir during the dawn of the paramilitary movement in Urabá: "Through various means, it is clear the Convivir helped the development and expansion of the paramilitary groups. They became spaces in which the [*paras*], the political class, members of the security forces, and national and multinational companies first coalesced into an alliance."[53]

A roadside billboard in Urabá: "Private Security and Vigilance Services in Urabá, Convivir. United against violence in Urabá. Lets defend our lands, companies, jobs, families, and lives. Denounce delinquents! Urabá, now or never!" (*Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado*)

The most vehement supporter of the Convivir in those days was then-Governor of Antioquia Alvaro Uribe, a rising figure from the most reactionary sectors of *antioqueño* politics. Uribe later become Colombia's first two-term president (2002-2010) after he amended the Constitution's ban on second terms. Uribe's life history closely parallels that of the Castaños: he grew up in a traditional *antioqueño* family and his father, too, died in a botched kidnapping by guerrillas. Like the Castaños, the Uribe family also invested heavily in the ranchlands of Córdoba. Througout his political career, Uribe has faced persistent accusations—and a mounting body of evidence—about his alleged ties to drug traffickers and paramilitaries (all of which he categorically denies).

[51] "Subject: Botero Human Rights Letter to A/S Shattuck," Embassy Cable, U.S. Department of State, Bogotá, Colombia, December 9, 1994.
[52] "MoD Alleged to have Authorized Illegal Arms Sales to Convivirs and Narcotraffickers," Embassy Cable, U.S. Department of State, Bogotá, Colombia, April 9, 1997.
[53] Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, Sala de Justicia y Paz, Proceso No. 2007 82701, Sentence against Freddy Rendón, December 16, 2011, p. 186.

During his three years as Governor (1995-1998), Uribe turned Antioquia into a proving ground for the Convivir, which in some cases were entirely made up of moonlighting paramilitaries. Uribe approved permits for at least 87 different Convivir groups, totaling more than 6,000 members.[54]

As Governor, he came under heavy criticism from the human rights community over his support for the Convivir. In response, he justified the militarization of society by citing the "weakness of the state."[55] Reflecting on his years as Governor, Uribe recently argued, "I supported and promoted [the Convivir] because I believe in citizen collaboration with the security forces. Collaboration builds citizens' confidence in institutions and prevents them from bowing down to crime or looking for unlawful solutions to their problems."[56] For Uribe, in other words, the Convivir were instruments of frontier statecraft that helped consolidate the rule of law by building ties and trust between civil and political societies. In Urabá, the Convivir also served an additional purpose.

The United Fruit Company, which culminated its rebranding effort as "Chiquita Brands International" in the 1990s, used the Convivir as a way of secretly contracting the security services of the *Casa Castaño*.[57] Revelations about the arrangement surfaced in 2007 when Chiquita cut a deal with the U.S. Department of Justice in which it admitted to making more than 100 payments totaling $1.7 million to the *Casa Castaño* between 1997 and 2004. As one paramilitary chief put it, "The Convivir were legal organizations that we used for illegal purposes."[58] The Convivir charged Chiquita a three-cent tax on every box of bananas loaded onto its boats in the Gulf (the same amount the U.S. builder of the aborted railroad to Urabá was going to charge banana companies in 1905). Left unresolved by the Department of Justice are allegations—corroborated by press accounts and a report by the Organization of American States (OAS)—that the boats of Chiquita's wholly owned local subsidiary unloaded a shipment of 3,400 AK-47 rifles and four million rounds of ammunition destined for the Casa Castaño in Urabá.[59]

Claiming extortion, Chiquita said its payments were motivated by a "good faith concern for the safety of our employees." Colombia's Attorney General, however, made a different assessment: "This was a criminal relationship. Money and arms and, in exchange, the bloody pacification of Urabá."[60] Indeed, the *paras* made sure they

[54] Ibid, p. 181.
[55] "Alvaro Uribe responde a críticas sobre las Convivir," *El Tiempo*, February 8, 1997.
[56] Press release by Alvaro Uribe, September 8, 2013.
[57] Before the rise of the ACCU, Chiquita made the same payments to Urabá's guerrilla groups.
[58] Ever Veloza, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, July 9, 2008.
[59] The Chiquita debacle is meticulously documented on the website of the non-profit National Security Archive: http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/ The weapons shipment was the subject of a detailed journalistic investigation by Phillip Robertson published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*: http://www.vqronline.org/essay/octopus-cathedral-salt/
[60] Toby Muse, "Colombian Prosecutor Probing U.S. Firms," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2007.

violently "cleaned" the banana workers' union of whatever militancy it had left.[61] As one paramilitary chief coldly described, "We killed a lot of unionists—not because they were part of a union, but because they were part of the guerrilla groups."[62] In fact, the victims were mostly one-time sympathizers of the UP, the civilian party linked to the FARC. In an interview with reporters, the same *para* commander said, "What we did was force the workers to go back to work on the plantations. Those who disobeyed the order and didn't work knew what would happen to them."[63] After the EPL's demobilization, years of worker bloodshed, and the dwindling fortunes of the banana industry, the corporate-backed paramilitary onslaught was the final nail in the coffin of labor militancy in Urabá's banana sector. Today, the union follows a strictly conciliatory—some would say reactionary (A. Chomsky 2008)—model of "social unionism."

According to Mauricio Romero, one of the most astute analysts of Colombia's armed conflict, the fate of Urabá's banana union proves "the impossibility of attributing behaviors to specific groups according to a priori classifications, without analyzing the relational settings in which they are acting."

> This is clear in the case of the banana workers of Urabá: in a single decade they moved from being considered as inhabitants of the "red zone" of Latin America and the vanguard of the Colombian insurrection, to participants in the project of restoring "law and order" in the region, a project that has an authoritarian character. Probably, they were not as revolutionary as they were once accused of being by the authorities and today they are not as reactionary as their opponents claim. Rather, they have had to move according to changes in relational contexts. (Romero 2005, 273)

In other words, amid Urabá's furies and the crossfire from all sides, unionists, like most civilians in the region, have simply made do.

Some former EPL members, however, actively joined the paramilitary movement. Some of its fighters, in fact, had never really left *el monte* in the first place, so they simply joined whatever group was offering the best terms of employment; for them, more than politics by other means, war was simply a way of life. Others ex-EPL fighters and militants joined the *paras* hoping to get a taste of the wild profits of the drug trade. For still others, the *Casa Castaño* simply presented an opportunity for fighting a no-holds-barred war against their hated enemy-comrades in the FARC. At first, Carlos and Vicente kept these new recruits at arms length, but the battle-tested ex-rebels—particularly those from the EPL's middle ranks—soon became some of the Castaños' greatest military assets. One EPL defector nicknamed "Monoleche," for instance, became their top lieutenant.

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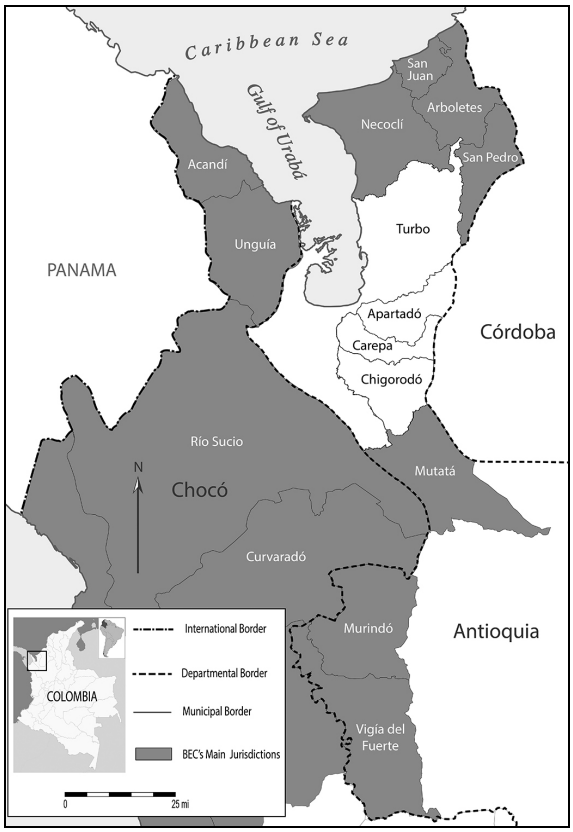
[61] Paramilitary commanders unanimously allege that Dole, Del Monte, and Colombian companies made the same payments.
[62] Ever Veloza, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, June 10, 2008.
[63] "Destape de un jefe 'para'," *Semana*, April 8, 2007.

By far, the paramilitary bloc with the largest contingent of ex-EPL was El Alemán's *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (BEC). Geography—in particular, the sociality of territory—proved pivotal for this fact: the BEC controlled the EPL's former strongholds in the north of Urabá, so many locals were also former rebels who joined the BEC in significant numbers for the reasons stated above. The BEC functioned as a semi-autonomous bloc, but it often got its marching orders from the *Casa Castaño* with whom it collaborated closely. In addition to the north of Urabá—meaning, everything north of Turbo—the Castaños also gave the BEC jurisdiction over the north of Chocó and everything south of Chigorodó.[64]



The municipalities with the BEC's claimed jurisdiction.

When the Castaños began their definitive march from Córdoba into Urabá in 1995, they sent an emissary to Necoclí to speak with Carlos Ardila, a wealthy rancher who had grown rich as the FARC's local financier. Through a personal friendship with the regional commander of the FARC, Ardila had made his fortune by taking a cut from the stolen cattle the guerrillas gave him to sell on their behalf. The Castaños' emissary told Carlos Ardila he had two choices: either join the paramilitary cause or be declared a military objective. After further negotiations, in which the Castaños sweetened the deal with lands and money, Ardila turned on his former patrons in the FARC and became the

[64] The BEC also operated in some municipalities of Córdoba and western Antioquia, but its main territories of jurisdiction were those state above.

power behind a rag-tag group of gunmen sent by the *Casa Castaño*. The nascent paramilitary group was so scraggily they acquired the name "Los Güelengues," local slang for a sickly or ugly horse. After recruiting some more fighters, they renamed themselves "La 70" for the number of troops in their ranks.

One of their early recruits was a young 22-year-old truck driver named Freddy Rendón, who worked at the local market in Necoclí on weekends. Freddy was a new arrival to Urabá. As a teenager, he had spent several years working for bus drivers and truckers on their long distance trips. In the early 1990s, he got a job driving a beer truck. Most of his work was along the Highway to the Sea. Shuttling between Medellín and Urabá, Freddy became well acquainted with the guerrillas thanks to their frequent roadblocks and tolls, which he always dully paid in either cash or beer. As a side business, Freddy began moving contraband.

"At night, you could look out into the Gulf and all you would see were a bunch of little lights—those were the contraband boats," Freddy remembered. After dropping off his beer shipments, Freddy would drive his truck back to Medellín loaded to the brim with contraband in a caravan with other smugglers. "We never once got stopped by police," he said.[65] On weekends, he worked at Necoclí's market, which was where Carlos Ardila recruited him to join La 70. Freddy made such a good soldier that in just over a year's time Ardila named him as one of the commanders of the bloc. Because of the strict discipline he demanded from his troops, they began calling him "El Alemán" (The German) and the name stuck.

During his ten-year tenure, from 1996 to 2006, the rag-tag group of *güelengues* grew into a disciplined army of more than 1,500 well-trained fighters. In 1997, honoring a fallen commander who died in combat with the FARC, they renamed the group, *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (BEC). Under El Alemán's leadership, the BEC gained a reputation as an expert counterinsurgent force whose specialty was the particularly violent process of breaking guerrilla territory. The *Casa Castaño* often called on the BEC, dispatching El Alemán and his troops for the initial stages of opening new battlefronts.[66]

With paramilitaries established nationwide in the form of more than a dozen semi-independent blocs, the *Casa Castaño* led the creation of a loose umbrella federation they called the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). The AUC was born at a 1997 meeting in Tulapas—site of the EPL's initial springboard into Urabá in the late 1970s. Carlos Castaño hoped the AUC would help the burgeoning movement coordinate strategy and serve as institutional groundwork for an eventual exit-strategy through negotiations with the government. Five years later, conditions had ripened for this planned exit from the conflict. The paramilitary war effort had been a smashing success, while the implementation of Plan Colombia—Washington's anti-drug and

[65] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, June 5, 2007.
[66] The BEC conducted operations and massacres in the departments of Boyacá, Cundinamarca, and Santander in addition to its main stomping grounds in Antioquia, Chocó, and Córdoba.

counterinsurgency package—along with the rise of Alvaro Uribe to the nation's presidency gave the *paras* the perfect conditions for a negotiated end to their rampage.

The Furies and the Politics of Scale

Uribe's predecessor in the presidency, Andrés Pastrana, had won office as a peace candidate. When he took office in 1998, Pastrana immediately moved into peace talks with the FARC, ceding them a Switzerland-sized demilitarized zone in the south of the country as a safe-haven. He also began lobbying Washington for a Marshall Plan-style assistance package he dubbed "Plan Colombia." The negotiations, which dragged on for almost the entirety of Pastrana's term, were doomed from the start. At the opening ceremony in January 1999, the FARC's supreme commander, nicknamed "Tirofijo" (Sureshot), never showed up. Seizing the moment in a public relations coup, Pastrana, a former television news anchorman, sat on the stage in silence beside Tirofijo's empty chair for all the cameras to see.

As the talks stretched and stalled, the content of Pastrana's Plan Colombia took on an increasingly military composition—especially, once the Pentagon and the Clinton administration's Drug Czar got involved in its design.[67] What Pastrana initially proposed was the "strengthening of the state" through an assistance package evenly split between military and development aid (Presidencia 1999). In the end, however, Plan Colombia became an annual assistance package of between appropriation of between $700 million to $1 billion with 80 percent of this money going to police and military, making Colombia (until 9/11) the third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid after Egypt and Israel. The other 20 percent of Plan Colombia bankrolled the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) programs for illicit crop substitution, institution building, and other development initiatives.

As a post-Cold War intervention, Plan Colombia and its state-building mandate made a comfortable fit with the threat-paradigm of the "failed state," which was then gaining popularity in Washington's military and diplomatic circles (Tate 2015)—a framework with echoes in scholarship from those days on "New Wars" (Kaldor 1999; P. Collier and Hoeffler 2000). An observer from a beltway think-tank linked to the Pentagon called Plan Colombia a necessity for tackling the "Hobbesian trinity" of narcotraffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitaries afflicting the country (Nuñez 2001). "The balkanization of Colombia into politically and socially unstable mini-states is a significant threat to this region," claimed an Ohio Senator. "Colombia is shaping up to be the Balkan problem of the Americas" (DeWine 1999).

[67] Ingrid Vacius and Adam Isacson, "'Plan Colombia': The Debate in Congress, 2000." Center for International Policy, Washington, DC, December 4, 2000.

After 9/11, Congress loosened Plan Colombia's parameters, making counter-terrorism an explicit part of the anti-drug program's new mandate. Explaining the shift, the U.S. Ambassador in Bogotá noted, "The U.S. strategy is to give the Colombian government the tools to combat terrorism and narcotrafficking, two struggles that have become one."[68] In both Colombia and Washington, the FARC's critics began relying on "narco-terrorist" as their preferred label for the group. Within the new post-9/11 security landscape, the Pentagon began casting Colombia's "stateless" frontier zones in the security discourse of "ungoverned spaces" that lacked "effective sovereignty." Outlining the new threat posed by "narco-terrorism in Latin America, Southcom commander James Hill warned:

> Today, the threat to the countries of the region is not the military force of the adjacent neighbor or some invading foreign power. Today's foe is the terrorist, the narco-trafficker, the arms trafficker, the document forger, the international crime boss, and the money launderer. This threat is a weed that is planted, grown and nurtured in the fertile ground of ungoverned spaces such as coastlines, rivers and unpopulated border areas. This threat is watered and fertilized with money from drugs, illegal arms sales, and human trafficking. This threat respects neither geographical nor moral boundaries.[69]

Plan Colombia was supposed to change all that.

The failure of the peace talks toward the end of Pastrana's term catapulted the presidential candidacy of Alvaro Uribe, a staunch critic of the negotiations with the FARC. Uribe campaigned as a hardline militarist with a heart. Using the slogan "firm hand, big heart," he promised to boost social spending while wiping the FARC off the map once and for all by, among other things, using Plan Colombia to double the size of the military. After the debacle of the peace talks, it proved a winning formula. When he took office on August 7, 2002, the FARC attacked his inauguration in downtown Bogotá with mortar fire that exploded just blocks away from the ceremony, a foreshadowing start to one of the bloodiest periods of Colombian history.

With Plan Colombia's help, Uribe unleashed a nationwide offensive against the FARC that devastated the group military capacity. Through combat, desertions, and demobilizations, Uribe cut down the rebels fighting force from its peak of 20,000 rebels in 1999 to about 10,000 by the end of his second term in 2010. Equipped with U.S.-supplied Blackhawk helicopters and smart bombs along with Brazilian and Israeli jets, the U.S.-backed military relentlessly attacked the rebels from the air, killing some of the FARC's top commanders. As promised, Uribe expanded the military's ground forces, which pushed the guerrillas deeper into the jungles and the mountains and away from major roads and cities.

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[68] U.S. Embassy Bogotá, Speech by Ambassador Anne W. Patterson, November 22, 2002.

[69] "Southcom Commander Warns of Narco-terrorist Threat in Latin America," remarks by James Hill Southcom Commander in Miami, Florida, March 3, 2002.

The *paras*, meanwhile, led the dirty war. Beyond their operational agility, paramilitaries made an ideal proxy force, in part, because Plan Colombia had attracted closer international scrutiny of the government security forces' dismal human rights record (Tate 2015, 85). Still, cooperation between the military and the *paras* remained systematic. The executive and legislative branches also forged tight links to the paramilitaries. Uribe's cabinet and his congressional coalition faced constant scandals, resignations, arrests, and convictions. To give just one example, the presidentially appointed chief of Colombia's intelligence service resigned after investigators revealed he had provided the *paras* with hit-lists of leftist activists who ultimately wound up dead. Despite a string of scandals following Uribe and his closest collaborators, his approval ratings hovered between an astounding 70 to 80 percent. Beyond the victories on the military front, government statistics showed dramatic drops in murder rates, kidnappings, and "terrorist attacks," but they all came with incalculable collateral damage on multiple fronts.[70]

With the guerrillas on the run, Plan Colombia in full swing, and an ally in the presidency, the *paras* saw their chance for an exit-strategy. During his campaign, Uribe had sent the paramilitaries clear signals that he was willing to negotiate their demobilizations and the exploratory talks began shortly after his inauguration. The result of the negotiations was the controversial "Justice and Peace Law" passed by Congress in July 2005.[71] Despite their crimes against humanity, the *paras*' top and mid-level commanders would serve no more than eight years in jail as long as they confessed the full extent of their crimes in court. The transitional justice initiative also structured the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of rank and file fighters.

The final paramilitary bloc to demobilize was El Alemán's *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*, which turned in its weapons on August 15, 2006. At the start of his trial a year later, El Alemán situated his armed struggle drawing on some of the founding tenets of liberal political theory. "We hand over to the Constitution and to the President our right to defend ourselves. We give them the monopoly of force to defend our rights. But when the state is incapable of this, then citizens must defend themselves with whatever tools at their disposal."[72]

The power of the insurgencies engendered their own oppositional forces in the form of the paramilitary movement, which, as this chapter has detailed, took shape amid a much broader set of conjunctural forces. But the constitutive link between insurgency and counterinsurgency was fundamental. Historian Arno Mayer's makes this point repeatedly about furies: "There can be no revolution without counterrevolution; both as phenomenon and process, they are inseparable, like truth and falsehood" (2000, 45). Gramsci made a similar argument, suggesting the next analytic step: "The problem is to see whether in the dialectic 'revolution/restoration' it is revolution or restoration

[70] Adam Isacson, "Don't Call It a Model," Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), July 14, 2010.
[71] Ley 975 de 2005.
[72] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, June 6, 2007.

which predominates; for it is certain that in the movement of history there is never any turning back, and that restorations *in toto* do not exist" (1971, 219).

The combination of the *paras*, Uribe, and Plan Colombia conspired in crucial ways to assure restoration's decisive victory. But, as the next chapter shows, the political and material gains won by the insurgencies shaped both the scope and form of this restoration in fundamental ways. With El Alemán at the helm, the *paras* in Urabá launched an all-out war of position for ensuring that the frontier state formations of the paramilitary restoration, once achieved, would be, in Gramsci's words, "decisive definitively" (1971, 239).

Chapter 3

The Paramilitary War of Position

The main school serving the town of Villanueva is impressive for a poor village on the western fringe of Córdoba's cattle lands. The grounds of the small campus are impeccably well kempt. A tidy hedge runs alongside a sturdy wooden fence that lines the entire perimeter of the school's property. It is the kind of enclosure more commonly seen surrounding the wealthy estates of local ranchers for whom quality fencing is both a point of pride and a status symbol. The school's one-story buildings surround a sports court paved with cement—also somewhat of a luxury in these parts. And the multicolored paintjob on the walls remains surprisingly intact. At one side of the main entrance is a white podium-like structure made of concrete with a large cast-iron plaque: "The Villanueva School Founded in 1988 by Fidel Castaño Gil."

Located just a few miles from the Castaños' hacienda "Las Tangas," the school was a pet-project of Funpazcor, the paramilitary NGO directed by Sor Teresa Gómez. Combining endearment and respect, locals usually called her "Doña Tere." Besides building and bankrolling the school, Funpazcor coordinated everything from staff and curricula, to the free uniforms and supplies doled out to students. Tuition of course was also free. Doña Tere kept the school's paperwork up to date with the governor's office and successfully petitioned for its incorporation into the public education system in 1998. Since then, amid changing political winds and against the protests of local residents, the departmental government has repeatedly threatened to close the school, often using its shady origins as a pretext. Making matters worse, two local families came forward in 2014 claiming Funpazcor had built the school on land Fidel Castaño had stolen from them at gunpoint. Despite serving hundreds of students from Villanueva and its surroundings, the school's future remains haunted by its paramilitary past.

Besides being the Castaños' first major populist gesture, the school was also the birthplace of a broader political initiative—one with nationwide repercussions.[1] In 1998, Carlos Castaño hosted a three-week conference at the school with about 150 paramilitary delegates in attendance from across the country. Through a series of panels, lectures, and training exercises, the conference aimed to broaden the scope of the paramilitary movement beyond military operations. And no one took this more seriously than Carlos Castaño's rising protégé, El Alemán. "We realized guns were never going to be enough," said El Alemán. "As a political-military movement, we also had to

[1] As discussed later, among those nationwide repercussions was the *parapolítica* scandal. Several commanders have claimed the meeting planted the first seeds of paramilitaries' turn toward in electoral scheming through which they came to control more than a third of the Colombian Congress, several governorships, and countless municipal offices (mayors and city council). López (2010) provides the most comprehensive empirical study of the *parapolítica* scandal.

think about the social and political front."[2] In Gramscian terms, they had decided their frontal "war of maneuver" against the insurgencies had to be complemented by a subtler "war of position" on the politico-ideological front (Gramsci 1971, 233-238).

As Gramsci formulated it, the war of position is about more than simply winning "hearts and minds," it is a hegemonic struggle over defining the relationship between civil and political society in a way that, once accomplished, is "decisive definitively" (Gramsci 1971, 239).[3] In other words, the war of position is a struggle for hegemony pressed into the service of a particular vision of statehood. Understood in this way, the concept perfectly captures the way paramilitaries conceived, discussed, and conducted what they called their "social and political work." In the paramilitary war of position, the cultivation of "*una base social*" (a social base of support) and state-building were inseparable, mutually dependent parts of the same self-serving, revanchist political-economic project.

Paramilitary state-building was not simply a smokescreen or a safeguard for their criminal economy, nor was it just the egotistical self-indulgence on the part of a few charismatic commanders, as some scholars and journalists have argued.[4] It was those things, but also much more. Paramilitary state-building should be understood in terms of what Corey Robin has claimed about counterrevolutionary movements in general: it was an attempt to "remake a regime that claims to have never been made in the first place," a regime he appropriately names, "democratic feudalism" (2010, 376, 375). In the case of Urabá, the impossible circle that paramilitaries were trying to square—that is, the old-new regime they were trying to remake—was the irreconcilable (but all too common) coexistence of formal democracy and primitive accumulation. While reactionary and revanchist, the *paras*' attempts to create a durable new regime of accumulation and rule were as dynamic and forward-looking as they were incoherent. The paramilitary war of position, however, was not the mechanical imposition of a premade ideological blueprint; it was a contingent and negotiated process that proceeded (had to proceed) in dialectical movement, combining coercion and consent, traversing civil and political society.

While scholars have discussed the paramilitaries' nexus with the political and business sectors, my focus on the war of position brings another largely unexplored

[2] Raúl Hasbún and Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre Conjunta, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 3, 2010.

[3] My conceptual framework for the relationship between hegemony, civil/political society, and the state in its everyday and integral sense draws on Thomas (2009, 190–195). He is one among a group of scholars who have been working at turning Gramsci right side up again, rescuing his dialectical thought from some of its influential interpreters such as Anderson (1976), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and Beasley-Murray (2010). The scholars I have in mind providing a much more faithful and fruitful reading of Gramsci are collectively represented in a recent anthology (Ekers et al. 2012). The work of Gillian Hart has been particularly influential on my thinking (2002; 2014).

[4] For the former see Soto et al. (2007), Duncan (2006), and even López (2010), while Ronderos (2014) often argues the latter.

nexus into the analysis: the polyvalent relationships mutually forged between the counterinsurgent paramilitaries and subaltern peasant communities.[5] Working at the municipal and sub-municipal scales, the *paras* relied on an intricate combination of community organizing, institution-building, and everyday right-wing agrarian populism that integrated well-established neoliberal discourses and practices of local governance with a host of political tactics learned from the insurgencies.[6] And in this, too, paramilitaries fit the mold of most counterrevolutionary movements, which as Robin notes, are "neither nostalgic throwbacks nor simple reactions, they are syncretic and hybridic movements, borrowing from a mishmash of sources to create a unique pastiche of contradictory effects." The paramilitary movement harnessed "the vitality of popular culture and the stuffiness of elite rule; the wild anarchy of violence and the iron law of oligarchy; a democratic openness to new recruits and an unyielding defense of antique privilege" (Robin 2010, 376).

Drawing on interviews, court documents, and ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter begins by examining how the violent dispossession of peasant communities was foundational to the construction of paramilitary territory and its consolidation through the war of position. Next, I reconstruct the micromechanics of how the *paras* actually waged their revanchist war of position as form of everyday state-building. The third section presents a couple of oral histories narrated by campesino leaders about their involvement in two paramilitary-sponsored "agrarian reforms." Finally, I conclude the chapter with an analysis of how the war of position integrated paramilitary populism, counterinsurgency, and state-building.

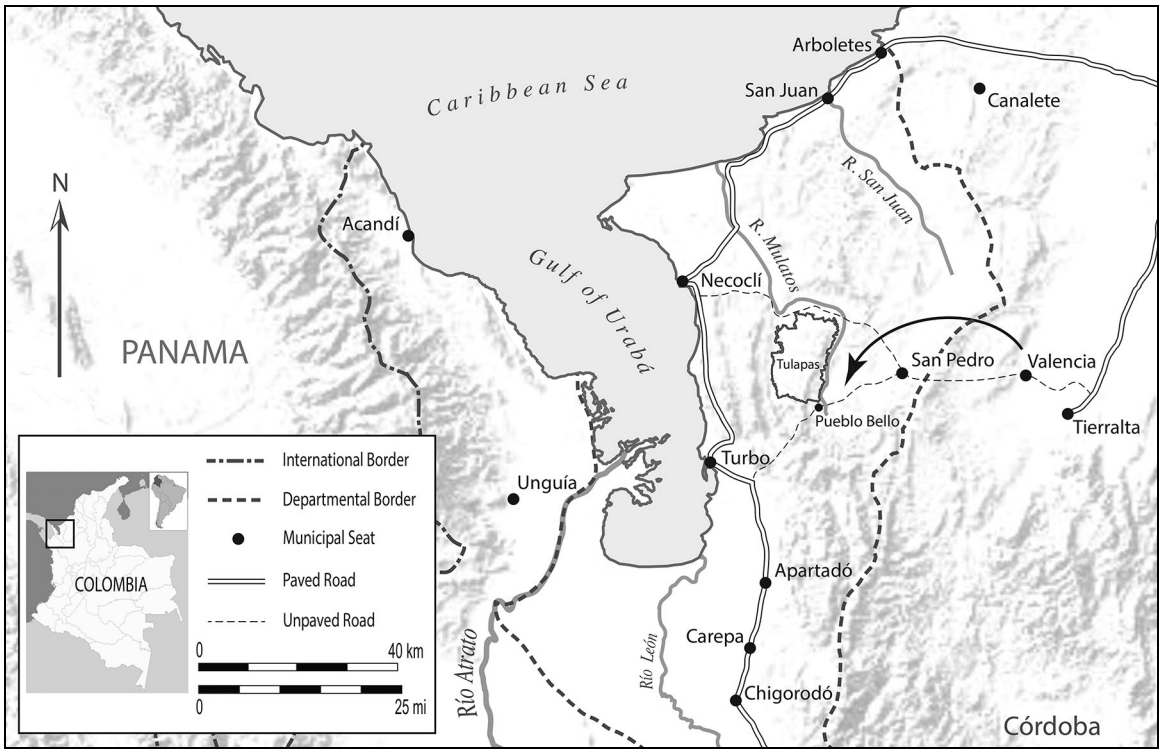
Although all of Colombia's paramilitary groups adopted aspects of this counterinsurgent war of position, it gained its fullest expression in Urabá, particularly in the territories controlled by El Alemán and his *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (BEC). The BEC gained a well-deserved reputation as a battle-hardened force with unrivaled expertise in the violent unmaking and remaking of guerrilla territories. The armed groups even have a name for this destruction and reconstruction of territorial control; they call it, "*rompiendo zona*," zone breaking. While focusing on the one-time rebel stronghold of Tulapas and the nearby town of Pueblo Bello, this chapter follows the arc of paramilitary tactics: from the violent negativity of zone breaking, to the more fulsome production of territorial control. It is within this arc or transition that the war of position played such a crucial role.

Zone Breaking as Human Geography

[5] The non-elite support received by paramilitaries is often downplayed or entirely discounted in many accounts of paramilitarism in Colombia (e.g. Hristov 2009; Romero 2011). Romero (2000; 2003) and Duncan (2006) do give incisive analyses of popular support, but mainly through the lens of the changing cultural politics of class relations and forms of symbolic capital induced by the drug economy.

[6] Later chapters will integrate other geographic scales into the analysis.

Paramilitaries usually announced their opening salvo of zone breaking with a wholesale massacre of civilians. For Tulapas, the massacre that hit closest to home was the slaughter of 43 residents of Pueblo Bello in 1990. When the Casa Castaño made its definitive incursion into Urabá that year, its first military objective was the EPL and its first territorial target was Tulapas. The EPL had built a strong social base in the area, and had reinforced it with selective assassinations against recalcitrant landowners, campesinos, and alleged government "collaborators." From their base in Córdoba, the Castaños saw Tulapas as the perfect steppingstone for their broader conquest of Urabá, the geopolitical cornerstone of their nationwide aspirations.[7]



The Castaños move on Urabá (see arrow) from their base in Valencia, Córdoba.

Besides offering favorable terrain in terms of topography, resources, and location, Tulapas also happened to be the site of the EPL's rebirth and its historical refuge, so its value for the *paras* was as symbolic as it was strategic. Although it was the FARC that had kidnapped and murdered the Castaño family patriarch, it was the EPL with its historical origins in Córdoba that had most relentlessly attacked the department's elite cattle ranchers, who alongside drug traffickers formed the Castaños' organic social base. Extorting these wealthy ranchers was the main source of financing for the EPL rebels, but it was their involvement in a cattle-rustling operation that became the final pretense for the Casa Castaño's bloody march into Urabá.

[7] Paramilitary chiefs Salvatore Mancuso and Ignacio Roldán both noted the importance of Tulapas for the Casa Castaño.

The Pueblo Bello Massacre

In December 1989, the EPL brutally murdered the foreman of the Castaños' ranch "Las Tangas" and seized 42 head of cattle as they passed through the village of Pueblo Bello. Fidel, who had already gained local infamy as "Rambo," quickly retaliated.[8] The night of January 14, 1990, he sent 60 heavily armed troops into Pueblo Bello. With shots ringing into the darkness, they barricaded the residents into the town by blocking its main exit points. With a list in hand, the *paras* began busting down doors and pulling people from their homes, guns jammed against their bodies. Others were dragged out of a Presbyterian church where they had sought refuge.

Castaño's men forced all 42 of their soon-to-be victims to lie facedown on the floor of the town's plaza. Town plazas, those quintessential colonial structures of orderliness and control, would soon become the *paras*' favorite stage for their butchery. As the first move in seizing guerrilla territory, the spectacular display of lifeless bodies in the most public of public spaces (the plaza) was a territorial practice they would repeat nationwide with methodical insistence. Like running a new flag up a pole, the bloodied plaza unmistakably announced regime change. Brutalized bodies pressed against the plaza floor were a visceral display, physically and symbolically, of how terror and territory in the Colombian conflict work through an intimate conflation of people and space.

In Pueblo Bello, rather than kill their victims on the spot, as became standard practice, the *paras* packed them into two trucks and took them back to Fidel's ranch. Police and military twice waved the two truckloads of armed men through their checkpoints: once on the way to Pueblo Bello and once again on the way back—the second time, with their terrified human cargo on board. The victims spent the rest of the night physically digging their own graves until shortly after sunrise when a single headshot killed the last person, a 16-year-old boy. During the ordeal, the victims endured tortured (eyes gouged, ears cut, genitals mutilated) and interrogation until finally being killed—in some cases, by Rambo himself.[9]

According to a police report, when the victims' families sought help from the local Army base the next day, the commanding officer gave them a chilling response: "Don't come here looking for answers. Or don't you remember that when the cattle were stolen none of you said anything? You traded lives for cattle."[10] According to locals, Fidel had vowed to kill one person for each of the 42 head of cattle the EPL had stolen (a truck driver killed on the road made the final tally 43). But the massacre also had clear

[8] Besides press accounts, the events of Pueblo Bello are reconstructed in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' ruling on "Case of Pueblo Bello Massacre vs. Colombia," January 31, 2006, which ruled the Colombian government was at fault for its willful failure to protect Pueblo Bello.

[9] Recalling the details of this massacre is a necessary way of contextualizing the seemingly "non-violent" aspects of the paramilitaries political activities, which are often presented in misleadingly roseate terms.

[10] Inter-American Court of Human Rights, "Case of Pueblo Bello Massacre vs. Colombia," January 31, 2006.

political motives. Most of the victims were militants of the EPL's legal political arm, the *Frente Popular*.

Regardless, the *paras* made little distinction between civilians and combatants in the process of zone breaking. For the paramilitaries, as is true for most armed groups, enemy territory had a deeply social existence, so much so that people and space are equal parts of a whole, a territory. As in Pueblo Bello, the *paras* would designate entire towns as "*pueblos guerrilleros*," so the violence of zone breaking tended to be both collective and indiscriminate. Alongside the spectacle of mass murder, the amazing efficiency of rumor in the countryside helped multiply its effects. In fact, the synergy between uncertainty and terror was an intentional part of Fidel's calculus for Pueblo Bello: he gave his troops a specific hit-list of suspected guerrilla collaborators, but he also instructed his men to choose a few people at random. For months, locals reeled in terror, unsure about the ultimate fate of the victims, the reasons behind the attack, the real identity of the perpetrators, and who might show up next on the *paras*' death list.

Residents' called Fidel's private militia as "Los Tangueros," after his ranch, but the group soon gained wider notoriety as "*los mochacabezas*," the decapitators, in reference to the gruesome way they dismembered their victims. Besides direct physical violence, zone breaking also worked through the circulation of terror, through what Michael Taussig once described as the "coils of rumor, story, gossip, and chit-chat" (1984, 494). Locals remember it as a time when "*el ambiente estaba pesado*," when even the air or ambience felt heavy.[11] From acts of spectacular violence to the intimate coils of everyday life, the Castaños produced a palpable atmosphere of terror that rippled through guerrilla territory, dissipating its hegemony.

"Pueblo Bello is when the disorder started," one resident of Tulapas told me, "that's when everything got turned around."[12] In the wake of the massacre came a steady spate of selective assassinations. Working closely with the Army, the Casa Castaño was chipping away at what it claimed was the guerrillas' social base. They singled out one of the area's most prominent peasant families, owners of a relatively large farm, killing three of its members, accusing them of being members of the EPL. If true, it would hardly be surprising, but the fact is that the fog of irregular war zones often clouds easy distinctions between member, accomplice, and reluctant collaborator. Although the categories might be blurred, the message was loud and clear: no one was safe.

Territory by Dispossession

[11] The richness of this expression was brought to my attention by Orrantia (2012).
[12] Author interview with anonymous peasant in Turbo, Antioquia, February 22, 2013.

For Tulapas, 1995 marks the definitive before-and-after of zone breaking. At gunpoint, paramilitaries ordered locals to leave the area, sometimes giving them only a matter of hours to pack up a few things. By emptying Tulapas of the real-and-imagined social underpinnings of guerrilla territoriality, the *paras* confidently described the area—using medicalized metaphors—as "sanitized" or "cleansed" of subversives.[13] But as a displaced peasant in another part of Urabá once told me, "They said they came here to clean out the guerrillas, but it was us, the campesinos, they cleaned out."[14] The residents of Tulapas scattered across the towns of Urabá, while some went as far as Bogotá and Medellín, joining what would eventually become Colombia's six-million-mass of dispossessed humanity—in technocratic terms, they became internally displaced peoples (IDPs).

According to Salvatore Mancuso, a wealthy rancher of Italian descent who eventually became a national paramilitary leader, when full-blown combat operations began in Tulapas, the *paras* and the Army worked jointly as a single military force in routing the guerrillas. He said the rebels knew that if they lost Tulapas, the rest of Urabá would soon follow. "The combat that displaced the guerrillas from those territories lasted like a month and a half," remembered Mancuso. "And from beginning to end, from the moment we planned, executed, and finalized our military operations, during all that time, we were buying up lands in Tulapas."[15] Still known as a respected cattleman at the time, Mancuso said the Castaños assigned him the mission of "purchasing" as much land as he could in the area.

Mancuso's comments demonstrate how, from the beginning, paramilitary-led dispossession combined military and economic rationales as a form of militarized land speculation. The longstanding presence of the insurgencies in Tulapas had held the worst of Urabá's savage agrarian capitalism at bay. By neutralizing the rebels, the Castaños knew property values would shoot up and that they would be further buoyed once the undercapitalized area became available for investment. (Their favorite way of accomplishing this valorization was by building roads.) The *paras* also guaranteed their future profit margins by forcing peasant landholders to sell at rock-bottom prices, or by simply never paying the coercively "agreed" upon price. The agribusiness plantations they established on the stolen properties became sinkholes for surplus narco-capital and a profitable means for laundering drug money. As is true for much of rural Colombia, the drug economy along with the dialectics of insurgency and

[13] In Spanish, they described an area as "*saneada*" or "*limpiada*." Taussig (2003) provides a chilling account of a paramilitary-led *limpieza* (cleansing), demonstrating its subtle yet pervasive "culture of terror" (1984).
[14] Author interview with displaced peasant in Carmen del Darién, Chocó, November 29, 2007.
[15] Salvatore Mancuso, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, November 11, 2011.

counterinsurgency were inseparable from the seesaws of uneven development and primitive accumulation.[16]

When prosecutors asked Mancuso why this area was so important to them, he replied, "Why Tulapas? Because Tulapas is far from everything." About three times the size of Manhattan, Tulapas is actually—at least on the map—only a 20-mile (32 km) beeline from Turbo's municipal seat, which is Urabá's second-largest urban center (population, 63,000). But the ruggedness of the terrain—the mud, jungle, rain, and mountainous topography—means there are no direct roads into the area, so the circuitous route from Turbo can take four to five hours by motorcycle. Tulapas is close and yet distant, which has made it a well-trodden crossroads of northwest Colombia's strategic corridors and, accordingly, a coveted geostrategic zone for the armed groups.

For the armed groups, the strategic corridors are a crucial aspect of their territorial imperative. The most revealing conversation I had about strategic corridors was with Karina, a former FARC commander.[17] For the rebels, she explained, zone breaking (*rompiendo zona*) is all about securing strategic corridors. She also clarified they understand "zone breaking" in a double sense. On the one hand, it refers to physically cutting paths into the jungle: "*rompíamos trocha*," we broke trails, she said. But strategic corridors also required breaking new ground socially. In other words, strategic corridors had to be socially produced.

Karina made clear that besides being material constructions, the corridors, as safe passageways for the movement of troops and contraband, were eminently social spaces. "We could spend one or two weeks breaking those trails," explained Karina about the physicality of the process. "But the other part of zone breaking was the work with the civilian population. It was about winning over the population." She said their work sought to at the very least "make sure they wouldn't rat us out [*…que no nos sapearan*]." But under ideal circumstances the "organizing commissions" she deployed paved the way for cultivating genuine political support. Zone breaking, as she summarized, was about "*abonando el territorio*," fertilizing the territory.

For guerrillas, a minimum degree of social support was a prerequisite for making their military operations possible. For the *paras*, however, zone breaking was a much more violent process and civilian support entirely an afterthought. To begin with, the real-and-imagined social underpinnings of guerrilla territoriality meant that civilian communities suffered the brunt of the paramilitary onslaught.[18] And, secondly, as

[16] Together, Harvey (2006) and Smith (2008) demonstrate how primitive accumulation and uneven development are mutually recursive processes.

[17] Author interview with Elda Neyis Mosquera, alias "Karina," FARC commander, in Carepa, Antioquia, December 10, 2013.

[18] Duncan (2006), López (2010), and others have claimed that the fact that paramilitaries had a surprisingly paltry combat record against the guerrillas made them an ineffective counterinsurgent force—a fact that casts further doubt as to the sincerity of their political commitment. But they should

proxies of the government security forces, the *paras* moved with impunity and given their wealthy backers were always flush with money, meaning they were far less dependent on poor civilians. For paramilitary blocs like the BEC, concerns about building "*una base social*" only came after guerrillas had been militarily defeated in an area and their alleged civilian collaborators wiped out or displaced. They made no distinction between campesinos and guerrillas. As Fidel Castaño coldly put it: "We would do a general cleansing (*limpieza*) and ask questions later" (quoted in Reyes 2009, 93). The *paras*' grassroots community work was an entirely post-facto endeavor for establishing more durable territorial control.

As the paramilitaries pushed into rebel-controlled Tulapas, Mancuso said the Castaños began sending small exploratory groups to the area, where they collected intelligence and, through hefty payments, recruited local guerrillas as assets. Next, the *paras* deployed small combat squads that disabled the corridors by cutting guerrillas' supply lines and attacking strategic points. In some places, paramilitary roadblocks imposed limits on the amount of groceries locals could take back to their farms from town (lest they be supplying the rebels). By choking-off guerrillas' outward social-spatial lifelines, paramilitaries began squeezing guerrilla territories into submission.

With their enemies sufficiently weakened, the *paras* made their definitive incursion into Tulapas in 1995. In total, some 4,000 campesinos in the area forcibly abandoned the family farms they had carved out of the forest over two generations of backbreaking labor. In the process, the Castaños' snatched up about 22,000 hectares in Tulapas, making it the single-largest land grab on record in Antioquia (which is saying a lot). Property registries and court documents show that alongside Mancuso, the Castaños also dispatched Sor Teresa Gómez to cut the shady land deals. Most of the sales took place between 1998 and 2002, just as the paramilitary war of position was heating up.

Secured through a combination of counterinsurgency and dispossession, the capital-intensive agribusiness projects were more than an economically driven material transformation of the space. The projects also came with a corresponding changeover in the legal-symbolic realm of property titles, cadastral maps, and other land-related registries. The final (and definitive) stroke in this processual production of territory was that paramilitaries promoted the partial repopulation of Tulapas with campesinos from other areas of Urabá, thereby thoroughly resetting the social-spatial relations of everyday life in the area. Zone breaking was an impressively holistic—material, ideological, and quotidian—feat of social engineering. Indeed, as a process of de- and re-territorialization, zone breaking involved all the constitutive strategic elements—political, economic, legal, and military—that define the workings of "territory" as a unique social-spatial formation (Elden 2010).

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instead be looking at paramilitary violence against civilians, which was obviously widespread and systematic, as a much more relevant "measure" for how paramilitaries engaged in counterinsurgency.

Political theorist of all stripes—fascist, liberal, and socialist—have noted the foundational role of landed dispossession in the making of political authority.[19] "Land-appropriation thus is the archetype of a constitutive legal process," wrote Schmitt, the fascist German jurist. "It created the most radical legal title, in the full and comprehensive sense of the term *radical title*" (2006, 47).[20] Describing Schmitt's work, Wendy Brown has further noted that many early liberal political theorists similarly "formulated land appropriation as the foundation of political sovereignty and the essential precondition for public and private law, ownership, and order" (2010, 44). Evoking language strikingly similar to Marx's classic "blood-and-fire" account of primitive accumulation, Foucault argued the law is "born in the blood and mud … of real battles, victories, massacres, and conquests … in burning towns and ravaged fields" (2003, 50). From an economic perspective, the land grab also fits the theoretical mold of "accumulation by dispossession," understood as capitalism's recursive tendency to recreate its conditions of possibility through the violent stripping away of people's means of subsistence.[21] But paramilitary-led dispossession was driven by more than narrow economic compulsions, it was also the primitive accumulation of political authority—call it, territory by dispossession.

Whenever El Alemán justified his armed struggle, he cited the threat guerrillas posed to "life, honor, and property," a selective phrasing of one of the Colombian Constitution's opening lines.[22] In mimetic fashion, his paramilitary bloc's written credo was draped in the language of popular sovereignty, natural right, social contract, and other touchstones of liberal political theory: "Our military doctrine was philosophically inspired by the natural right to self-defense," reads one of its lines.[23] (Hence, paramilitaries' preferred name for themselves: *autodefensas*.) In Schmitt's terms, the *paras* justified their armed struggle as a passing extra-legal necessity, a "state of exception," for preserving the legal-spatial order of the state, its "*nomos*," against the existential threat posed by the guerrillas as "unjust enemies" (Schmitt 2005; 2006).

Rather than compounding the sovereign void of a supposed state of nature—the mythical Hobbesian war of all against all—paramilitaries set out to *decide* its conclusion.

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[19] Wendy Brown (2010, 44) mentions Locke, Rousseau, Machiavelli, and citing Schmitt adds Vico and Kant; Lefebvre (1991, 280), Schmitt (2006, 47), and even Weber (2004, 37) all make similar arguments.

[20] Bosteels (2005) makes an interesting analysis of Schmitt's language, noting his obsession with words having the German prefix "ur-" (meaning, originary or primeval). Worth noting, in light of the link I am making between the foundational violence of political authority and landed dispossession, is that Marx's term for "primitive" or "original" accumulation was *ursprünglich*.

[21] My understanding of primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession) as an ongoing and recursive process draws on De Angelis (1999), Hart (2003), Harvey (2003; 2006), and Retort (2005). Together, these scholars show the ways in which social struggles, changing forms of exclusion, and uneven development constantly recreate opportunities for capitalist expansion via accumulation by dispossession.

[22] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Unidad de Justicia y Paz, June 5, 2007.

[23] "Bloque Elmer Cárdenas – Autodefensas Campesinas: Nuestro Credo Político," 12 pages, undated document.

In theory, paramilitary ideologues like El Alemán envisioned a temporal horizon for this extra-legal order by defining the *autodefensas* as a "social and political movement *temporarily* in arms." Indeed, when they began demobilizations negotiations with the government, paramilitary commanders emphasized, "The purpose of this process is the achievement of peace in a way that fortifies democratic governance and reestablishes the monopoly of force in the hands of the State."[24]

The *paras*, however, did not engage in state-building solely for the sake of state-building. Their activities went beyond simply shoring up the political authority and institutional presence of "the state" in places were these conditions had supposedly lapsed or never existed. Paramilitary state-building—the strategic assemblage of political relationships, practices, discourses, and institutional formations discussed in the next section—was an attempt to assemble their revanchist political-economic project into a more durable regime of accumulation and rule. Gramsci's notion of the war of position makes profound sense in this context because its basic premise is that state-building projects are always-already imbued with a particular political bent and vision of statehood. The war of position, as a concept, does not take "the state" as a predetermined, universal social formation, because its form is precisely what is at stake. As such, the war of position is a hegemonic struggle pressed into the service of a particular vision of statehood. In the case of the *paras*, the war of position was the means through which they tried to reconcile primitive accumulation with liberal democracy as a political form. As one former paramilitary operative told me, "We realized we could do more by working in an organized way through the law and what was legal, than we could do with 10,000 armed men."[25]

Everyday State-Making

A few months after Carlos Castaño hosted the paramilitary workshop at his family's school in Villanueva, El Alemán set up a more extensive training process for his bloc's community organizers. The troops chosen for this job were mostly rank-and-file soldiers who had been wounded in battle or were otherwise deemed unfit for combat. "We trained this personnel as 'political commissars,' " El Alemán told the courts. "We then sent them out to do community work—initially, as liaisons between the communities and the different local BEC commanders."[26] They soon rechristened these "political commissars" with the loftier title of "*Promotores de Desarrollo Social*" (Promoters of Social Development or PDSs). Dressed in civilian garb and armed with

[24] Alto Comisionado para la Paz, Presidencia, República de Colombia, "Acuerdo de Santa Fe de Ralito para contribuir a la paz de Colombia," July 15, 2003.
[25] Author interview with demobilized paramilitary "Cocinero" (pseudonym) in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 23, 2013.
[26] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, November 23 to December 4, 2009.

nothing more than a radio on their hip, the PDSs were the frontline foot soldiers of the BEC's war of position.

El Alemán, commander of the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas paramilitary faction, in August 2006

As mentioned before, the BEC learned and borrowed heavily from the political cultures of its sworn enemies: the EPL and the FARC. The workshop at the school in Villanueva essentially trained paramilitaries in what insurgents refer to as "*trabajo de masas*," the *work* of building a *mass* base. Among the guerrilla movements, the individual combatants tasked with this community-oriented detail had the title of "political commissars," the same name initially adopted by the *paras*. And since many of the BEC's mid- and lower-level ranks were ex-EPL who had defected to the paramilitaries, El Alemán shrewdly tapped his retinue of former rebels for carrying out the grassroots-oriented work. As former guerrillas, they came pre-equipped with the necessary experience and skillset. By repurposing the tactical repertoire pioneered by the rebels, the BEC was able to produce its territories by using a proven (and familiar) set of political practices, relationships, institutional forms, and discourses. In fact, the deep-seated social sedimentations of guerrilla territoriality paradoxically boosted the BEC's success in remaking territorial control in places like Tulapas. Such is the way that the territories of the conflict accumulate, overlap, and, fatefully, collide.

Following the mass exodus from Tulapas in 1995—and with the authorization of its new paramilitary overlords—peasants from other parts of Urabá began slowly tricking into the area and resettling the abandoned farmlands. It was among these new settlers and at the intimate scale of "community" that the BEC began the "social and political work" of its war of position. Some of the new arrivals had fled violence

elsewhere; some came at the express invitation of the BEC, while still others were simply landless peasants looking for work, land, or opportunities. For instance, one campesino settler told me he arrived after hearing from a friend that the *paras* were hiring *macheteros* at one of their new estates to help hack away at the overgrowth that had consumed the abandoned farmlands.[27] He also mentioned that in the early days of this resettlement the *paras* "wanted more population in the area, so they brought in maybe 30 or 40 families and gave them parcels to work."

"Why did they want more people?" I asked.

"I guess they needed workers and they had too much land," he replied. "There was also the issue of the coca, so they also needed people to work that too."

The EPL had left behind several coca fields in Tulapas. The size of the crops shocked one of the campesinos allowed to settle the lands: "The coca bushes had trunks the size of trees."

"In those days," recalled another peasant, "you never would have come here without the paramilitaries' permission. You had to ask one of their people, their *Promotores* [the PDSs]. So when I went to Tulapas, I had El Alemán's permission and I started growing coca. But the condition was that I could only sell the product to them."[28]

A person who ended up becoming a prominent community leader in Tulapas received a much more direct invitation. "They [the *paras*] came and found me," he said. "They wanted someone who knew how work with communities. And since I had helped manage a community organization where I was from, they brought me in."[29]

The *paras*' may have wiped it clean of its "native" residents, but Tulapas was hardly a *tabula rasa*. The coca crops left behind by the EPL were there, as were the well-worn strategic corridors that the paramilitaries now assumed as theirs. The sociality and materiality of nature is also part of how territories begin to sediment through the war. Finally, coming mostly from other zones formerly controlled by guerrillas, the new settlers arrived with a fluency in the insurgent political cultures that the *paras* were in the process of assimilating and repurposing through their community organizers, the *Promotores de Desarrollo Social* (PDSs).

Eventually, the BEC had more than 100 thoroughly trained PDSs dispersed across its territories. The PDS received their training at a special academy set up by the bloc called the "Simón Bolívar School for Social and Political Formation," named after the South American Independence hero—an icon the guerrillas claim as their own. El Alemán even trucked in professors from the University of Córdoba to give workshops on

[27] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Turbo, Antioquia, May 9, 2013.
[28] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Turbo, Antioquia, May 9, 2013.
[29] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Cartagena, Bolívar, October 2, 2013.

legal issues for his troops. Above all, the professors made sure the PDSs were especially well versed in legislation governing the relationship between municipal administrations and the local *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, the community governance institutions introduced after *La Violencia*.[30]

By law, *Juntas de Acción Comunal* are state-sanctioned, democratically elected bodies of local governance—with a president, vice president, treasurer, and so on. But they are legally defined as non-governmental "civil society" organizations. As the most subsidiary institutions of local governance, the *Juntas* resolve local disputes, maintain basic infrastructures, and give communities a stronger collective voice before government entities. Although working through the *Juntas* was another tactic taken directly from the guerrillas' political playbook, these community organizations had gained new salience through the 1991 Constitution and the BEC took full advantage of their reinvigorated role. The *Juntas* formed the foundations for all of the BEC's frontier state formations.

The Constitution's decentralization reforms had indirectly turned the *Juntas* into more influential institutions of local governance. By giving municipalities greater political, administrative, and fiscal power, the decentralization turned the *Juntas* into increasingly relevant vehicles for lobbying municipal administrations for community development projects (roads, schools, clinics, agricultural assistance, etc.). Decentralization also helped break up the country's two-party duopoly, which had relegated the *Juntas* to the role of vote banks for local political bosses. Though still firmly ensconced in localized networks of clientelism, the *Juntas* gained a slightly stronger footing after the decentralization because they could suddenly draw on a wider menu of potential political patrons. Thus by the time paramilitaries arrived en masse, the *Juntas* were pivotal institutional hubs and political brokers between rural communities and municipal government structures.

Working through the *Juntas*, the young men tapped to be PDSs trafficked between civil and political societies. They were intermediaries—or as one PDS euphemistically described it, "ice breakers"—between campesino communities, the paramilitary group, and municipal entities. "Our PDSs would go out and do community work," explained El Alemán. "They had a degree of knowledge of cooperativism, so they knew something about how to create a *Junta* and how citizen oversight worked, empowering the presidents of the *Junta*, giving them juridical life in all our municipalities."[31] The PDSs gave "juridical life" to the *Juntas* in one of two ways: they either helped communities create *Juntas* in places that lacked them or, as was more often the case, they ushered communities through the legal-bureaucratic process of

[30] Specifically, the laws were Ley 80 del 1993 on municipal contracting; Ley 136 del 1994 on the role, function, and organization of municipal government; and Ley 743 del 2002, which further institutionalized and regulated the Juntas de Acción Comunal.

[31] I will come back to the issue of cooperativism in chapter six on the BEC's economies of violence. Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 16, 2009.

registering an already existing *Junta.* The BEC would even bankroll the trips of community leaders to Medellín for the registration process. Without this formal registration, the *Juntas* had no official legal standing before government entities.

The favorite word used by the PDSs for describing their role with the *Juntas* was that they "accompanied" them in their creation and daily activities. According to government prosecutors, between the paramilitary conference at the school in Villanueva in 1998 and the bloc's demobilization in 2006, the BEC worked with an astonishing proportion of *Juntas* in the municipalities under their control: for example, 110 out of 121 in Necoclí, 37 out of 69 in Arboletes, and 39 out of 50 in San Juan.[32] As the *Juntas* took shape and gained "juridical life," the *paras* were consolidating their own relationship with communities as much as communities' relationships with municipal governments. In this sense, paramilitaries' frontier state formations made their own territories and the spatialities of the state into wholly interpenetrated spaces.

After many months of tight-lipped responses, a few former presidents and members of the *Juntas* in Tulapas finally began opening up to me about some of their dealings with the BEC. As I expected, their stories revealed much more nuance than I had heard from former members of the BEC about the relationships between the PDSs, the *Juntas*, and municipal administrations. One woman, for example, recalled submitting a formal letter of complaint to her municipal government requesting more information (*un derecho de petición*) about a stalled road construction project. She wrote the letter at the prodding and with the help of a PDS.[33] Directed to the Mayor's office in Turbo, the request made clear she was seeking documentation on whether the funds for the road project were being well managed—a legally enshrined mechanism of "*veeduría ciudadana*" (citizen oversight). The PDSs gave Junta members thorough training on the legal processes associated with conducting this oversight role. The PDSs framed the process as strengthening the *Juntas* in a way that helped foster good governance and the rule of law. While aware of these loftier goals, the *Junta* leader who wrote the complaint letter admitted to me she had more immediate aims.

She said the reason behind the letter, at least for her, was not so much about curtailing the mismanagement of public funds as it was a way of pressuring the Mayor into making sure the road actually got built. "*¡Corrupción siempre va haber!*" she laughed. There'll always be corruption! She explained that letting the Mayor know he was being watched was a way of "*poniendo a funcionar el estado*," making the state work. Indeed, by helping thread together this multiply scaled network of legal, political, social, and institutional relationships and putting it "to work" for communities, the PDSs helped materialize relationships between civil and political society—despite the differing agendas at work. The PDSs often helped *Junta* members navigate this

[32] Prosecutors also mentioned 15 *Juntas* in Córdoba and 13 in Chocó influenced by the BEC.
[33] Author interview with anonymous campesina in Turbo, Antioquia, July 16, 2012.

ensemble of relationships in ways that produced concrete, material results. "My re-election depended on it," noted one *Junt*a's ex-president.[34]

However, another resident of Tulapas from those days described the BEC's relationship to the *Juntas* in much more authoritarian terms: "When the president of a *Junta* gave an order—whether to gather up certain people or do a certain job—you knew it was coming from the boss [*el patrón*]. If the president of the *Junta* said it, you knew El Alemán had said it."[35]

"Those things happen with the *Juntas* because some people are very ignorant," continued the campesino. "But the members of the *Junta* were the ones who were given the power and the community had to follow in line. So, of course, all of this worked to perfection for El Alemán."

The campesino making these comments had actually served as a president of a *Junta* in Tulapas, so I followed up asking, "Well, what about you? Weren't you a president?"

"Yes, sure, and that was the problem I had with the PDSs," he replied. "I wanted to work with the people in the community who were really working for the community. And those kinds of divisions were not convenient for [*the paras*]."

One campesino, who was still vice president of his *Junta* when I met him, characterized the relationship with the BEC as being on much more equal footing. "As the *Junta de Acción Comunal*, we'd tell the PDSs if we felt the bloc was doing something that we didn't like. And, in general, that was respected," he said. "We were very direct with them, and them with us. It was more or less upfront [*como frentiándonos*]."[36]

The BEC began coordinating its work among the Juntas through an NGO called Asocomún, a non-profit founded by El Alemán's brother, Jairo Rendón, who went by the name Germán Monsalve.[37] Eventually, Asocomún became the BEC's main instrument for its interventions in the civilian and political life of its core territories. Within the BEC itself, El Alemán gave the critical job of "General Coordinator" of the PDSs to a trusted confidant, whom I'll call, "Secretario." Before becoming El Alemán's personal assistant, he had served Carlos Castaño in the same capacity. Initially, Secretario's new job with the BEC consisted of a series of mundane administrative tasks: managing emails, updating the group's website, coordinating meetings, as well as keeping his boss abreast

[34] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Turbo, Antioquia, July 19, 2013.
[35] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Cartagena, Bolívar, October 2, 2013.
[36] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 23, 2013
[37] The Asociación Comunitaria de Urabá y Córdoba (Asocomún), founded by El Alemán's brother (Jairo Rendón), was registered in 2002 with Urabá's Chamber of Commerce, under tax identification number (NIT): 0811040618-4. For the details of this wheeling-and-dealing see Ballvé (2012) and my more investigative journalistic piece: "La telaraña de los 'paras' en Urabá," *Verdad Abierta*, June 14, 2011: http://bit.ly/1yVsLQO.

of reports from the field about the bloc's relations with communities.[38] It was through this last responsibility, he told me, that he "became interested in the social side of the BEC."[39] When I met Secretario in 2013, he described the relationship between the PDSs and the *Juntas* through a revealing metaphor:

> We [the PDSs] were in charge of organizing the communities, organizing them as units, as the base of power in Colombia. The state in Colombia is like a pyramid with the communities at the bottom. At the top are the president, senate, and then [the lower house of] congress with the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* at the very bottom with the communities. Every community has a *Junta*, so our job was to organize those *Juntas*, train them, and show them how to do their work.

El Alemán used the same metaphor to describe the *Juntas* as the basic and most subsidiary building blocks of the state: "Training the *Juntas* was really important to us because they are the first step in the pyramid of democratic participation, so our objective was for them to be mechanisms of social participation, as legislated by Law 743," which is a bill passed in 2002 regulating the role of the *Juntas*.[40]

The spatial metaphor of the state as a pyramid reflects what Ferguson and Gupta (2002) have described as a discourse of "vertical encompassment." By this, they mean the way we make sense of the state in both everyday life and scholarly discourse through spatial metaphors of verticality and encompassment. We discuss the state as *vertically* standing above society and *encompassing* localities across an expanse of national space ("levels" of government, repression "from above," while "communities" and "the local" constitute politics "from below"). In Secretario's version, and echoed by El Alemán's comment, the *Juntas*, as the most immediate entities for local political participation, form the encompassing base of the pyramid while the nation's president is pinnacled at the top of its stratified hierarchy. Ferguson and Gupta's point is that the discursive practices associated with vertical encompassment are key to they way "states represent themselves as reified entities" (2002, 982). In a mix of sarcasm and seriousness, Lefebvre similarly noted: "This social architecture, this political monumentality, is the State itself, a pyramid that carries at its apex the political leader—a concrete abstraction, full of symbols, the source of an intense circulation of information and messages, 'spiritual' exchanges, representations, ideology, knowledge bound up with power" (2009, 224).

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[38] As a 21st Century counterinsurgency with savvy public relations and communication strategies, the *paras* had several websites. Beside the one managed by the AUC umbrella group and the BEC's www.acbec.org, there were at least ten others maintained by individual blocs. Most of the sites published speeches, articles, communiqués, and those sorts of things.

[39] Author interview with anonymous paramilitary operative (pseudonym, "Secretario"), in Medellín, Antioquia, September 18, 2013.

[40] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, November 23 to December 4, 2009.

Although Secretario and El Alemán both describe the state in the reified pyramidal terms of vertical encompassment, they also talk about creating, training, and organizing the *Juntas* as well as guiding the work of these institutions based on specific legislation. Their comments imply a reified state (the pyramid), but not as an entirely fetishized freestanding entity completely divorced from social relations. Pyramids (to continue the metaphor) might be monumental awe-inspiring superstructures, but they are also human-made and collectively built block-by-block. The fact that they are built under the coercive forces of deeply asymmetrical power relations makes the metaphor all the more appropriate. In situating the *Juntas* and communities—that is, civil society—as part of the pyramid, the discursive imagery being conjured by these two paramilitaries even parallels Gramsci's understanding of the "integral state," a concept aimed precisely at disrupting the state-society divide that Ferguson and Gupta find so problematic.[41] In fact, even the nuanced analysis of these scholars falls back on implying the state as a thing-in-itself that is somehow capable of "spatializing *itself*" (2002, 990; emphasis added). For paramilitaries, on the other hand, the spatialization of "the state" as a meaningful presence was something that had to be collectively and very deliberately produced.

States in the Plural

The following courtroom exchange between El Alemán and the prosecutors helps further illustrate the political imaginaries underwriting the *paras*' war of position. In 2003, El Alemán addressed a letter to several other paramilitary commanders. It said he was handing them control—a "transfer of jurisdiction"—over seven of "his municipalities" in Córdoba. During his trial a few years later, government prosecutors questioned him about the letter: "In handing over territories like that … was it normal to issue these sorts of announcements?" Before allowing a full response, the prosecutor added that what surprised him most was the list of public officials copied on the letter: all seven mayors of the municipalities in question, the governor of Córdoba, as well as the local heads of the police, Army, and Catholic Church.

"It's shocking," broke in the representative of the Inspector General's office, a national agency charged with public sector oversight. "It just doesn't seem like the most normal thing to go and say to a governor: 'Look, from this point on we're handing control over to this other group.' " El Alemán began explaining the letter had to be understood within the context of the BEC's "social and political work," through which his group had forged "excellent relations" with the grassroots leaders, communities, and

[41] Ferguson (2006) discusses Gramsci as a prime exemplar of the problematic dichotomy between civil society and the state. In fact, Gramsci's understanding of the "integral state," as a dialectic of political and civil societies, and his objections to theories of "base/superstructure" (another spatial metaphor) were precisely aimed at avoiding the often-assumed state-society division in our analyses. For example, see Gramsci's prison notes: Notebook 4, §38 and §15 among many others.

elected officials in the area—so much so, he said, that they had supposedly begged him to stay. When he added that he had personally hand-delivered the letter to the mayors at a meeting, the ombudsman asked, "So they knew they were meeting with the commander of an armed group behind the back of *la institucionalidad*?" This last term, *institucionalidad*, is colloquial shorthand for the ensemble of institutions and agents of government at all scales. El Alemán's reply turned on the BEC's role as counterinsurgent state builders.

"It's well known that the hegemony or the states that existed in those areas were those of the guerrillas," he began. "But in the case of the states in formation of the *autodefensas*—which were not the states of the Colombian state, they were states in formation—what we did was carry out the work of the state in those places." As examples, he pointed out they would resolve local disputes, fix bridges and roads, and even coordinate municipal investments into rural communities. "So, yes sir," he said. "The mayors knew exactly what was going on."

At the root of this courtroom dialogue lie the multiple, overlapping, and superimposed territories of Urabá's parcelized sovereignties, a complexity that prosecutors had difficulty grasping. They were shocked paramilitaries had seemingly exercised authority "over and above" that of the mayors, the governor, and the national security forces. El Alemán, however, painted a far more fluid picture. He described the BEC's cozy relationship with public officials as simply the intended outcome of its deeply localized social and political work—as part and parcel of its "states in formation," a phrase purposefully constructed in the plural. By working through the *Juntas* and the PDSs, the BEC saw its territories as prefigurative and multi-sited "states in formation" aimed at countering insurgents' territorial hegemony—that is, the guerrillas own localized "states" (also in the plural). In short, El Alemán was explicitly analyzing struggles over territory in Urabá as struggles over state formation.

He saw the *paras*' states in formation as a solid foundation and holding pattern until "the states of the Colombian state" could somehow reassume control of these territories. And yet, in mentioning the social and political work through which he built "excellent relations" with local leaders and elected officials, he made clear that the BEC's states in formation worked in and through the structures, agents, and practices of municipal government. Put into the technocratic terms of vertical encompassment often used by the World Bank, the *paras*' counterinsurgent brand of frontier state-making was both "decentralized" and "bottom-up." But all this was by no means a selfless public service.

In sum, the politico-juridically defined space of the Colombian state was only one territory among others and not necessarily the hegemonic one. The sovereign space of the nation-state was pockmarked and shot through with what El Alemán called "the states of the guerrillas." For paramilitary ideologues, this was precisely the problem. They described the "absence of the state" and the presence of "guerrilla states" as

synonymous afflictions with the same remedy. In El Alemán's words, "Our interest as a politico-military organization in arms was not only to win the war against Colombian society's number one enemy—the guerrillas—it was also for the state to gain a presence in those areas." With the help of the PDSs, the *Juntas* were supposed to be the localized building blocks of this desired state presence.

Building 'Basic State Structures'

In the dry words of a BEC training manual, the work of PDSs in the *Juntas* was supposed to "promote social and community development in geographic areas characterized by state abandonment and high levels of unmet basic necessities through the consolidation of basic state structures."[42] Secretario explained what this meant in practice: "Our function was wholly social and included all kinds of community work: creating the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*; training the *Juntas*; creating their dispute resolution committees; generating and motivating work brigades to improve bridges, roads, community centers."[43]

The building (or maintenance) of roads and bridges was particularly important. The lack of a road, or the terrible state of an existing one, almost always tops the list of grievances expressed by campesino communities in Colombia. Roads are powerful symbolic and material indices of "state presence" (or lack thereof). For the *paras*, besides valorizing their ill-gotten properties, building roads was a sure-fire way of drumming up local approval and consolidating their territorial hegemony.

A former PDS explained how road-building worked: "The organization [i.e. the BEC] would pay for the bulldozers and fuel, and the *Juntas* were in charge of organizing the community—food, manual labor, and the rest. That's how we worked hand-in-hand in making the roads, leaving everything nice and organized […*para que todo quedara bien organizadito*]." Looking down at the map of Urabá that I always took with me to interviews, he began circling his finger around an area that included Tulapas. "You see all those *carreteras* [roads] here—that bunch of internal *carreteritas*? Ninety-eight percent of them were done by the *autodefensas*."[44] It was the third time I had heard the same statistic from a member of the BEC, offered as concrete evidence of their contribution to the "presence of the state." Roads, not to mention railroads, have a long history as indices of frontier state formations in Urabá and elsewhere.

[42] Document titled, "Propuesta capacitación política social: Promotores de desarrollo social," Bloque Elmer Cárdenas (BEC), October 28, 2002.
[43] Deposition of anonymous paramilitary operative (pseudonym, "Secretario"), Montería, Córdoba, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Fiscalía Especializada Estructura de Apoyo, April 7, 2010.
[44] Author interview with demobilized paramilitary "Cocinero" (pseudonym) in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 23, 2013. In Colombia, *carretera* can mean both highway and road, even the unimproved kind.

In most cases, besides the *paras* and the *Juntas*, government ministries from all scales—municipal, departmental, and national—also got involved in the road construction projects. The Army's 17th Brigade, which is one of the few government institutions in Urabá with its own bulldozer and other kinds of heavy machinery, was another frequent participant. Additionally, since wealthy landowners reaped significant economic benefits through improved access to markets and the valorization of their properties, El Alemán said he usually convinced them to chip in funds as well. Through these joint-efforts, road construction in paramilitary territories took on the trappings of a neoliberal-style "public-private partnership."

Although campesino communities were always cited as the beneficiaries of the roads, another paramilitary commander admitted, "We would sell them to the communities as something entirely for their social welfare, but the benefit was really for us."[45] Without a shred of naivety about the *paras*' ulterior motives, local communities dutifully played along. The upshot was that their longstanding road problem had finally been resolved. Indeed, this example reiterates how, despite the violent foundations of paramilitary rule, civilian communities were never passive subjects entirely sapped of their political agency. In some cases, civilians secured noteworthy concessions from the *paras*.

One *Junta* even succeeded in pressuring the BEC into a mini-agrarian reform—albeit, a very meager one and with lands that had been stolen. In 2002, the president of a local *Junta* in Tulapas convinced El Alemán to cede a small chunk of a paramilitary estate known as "La 24," a 4,000-hectare spread made up of stolen properties.[46] Working through the local PDSs, the *Junta* president received 300 hectares for 16 families. The chosen families had been working under feudal conditions for the hacienda's "administrators." They had been harvesting crops and logging on La 24 in exchange for permission to grow a patch of subsistence crops.

The PDSs had other, more everyday forms of shoring up the bloc's territorial hegemony. Locals said that whenever anyone became gravely ill, the family would simply call one of the local PDSs, who would then get on his radio, and within minutes a late-model SUV would pull up for a ride to the hospital hours away. Campesinos also told me the BEC donated things like generators, water pumps, pesticides, seeds, and other basic necessities, while community events and festivities were usually all-expenses-paid. According to one story, every Christmas, El Alemán would smuggle a shipping container full of toys from Panama. While the origin of the toys sounds doubtful, campesinos confirmed the PDSs made sure every child under the age of 10 had a toy for Christmas, a task facilitated by the census every PDS was supposed to have of their jurisdiction.

[45] Raúl Emilio Hasbún, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, August 8, 2008.
[46] Author interview with a group of campesinos in Turbo, Antioquia, February 22, 2013.

When I asked a PDS who I'll call "Cocinero" about this practice, he went into his house and came out with a Barbie doll, a plastic tool set, and a toy truck in his arms as proof. The toys were still in their original (now-yellowing) plastic packaging like collector's items. "We gave them nice Barbies, not some little ugly thing—the latest models, *papá*." I told Cocinero it was almost comical to think that Barbie had helped paramilitaries keep their territories intact. With his usual macho bravado, he shot back: "Well, she's a hot little lady [*está buena la muchachita*]."[47]

Cocinero was the former PDS I got to know best during my fieldwork. He had demobilized from the BEC in 2006 and, like many former combatants, was now a devout evangelical Christian.[48] Before joining the BEC, he had spent stints in both the FARC and the EPL. After leaving the guerrillas, he faced unemployment along with the threat of reprisal from his former comrades, prompting him to sign up with the BEC. But within a few weeks of his enlistment, he contracted severe lung problems while slogging through the swamps of Chocó. His higher-ups reassigned him as a PDS, a job he took to quickly thanks to his guerrilla experience.

Examples of the gifts the BEC gave out during Christmas. (*Photo by author*.)

[47] Author interview with demobilized paramilitary, "Cocinero" (pseudonym), in Necoclí, Antioquia, December 6, 2013.

[48] In the interest of confidentiality, privacy, and the safety of human subjects, I have changed certain details about this PDS. For more on the link between the afterlife of the conflict among former combatants and evangelical Christianity in Urabá, see Kimberly Theidon's most recent richly ethnographic work (2015).

Cocinero explained that being a PDS meant respecting the firewall between the bloc's social-political work and its military operations. El Alemán also insisted the PDSs were under strict orders to comply with this division of labor. Civilians, of course, had no doubts about the role of the PDSs as an extension of a violent military apparatus. Indeed, the BEC's status as a "politico-military" organization meant that such sharp distinctions were usually much blurrier in practice. As one of the peasants who resettled the lands in Tulapas bluntly put it: "In some cases, you might ignore what a *Junta* president tells you to do, but not when there's someone with a gun behind them."[49] Although the PDSs were unarmed while conducting their day-to-day work, his point stands.

The specter of violence was omnipresent, and it materialized often and in some well-known cases at the hands of the PDSs themselves. One PDS, for instance, was the gunman in the 2005 killing of Orlando Valencia, a widely respected leader of displaced campesinos in Chocó. Although it was no secret in the area that Valencia had once belonged to a guerrilla group, he had long since laid down his weapons, becoming a beloved leader of an Afro-Colombian community clamoring for the return of their lands from paramilitary-backed palm oil companies. Hoping to eliminate his burdensome presence, local landowners told the BEC that Valencia was still working with the rebels. Police detained him a few hours later—a less-than subtle way of turning him over to the *paras*. After police released him, he was on his way home when a local PDS stopped him. When the word came down the chain of command, the PDS pulled the trigger.

Indeed, despite operating at the frontlines of the *paras*' war of position, the PDSs operated well within the BEC's ecology of fear. As Gramsci made much clearer than many of his interpreters, hegemony is always protected in all instances by "the armour of coercion" (1971, 263). Still, it was Cocinero who spoke the line cited earlier in this chapter: "We realized we could do more by working in an organized way through the law and what was legal, than we could do with 10,000 armed men." Counterinsurgency and primitive accumulation may have been the twin-pillars of the paramilitary war machine, but consolidating them into a lasting regime of accumulation and rule required far subtler means. Territory could be seized with the force of "10,000 armed men," but it had to be held "in an organized way through the law and what was legal."

Cocinero, who had been El Alemán's most trusted PDS, made me an offer as we chatted on his porch one afternoon: "One of these days, if you want, I can give you a tour of some of our projects." As he explained the invitation, it became clear that "our projects" referred to the communities his bloc had not only supported but actually created. Before extending the invitation, Cocincero had been telling me the *paras* deserved credit for having "brought the state to the communities." His proposal was an invitation for me to see for myself. "I can take you to talk to the communities. I want

[49] Author interview with campesino in Apartadó, Antioquia, October 2, 2012.

you to see that I'm not talking about some utopia," he insisted. "This was something that was actually done and achieved. I can take you on the roads and the bridges we built and show you the clinics that are still there. All that is still there."[50] From his perspective, the state was "still there" as something we could go see, touch, and experience. With a clear sense of pride, he added, "We did some very elegant things." Whenever Cocinero wanted to highlight the sophistication of his bloc's "social and political work," those were the words he used most often: "*muy elegante*." A few weeks later, I was riding on the back of his motorcycle heading into the mountains toward Tulapas.

The 'Agrarian Reforms' of Paramilitary Populism

Cocinero had not always been this amenable to my prying curiosity. The first time I approached him about speaking with me his response was gruff: "What, so you can turn us into the bad guys of the story like everyone else is doing?" My timing was especially unfortunate. He was alluding to the premier of a popular new television series called *Los tres Caines* (*The Three Cains*) based on the story of the Castaño brothers.

"That show is pure lies," he fumed. "So I'm sure you can understand why I'm not so willing to talk."

I tried explaining I was interested in a "much more serious analysis." But he was adamant.

"Look, if you talk to *el comandante* [El Alemán] and he says we should talk, then we talk," said Cocinero. "But until that happens, that's as far as this thing goes."

The chain of command and control among former members of the BEC was still surprisingly intact. Indeed, it was only after *el comandante* gave his blessing that I got to know Cocinero. The only reason I ended up on the back of his bike speeding into the mountains was because, with his word, El Alemán had made it so.

Over the course of two days, Cocinero took me to two separate communities the BEC had established in the early 2000s as paramilitary-backed land occupations. As we drove to the different communities, he pulled over to point out a bridge or a road built by his bloc. Once we arrived, we only stayed in each place long enough for me to do a handful of interviews. The simple fact I had arrived with a former paramilitary meant my conversations all took place in a controlled environment. The trip, of course, was by no means an objective stroll through the local history of paramilitary-civilian relations. It was a guided tour and Cocinero—following what were surely strict orders from El Alemán—was my handler.

[50] Author interview with Cocinero (pseudonym) in Necoclí, Antioquia, November 11, 2013.

I figured the controlled environment of the tour itself would be revealing: the places I was taken and not taken, what I was allowed to see and not see, and what locals would say and not say. In what follows, I present two brief oral histories of the land occupations as told to me by a person from each community.[51] Together, they complement the previous discussion by providing a fuller portrait of how paramilitary state-building was as much concerted strategy as it was an inherent byproduct of the way they produced and maintained territorial control.

Day 1: El Olleto, December 7, 2013

Cocinero picked me up at my hotel in the municipal seat of Necoclí. From the shores of Urabá's coastal flatlands, we headed eastward toward the mountains. Leaving the ocean behind us, we passed through a long patchwork of smallholder plantain farms until the landscape abruptly transformed into an undulating green expanse of huge cattle estates—the ranchlands had been ground zero for the narco land-rush in the 1980s. Past the herds of hump-backed zebu cattle we gained elevation, and the scenery transitioned into forests interrupted by neatly planted rows of teak, melina, and acacia trees.[52] As we slightly descended into rolling hills, the sea of rubber trees announced that we were in Tulapas. We sped past the sign at the main entrance of the "Hacienda Tulapas," a huge estate of stolen properties stitched together by a paramilitary-backed cattle company. Shortly after the fancy fencing of the hacienda ended, we reached our destination: a tiny village called Olleto, named after a tree common in the area. The road conditions, the uneven elevation, the circuitous route, and all the twists and turns had taken us three hours to reach a place that, as the crow flies, is only 18 miles away from the coast (almost 30 kilometers).

As we got off the bike, a woman came out of the largest house bordering the dirt road and effusively greeted Cocinero. "Reina, I brought a friend," said Cocinero.[53] Reina's house was only slightly larger than most in the area, but it had the same dirt floor, wooden-planked walls, and scrawny, balding chickens milling about. "Come, come," she said, inviting us to take a seat around a billiard table. The tin roof providing cover to the table attached to her house was also the village cantina. After about ten minutes of chitchat and some catching up between Cocinero and Reina, he began explaining the purpose of my visit.

"So, the guy is doing a thesis. He already talked to El Alemán, who mentioned everything … and now the guy is here to sort of see concretely over here what he was told over there."

[51] Working from transcripts, the excerpts are condensed, translated, and lightly edited versions of the interviews.
[52] Respectively, the trees are *Tectona grandis*, *Gmelina arborea*, and *Acacia maegiun*.
[53] "Reina" is a pseudonym. All citations from Olleto took place in Necoclí, Antioquia on December 7, 2013.

Cocinero continued, "El Alemán called me and he said, 'That guy I mentioned is coming to talk to you, host him, and help him out.' So he's here to hear your testimony because he's interested in—what is it you're interested in?"

Caught off guard, I offered the simplest and least leading (yet honest) response that popped into mind: "Well, I was hoping to learn more about what the relationship was like between the bloc and the community."

"Right," broke in Cocinero, "so he's here to hear about everything—the bad as much as the good. He knows the *autodefensas* were no little angels. Remember, El Alemán told him everything."

Far from encouraging her to give a fair or faithful account, the bulk of what followed were assurances Reina would not be incriminating herself for revealing details about the community's relationship with the *paras*. Reina's response was matter of fact: "Sure, of course, nothing to hide, nothing to fear."

After some more back and forth with Cocinero, during which Reina kept repeating, "Yes, of course, well, at your service [*a la orden*]," he excused himself. "I'll leave, so you all can talk freely."

Left alone with Reina, I began by explaining more details about my research and the different people I had already spoken with. Seeking information in the polarized context of Urabá, this was my way of trying to position myself as neutrally as possible. In any case, she didn't seem very interested at all in what I was saying. After a few more minutes of small talk, I asked if I could use my audio recorder.

With a hearty laugh, she replied, "You better, it's a long story."

"Okay. Maybe you could start by telling me where we are."

"Well, El Olleto, the place you see here, is mostly made up of people brought by the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*," Reina began. "Imagine, before the *Bloque* brought them, we barely had enough people to make up a *Junta de Acción Comunal*, at least one with all the proper committees."

As a place tightly controlled by the EPL, El Olleto's residents had all fled when the paramilitaries began zone breaking the area. Reina had only bad things to say about the EPL. "It was terrible. If you wanted to go to San Pedro you couldn't. They wouldn't let people in or out of Olleto because they said you were giving information to the government," she remembered. "If you wanted to leave, you'd have to leave forever, leaving everything behind. That's what a lot of people did. They never came back."

The main exodus, however, came with the paramilitary onslaught. "They came in with blood and fire (*entraron a punta de sangre y fuego*). Everyone had to leave. Everyone was afraid of being killed, so some fled for San Pedro, others went to Necoclí."

After several years of living in San Pedro, Reina and her family began hearing the *paras* had "cleaned out" the guerrillas. "It was through gossip [*chisme*]. You know, like a broken telephone. We heard it was safe and people at first just peeked their head around here to see if it was true. And it was, but everything was gone. A whole lot of work to do—that was all that was left." She returned with her family in 1999. "And that's when the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* started supporting us."

"We didn't have to come and go from town hiding all the time. You would just go to San Pedro, shop, and then come back." The only problem was that the jeeps used as public transportation no longer circulated on the roads. The armed groups had killed drivers and had torched whole buses. "So the *Bloque*'s people would sometimes help us with their trucks taking some of our products into town, maybe bringing back a little bit of groceries [*un mercadito*]. And they started working with the community."

Since she was still living with her father on his farm, Reina joined a few other locals in taking up residence on a set of small abandoned properties lining one side of the road that bisects El Olleto. "The lands over there on the other side of the road belonged to a single person who bought them from people when we were displaced. You could say that this *señor* took advantage of them. They sold to him because, you know, people will do whatever it takes to save their life."

Paraphrasing the Old Testament, she added, "You can recover land, but not your life. Your life is not a tree that sprouts up again when it's cut down. But this *señor* didn't care about the *parcelitas* on this side of the road; he only cared about his huge farm."[54]

Following up, I later tracked down the property's publicly registered documents. Roberto Ojeda, a rancher from Córdoba who had led a small group of hired guns in the 1990s that was absorbed by the Casa Castaño, "bought" the lands from the displaced campesinos.[55] Ojeda then agglomerated the properties into a 2,000-hectare spread. Property documents show Ojeda then sold off most of the property in 2000 to a member of the Mafioli clan, another one of Córdoba's elite families. Famous for the gamecocks it breeds, the Mafioli family has faced accusations for decades over its alleged involvement in the drug trade.

"So I built my little house on one of those *parcelitas*," said Reina. "No one bothered me about it. No one said, 'This is mine' or told me to leave, or anything like that, so along with some neighbors we organized a *Junta de Acción Comunal*."

When the Mafiolis took control of the estate, they began offering work to all the residents of El Olleto living on the other side of the road. Not long afterwards, El Alemán

[54] "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail" (Job 14:7).

[55] See sentence against Jesús Igancio Roldán Pérez ("Monoleche"), Tribunal Superior del Distrito, Sala Justicia y Paz, Medellín, December 9, 2014, pp. 92-93.

and his troops arrived. Reina remembered one of the first things El Alemán did was to pay for a teacher to come back to the community. The local schoolhouse had been without a teacher for more than a decade after guerrillas killed the previous one. A few months later, he called a community meeting through the *Junta de Acción Comunal*, then-led by a respected campesino named Alberto Jiménez.

"And that's when Alberto told us El Alemán was bringing all those *desplazados* from over there, from the Chocó. These were very needy people."

"Why did he bring them?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly what happened. But they had been practically sequestered by the FARC in the Chocó. They had been stuck there forced into collaborating with the guerrillas, growing their food and all that."

Alberto Jiménez also informed everyone that El Alemán was going to give out the Mafiolis' lands to the current members of the community and to the incoming *desplazados* from Chocó. El Alemán gave the locals in El Olleto a 10-hectare plot, while the newly arrived *desplazados* got five hectares. In court, El Alemán claimed he simply took the Mafiolis' 2,000 hectares by force, but, according to rumors, the family handed over the tract in payment for a debt they had with the Castaños.[56]

"Now that we had land, El Alemán saw that we were really hardworking people, so he sent in the PDSs like Cocinero and they began doing workshops with the community," Reina recalled. "They trained us and taught us how to work through the *Juntas* and its committees. We even had a committee in charge of reforestation."

The "reforestation" formed part of a government-backed coca-eradication project, a program I recount in a later chapter. "All the teak and melina trees you can see planted here in this area is because they always brought very good development projects—very good projects," she added for emphasis. "And we learned a lot because as long as you get well trained you learn how to get in with the state [*aprendes como entrarle al estado*] to get what you need."

Reina recalled that El Alemán sent several community representatives to Villanueva, Córdoba for leadership workshops. "They came back very well prepared," she said. "Politicians could no longer come to us and say, 'Oh, the thing is that the law says such and such.' No, now we're much better informed. No one believes those stories anymore."

According to Reina, Alberto Jiménez, the one-time president of El Olleto's *Junta*, was a product of the BEC's careful training. In fact, after his work with the land parcelization, Jiménez got the BEC's blessing to run for Mayor of Turbo. After failing to

[56] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 11, 2010.

secure the mayor's office, Jiménez made yet another failed political run—this time, for the lower house of Congress as part of a slate of candidates backed by El Alemán. In 2010, the national judicial police arrested Jiménez in a mass roundup of regional politicians with ties to the paramilitaries, a process discussed in the next chapter. Reina and other residents of El Olleto decried Jiménez's arrest. "It was the most unjust thing that could've happened," argued Reina. "Because he was just working for the community, not for the paramilitaries. But things need to be said exactly how they are: he was very good leader, a very good leader. Alberto always let the communities know exactly what was going on. He was very loved."

> I'll say it again: the *Bloque* helped us immensely. As a campesino, the state had always turned its back on us, but now the state more or less looks at the campesino. And the experience we gained still serves us. Now, we all know what to do with the state, exactly where to complain, how to do things right, and how not to make mistakes. The *Bloque* made that bridge for us with the state and we crossed it.

Day 2: Galilea, December 8, 2013

The next day, Cocinero again picked me up at my hotel. This time we headed to a community called Galilea on the Caribbean coast in Córdoba just over the border from Antioquia. I had heard about this land occupation from Secretario, the BEC's General Coordinator of the PDSs. "That was our biggest land invasion; that was something very pretty," he had said. Once again, it was an idle property belonging to a narco, but in this case the property had been languishing under the administration of the national drug enforcement agency, which had seized it many years before.

According to Secretario, "The day of the invasion, the bloc gave the order that every bus, truck, or jeep in the area was being commissioned for the invasion. We put families onto that property by the truckload." He also mentioned that the Governor of Córdoba at the time, Jesús María López, "was a big friend of the invasion" and provided wood, tarps, and other supplies for the effort. (Authorities arrested López, who comes from one of Córdoba's founding families, in 2009 for his links with paramilitaries.) "He also helped me out because he gave the order to the police not to force the people out," claimed Secretario.[57]

When I arrived to Galilea with Cocinero, people from the community were in the midst of a workshop led by an agronomist from the national rural development agency, Incoder. The workshop, part of an Incoder-backed plantain production project, was just wrapping up. With everyone still in their seats, they invited me to explain the purpose of my visit. After outlining the reasons behind my interests in the community, I admitted, "I

[57] Author interview with paramilitary operative (pseudonym, "Secretario") in Medellín, Antioquia, September 18, 2013.

was really surprised when I heard that the *autodefensas* had sponsored a land invasion. It's interesting to me because one of the things I'm trying to understand better is the kinds of relationships that communities have with the armed groups."

After a break for "*el refrigerio*," the obligatory snacks and refreshments religiously expected at every community meeting in Colombia, a campesino who introduced himself as "one of the original leaders of the invasion" offered to tell me the story. I'll call him, "Roberto." We grabbed two of the white plastic chairs used for the workshop and took a seat beneath the generous shade of a tropical almond tree. Roberto began by explaining that Galilea had belonged to a drug trafficker. "I think his name was Matta Ballesteros."

The Honduran-born Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros had an infamous career in the transnational drug-trafficking world until his capture in 1988. He helped pioneer a working relationship between the Mexican and Medellín cartels. According to a U.S. congressional investigation released in 1989 (the Kerry Committee Report), Matta was also behind the private airline that shipped cocaine and brought back arms shipments for the Contras in Nicaragua under the watch of the U.S. State Department and the CIA. He is currently serving out consecutive life-sentences in a high-security prison in Pennsylvania for the kidnapping and murder of a federal agent. Colombia's notoriously corrupt—and now-disbanded—anti-narcotics agency seized Matta's properties. As illegitimate properties held in the public trust, the lands held by this agency have continually made attractive targets for occupations by land-hungry campesinos.

"The land had belonged to this trafficker," noted Roberto, "but here we're in a territory that belonged to the *autodefensas* and so it all happened with their accompaniment and help (*de la mano de ellos*)."

Justifying this mutual collaboration, he explained, "Campesinos are stuck in the middle of the armed conflict with a sword at their necks and their backs against the wall. You always end up having to tend to one group or another.

"The abandonment of the state gives rise to those things," Roberto continued. As examples of this abandonment, he noted some villages in the area had never seen a policeman. "Who do you think controlled stealing and those types of things in the area? The *autodefensas*! Who else can you turn to?

"But the absence of the state was not only in a military sense," he added. "There was no presence of the state in the sense of public works. It was the *autodefensas* that were out there building the roads and bridges. With what money, I don't know, but they'd do it. The roads were in even better condition than they are now.

"Of course, with Galilea, the only reason we dared with the invasion—it has to be said—was because we were backed by the *autodefensas*. They said, 'Go for it. Relax, no problem [*háganle a eso. Tranquilos, no hay problema*].' "

Trying my best at gentle provocation, I asked, "In the eyes of some people, does that make you in some way part of the *autodefensas*?"

"I was never a part of the *autodefensas*, but I have a lot of experience doing the kind social work that was done here," Roberto explained. "I've always lived in places in the middle of the conflict. I suppose it's because of my behavior that I never had any problems with the EPL or the *autodefensas*, or with the new groups today. You just have to know how to work and live well."

"And how did you end up here?" I wondered.

"I was one of the leaders of the whole process," Roberto replied. He had been living in Bajirá on the Antioquia-Chocó border, a place where the *paras* had done another land parcelization overseen by Sor Teresa Gómez. He said members of the BEC came and sought him out: "They found me and said, '*Hombre*, way over there people are going to do this and that. And, *hermano*, there are some lands over there that the people could get for themselves. We need people who can help organize the communities.' "

"It attracted me," Roberto told me. "I wasn't even thinking about having a *parcelita* here. My objective was just to help the people. That's what really brought me here, because I've had a long trajectory as a leader."

Roberto got his start in the banana union linked to the EPL, which he said gave its labor militants "a very solid political education." Working his way up the ranks of the union positioned Roberto as a community leader of the worker-led land occupations initiated by the EPL after its transition into civilian life. He spent long stints serving on the *Juntas* of Apartadó's La Chinita neighborhood, product of Urabá's largest-ever land occupation. Drawing on his organizing experience in struggles around land and labor, he ran on an EPL-backed ticket and won a seat on Apartadó's municipal council in the 1990s. "During all these processes," said Roberto, "I got to know the laws: like 136 on how municipal government is supposed to work, 743 about the *Juntas*, law 80 about contracting—all those rules. I filled myself with knowledge about our rights and obligations, and tried to impart [*socializar*] that knowledge to the communities."

> But being in an area under the control of the *autodefensas*, I gained much more experience with all the mechanisms related to citizen participation: tools for filing an injunction, petitioning for the redress of grievances or for rights to information, and ensuring the enforcement of legal decisions.[58] I learned all those types of things. I'm really good at talking with people, organizing them,

[58] What he mentioned was "*acción de tutela, derecho de petición y una acción de cumplimiento*," which are all legal resources for the citizen-driven protection of rights enshrined by the 1991 Constitution and its implementing legislation. My English translations are close yet unavoidably imprecise renderings of these legal motions.

> approaching organizations and saying, "Okay, these are the mechanisms we can use for enforcing what's in such and such law."

Roberto's experience made him an ideal candidate for helping the BEC's planned occupation of Gaililea. For almost a year, Roberto and other community leaders with help from El Alemán's PDSs began organizing for the occupation of Galilea. "Of course, considering the *autodefensas*' military control, no one would have stepped foot on even a centimeter of this land without permission. But they gave us a lot of support, especially at the beginning." As examples of this help, Roberto noted, "They were the ones who got the trucks to transport all the people. I don't know where they got so many trucks, but they did. We were 500 families, with women, children, everything. We did it on September 23, 2003, arriving at night."

"By the morning, this was all pure tents, plastic tarps and all that. Sometimes we would hear, 'Ah, the Army is here.' Everyone would stay crouched under their little piece of plastic, waiting to see what was going to happen. But, no, thank god we were never forced out." The BEC's lobbying efforts with the Governor of Córdoba had assured the police presence was just for show. "One of the first things we did was that we chose our spokespeople and organized an assembly. It was all coordinated by the PDSs and Asocomún," the NGO led by El Alemán's brother, alias Germán Monsalve. "Don Germán," as he was reverently known, brought the land occupants meat, rice, and vegetables grown by what Roberto called their "sister communities in Tulapas." The BEC's territories had become an archipelago of mutual aid. At this point, zone breaking had transitioned toward more quotidian forms of territorial control. Roberto recalled:

> Asocomún also helped us approve a manual of coexistence [*manual de convivencia*] for the community.[59] These were the norms we had to abide by inside Galilea. Everyone had to volunteer for community work and guard duty. If you left for town, you had to give notice to the guards and sign a paper, saying at what time you left and at what time you were coming back. There was no drinking, smoking, gambling, or prostitution, and shacking up [*meterse al cambuche*] with another person's wife—all of that was prohibited. We also had an area cultivated with plantains and everyone worked some shifts when it was their turn. Everyone who lived here had to respect those rules. A lot of people that were part of the invasion got bored with all the rules and left. They didn't like being corrected.

Many of those first arrivals left, annoyed by the rules and sanctions. Other participants left after it became clear they would have to wait more than a year for their own individual parcel of land. Eventually, each remaining family got a three-hectare plot. Today, Galilea has about 350 families divided into some 15 communities. "Those of

[59] As the convoluted minutes from one of Asocomún's board meetings confirm, "With respect to humanitarian and technical aid, we managed to gain democratic participation in the community of Galilea. We also made a manual of coexistence for this community, which also chose three responsible leaders. Support committees and a reconciliation committee made up of ten people were also created.

us who stayed are very happy," said Roberto, "because the Incoder [the national rural development agency] gave us a certificate that shows we're registered with them, so we can get loans. It's not a title yet, not like when the land is totally yours. But at least we know that we have a paper with the state."

Their increasing security of tenure has also opened up doors with national and international sources of financing for agricultural projects. The workshop I saw, for instance, was part of a $1.5 million dollar plantain project backed the Ministry of Agriculture. The community had also enlisted the help of the Rotary Club for a microcredit fund. "All this organization we have achieved is because Asocomún directed us very well … we've learned how to secure and manage (*gestionar*) our own resources," Roberto maintained. "These are all things we've been doing because of the social development and the training we got from Asocomún."

I followed up, asking, "Why do you think the *autodefensas* have been so good to Galilea and so violent with other communities?"

> The analysis I make of it is that this area was always part of the *autodefensas*; they were born nearby from here. When they came here, it was all under their control. So, logically, in places where they have control, they have no reason to be abusive with the people. But in Pueblo Bello, they did *una limpieza* [a cleansing], as they call it, and killed something like 50 people. In those days, they would show up with all their force but without any ideology. It was just an organization of extermination against the guerrillas. Anything with a whiff of guerrillas had to be exterminated. They killed a lot of people. One can't deny that…
>
> It has no justification; they were human beings. I'm a Christian. But sometimes people create their own problems. If I go out and steal, then I can't be surprised if something happens to me. But what happens is that the state's abandonment means there's no justice for that theft. *¡Hombre!* If there had been real justice, then there would be no need for the *autodefensas* to have come in. If all the roads were in the right conditions, like the Constitution says, then they wouldn't have been forced to build them… Around here, we often say that the problem behind the violence is not the armed groups; the real problem we say is the absence of the state. The absence feeds the violence.

The Populism of Territory: Beyond Hearts and Minds

In addition to being examples of yet another appropriation by the *paras* of a tactic pioneered by the guerrillas, the two land invasions reveal the rich nexus of material practices and social relationships involved in the production of paramilitary territory as a collective relationship between communities and combatants. They also demonstrate how formative relationships between civil and political society were an inherent byproduct as much as an intended effect of how paramilitaries produced and

maintained their territorial hegemony. But these instances of paramilitaries' mini "agrarian reforms" were no more than tiny specks in a sea of mass dispossession. Upon the broader canvass of widespread primitive accumulation, the land invasions sponsored by the BEC were a way of building *una base social* in geostrategic areas as well as a public relations move against the bloc's well-founded reputation as an army of plunder. The *paras* nonetheless closely policed these communities, subjecting them to a deeply repressive environment, as indicated by the "manual of coexistence" and its strict set of rules.

One campesina who was part of the first families who occupied Galilea described how a PDS reprimanded and almost kicked her out of the settlement for failing to report for her guard-duty shift one night. She had been unable to find someone to watch over her two young daughters, and she didn't want to leave the children home alone: "Because one hears about all kinds of things. And the community was almost all men. You didn't know people at first," she said. "What if an evil-twisted man (*un hombre mal pensado*) came and did something to my daughters. People don't always have you in their hearts, but the devil can get in there from one moment to the next."[60]

Beyond the land and the everyday practices of paying for medical treatments, providing transportation, and road-building, the BEC needed more self-sustaining ways of providing for the communities. On this front, as Reina told me in El Olleto, the BEC "brought very good development projects—very good projects." Roberto made a similar argument about Galilea's million-dollar agricultural assistance project, which he said they had secured thanks to the legacy of Asocomún's involvement in the community. Besides the instruction received from the PDSs on the *Juntas* and other matters, Reina described the development projects themselves as experiences through which they learned how to "get in with the state and get what you need."

Most importantly, for her, the BEC had helped campesinos gain more equal footing with politicians who could no longer wield the law as an esoteric abstraction. "Nobody believes those stories anymore," she chuckled. The ultimate upshot of the land invasion, in her mind, was that the state no longer had its back turned against communities like hers: "Now the state more or less looks at the campesino." And she concluded her story with a vivid description of how the *paras* became the conjoining force of the "civil-political society" relation: "The *Bloque* made that bridge for us with the state and we crossed it." The state, in Gramsci's integral sense, congealed from the two-way traffic across that bridge. Along the way, the PDSs in the role of intellectuals—understood in Gramsci's elaborate formulation—offered a guiding hand. In this regard, the war of position was not only a battle over hearts and minds; it was a struggle over state formations.

The mutually formative relationship between "hearts and minds" and state-building is a longstanding tenet of modern counterinsurgency doctrine, and the BEC

[60] Author interview with anonymous campesina in Los Córdobas, Córdoba, December 8, 2013.

deployed many of its classic tactics. In the 1960s, Roger Trinquier, the architect of the French counterinsurgency in Algeria and Indochina, noted the importance of "practical projects." He specifically cited things such as the "construction of new roads, or the repair of those that have been sabotaged; construction of new strategic hamlets … school construction, and economic development" (Trinquier 1964, 81). More recently, after a stint of fieldwork in Colombia, David Kilcullen, the influential counterinsurgency guru described by some as a "modern-day Sun Tzu," lauded the government's "quick impact projects in contested districts (from water reticulation, sewers, bridges and roads, to community sports centres)."[61] While not mentioning or perhaps unaware of the shady origins of many of these practical projects, Kilcullen noted their role in the "amazing turnaround" that pulled the country back from the brink of becoming "a failed state."

After his stint counseling the fiascos of foreign intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, Kilcullen criticized counterinsurgency campaigns that "focus on top-down, state-centric processes that have a structural focus on putting in place the central, national-level institutions of the state rather than a functional focus on local-level governance functions" (2010, 155). The work of the PDS in the *Juntas*, traversing the terrains of civil and political society, was a methodical execution of what Kilcullen described—using key discourses of vertical encompassment—as "bottom-up, community-centric approaches" to state-building (2010, 156). El Alemán was clearly way ahead of the game, combining unbridled violence and terror with grassroots community organizing, local institution building, and quick-impact practical projects. Citing the *paras* deployment of arms, civil society organizations, and social-political work, one paramilitary chief said their "mix of the political, the military, the strategic, and the social" was a lesson they learned from what the guerrillas called "the combination of all forms of struggle."[62] "Counterinsurgency," as Greg Grandin noted, "above all else, is choreography" (2010, 2–3).

For example, the BEC concrete practical projects of frontier state formation—or what its basic training manual called "basic state structures"—served as the physical-material analogue to the observation of another influential military strategist who stated "the only territory you want to hold [in a counterinsurgency] are the six inches between the ears of the campesino."[63] As with most of the BEC's territorial practices, the road projects served multiple purposes: they both materialized the state and won the hearts and minds of a potential *base social*. The roads also boosted the *paras*' property values and gave them military mobility for their contraband and troops. But

[61] Kilcullen, David and Greg Mills. "Colombia: From Political economy of War to Inclusive Peace," *The Daily Maverick*, January 18, 2015.
[62] Raúl Hasbún, Versión Libre Conjunta, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 3, 2010.
[63] Quoted in Siegel and Hackel (1988, 119), Col. John Waghelstein, as the "Chief of the U.S. Military Group" for El Salvador beginning 1982, oversaw the most violent years of the U.S.-backed counterinsurgency. He went on to teach counterinsurgency for 25 years at the U.S. Naval War College.

the BEC "social and political work" was about much more than winning hearts and minds. The BEC's war of position was an attempt to reconcile a violent political-economic project with the practices, substantive values, and institutional formations of Colombia's liberal democratic system.

Nonetheless, paramilitary state-building was not the result of a premade ideological blueprint. The BEC's war of position—as an attempt to decisively redefine the social relations of statehood—proceeded (had to proceed) in a dialectical movement, combining coercion and consent and tacking between civil and political society. The *paras*' everyday populism—embodied in the PDSs, the *Juntas*, the roads, the land distribution, the Christmas gifts, and more—inherently presumed (and was shaped by) the agency of civilian communities. Despite their scorched earth combination of primitive accumulation and counterinsurgency, the *paras* still found themselves having to contend with actual communities made up of real people with real problems. And yet, despite their subaltern status in this war of position, campesino communities did manage a few minor victories, tactical moves and reversals.

Indeed, the populist content of the BEC's counterinsurgency and its state-building practices were driven not only by the right-wing political project of the paramilitary movement itself, but also by the fact that their territories—even at their most economically utilitarian extreme—hinged on campesinos' agency. Even some of the most sophisticated accounts of populist reason (Laclau 2005), as Gillian Hart has argued (2012; Arditi 2010), have endorsed a view of people as passive and unwitting "subjects" seduced by the empty rhetoric of a charismatic and authoritarian leader. The form of paramilitary populism in Urabá was molded by the concentrated power attained by the insurgencies. The political opening that culminated in the 1991 Constitution was the final straw. In this context, regional elites tried to remake their regime of agrarian feudalism in the mold—or at least with the trappings—of liberal democracy. The *paras* became the handmaidens of that maxim of reactionary conservatism from *The Leopard*: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (Lampedusa 2013, 28). Counterrevolutions, as Arno Mayer and others have shown (2000; Grandin and Joseph 2010), are always up to the task of meeting revolutions with their own dynamic—even forward-looking—political projects of reaction.

Though under the thumb of paramilitaries revanchist political-economic project, campesino communities were neither mindless dupes, nor the romanticized resisters subaltern heroism. Most of the time, they simply made do. Within complexities and ambiguities of the armed conflict's territorial masquerades, hegemony must be understood in terms of the way civilian communities negotiated their relationships to the combatant groups. These relationships are always polyvalent and contradictory, shaped by shifting degrees of complicity, convenience, resigned accommodation, and of course in the last instance, coercion.

Chapter 4

Urabá Grande: Constructing the Region

In 2010, judicial police from the Attorney General's Office began arresting politicians all over Urabá for links with El Alemán's Bloque Elmer Cárdenas (BEC). In the wake of the arrests, an unsigned flyer titled, "In Defense of the Region of Urabá," began circulating. The flyer argued the accused politicians were committed public servants whose only crime was that they had worked tirelessly for "the identity, dignity, and political unity of the region of Urabá." At the top of the single page of text was a long-winded preamble:

> TO THE PEOPLE OF URABÁ: We have always dreamed of and for the past two decades have tried to find a way of organizing a regional political project for Urabá with the objective of obtaining the representation we deserve and so badly need in the highest echelons of our popularly elected institutions regionally and nationally in the interest of generating benefits, projects, public works, and programs without depending on other regions and leaders who are not our own, so as to finally bring to an end this forgotten land's abandonment by the state.

The flyer was a post-mortem justification of what had gone by the name of "*Proyecto Político Regional: Urabá Grande, Unido y en Paz*" (Regional Political Project: Greater Urabá, United and in Peace). Backed by the *paras*' guns, money, and logistical support, *Urabá Grande* was a coordinated attempt to stack elected political offices at every administrative scale with candidates approved and backed by the BEC—from municipal governments to the halls of Congress in Bogotá. It was the localized iteration of what became known nationwide as the *parapolítica* scandal, whose roots can be traced back to the three-week paramilitary conclave in 1998 hosted at the Castaños' school in Villanueva, Córdoba.

Once the *parapolítica* scandal broke in 2005, criminal investigations began revealing that hundreds of elected officials across the country had secured their positions with the help of the *paras*.[1] The pacts between paramilitaries and politicians (hence, "*parapolítica*") were aimed at, in the words of one agreement, "re-founding the homeland [*la patria*]" and "signing a new social contract."[2] *Parapolítica* envisioned

[1] López, Claudia. "Votaciones atípicas en las elecciones de congreso del 2002," *Semana*, September 11, 2005; also see López (2007; 2010). By one tally, the number of "public officials" serving between 1995 and 2010 links to paramilitaries included 400 elected officials, 109 non-elected government agents, among them several members of Uribe's cabinet; and 324 agents of the security forces, many of them high-ranking (López 2010, 29–30).

[2] From the infamous 2001 "Pacto de Ralito," signed in Santa Fe de Ralito, Córdoba, by several paramilitary bosses and almost two-dozen regional politicians.

state-building as a joint-venture between regional political elites and paramilitary groups. Through this shady alliance, wholesale massacres and landslide elections gained a vicious correlation across the country. Between 1998 and 2002, in districts where candidates won the atypical result of 70 percent or more of all votes, massacres by paramilitaries had spiked by 664 percent and homicides by 33 percent.[3] *Urabá Grande*'s foundations were just as violent as every other instance of *parapolítica*, but it was also unique in both scale and scope.

First of all, no single paramilitary bloc managed to capture elected offices at every scale with the sweeping success of the BEC thanks to its painstaking community work through the *Juntas*. But, more than a strictly electoral process, *Urabá Grande* was an intricate articulation of civil and political society and thus an integral part of the bloc' state-oriented war of position. It was the BEC's most elaborate frontier state formation—a fleeting and extra-legal political ensemble conjured at the imagined limits of the state. *Urabá Grande* drew on the deep-seated cultural politics of Colombian regionalism, mobilizing an elaborate imagined geography—a creole orientalism (Said 1994)—based on the conflation of regional difference and statelessness. One politician described *Urabá Grande* before a roaring crowd as a political project intent on "constructing that *collective dream* called Greater Urabá." Indeed, true to its name, the BEC's "Regional Political Project" envisioned the construction of regionhood and the production of statehood as mutually dependent, if not synonymous, affairs.

Coming at the height of paramilitary power, the timing of *Urabá Grande* and *parapolítica* more generally were not coincidental. They emerged in the run up to a pivotal electoral cycle. In 2002, Colombians were choosing a new Congress and a new President in back-to-back elections. The *paras* had been calling for negotiations with the government for years. And the presidential frontrunner, Alvaro Uribe, was not only ideologically in sync with the paramilitary movement, he had also publicly suggested the *paras* call a unilateral ceasefire and begin negotiating their demobilization. Sure enough, less than three months after taking office, the Uribe administration began those negotiations. At the time, paramilitary chiefs boasted that they consoled 35 percent of the country's legislative—a statistic later borne out by investigators.[4] The move on elected offices at all scales was partly a pragmatic wager aimed at securing a more favorable peace deal, but it was also a means for institutionalizing the politico-military power they had accumulated on the battlefield.

The BEC began by backing candidates running for Urabá's municipal offices in Antioquia and then expanded into neighboring municipalities in Chocó and Córdoba—i.e. "Greater Urabá." For the 2002 national elections, the BEC also had candidates running for congress and, like most paramilitary blocs, openly campaigned for Uribe.

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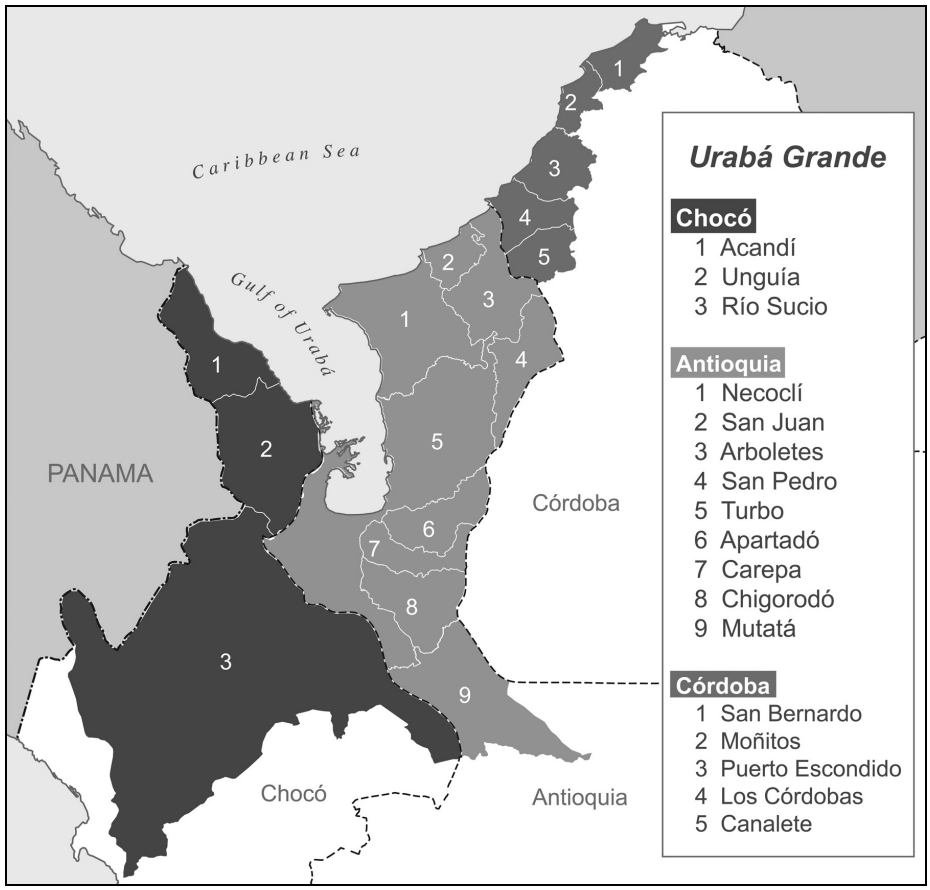
[3] López, Claudia. "Los 'heroes' que no se han reinsertado," *Semana*, February 25, 2006.

[4] Both Salvatore Mancuso and Vicente Castaño cited the figure in interviews with reporters, a claim that was later confirmed by judicial investigators. See, López (2010, 33) and p. 62 in López, Claudia and Oscar Sevillano, 2008. "Balance politico de la parapolítica," *Arcanos* 11(4): 62-87.

Urabá Grande was a smashing electoral success. It was so successful that once the *parapolítica* scandal investigations hit Urabá, judicial police gave up on making individual arrests of politicians and resorted to mass roundups: one raid netted 26 in 2010, while another in 2014 detained 32. During its lifespan from 2001 to 2006, *Urabá Grande* helped elect an astounding number of politicians: countless municipal councilors, several dozen mayors, departmental assembly members, a few governors, and at least six congressmen and three Senators.[5] Taking place in the five years immediately preceding the demobilization, the electoral project's success could not have come at a better time, which was (again) no coincidence.



Urabá Grande exerted its influence over 17 municipalities in three departments.

'*La Región*' as Frontier Effect

With the demobilization talks well underway and *parapolítica* in full swing, one of the paramilitary movement's most influential ideologues published a book titled,

[5] Definitive numbers are nearly impossible to compile because of conflicting reports, rulings, and evidence—particularly, in the case of Senators, who are individually elected by voters nationwide, diffusing the impact of any single paramilitary bloc's efforts. And, in some cases, El Alemán admitted he met with politicians, but denied he gave them any material support.

Scenarios for Peace, From the Construction of Regions, calling for a "debate between the State and society over the urgency of constructing regions, politically, economically, and socially."[6] Only "the arrival or return of the State to these regions," said the book, would address the underlying conditions that have made these areas breeding grounds of illegality and violence. The construction of regions was a call for pinpointed, localized state-building. In a similar vein, the BEC listed the "regional integration and consolidation of Greater Urabá" as one of its primary "politico-military" objectives. For El Alemán, the "defense of *la región*" amid the absence of the state was a matter of life and death: "If the state's reach had extended across its territory, then we wouldn't have turned into citizens bearing arms in defense of the regions—in the defense of our very lives," he said.[7]

"*La región*" became an imaginative geographical idiom of the frontier effect. In other words, it marked out a "stateless" geopolitical terrain that *Urabá Grande* was supposed to resolve. Even the name "*Urabá Grande*" itself, meaning Greater Urabá, was a politicized—many would say expansionist—claim, roping in portions of Chocó and Córdoba into a region dominantly associated with Antioquia.[8] Even the two-dimensional spatiality of where "Urabá" begins and ends as lines on a map is ambiguous and contested. During a conversation I once had with a displaced Afro-Colombian peasant from Chocó, I referred to the Lower Atrato River basin as part of Urabá. "I'm not from 'Urabá,' " he objected, "*eso es un proyecto paisa*," that's a *paisa* project, meaning an *antioqueño* (read: white) project. For others, the Lower Atrato is unquestionably part of Urabá, while still others would qualify it as "el Urabá *chocoano*."

The notion of a Greater Urabá extending beyond Antioquia's panhandle—that is, beyond "Urabá proper"—was not a paramilitary or *paisa* invention. Nonetheless, "Urabá Grande," as both a term and as the BEC's political project, brings with it a heavy load of historical baggage with deeply racial overtones: namely, *paisa* expansionism beyond Antioquia's borders and Medellín's longstanding neocolonial relations with Urabá.[9] In broad strokes, as mentioned in the first chapter about the production of the frontier, whiteness in northwest Colombia is stereotypically associated with *antioqueños*

[6] Autodefensas Campesinas Bloque Central Bolívar. 2004. *Escenarios de paz: A partir de la construcción de regiones*. Cuartel General de San Lucas, Sur de Bolívar. The official author is the "Autodefensas Campesinas Bloque Central Bolívar," but the text was probably written by Iván Roberto Duque (alias, Ernesto Baez), a rancher-turned-paramilitary-chief and one-time politician who got his start with the *paras* as the head of the Magdalena Medio's Cattlemans' Association (Acdegam).

[7] The original Spanish: "Si el estdo hubiese llegado a su territorio, no nos hubieramos vuelto civiles tomando armas a defender las regiones, a defender nuestra propia vida." Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 16, 2009.

[8] Author interview with displaced Afro-Colombian peasant in Carmen del Darién, Chocó, November 27, 2007. It should be noted that the idea of *el Gran Urabá* or *Urabá Grande*, vaguely meaning the Gulf Region, has precedents in all kinds of popular, academic, and governmental sources, but it is still an ambiguous and contested concept.

[9] Parson (1967; 1968) and Appelbaum (1999; 2003) both detail antioqueño expansionism and its neocolonial dimensions, which Appelbaum carefully shows were always mediated by local actors and broader political forces.

(*paisas*), blackness with *chocoanos* and Caribbean *costeños*, while mestizos are hailed as *chilapos*, also used in reference to *cordobeses*.[10]

The "regional dimensions of racial identity and the racial dimensions of regionalism" are inseparably linked in Colombia (Appelbaum 1999, 631). Alongside the country's uneven development, a distinct "regionalization of difference," as anthropologist Julio Arias calls it, emerged in which race and regionalism became powerful idioms of cultural and geographical difference (J. Arias 2007).[11] But Urabá's ambiguous regional affiliation and its ethnically diverse population—made up of recent migrants no less—made it an awkward fit for Colombia's geographically laden racial categories (P. Wade 1995). The degree to which Urabá constitutes an imagined regional community stems more from a shared experience of political and economic violence than from some hegemonic cultural heritage (García 1996).

Margarita Serje (2005) has traced the long and twisted history of how entire swaths of the country get cast as stateless no-man's lands through Colombia's deeply racialized geopolitical imaginaries. "The map of what were once savage territories chosen to be civilized by [colonial] prefectures and governors is largely coincident with today's so-called 'internal frontiers,' " writes Serje. The notion of "internal frontiers," she adds, "designates the expansionist fronts of the national[izing] project, places where a defining characteristic is precisely the [so-called] absence of the state" (2005, 19).

The ideological power linking statehood and regionhood in Colombia comes through strongly in the opening line of María Teresa Uribe's exhaustive history of Urabá. In her conceptual terminology, a territory is a not-yet-consolidated region, which for her implies a space that is much more internally cohesive and outwardly integrated to both state and nation. Writing in 1992, Uribe claimed, "Today, Urabá could be called a territory under construction, because it has yet achieved internal and organic cohesion. And its articulations with Antioquia, with neighboring departments, and with the Nation are still weak and conflictive. Urabá, then, does not yet constitute a real region [*una verdadera región*]" (M. T. Uribe 1992, 9). Within this context, paramilitaries' claims about the "urgency of constructing regions, politically, economically, and socially" had all the more salience for Urabá.

The existence of "regions" at any geographical scale, as Nathan Sayre has pointed out, is "at once commonsensical and problematic," but not altogether arbitrary when viewed historically.[12] Regions are not naturally pre-existing spaces, they are socially produced through a mix of political-economic and -ecological processes ranging

[10] I realize this is a gross over-simplification, but I am trying to give those unfamiliar with Colombia's racial-regional relations a flavor of the stereotypes.

[11] Julio Arias, whose work draws on that of Peter Wade and Nancy Appelbaum among others, helped me develop some of the points in this paragraph.

[12] The point is made in the opening line of an undergraduate syllabus designed by Nathan Sayre, a geographer at UC Berkeley.

from the contingent to the more structural (Pred 1984; Pudup 1988; Massey 1994). Accordingly, *Urabá Grande*'s calls for the integration, unity, and defense of "*la región*" were deployed on multiple registers—political, economic, *and* cultural. And these connections were made explicit in the BEC's politico-military mission statement:

> The Bloque Elmer Cárdenas operates in areas with very diverse sociocultural characteristics, such as those of the south of Córdoba or the north of Urabá—or those of the campesinos from the mountains of western Antioquia or the indigenous and Afro-Colombians of Chocó. But what all these areas fundamentally share is a common inventory of unmet basic necessities. By implication, they also share an immense potential that could be unlocked through the region's integration and consolidation.[13]

Those untapped advantages, according to the BEC, included Greater Urabá's "geographic position, biodiversity, diversity of microclimates, abundance of water resources, human capital, agroindustrial expertise, infrastructure, export experience, and its Special Economic Zone." As an electoral project straddling civil and political society, *Urabá Grande* was supposed to help achieve this paramilitary vision of neoliberal integration.

Through an articulated discourse of regionalism and statelessness, *Urabá Grande* reactivated the frontier effect with new purpose. But, as Edward Said suggested regarding Orientalism, the frontier is "something more formidable than a mere collection of lies." *Urabá Grande* drew on much more than lofty *antioqueño* or paramilitary fantasies about the region, it depended on a "body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there [had] been considerable material investment" (Said 1994, 6). Material investment in Urabá can be traced back for centuries, but in *Urabá Grande*'s triumphant frontier narrative the watershed moment is the region's transformation into a banana export enclave.

In 2003, the El Alemán's PDSs organized a huge campaign rally at a theatre in the city of Apartadó. *Urabá Grande*'s regional organizing committee invited all the candidates running for Governor of Antioquia to make speeches. The gubernatorial contenders sat on the stage at a table behind a huge yellow banner with black letters that read: "*¡Qué Bueno! Urabá Grande y Unida*."[14] The Conservative Party candidate, an aging man with white hair named Alvaro Villegas took the microphone. Besides being a Conservative Party bigwig and titan of Medellín's commercial-industrial elite, Villegas had also helped launch Alvaro Uribe's political career, giving the future president one of his first political appointments back in the 1980s.[15] "The miracle of the banana and the

[13] "Bloque Elmer Cárdenas – Autodefensas Campesinas: Nuestro Credo Político," 12 pages, undated document.

[14] The entirety of the rally was recorded in a video from September 2003 obtained by the author.

[15] In 1982, as governor of Antioquia before the popular election of mayors, Villegas appointed Uribe Mayor of Medellín, the future president's first political post. Villegas again made headlines in 2013 when

Highway that unites *la región* with the center of Antioquia created a lot of prosperity," Villegas began. Of course, for the overwhelming majority of those in the audience, the "miracle" of prosperity had never materialized, so Villegas quickly adjusted.

"The model of development that Antioquia has used for the last 100 years is completely exhausted," he continued. "It was a centralized model in which the totality of the department's wealth was sent to and concentrated in Medellín." Unwittingly channeling Marx's observation that "the accumulation of wealth at one pole" is simultaneously the "accumulation of misery" at the opposite pole (Marx 1990, 799), the Conservative candidate painted his own portrait of uneven development: "The only result of this exhausted model is a region where the only common denominator is poverty and on the other side a grandiose city with high levels of development, wealth, and services." The gubernatorial candidate promised to transform "Urabá into a genuine pole of development for Antioquia and for the country." Although Villegas lost the election, his speech was the clearest echo among the candidates that night of how *Urabá Grande* channeled the frontier imaginary of regionalism and statelessness into an affirmative political-economic project.[16]

The *paras* were certainly not pioneers in waving the banner for integration and political unity in Urabá—this, too, was an appropriation from the left. For example, the Colombian Communist Party, during the height of the radical-left's control over municipal offices in Urabá, commemorated an assassinated Mayor in 1992 saying, "He always used his position to defend the integration, progress, and unity of the region."[17] In fact, until *Urabá Grande* got off the ground, the charge for regional integration and political unity had actually been led by the radical-left. The guerrillas' political parties, for instance, were pivotal in the creation of the Municipal Association of Urabá (Madú), an institution they organized for pooling funds and coordinating infrastructure projects across municipal borders.

Indeed, the first moves toward forging a regional political coalition grew out of electoral agreements between legal political parties linked to the guerrilla groups. The guerrillas also helped forge the first major broad-based coalition involving multiple parties. The alliance emerged in 1994 out of a non-aggression pact between the FARC

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a residential apartment building, "Edificio Space," constructed by his company collapsed in Medellín, because of shoddy construction.

[16] The winner of the gubernatorial race was Liberal Party candidate Aníbal Gaviria, who was following in the footsteps of his slain brother, Guillermo, whose own term as Antioquia's governor was cut short when he was kidnapped by the FARC. The guerrillas held Guillermo for a year in the jungles just outside of Urabá and then brutally killed him along with nine other captives in May 2003 during an Army rescue attempt. Five months later, Aníbal won the governor's office. The Gaviria family patriarch, Guillermo Sr., had been a pioneer of the banana industry in Urabá and was still one of Medellín's most powerful business leaders when he was arrested in 2012 at the age of 88 for having supported the *paras* in Urabá. El Alemán claims *Urabá Grande* gave Aníbal Gaviria's campaign "unrestricted support." Gaviria, who became Mayor of Medellín during my fieldwork, has denied El Alemán's accusations are true.

[17] "Una muestra de irracionalidad," *El Mundo*, October 27, 1992.

and the EPL as a way of stemming the tide of bloodshed between them. The Catholic Church brokered the fleeting truce by getting the two groups to agree on a single consensus candidate for Mayor of Urabá's most populous municipality, Apartadó (population then, 57,000). The agreement, known as the "Apartadó Consensus," also roped in every other political party with a presence in the region.

Local newspapers celebrated the deal. "Liberals, Conservatives, Communists, civic leaders, and Christians; whites, blacks, *paisas*, *costeños*, and *chilapos* all signed off on the deal," stated one report, citing the racialized-regional monikers associated with the three protagonists of Urabá's triumphant frontier colonization.[18] Although Chocó, playing the role of Colombia's "dark continent," is glaringly written out of the history, the newspaper was hailing the deal's legitimacy as an inclusive show of unity across political, regional, and ethnic lines (again, minus the overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian *chocoanos*). The practical details of the "Apartadó Consensus" meanwhile were a multi-partisan reprise of the political settlement that ended *La Violencia*: a mathematical division of administrative positions. "All the parties and movements also agreed that bureaucratic posts will be divvied according to the distribution of votes for municipal council," observed the newspaper.

The next major regional alliance, which emerged four years later in 1998, reactivated some of the ties first forged through the Apartadó Consensus. But this new coalition, cobbled together by Liberal Party leaders and banana company executives, had much broader aspirations. The multiparty alliance, which included Liberals, Conservatives, and EPL party leaders, set its sights on seats in both Antioquia's Departmental Assembly and the national legislature. Despite winning an impressive number of votes, the coalition only managed to squeak by with a seat in Antioquia's Departmental Assembly. (The winner of the seat was Gerardo Vega, the young EPL-affiliated lawyer mentioned in the preface.) Having watched this last attempt from the sidelines, El Alemán decided to try his hand in politics and began tinkering with municipal political campaigns.

Building a Regional Political Project

El Alemán officially launched *Urabá Grande* in 2001 with the help of Jorge Pinzón, a politically well-connected wealthy rancher from Necoclí. By then, the BEC had already gained expertise working with the community *Juntas* as well as a year's worth of experience supporting candidates running for municipal offices. But what Pinzón and El Alemán now planned was a much more systematic initiative—a genuine "political project." Pinzón began by setting up a "Regional Political Action Committee" in Apartadó with branch offices in each one of the BEC's municipalities. He created this

[18] "Escogida por consenso la socióloga Gloria Cuartas Montoya," *El Heraldo de Urabá*, No. 180, August 28, 1994.

decentralized organizational structure under the guise of an NGO, which helped give *Urabá Grande* a respectable institutional façade. Leaving nothing to interpretation, he even put the Spanish acronym for "NGO" in the name of the non-profit: "Corporation NGO: Democracy, Peace, and Development for Greater Urabá."[19] Each municipal office of the project was led by a couple of "coordinators" who answered directly to Pinzón and worked closely with the paramilitary bloc's Promoters of Social Development (PDSs). Naturally, the PDSs not only helped set up the offices and delivered monthly wads of cash to cover overhead expenses, but also served as the project's liaisons with the *Juntas*.

Through this elaborate logistical-institutional infrastructure, the BEC turned the *Juntas* into incubators of local political careers. "We trained leaders who carried out their work in the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*," said El Alemán. "So that they would then go out and become municipal council members, and so that they'd work for the communities in which combat operations had ended and a state presence was needed."[20] The PDSs, who by straddling civil and political society were the ground troops of the BEC's state-building war of position, did most of the heavy lifting. During election season, the PDSs organized cattle auctions to finance candidates, delivered SUVs to the campaigns for transportation, and arranged buses for voters on Election Day. But their most important job was jointly strategizing with the BEC's commanders, *Urabá Grande*'s coordinators, community leaders, and aspiring politicians.

The notes from one meeting held in November 2005, just as the bloc was nearing a deal with the government, show how regionalism was worked into their political project.[21] After a brief prayer, El Alemán opened the meeting reminding those present that the "uniting ideology" guiding *Urabá Grande* was "the political progress of our region." Lamenting that he was headed to jail for "defending our Urabá," he told the community leaders, "Instead of seeing me like the Commander that makes you come to all these meetings, I want you to see me like a friend who you can count on to *construct the region* […*con el que pueden contar para construir región*]." They spent the rest of the meeting working out how the political project would translate this production of regionhood into practice. They discussed potential future candidates, created working groups on thematic issues, and debated the contents of a united regional front in upcoming elections—all of which required elaborate logistical finesse. But by this point, the BEC already had a well-established process.

For the election of municipal councilors, community assemblies would present the PDSs with a slate of candidates who were then vetted by the BEC command structure and *Urabá Grande*'s municipal coordinating committees. The few remaining

[19] *Corporación ONG: Democracia, Paz y Desarrollo del Urabá Grande*, registered with Urabá's Chamber of Commerce, *personería jurídica* No. S0000759.
[20] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 6, 2007.
[21] Bloque Elmer Cárdenas – Autodefensas Campesinas, Acta Reunión, Proyecto Regional Político: Urabá Grande Unido y en Paz, November 15, 2005.

candidates would then face off at the polls with voters deciding the winner. Explaining the process at one of his court dates in 2009, El Alemán claimed, "That's why there's not a single municipal councilor in Urabá from the last three administrations who can say they didn't know me and the social work carried out in these communities by the PDSs."[22] By using the *Juntas* as political springboards, he estimated as many as 80 percent of municipal councilors hailed from rural areas, rather than from the municipal capital as was usually the case. In this way, the BEC sought stronger ties and accountability between rural communities and municipal administrations. According to El Alemán, by thickening the ties between campesino leaders and local government, the BEC helped foster a stronger "sense of belonging" in Urabá.

For getting mayors elected, the BEC devised a slightly more sophisticated democratic simulation. "The idea was to have two candidates per municipality," explained El Alemán, "a preferred candidate aligned with the social work of the *autodefensas* and another candidate with little political weight." But things did not always go according to plan, especially during the early days of the project. In 2000, the BEC organized a meeting in Tulapas for narrowing down the slate of candidates running for Mayor of Necoclí. The event was organized by a 23-year-old PDS known as "Grumpy" (*El Escamoso*) who was then the key intermediary between El Alemán and local politicians.

Grumpy explained, "We had our candidate and the puppet candidate—you know, for quote-unquote 'Democracy.' " But the plan backfired. On Election Day, the BEC's preferred candidate—a community leader who had worked his way up from the *Juntas*—lost in a landslide. The puppet candidate, a respected member of the evangelical Christian community, won three-times as many votes by drawing on his relationship with the churches. Once in office, however, the devout Christian Mayor had excellent relations with El Alemán, according to the PDSs.[23] However messy and tumultuous, *Urabá Grande* was meticulously incorporating municipal administrations into its expanding networks of political authority.

And yet, despite all the work, the scheming, and the BEC's military might off in the wings, *Urabá Grande*'s candidates initially had trouble breaking through Urabá's patron-client relationships. Even the political project's own "Chairman of the Board," Jorge Pinzón, failed in his bid for a seat in Antioquia's Departmental Assembly. But the project soon gained an orchestrated momentum. As Grumpy, the PDS, recalled, "Since we weren't really sure who was going to win, we began working with all sides to keep control after the elections, making sure all [the politicians] were implicated in the project—like it or not."[24] During his trial, El Alemán emphatically denied voters were

[22] Ibid.
[23] Declaración Oficio UNAT – F-22 2080, Unidad de Fiscalías Delegadas Ante los Jueces Penales del Circuito Especializados de Medellín y Antioquia, March 10, 2010.
[24] "Declaración," Fiscalía, No. 305 Estructura de Apoyo, Arboletes, April 7, 2010.

forced into choosing particular candidates. But since the choices were already limited to candidates all equally under his thumb, coercion was irrelevant.

In Chocó, for example, where the FARC still had a strong presence, one local paramilitary commander explained that elections had to be more "carefully calibrated."[25] The way the BEC determined its preferred candidate in the race for Mayor of Río Sucio is a case in point. In the run up to an election in 2000, the local commander organized a "primary" for deciding the candidate. The BEC's favorite faced off against an indigenous leader, who was suspected of having sympathies for the FARC. The paramilitary commander called in Río Sucio's community leaders for a vote over who would be allowed to run against the puppet candidate. When the indigenous leader won the secret ballot by five votes, the commander pocketed six of them, leaving the BEC's candidate with a one-vote victory. The indigenous leader's demand for a re-vote received a curt denial from the commander. "We don't have time for that," he said.[26]

Campesinos who lived in the BEC's territories gave varying opinions about the bloc's political interventions. One characterized it as outright "administrative terrorism."[27] But another told me he saw it as more participatory than under "*la misma politiquería de siempre*," the usual crooked politicking. Despite differences of opinion about the BEC's political practices, they were unanimously described in paternalistic terms, though not necessarily in a disparaging way. A campesina who lived on a farm personally gifted to her by El Alemán told me she actually appreciated the "political counsel" that her community received from the BEC in those days. "Because, you know," she said, "sometimes mayors show up, leaving everyone all mixed up [*embolatando las personas*], so they counseled us about who would bring the most benefits."[28] In her eyes, the BEC was a welcome buffer against the predations of local politicians, improving the chances for material rewards. In this way, in its role as a broker, the BEC both connected and mediated the give-and-take power relations between civil and political society in its territories.

However, despite being beholden to the BEC, politicians did not always march in lockstep with the bloc. In some cases, the PDSs had to flex military muscle to keep the mayors in line. For instance, when Grumpy was stationed in the town of Acandí on the Chocó side of the Gulf, he stepped in to mediate a dispute at a public meeting that erupted between local schoolteachers and Acandí's Mayor. At one point, the Mayor objected to the BEC's intervention and Grumpy, a bulky man of good size, lost his temper: "You talk too much! Keep at it and I'll drag you out of here by your feet." When

[25] Catalino Segura, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, March 12, 2012.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Affidavit submitted to prosecutors, titled, "Periódo 2001-2003: Años del terror administrativo en Acandí," undated document.
[28] "*Asesoría*" and "*asesoraban*" were the Spanish words she used. Author interview with anonymous campesina in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 25, 2013.

a bucked-tooth municipal councilor chuckled at the reprimand of his colleage, Grumpy snapped, "You, too, toothy [*muelón*]? Shut up or you're next."[29]

Once things settled down, however, Grumpy spent the rest of the meeting explaining at length that legal actions (*tutelas*, writs of injunction) against the municipal administration—by the disgruntled teachers for instance—would not be tolerated. He demanded all grievances be taken up with him directly. Rather than risk drawing unwelcome attention from outside its territories—that is, from beyond its meticulously crafted spheres of influence—the BEC preferred to handle such things internally. The PDSs may have trained the *Juntas* in things like civilian oversight (*veeduría ciudadana*) over budgets and contracting, but this dirty laundry was never supposed to be aired in the form of judicial action.

The Politics of Corruption

As a check on municipal politics, the BEC could be a burdensome presence for the mayors. By strengthening the *Juntas* through its methodical social and political work, the BEC created a demanding and meddlesome counterweight that sometimes obstructed the mayors' agendas. Moreover, by registering these community institutions and thereby securing their formal juridical standing (*personería jurídica*), the BEC legally empowered them for tendering municipal contracts—a practice encouraged by decentralization-related legislation. As part of its populist politics, the BEC would pressure administrations into contracting with the *Juntas*, cutting into the mayors' sweetheart deals and kickbacks with the private sector.

"The mayors didn't like the *Juntas*," said El Alemán. "Because the Constitution says they are supposed to play a transcendental role in making public administrations in the countryside stronger and more participatory. So if a school is going to be built in a community, the first one offered the construction contract should be the *Junta*, not the Mayor's contractor-buddies."[30] Municipalities did sometimes contract the *Juntas* for minor construction jobs and services, but the larger and more lucrative projects inevitably went to private companies run by, as El Alemán said, "the mayor's contractor-buddies." Although the PDSs always kept a close watch over the budget appropriations of the *Juntas*, this sanctimonious oversight was much more lax when it came to these larger contracts.

Secretario, the General Coordinator of the PDSs who had started off as El Alemán's personal assistant, gave me a frank description of contracting practices in the

[29] Affidavit submitted to prosecutors, titled, "Periódo 2001-2003: Años del terror administrativo en Acandí," undated document.

[30] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 16, 2009. The Constitution has a vague article (No. 38) about citizen participation and free association that was legislated by Law 743 of 2002, which is specifically about *Juntas de Acción Comunal*.

BEC's territories.[31] As the head of the PDSs, Secretario had dealt with these situations as part of his day-to-day work. Using the typical example of a road construction project, he told me that "the normal custom" was for the municipal administration to award the contract to the private company of a close business associate who would in turn give the mayor a kickback for as much as 10 or 20 percent of the contract's value. "And so we'd look over things to make sure it wasn't like this," began Secretario. Noticing my skepticism, he continued:

> Or, at least if it was… if it had to be this way, then we'd say, "Please, *hermano*, take a bit less, don't take such a huge chunk of the community's money for your pocket. Take a little bit less, invest the rest." And we'd make sure the engineers finished the job. We intervened in everything. We were without a doubt the absolute power in the area. There was no state there.

Despite his statements about the BEC's "absolute power" and the absence of the state, the anecdote reveals some nuances in describing how these claims translated into material practices. The story includes a mayor, a municipal road construction project, public funds, a legally binding concession contract, and yet it still ends with, "There was no state there." Upon the broader canvass of statelessness in Urabá, Secretario paints a portrait in which the BEC took on the burden of using its "absolute power" to enforce the contract, reduce the kickback, and improve the chances of the road being built. Though supposedly absent, the state, or at least the shadow cast by the idea of the state, structured the entire situation and even imposed certain constraints, because paramilitary territory always existed in some kind of relationship with the spatiality of the state.

What I mean is that the *paras* had to balance the contradictory political forces constituting their territories. In the case of the road, they were pinned between the road-desiring communities, the profit-driven private contractors, and the mayor's political and economic ambitions. And last, but not least, the BEC had its own multidimensional territorial imperatives (political, economic, social, military, etc.) to consider. If they failed to successfully triangulate between these forces, they risked the unraveling of their territorial hegemony. But since corruption "had to be," as Secretario put it, the BEC maneuvered between these interested stakeholders by regulating graft rather than eliminating it.

And yet, anti-corruption was still a key discourse of paramilitaries' authoritarian brand of agrarian populism. By putting the "defense of the region" above all else, paramilitaries could—and often did—denounce the guerrillas, the oligarchy, the state, and corruption all within the same breath. Salvatore Mancuso, the rancher-turned-paramilitary capo that had helped the Castaños "buy" all the lands in Tulapas, once told a reporter: "Our interest was not just defeating the guerrillas. We also pushed for the

[31] Author interview with paramilitary operative (pseudonym, "Secretario") in Medellín, Antioquia, September 18, 2013.

progress of our regions and if this implied an end to the fiefdoms of the local politicians, so be it." In fact, claimed Mancuso, "Since we got in the way of their personal interests, the biggest complaints were always from the region's most corrupt politicians [*los corruptos de la región*]" (quoted in Aranguren 2002, 303). Within *la región*, the *paras* positioned themselves as crusaders against public sector graft and attributed the absence of the state to the systematic corruption that always laid everywhere except at their own feet.

As the self-proclaimed defenders of "the regions," their critiques against corruption on a national scale rolled the central government, metropolitan political elites, and the oligarchy into a single omnipotent enemy aligned against the hardworking campesinos of the countryside. "The reason guerrillas have lasted 40 years in Colombia," said Carlos Castaño in the 1990s, "is because subversion and government corruption have formed a symbiosis that ensures their mutual coexistence, so the war enriches the few and impoverishes the many." In even bolder terms, his brother Fidel maintained, "My struggle is against communism and the oligarchy. It's a military struggle against the guerrillas and an economic struggle against the oligarchy."[32] Echoing these same populist correlations between centralism, elites, and corruption, El Alemán vividly compared the contemporary conflict to *La Violencia*:

> They have both happened under a gaze of indifference from an inept and corrupt upper class who have looked on at the bloodletting as if watching it on television in a soap opera… The only things that have mattered to this corrupt class are its own interests, divvying up bureaucratic posts and lining their own pockets through the clientelistic distribution of public funds.[33]

El Alemán actually made most of the politicians that joined *Urabá Grande* sign a written pact with the BEC called, "Declaration of Programmatic Agreements." In the case of candidates running for municipal offices, the politicians pledged to govern "with pluralism, equality, transparency, and without corruption in accordance with the policies of the BEC." Another clause called for strictly merit-based appointments of public officials, who would in any case be subject to the "BEC's approval." In the longest point of the text, the candidates promised to "create our governing platform, municipal development plan, and territorial organization in concert with all the region's active social forces: business sectors, *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, and all kinds of entities, both public and private, in accordance with the policies of the BEC." The paramilitary bloc also reserved the right for itself "to approve all projects coming from departmental, national, or international entities." Finally, the mayors also swore they would help strengthen the *Juntas* in their municipalities. In short, the candidates were essentially promising that they would steer a series of multiply scaled forces towards the fulfillment of *Urabá Grande*'s lofty ideals about regional consolidation and integration.

[32] The quote from Carlos Castaño is from Aranguren (2002, 345) and the one from Fidel Castaño is from Reyes (2009, 94).
[33] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 5, 2007.

When the future Mayor of Arboletes signed this Declaration of Programmatic Agreements in 2003—an event captured on video—Sor Teresa can be heard off-camera loudly telling locals: "Anyone who really has Democracy in their blood doesn't even expect an *empanada* in exchange for their vote."[34] Considering all the wheeling and dealing, the vote rigging, and everything else, the *paras*' discourses of anti-corruption were obviously packed with all kinds of contradictions, especially coming from her. And, of course, the BEC's hands were never as clean as El Alemán insisted.

In fact, with its anointed *parapolíticos* placed in mayor's offices and municipal councils across Urabá, the BEC appears to have accumulated vast resources by steering contracts to its various fronts. The bloc took full advantage of the administrative functions and fiscal powers that municipalities had recently gained through the decentralization. Municipal contracts for community development projects and public services, including health care and education, proved particularly enticing. The BEC even created a handful of NGOs—those wholesome paragons of "civil society"—for securing these contracts. Besides his role as a PDS, Grumpy was also the "director" of one of these NGOs. However, Asocomún, the non-profit run by El Alemán's brother, remained the BEC's main front in civil society.[35] It was Asocomún that had reactivated the Municipal Association of Urabá (Madú), as a clearing house and regional coordinating hub for contracts with municipal administrations.

Judicial police allege that one of the more flagrant cases of corruption linked to the BEC took place in Arboletes, where the Mayor (elected with *Urabá Grande*'s help) was accused of siphoning off 40 percent of both the municipal health and education budgets to the BEC during his 2004-2007 term. El Alemán denied the charges, but Grumpy, the PDS, told prosecutors he personally established a healthcare company called Orsalud that was specifically created as a vehicle for receiving the public health monies. The same investigation claimed the BEC had also skimmed off contracts awarded to its front companies for street lighting, water and sewage, and even one for the construction of a "Park of Non-Violence."[36] But corruption did sometimes have an "autonomous" existence beyond the BEC's control, particularly when it involved local elites. Indeed, despite being a well-oiled machine, *Urabá Grande* was sometimes derailed when it came up against the interests of these elites, as happened in Unguía, Chocó.

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[34] The details of this "Declaration of Programmatic Agreements" are from a video from October 2003 obtained by the author. The same incident was discussed in court: Bloque Elmer Cárdenas, Audencia de Control de Legalidad de Cargos, Sala Justicia y Paz del Tribunal Superior de Medellín, August 28, 2012.

[35] Grumpy's NGO was called Corporación Nacer Comunitario (Cornacom), registered in 2005 with Urabá's Chamber of Commerce, under tax identification number (NIT): 900032414-8. The Asociación Comunitaria de Urabá y Córdoba (Asocomún), founded by El Alemán's brother (Jairo Rendón), was registered in 2002 with Urabá's Chamber of Commerce, under tax identification number (NIT): 0811040618-4. For the details of this wheeling-and-dealing see Ballvé (2012) and my more investigative journalistic piece: "La telaraña de los 'paras' en Urabá," *Verdad Abierta*, June 14, 2011: http://bit.ly/1yVsLQO.

[36] Field report to the Fiscalía, referenced, "Denuncia nexos de políticos con AUC en Arboletes Antioquia (07857 – 02993)," April 21, 2008.

After two brutal military incursions against the FARC, the *paras* finally seized Unguía in February 1996, making it their gateway into the vast Atrato River basin. Until then, the FARC's financier in the area was Dagoberto Asís, a local cattleman and business owner who had amassed a small fortune by coordinating and skimming from the extortion payments the guerrillas imposed on local ranchers. "Don Dago," as he was known with deference, also had a history being the patron of aspiring local politicians. His political and economic networks made him such a valuable asset that when the *paras* seized Unguía they pardoned and groomed him into their right-hand man in the area.[37] He even became the go-between for the BEC's collaboration with the government's local security forces.

At the height of *Urabá Grande* in 2003, however, Don Dago defied the BEC. He bet on the BEC's "opposition" candidate with $160,000 dollars in campaign financing for an election in which less than 3,000 people ultimately voted. Some of the money was used to boat people in from neighboring Turbo on Election Day. Using fake IDs, these voters tipped the scales for Don Dago's candidate, who won by just 65 votes. Once the new Mayor took office, Don Dago began receiving hefty payments for goods and services never rendered. He also became the exclusive seller of supplies—at enormously inflated prices—for the municipality's private contractors.[38] El Alemán tolerated these indiscretions, but Don Dago's winning streak soon ran out. In August 2004, a year after the elections, he was found dead for reasons apparently unrelated to the BEC. According to local rumors, a local thug made the hit under orders from the new Mayor with the motive of clearing his debts with Don Dago. While not always a complete success, the highly localized political work of the BEC in places like Unguía formed the cornerstone of *Urabá Grande*'s broader—that is, national—political ambitions.

The Multiple Scales of Regional Integration

Urabá Grande's ultimate aspiration was gaining a presence in the halls of the national legislature. But this was a particularly tricky political feat because besides triangulating between local mayors, councilors, and *Junta* presidents in nominating congressional candidates, the *paras* also had to contend with regional and national political party structures.[39] The BEC also needed a candidate who would satisfy all the rival political parties in the region, a task further complicated by demands for equal

[37] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 5 and 11, 2007.

[38] The election numbers are from the Registraduía Nacional del Estado Civil. The information about voters from Turbo comes from the Consejo Nacional de Electoral, Resolution No. 0981 from 2011. The charges against then-Mayor Cayetano "El Ratón" Tapias were made in various testimonies by members of the BEC.

[39] The details that follow about the BEC's political interventions for Congress are drawn from court sentences and paramilitary testimonies. See, for instance, Rubén Quintero's conviction: Proceso No. 34653, Corte Suprema de Justicia, Sala de Casación Penal, Aprobado No. 310, September 27, 2010.

representation of each sub-region of Urabá. And then there was the fact that the most *Urabá Grande* could hope for was a single seat in the lower house of Congress.

After intense jockeying by all the parties and sub-regional factions, El Alemán struck a compromise. Instead of a single candidate, they settled on four politicians who became known as "*Los Cuatrillizos*" (The Quadruplets), each representing a different party and region of Urabá. By exploiting a loophole in Colombian electoral law, the plan was for the four candidates to each serve one year of the single seat's four-year term. But for the Quadruplets to win that seat, they needed the official sponsorship and national political weight of a candidate running for Senate. So with the help of a banana company executive, El Alemán got in touch with Rubén Quintero, a senatorial candidate and former personal secretary of Alvaro Uribe. Quintero agreed to support the Quadruplets after receiving a $100,000-dollar campaign "donation" from El Alemán.[40]

With the BEC's support, Quintero ended up doubling the number of votes he had won in the previous elections. The Quadruplets, too, won handsomely. And, as planned, they each served a quarter of the four-year term—albeit with a few nudges from El Alemán enforcing the one-year rotations. Within the same elections, the BEC also helped elect two congressmen from Chocó. All told, from 2002 to 2006, the BEC's "congressional caucus" sponsored more than 100 pieces of legislation. Although barely any of these bills made it out of committee, they give an indication of *Urabá Grande*'s legislative *quid pro quo* and the political project's vision for *la región*.

One bill, which was co-sponsored by two of the BEC's *parapolíticos*, proposed to "foment the development of civil organizations and provide a legal framework for their relations with the state." Specifically citing the *Juntas* and NGOs as its primary beneficiaries, the law included an entire chapter on empowering these "civil organizations" for tendering government contracts and concessions. The goal of the reform, wrote the authors, was "maintaining the independence of state and civil society, but also their interdependence."[41] In a similar vein, another bill promoted by one of the BEC's Senators was aimed at "defining the relationship between the state and associative labor cooperatives."[42] As detailed in the next chapter, the institutional structure of "cooperatives" was the *paras*' favored vehicle for laundering and consolidating their massive land grabs in Urabá.

Many of the laws backed by the BEC's politicians with direct bearing on Urabá were in one way or another pushing for "regional integration." One bill would have given more power to the executive director of the regional development corporation (Corpourabá), which among other responsibilities oversees environmental licensing for infrastructures, resource extraction, and agribusiness projects.[43] Another piece of

[40] Ibid.
[41] Proyecto de Ley Estatutaria 117 de 2002 Senado, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 447/02, October 28, 2002.
[42] Proyecto de Ley Estatutaria 72 de 2004 Senado, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 427/04, August 8, 2004.
[43] Proyecto de Ley 048 de 2005 Cámara, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 494/05, August 5, 2005.

legislation, sponsored by all but one of El Alemán's *parapolíticos*, would have "nationalized" the 198 kilometers (123 miles) of road cutting through the middle of the BEC's territory.[44] The road not only connects Turbo to the Casa Castaño's turf in Córdoba and beyond, it is also the main artery connecting the *paras*' strategic corridors between Córdoba and Urabá. By "nationalization," the road would have shifted from being under a hodgepodge of municipal and departmental jurisdictions, to being administered by the national Ministry of Transportation, implying more investments and the further improvement of the road. The last bill worth mentioning would have reinforced aspects of Urabá's status as an export-oriented "Special Economic Zone" (SEZ). The bill, which was proposed as the BEC began negotiating its demobilization, claimed it would help address the nation's "social deficit with the frontier population of Urabá, which is the stage, once again, of a peace process."[45]

Ultimately, these bills stalled and were never signed into law—largely, due to a lack of follow through by their sponsors. Indeed, although El Alemán achieved *Urabá Grande*'s goal of securing congressional representation, he expressed disappointment over the performance of his politicians, particularly the Quadruplets. "One after another they had their debut in Congress and all they did was shine for their absence," he lamented. The one act they did manage to pass through was awarding a congressional medal of freedom to Asocomún, the NGO run by El Alemán's brother, "in recognition of its work promoting community development " in Urabá.[46] Another law the Quadruplets successfully passed was "an homage by the Nation" to Urabá on its hundredth anniversary as part of Antioquia (1905-2005).[47] The bill included a series of symbolic measures: one was the construction of a monument "representing the clash and integration of ethnicities and cultures in the region." Another article in the law decreed the creation of an annual festival of "*Urabaneidad*" (an invented term of regional identity). One of the more far-reaching articles declared, "With this law, the National Government through its respective ministries will craft a 'Strategic Plan' for Urabá that will promote the region's integral development." The strategic plan, which is discussed in my concluding chapter, had sweeping implications. Although Urabá *Grande* failed to meet his lofty expectations, El Alemán did see at least one worthy outcome: "The importance of the process was that we made clear that regional political forces were consolidating in Urabá."[48]

A Regional Sense of Place?

[44] Proyecto de Ley 164 de 2005 Cámara, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 701/05, October 7, 2005.
[45] Proyecto de Ley 029 de 2005 Cámara, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 478/05, August 3, 2005.
[46] "Congreso concedió orden de la democracia a Asocomún, *Urabá Hoy*, August 1-15, 2006.
[47] The legislation was passed as Law 935 of 2004 and was first proposed as Proyecto de Ley 233 de 2004 Cámara, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 90/04, March 25, 2004.
[48] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, July 7, 2007.

The consolidation of these regional forces had been accomplished through broadening and interlinking scales of political networks: from the communities to the *Juntas*; from the *Juntas* to the municipalities; from the municipalities to the region; until finally doubling back on Urabá via Congress. Consolidating these regional forces was also a cultural project as much as a political one. As El Alemán noted, "We did a lot of workshops and awareness-raising with the mass of campesino leaders with the goal of creating a stronger sense of belonging [*sentido de pertenencia*]."[49]

From the point of view of counterinsurgent ideologues, the frontier history of Urabá's settlement by waves of migrants without a "proper" sense of belonging to *la región* has been a recurring source of geopolitical anxiety. The so-called "pacifier of Urabá," General Rito Alejo del Río, who led the Army's 17th Brigade in Urabá during the paramilitary onslaught, gave me a typically racist summation of this argument. "Do you know what a *chilapo* is?" he asked. In Urabá, a *chilapo* is someone from Córdoba, but it can also be used as a label for mestizo. Curious about what the mustachioed general would come up with next, I feigned ignorance: "No, what do you mean?"

"It's a mix of someone from Antioquia and Córdoba," he told me, with the *antioqueño* clearly coded as white in his formula of miscegenation. "And, well, from out of that mixture come a bunch of degenerates, and they're the ones who have promoted the illegal armed groups in Urabá." As we sat at a cafeteria table at the Army base in Bogotá where he was under house arrest, he continued, "Eighty percent of those migrants to Urabá had criminal records when they came to the region. They were completely rootless people [*unos desarraigados*] without any sense of belonging."[50]

For El Alemán, on the other hand, the fact that his combatants mirrored the demographic make up of the region was a point of pride that he often cited as evidence of his bloc's legitimacy and its rootedness in Urabá. He told me that this was one of the first points he made clear to President Uribe's peace commissioner when the demobilization negotiations began. El Alemán said he told the government envoy:

> This bloc, these men I am going to represent here are not mercenaries—they aren't Russians or Nicaraguans, they're Colombians. They are *negros, chilapos y blancos* from here, from this very region. If you and me achieve this demobilization… you won't have to bus them to Medellín or Bogotá. They'll throw down their weapons and head straight to their momma's house. Because

[49] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, November 23 to December 4, 2009.

[50] Author interview with Gen. Rito Alejo del Río, Batallón de Policía Militar No. 13, in Bogotá, D.C., October 17, 2013.

> they are *muchachos* and *muchachas* from right here, from this region, where the state shines for its absence.[51]

Although El Alemán and the General make contradictory arguments about the relationship between the region's multiracial makeup and local people's sense of belonging, both statements divulge an underlying insecurity about Urabá's degree of genuine regionhood. Since the nineteenth century Colombia has been called "a country of regions," or as the title of one of the more famous histories of the country described it, "a nation in spite of itself" (Bushnell 1993, 50–100). The implication being that its balkanized regionalism has been an impediment to consolidating. In short, within the cultural politics of state formation, the region is what the state has been "formed *against*" (Corrigan and Sayer 1985, 7). But *Urabá Grande* flipped this script: it cast the making of regionhood and statehood as mutually reinforcing process.

[51] Author interview with Freddy Rendón, paramilitary chief (alias, "El Alemán"), in Itagüí, Antioquia, September 13, 2012. Out of 1,538 combatants in the BEC, 45 were women, according to Report No. 8 of the MAPP/OEA Mission to Support the Peace Process, February 14, 2007.

Chapter 5

Grassroots Developments: Land Laundering and the 'Arriving' State

When prosecutors confronted El Alemán about his bloc's involvement in an ecotourism project near the Panamanian border, he launched into one of his lengthy presentations, replete with maps and a laser-pointer. The venture in question was an ecotourism project in the municipality of Acandí at a spot called Playona, a famous nesting ground for the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). Playona's beaches had also been a recreational refuge for the FARC and a longstanding entrepôt for shipments of outgoing drugs and incoming guns. During the onset of the paramilitary incursion in 1996, according to El Alemán, "The abandonment of the state was total and combat was so intense with the guerrillas that a lot of residents fled the area."[1]

He said that in light of Playona's troubled history the ecotourism project had been set up with a cooperative participatory structure. Besides "helping repair the community's social fabric," he continued, the project was intended as an environmentally friendly alternative to the area's main source of income: contraband smuggling. He had even dispatched his PDSs to "work with the local campesinos, teaching them not to eat the turtle eggs or to bother *los animalitos*," the hatchlings—all this from a man facing charges for drug trafficking and crimes against humanity.[2] While denying the community-oriented ecotourism project in Playona had been backed by the BEC in any significant way, he acknowledged it had grown out of a flagship post-demobilization project designed by the bloc called "*Guardagolfos*" (Guardians of the Gulf)—a program promoting fishing cooperatives, ecotourism, and handicrafts.

The BEC's grassroots projects had an uncanny ability of being absorbed into the official programming of national and international development agencies. Indeed, *Guardagolfos* has won several grassroots development awards and has been replicated nationwide in other coastal areas with the help of its sponsors: the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and its partner agencies from the central government. And in 2013, citing national laws and international treaties protecting biological and ethnic diversity, the national Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development designated Playona a National Wildlife Sanctuary.[3] But the turtle ecotourism project in Playona was not the only paramilitary-linked venture in Urabá drawing on similar discourses of grassroots development. Some projects were even pitched as being tailor-made for "ethnic communities." Why were plunderous paramilitary groups deploying discourses of grassroots development? How could anything associated with these violent militias be

[1] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, July 10, 2007.
[2] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 6, 2007.
[3] Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible, Resolución 1847, December 19 2013.

characterized as promoting grassroots development ideals of political participation and subsidiarity, environmental sustainability, and ethnic empowerment?

In this chapter, I argue that grassroots development became the principle means through which paramilitaries executed and ratified their massive land seizures and agribusiness developments. More than a case of "whitewashing" plunder with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—was an integral part of the paramilitary land grab. Grassroots development actually made paramilitaries' economies of violence perversely compatible with formal projects of liberal state-building commonly associated with tropes about institution building, good governance, and the rule of law. Following in the wake of the scorched earth dispossession of peasant communities, this process formed an integral part of what El Alemán called the "states in formation of the *autodefensas*."[4] Deployed as a frontier state formation, grassroots development was a practical, discursive, strategic, and institutional articulation—an apparatus (*dispositif*)—that helped make violent accumulation and liberal state formation mutually compatible processes.

Moreover, when operating alongside practices of land parcelization, iterative transactions, producers' cooperatives, and third-party intermediaries, grassroots development became the basis of "land laundering," the process by which the illegal origins of a land acquisition are concealed. Land laundering operated through symbolic, material, and everyday practices. But, again, my point is that grassroots development discourses did much more work than simply give paramilitary-backed projects an air of *symbolic* legitimacy, they implied a series of *material* practices and institutional formations that further obfuscated the illicit origins of the lands. Land laundering, then, was not the one-off conversion of the illegal into the legal, but rather an ongoing, everyday process that blurred any distinction between the two. And Urabá was a forging house for this legal alchemy.

Synergistic relationships between illegality, capitalism, violence, and state formation are of course not unique to Colombia. Research has exposed similar dynamics in various other parts of the world, from post-Soviet Russia to sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.[5] These studies resoundingly demonstrate that illegality and violence are not aberrations but rather constitutive parts of actually existing democracies and free-market economies the world over. But through a fine-grained account of the intricate machinations of dispossession at work in Urabá, this chapter shows how the "development" industry can be the conduit making these shady synergies possible.

In other words, this chapter is about how paramilitary plunder of land and resources, drug money laundering, and political violence worked right alongside

[4] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, July 10, 2007.
[5] Examples of work making these connections are numerous, but I have my favorites (Blok 1974; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Volkov 2002; Hibou 2004; Roitman 2005; E. D. Arias and Goldstein 2010).

development projects cast in terms of providing rural livelihoods, local political participation, ethnic and women's empowerment, environmental conservation, and institution building. Even initiatives aimed at shoring up the rule of law and good governance became functional to paramilitary strategies. So rather than an example of "civil war as development in reverse," as Paul Collier and his colleagues at the World Bank would have it (P. Collier et al. 2003), Urabá is a case in which the "development" apparatus helped operationalize paramilitaries' criminal political economy.

The Grassroots Development Apparatus

Discourses, as the socially produced and historically situated statements we use to represent knowledge about the world, are powerful in so far as they help construct problems in particular ways. They enable some understandings and practices, while limiting others (Foucault 1972; Hall 1992, 291). Foucault, for instance, described how discourses of criminality in eighteenth-century France emerged in the context of demographic shifts, the hardening of private property relations, and intensifying capitalist accumulation.[6] The increasing problematization of crime and delinquency generated a mushrooming strategic ensemble of interlinked discourses, disciplines, policies, institutions, practices, and tactics that Foucault ultimately called an apparatus, a *dispositif* (Rabinow and Rose 1994).

Applying Foucault's insights about the interrelations between discourses, knowledge, and power, scholars have launched powerful critiques of the development apparatus (Ferguson, 1985; Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). However, Hart (2001; 2009) has argued those trailblazing accounts disregarded the tight and formative relationships at key turning points between "Development," as a project of Third World interventions, and the on-going historical development of capitalism. In her view, both popular resistance and shifts in capitalism (crises, in *some* cases) are the multiply scaled motive forces of development's dialectic. As detailed below, the emergence of grassroots development must be approached with similar understandings of how the course of development and capitalism are dynamically interrelated.

By "grassroots development," I mean the apparatus—the strategic ensemble of discourses, practices, policies, institutionalizations, and tactics—that culminated into a "bottom up" alternative to the perceived failures of "top-down" development policies supported by governments and international agencies.[7] Development was supposed to

[6] The scholarship drawing on *Discipline and Punish* has ignored that the book is in many ways a story of primitive accumulation in which Foucault is drawing connections between the law, property, and the intensified onset of capitalist relations (1995, 80–91, 221, 270–300).

[7] I prefer "grassroots development" rather than related terms such as "sustainable" or "alternative" development. "Sustainable" has gained a primarily environmental connotation, while "alternative development" in Colombia refers to crop-substitution programs aimed at weaning farmers off of

grassroots, bottom-up, local, or from below—keywords of what Ferguson and Gupta would describe as claims of vertical encompassment (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ferguson 2006, 89–112). And, indeed, development praxis is often understood through the same topographical metaphors as statehood.

The shift toward grassroots development gained traction in aid institutions as a perceived alternative—or at least a corrective—to the failed one-size-fits-all neoliberal structural adjustment programs that had met with popular opposition in so much of the world in the 1980s and 1990s. A World Bank report from 1989, for instance, argued that the failures of "top-down," state-led modernization, and import-substitution models demanded a fundamental course-correction. "Alternative paths have been proposed," claimed the report. "They give primacy to agricultural development, and emphasize not only prices, markets and private sector activities, but also capacity building, grassroots participation, decentralization and sound environmental practices. So far such ideas have been accepted and tried only halfheartedly, if at all. The time has come to put them fully into practice" (World Bank 1989, 37; cf. Watts 1993).

Grassroots development gained further impulse from the decline of the Cold War, the toppling of authoritarian regimes along with the related political surge of NGOs and social movements (Buttigieg 2005). Structural changes in capitalism related to the deepening debt crisis, the exhaustion of import-substitution, and the rising intensity of free-market reforms also helped open the way (Hart 2001; 2009). Amid this confluence of factors, development policies and practices became problematized in new ways that helped further crystallize grassroots development through interlinked ideas about political participation and subsidiarity, environmental sustainability, as well as ethnic and women's empowerment.[8]

Environmental concern is a revealing proxy for gauging these broader shifts. For example, from 1985 to 1995 the number of environmental specialists on staff at the World Bank went from five to 162, while the Bank's loan portfolio for "environmental management" ballooned from $15 million to $990 million (R. Wade 1997, 611–612). Outside the halls of the World Bank, the discourses associated with grassroots development—whether women's empowerment, environmental conservation, or ethnic rights—increasingly helped thread together the work of community groups, NGOs, multilateral lenders, government agencies, experts, and activists.[9] In Colombia, for instance, the number of environmental NGOs shot from 26 in 1990, to more than 400 just four years later (Winograd 1994, 62).

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cultivating drug-related crops. Plus, "grassroots" usefully identifies the political rationality of the approach in terms of vertical encompassment vis-à-vis problematized "top-down" strategies (Ferguson 2006).

[8] With varying levels of criticism, several scholars have traced similar shifts resulting from these problematizations (R. Wade 1997; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Sheehan 1998; Hart 2001; Goldman 2005; Elyachar 2005; Asher 2009).

[9] This specific shift and its multiple "grassroots" articulations have been traced by a large body of scholarship (e.g. Escobar 1995; 2008; Hayden 2003; Appadurai 2001; Elyachar 2005; Asher 2009).

Within the entwined historical trajectories of capitalism and development, the ground began shifting decisively during the final throes of the "developmentalist state" in the 1970s. The internal contradictions of import-substitution, U.S. geopolitical anxieties, and rising anti-systemic movements in the 1960s all helped shift the idioms and practices of development toward "Basic Needs" (Hart 2009, 123). Itself an outgrowth from "community development" initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s, Basic Needs also coincided with projects of "integrated rural development" that became all the rage in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the wake of the evident failures of the Green Revolution and the ratcheting up of the Cold War, which was in many ways a war against Third World peasantries (Ruttan 1984; Escobar 1995). In Colombia, foreign aid-backed initiatives of "integrated rural development" sought to alleviate rural poverty by promoting small-scale production, producer cooperatives, credit programs, and local political empowerment (Restrepo 2010; Aparicio 2009). In fact, according to Arturo Escobar, Colombia hosted the first integrated rural development program applied on a nationwide scale (1995, 131).

Meanwhile, and with growing frequency, international summits, reports, and treaties mainly shepherded by the UN system began articulating development with new discursive registers. The UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, the Brundtland Report on "sustainable development" in 1987, and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit) in 1992 all helped frame a redemptive vision of development as both local and green (Hayden 2003). The growing chorus of reports, events, and treaties called for development to be more environmentally sustainable and more empowering of local communities, who would ideally take ownership of projects aimed at working through, rather than against, "the local" and its particularities (Mohan and Stokke 2000; Mosse and Lewis 2005).

Cultural and ethnic rights were integral parts of the new grassroots development ethos (Healy 2001), particularly when coupled, as it usually was, with notions of biodiversity conservation (Hayden 2003; Asher 2009). Signatories to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, for instance, agreed to "preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity" (UN, 1992). Ethnic and minority groups along with local communities, long seen as the principle "victims of progress" (Bodley 1975), were recast as stewards of nature and knowledges that could be harnessed rather than bulldozed by the development apparatus (Hayden, 2003). International Labor Organization's "Convention No. 169" ratified by most signatories in the 1990s further soldered the links between local development, environmental conservation, and ethnic rights (Van Cott 2000). Women, too, became not just targets of development policy, but key conduits through which many development goals were to be achieved.[10] Amid these shifts, a growing

[10] Several scholars have tracked the gendered turn—specifically, feminized—in development ideology and practice (Boserup 1970; Moser 1993), a trend that becomes all the more pronounced when paired with neoliberal rationales of responsible individual subjects (Molyneux 2006; Roy 2010) and "NGOization"

global army of NGOs emerged and helped attend to this expanded conception of stakeholders.

Positioned within vague notions of "civil society," the NGO sector exploded with the decline of the Cold War, the fall of authoritarian regimes in South America and Eastern Europe, and the travails of postcolonial statehood (Buttigieg 2005; Choudry and Kapoor 2013). The increasing role assumed by NGOs in steering development practice were justified by critiques from both ends of the political spectrum opposing the heavy-handed, top-down, and overly centralized dealings of the developmentalist state (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Besides picking up the slack from shrinking public services, which were being systematically starved of funds under structural adjustment programs (Petras 1997; Davis 2006), NGOs also became privileged agents of development's new-and-improved grassroots vision. Finally, the growing role of NGOs was also well-aligned with the "second generation reforms" of the Washington Consensus, emphasizing institution building, good governance, the rule of law, and social capital (Naím 1994; Williamson 2003).

However, it would be entirely misguided to see the emergence of grassroots development as the unilateral brainchild of conspiring international institutions, governments, and policymakers. Social movements, from radical to reformist, have been a determinant force in the torturous course of development since its colonial roots (Cooper 1997). Social movements' critiques and struggles are what gave many of the key discourses of grassroots development political traction in the first place. Transnational networks of NGOs and "new social movements" advocating diverse agendas—e.g. human rights, environmental conservation, labor, gender and ethnic rights—have been key actors in pushing the political horizons of development.[11] The results, of course, have been mixed.

International development agencies' escalating incorporation of green, gendered, local, and multicultural concerns indicates the extent to which these discourses have become powerful. But reducing the mobilization of grassroots discourses by mainstream institutions to a blanket case of co-optation is far too simplistic and would overlook the significant (and on-going) material and symbolic gains achieved through movements' mobilization of the discourses. Rather than cooptation, the concept of hegemony offers a much more subtle way of understanding these shifts. William Roseberry's point that Gramsci's notion of hegemony should "not be used to understand consent but to understand struggle" helps capture the elastic push-and-pull political struggles that have determined development discourse and practice (1994, 360).

(Choudry and Kapoor 2013). For better *and* for worse, conflict or post-conflict situations also trend toward this feminization of policy (Irvine and Hays-Mitchell 2012).

[11] The scholarship on this point is thematically varied (Jelin 1990; Escobar 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sheehan 1998; Goldman 2005)

"What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination," writes Roseberry. "That common material and meaningful framework is, in part, discursive: a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur" (1994, 361). Discourses of grassroots development are not some elaborate ideological hoax. In fact, when discourses cast development as green, gendered, multicultural, and local, they are point out precisely what is political at stake in struggles over development. It is through such hegemonic struggles that processes of rule—in all their inevitable contingency and incompleteness—are actually produced in practice (Hall 1977; Williams 1977).

Scholarship in Colombia has been particularly attuned to how articulations of green, gendered, local, and multicultural ideas about development have produced dramatically contradictory results. In some cases, the discourses have helped reconstitute political authority and capitalist-oriented development at moments when both faced crises of legitimacy, paving the way for violent and destructive land grabs.[12] Scholars working in Colombia have also debated the complex entanglements arising from subaltern groups' attempts—peasants, Afro-Colombians, women, and indigenous peoples—at turning what I am calling the "grassroots development apparatus" toward more radical, even liberatory, political horizons.[13] But this debate has failed to take into account how illegal armed groups—especially paramilitaries—have systematically repurposed the discourses and institutional forms most frequently used by these social movements as political footholds against violent forms of accumulation and rule.

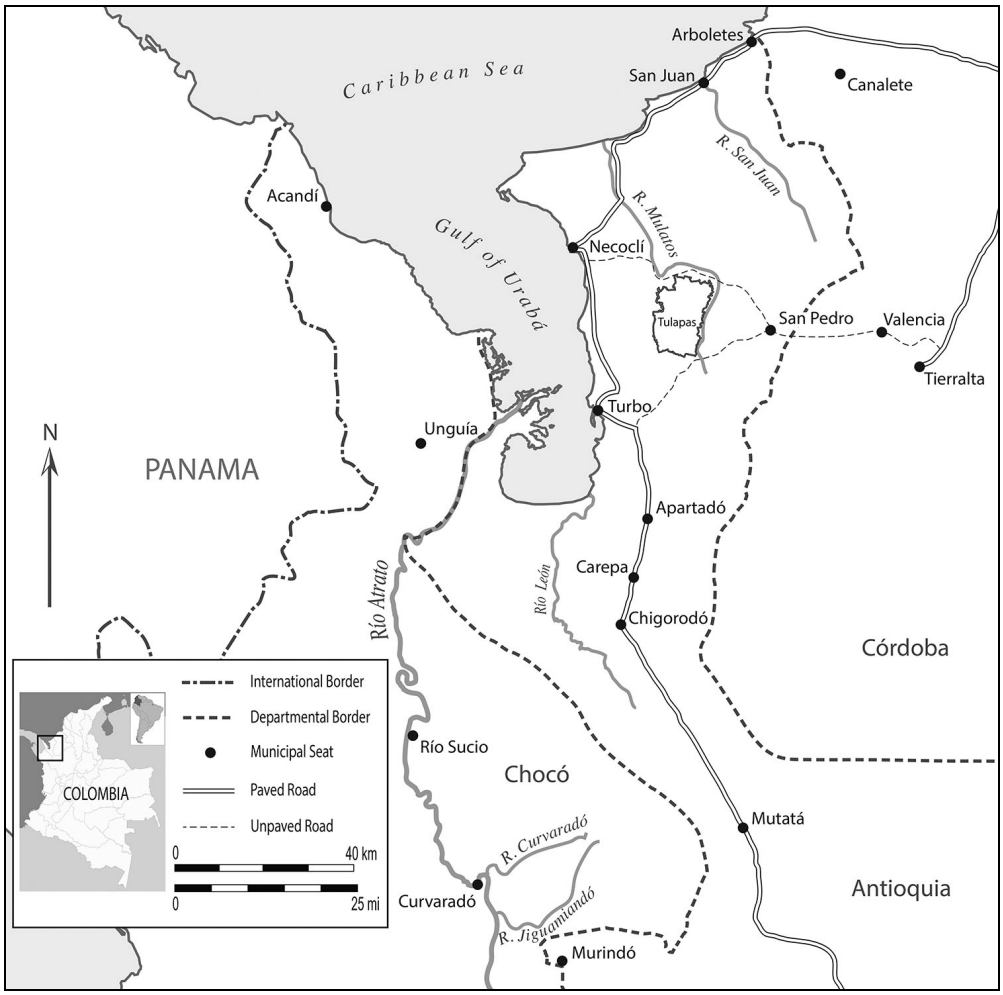
In what follows, I analyze how the grassroots development apparatus doubled as a frontier state formation that paramilitaries steered toward their own predatory ends in ways that became perversely compatible with "formal" projects of liberal statehood. This analytical task is all the more urgent given that a composite of recent World Bank reports have endorsed a renewed vision of grassroots development for addressing related problems of "fragile states," violent conflict, and land grabs, a combination of factors that Colombia has faced for decades, if not centuries—and perhaps nowhere more so than in Urabá.

The 'Afro-Colombian Oil Palm Project'

[12] (Ng'weno 2007; Oslender 2008; Asher and Ojeda 2009; Asher 2009; Ballvé 2012; Cárdenas 2012; Ojeda 2012)

[13] The literature from Colombia on the relationship between social movements and development is both extensive and influential (Escobar 1995; Escobar 2008; P. Wade 1999; Restrepo 2004; Agudelo 2005; Aparicio 2009; Asher 2009; Oslender 2010; Aparicio 2012).

Paramilitaries did more than simply *describe* their agribusiness projects as local, green, gendered, and multicultural. The discourses themselves accompanied and made possible a strategic ensemble of practices and institutional forms (an apparatus) through which the land grab was achieved. For the *paras*, putting the grassroots development apparatus to work in Urabá concretely meant they drew together a complex network, involving grassroots discourses, peasant associations and cooperatives, NGOs, private companies, as well as government and international aid programs. The Casa Castaño pioneered paramilitaries' brand of grassroots development that was later exported to other parts of the country with a strikingly similar sequence of events, institutional forms, and practices.[14] The paramilitary-backed oil palm project in the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó basins in Chocó near its border with Antioquia is an emblematic case.



The two places discussed in this chapter: the Curvaradó & Jiguamiandó (south) rivers and Tulapas (north).

[14] Although flickers of the model can be traced backed to Acdegam, the ranchers association in the Magdalena Medio, the Castaños took it to a whole new level in the 1990s. For instance, the tactics employed by the Casa Castaño in Chocó around oil palm and dispossession were later repeated as far away as Nariño and Sur de Bolívar.

The mostly Afro-Colombian campesinos of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó rivers fled their farms in 1997 when a joint operation between the Army and the *paras* tore through the two basins. Forced from their family farms, local campesinos took refuge in nearby towns and for the next several years were unable to visit their farms. When some of them began returning in 2002, they found a devastating sight. "All the work of my youth was gone," recalled an elderly campesino about the day he first glimpsed his razed farm.[15] Reciting an inventory he had apparently repeated often, he added, "110 heads of cattle, nine horses, my wife had tons of chickens, pigs… all of it gone."

Tidy and seemingly endless rows of oil palm saplings had replaced the messy patchwork of fields, pastures, and forest that had previously shaped his farm. The "private property" signs of one company were particularly ubiquitous: Urapalma. Urapalma helped coordinate about a dozen other agribusiness companies in developing an oil palm complex projected to encompass some 22,000 hectares of land.[16] Although the companies only managed about a quarter of this goal, they claimed ownership over 35,000 hectares. The stolen property was within the boundaries of the 101,057 hectares of collective property titled in 2000 to the mostly Afro-Colombian campesinos of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins under the ethnic rights provisions of the 1991 Constitution.

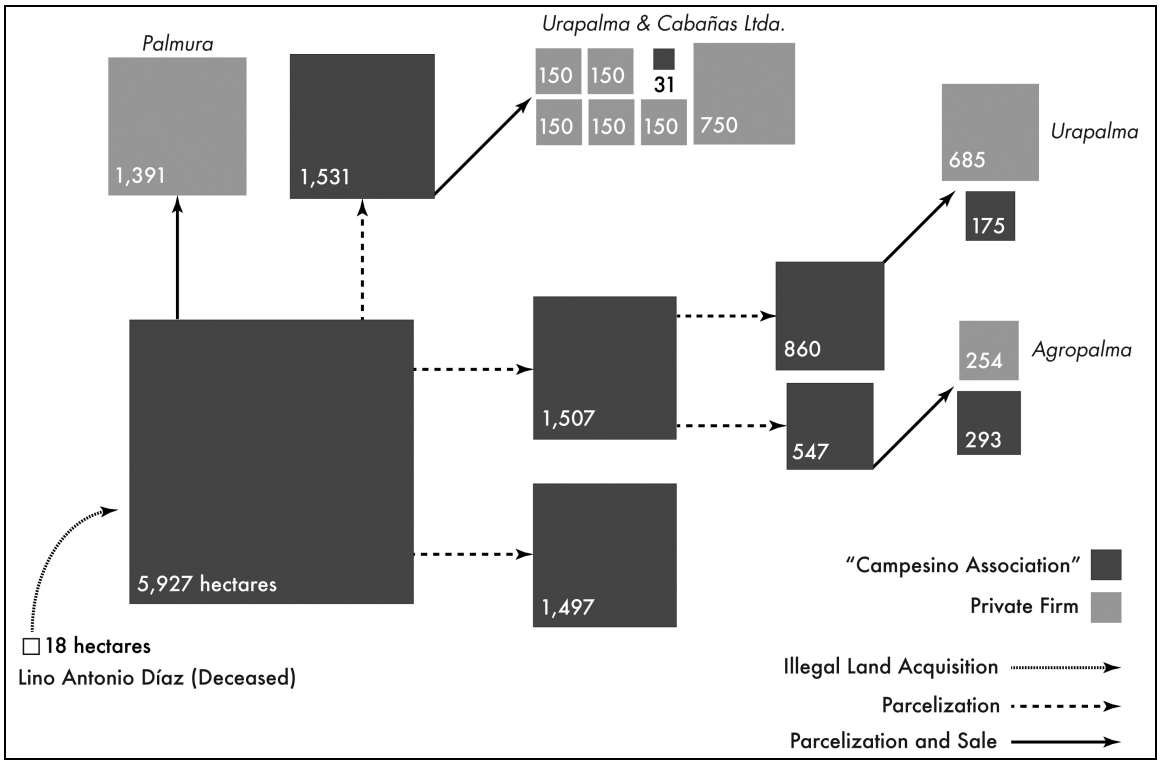
In an interview with a national news magazine in 2005, Vicente Castaño boastfully admitted: "In Urabá we [paramilitaries] have palm cultivations. I personally found the businessmen that invested in those projects." Castaño viewed the project as a process of state formation, saying, "The idea is to take rich people to invest in those kinds of projects in different parts of the country. By taking the rich to these zones the institutions of the state also arrive. Unfortunately, the institutions of the state only back those things when the rich are there. So you have to take the rich to all those regions of the country and that's a mission shared by all the [paramilitary] commanders."[17]

In these years, oil palm had already become the darling crop of national government agencies, receiving generous tax breaks and subsidies. The agribusiness sector had started banking on oil palm as a way of diversifying the country's agricultural portfolio while tapping into surging markets in food and biofuels.[18] Under President Uribe (2002-2010), one of the sector's fiercest advocates, oil palm cultivation in Colombia more than doubled from 170,000 to 400,000 hectares.[19] The country's oil palm industry—the world's fourth largest—has been dogged by accusations of

[15] Author interview with displaced campesino in Zona Humanitaria Caño Claro, Curvaradó, Chocó, May 23, 2008.
[16] 1 hectare (Ha.) ≈ 2.5 acres.
[17] "Habla Vicente Castaño," *Semana*, June 5, 2005.
[18] Author interview with Jens Mesa, President of Fedepalma, in Bogotá, June 18, 2008.
[19] Data culled from the annual statistical reports of the National Federation of Palm Growers (Fedepalma).

complicity with paramilitaries across the country. But the case of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó remains the most famous.

Along with simply forcing people to leave or coercing them into selling at giveaway prices, the Castaños crafted an intricate process for swindling the lands. The most notorious case involved Lino Antonio Díaz, a long-time campesino resident of Curvaradó who had an individual title to his land. (The Constitution's collective property provisions for ethnic communities, which mostly encompassed untitled lands, did not nullify previously existing individual private property titles.) Colombia's rural land management agency had awarded Díaz an individual private title for 18 hectares of untitled land (*tierras baldías*) in 1990. Ten years later, on May 27, 2000, Díaz supposedly filed paperwork at a public notary's office extending his property to 5,927 hectares. The enormous property gain was justified by alluvial "natural accession" in which the changing course of an adjacent river had enlarged his property by the improbable sum of almost 6,000 hectares.[20] Within the same bureaucratic transaction that day, Díaz sold the newly enlarged property for a nominal price to a group called the "Association of Small-Scale Growers of Oil Palm in Urabá."



Land laundering Lino Antonio Diaz's property.

[20] "Natural accession" is a legal term referring to the enlargement of a property due to biophysical changes in the land, such as when a river changes course or dries up.

The problem is that Díaz had been dead since 1995 when he drowned in the waters of the Jiguamiandó—five years before all the transactions (with his signatures) took place. The Association of Small-Scale Growers of Oil Palm in Urabá was a paramilitary front. The head of the Association at the time was Javier Morales, who later demobilized confirming his paramilitary status. Land registration papers show that Morales immediately parceled the hefty 5,927-hectare lot into four individual plots. Parcelization helps launder the land because each new parcel of land is assigned a new registry number (*matrícula inmobiliaria*), breaking up the detailed chain of transactions and ownership recorded in a property's registry documents.[21] Three out of the four resulting properties were then subdivided once again and some a third time, further muddling up the paper trail. In the end, through parcelization and sales, the Association transferred more than 90% of its 5,927 hectares to a handful of private palm companies, including Urapalma.

The government alleges that the farm of another dead campesino—Sixto Pérez—met a similar fate. This time, the dead man's land ballooned from 33 hectares to 4,241 hectares. Again, the miraculous enlargement was justified by alluvial "natural accession." Since the oil palm plantation was inside the bounds of an Afro-Colombian community's collective title—constitutionally protected as immutable and inalienable—natural accession was apparently the easiest way of "legally" encroaching on the communal lands. In the case of Perez's property, two other organizations of "small-scale producers" became the institutional vehicles for its parcelization and piecemeal sale. After divvying the tract into four plots, the "small-scale producers" dully sold the largest of the new parcels at 1,400 hectares to Palmadó, a private firm. But the most active "peasant organization" in the area was the Association of Agricultural Producers of Belén de Bajirá (Asoprobeba).

For several years, the director of Asoprobeba was Sor Teresa Gómez (Doña Tere), the honorary family member of the Castaños who managed their NGOs and social projects. In 2002, as the director of Asoprobeba, Doña Tere purchased 1,100 hectares of disputed land from a drug-trafficker that had worked for Pablo Escobar.[22] The following year, registry documents show this property, too, was broken up. Again, it appears to have been a token parcelization for laundering purposes, resulting in a plot of a mere 12 hectares and another of 1,088 hectares. From the larger property, Doña Tere ceded six-hectare plots to Asoprobeba's affiliated members, who gained indefinite use-rights over the lands under no-cost concession contracts with the association retaining legal ownership (*comodato*).[23] According to human rights groups and displaced campesinos, it was through these kinds of land concessions and through organizations like Asoprobeba that paramilitaries repopulated stolen lands. Asoprobeba recruited its members from neighboring villages and from groups of peasants displaced from other

[21] It is possible to trace numbers from one registry document to another all the way back to the original property of un-parceled land, but iterative parcelizations make it unlikely this ever happens.
[22] The drug traffickers name is Hugo Fenel Bernal Molano.
[23] "Contrato de Comodato," Asoprobeba, two pages, undated, obtained by author.

parts of the region.[24] With this organization's help, more than 600 families settled on the lands and were still there at the time of my research more than a decade after their arrival.[25]

Though rife with paradox it is not hard to imagine why paramilitaries seized upon "the NGO" as their favoured institutional façade. For one thing, it constitutes an act of sly political appropriation: Paramilitaries adopted the preferred institutional vehicle of their harshest critics—the human rights community. The choice also makes sense in that NGOs have positioned themselves—and been positioned—as uninterested do-gooders fostering "empowerment" and "participation" due to their "closeness" to "local communities." And on a practical level, even when compared to corporations, NGOs are generally subject to much laxer rules regarding transparency and the information they must report to authorities—ideal for paramilitaries' illicit choreography.

Besides serving as a legal-institutional structure for repopulating and controlling the stolen lands, the "small-scale" and "local" producer associations also helped justify access to soft loans from agricultural assistance programs under the rubric of what the government, the private sector, and aid agencies call "strategic alliances."[26] Strategic alliances are a form of corporate-peasant contract farming subsidized through grants, loans, and tax breaks. Loan documents show that with its peasant associations in place Urapalma secured the equivalent of $2.1 million dollars from the government's agrarian bank for its "system of associative strategic alliances."[27] Through this three-way "alliance," peasants contracted by private agribusinesses are supposed to provide land and labor—often organized into cooperatives or other associative arrangements—while the government and international organizations such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) offer capital and technical assistance.

Across the Third World, this form of contract farming gained wider application in the 1980s through another episode of the dialectical relations between capitalism and the development apparatus. With the onset of the debt crisis in the 1980s, USAID and the World Bank began aggressively pushing these so-called "dynamic partnerships" between small farmers and capital. With populist rhetoric about "putting peasants first" and "targeting the rural poor," the internationally backed schemes were supposed to boost agricultural exports at a time when developing countries were burdened with debt and sapped of foreign exchange (Watts 1994). In Colombia, these strategic alliances gained further impetus in the following decades through the "state-building" development initiatives backed by Plan Colombia—itself a frontier state formation.

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[24] "El fantasma de Sor Teresa Gómez en territorio chocoano," Verdad Abierta, November 5, 2013.
[25] The numbers are from "Caracterización Juridica y saneamiento de los territories colectivos de Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó," Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (Incoder), July 12, 2012.
[26] In Colombia, they also go by the name of "productive alliances" or simply "productive projects," but for consistency I stick with "strategic alliances."
[27] Letters dated April 20, 2001, and September 27, 2002, from the Banco Agrario de Colombia to the President of Urapalma's Board of Directors.

In 1999, the office of then-President Andrés Pastrana issued the framing document of what would become Plan Colombia. Subtitled, "Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State," the policy paper's basic premise for Plan Colombia was the absence of the state (Presidencia 1999). "There is no question," stated one of the opening paragraphs, "that Colombia suffers from the problems of a state yet to consolidate its power…. The recovery of this capacity of the State requires a process of community and institution building." In Gramscian terms, state-building was to be operationalized through a stronger marriage between civil and political society, and strategic alliances were envisioned as a cornerstone of the process. As a key pillar of Plan Colombia's community-oriented "alternative development" efforts, the strategic alliances were supposed to give "peasant farmers and their families" a legal alternative to drug-related crops. Helping these efforts along, President Pastrana pushed his national development plan through congress that same year, specifically making "strategic alliances" a national imperative.[28] Since 2002, USAID has spent about $75 million dollars a year through Plan Colombia's Alternative Development portfolio.

In choppy English, Plan Colombia's framing document was laden with grassroots discourses, claiming the agribusiness alliances would promote "economically-feasible environmental protection activities designed to conserve forest areas and end the dangerous expansion of illegal crops across the Amazon basin and Colombia's vast natural parks-areas of immense biodiversity." The strategic alliances would offer "sustainable, integrated and participatory productive projects combined with the required infrastructure." All of which would be especially targeted at regions that "combine high levels of conflict with low levels of State presence, fragile social capital and serious environmental degradation" (Presidencia, 1999). In short, as a frontier state formation, the strategic alliance model combined all the key strategic elements of the grassroots development apparatus: its discourses (green, participatory, and local) and its standard institutional linkages between cooperatives, NGOs, international aid, and multiply scaled governmental entities.

In 2003, Urapalma seized the opportunity and applied for a grant from USAID under Plan Colombia's alternative development program. The six-page draft of Urapalma's application was titled, "The Afro-Colombian African Oil Palm Cultivation and Development Project."[29] Although Urapalma left its proposal pending with USAID and apparently never received the grant due to missing paperwork, the application contains revealing details about how the paramilitary-backed company situated the project within the grassroots development apparatus to both legitimate and operationalize the project.[30] In the application, Urapalma claimed its palm project was the product of a "united effort by a group of farmers that in 1999"—i.e. the height of paramilitary

[28] The National Development Plan was passed as Law No. 508 of 1999.

[29] "Proyecto afrocolombiano de siembra y desarrollo de palma Africana de aceite: Extractora bajiá S.A. & Consejo Comunitario La Larga – Tumaradó," draft application to USAID, obtained by author, July 13, 2003.

[30] A journalistic article I wrote exposed USAID's negligent financing of paramilitary-linked oil palm projects under Plan Colombia (Ballvé 2009).

terror—"set the long-term goal of implementing a viable, environmentally and economically sustainable business in the region of Urabá."

Urapalma further argued, "[The] timing is ideal for establishing a sustainable social program, as this project proposes, that could become an exemplary model of development between business owners and communities, co-participating in decision making and responsibility while working side-by-side." The application emphasized the absolute subsidiarity of the project by repeatedly referring to beneficiaries as "small-scale producers" and "families." Reference to "families" should be understood as a gender-coded term, resting on deep-seated normative assumptions about the role of women in the division of non-wage household labor and social reproduction (Molyneaux, 2006; Razavi and Hassim, 2006). The application's constant reference to families, therefore, did three-times the work: it framed the project as local, bottom-up, and inclusive of women.

Among the many handwritten edits introduced into the draft application by a company employee was one that apparently tried to shore up its green credentials. Next to a list of justifications for the project, the editor inserted an extra bullet point: "Environmental: Reforestation in areas degraded due to lack of [economic] options." And playing to USAID's counterinsurgency and anti-drug mission under Plan Colombia, the application notes, "This zone is susceptible to all kinds of influence by the illegal armed groups, who see in the region a corridor for trafficking drugs and arms, given the area's waterways and dense vegetation." Finally, the application concludes stating the company will give "juridical form" to this "strategic alliance," which "by working collectively hand-in-hand with the community, hopes to produce a glimpse of what we all long for: A peaceful and developed Colombia."

One of Urapalma's employees told authorities that company executives sent him to Bogotá to help officials from the government's rural development agency (Incoder) write "Resolution 1516" in 2005.[31] He said he spent three days helping the officials write the resolution, which spelled out a legal structure for the "strategic alliances" in ethnic territories. As a way of retroactively giving Urapalma's land claims legal fundament, the resolution called for "entrepreneurial collaboration and productive sustainable development… allowing afro-descendant communities in the country to create collaborative [*formas asociativas y solidarias*] forms of production for the sustainable use of the natural resources in their territories."

The grassroots discourses were much more than a rhetorical smokescreen. They enabled and were accompanied by a whole set of attendant practices, institutional formations, and linkages making the land grab possible. Urapalma's activities demonstrate that it was precisely the local and participatory grassroots mechanisms of the strategic alliance structure that made it such an appealing vehicle for the seizure

[31] Signed affidavit by former Urapalma employeesubmitted to Attorney General's Office, 21 pages, February 1, 2007. Resolución 1516 de 2005, Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (Incoder).

and laundering of lands. Through their combination of NGOs and peasant associations, the strategic alliances provided paramilitaries with a readymade institutional infrastructure already articulated with an established set of grassroots development discourses and practices. Vicente Castaño and his agribusiness allies literally put the grassroots development apparatus to work. All they had to do was plug in.

They combined legal maneuvers, outright fraud, narco-capital, and coercion with grassroots discourses and institutional arrangements (e.g. the strategic alliances and peasant associations). As paramilitaries situated their projects within some of development's most contentious terrain—local politics, environmental conservation, ethnic rights, and collective property regimes—the grassroots development apparatus became their very own anti-politics machine.[32] This model for a grassroots development land grab may have been pioneered by the Casa Castaño, but it was perfected by El Alemán and his Bloque Elmer Cárdenas (BEC).

Forest Guardians: 'We Got a Project' and the 'Arriving' State

In June 2003, about a year into President Uribe's first administration, his "High Commissioner for Plan Colombia," Sandra Suárez, began advertising a new alternative development program. The new initiative, called "*Programa Familias Guardabosques*" (Forest Guardian Families Program), was a conditional cash-transfer program aimed at reducing drug-related crop production.[33] Under *Guardabosques*, campesino families signed contracts with the government promising they would keep their lands free of illicit crops and promote "the natural reforestation and the conservation of strategic ecosystems" (Acción Social, 2007). In exchange, affiliated families received $833,000 pesos—about $300 to 350 dollars—every two months for three years along with "social, environmental, and technical assistance."

Guardabosques was jointly run and funded by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Acción Social, a now-defunct government agency overseeing development and social welfare programs that answered directly to the President's office. *Guardabosques* squared perfectly with Uribe's carefully crafted populist persona as a hardworking man of the people with a soft spot for the countryside. His populism, a combination of authoritarian militarism and pastoral paternalism, was summed up in his personal motto and campaign slogan: "*mano firme, corazón grande*," meaning a "firm hand" against guerrillas and a "big heart" for the plight of common people. After taking office, he laid out his vision for the country in an elaborate four-year development plan titled, "Towards a Communitarian State." It described ideal statehood as participatory,

[32] The "anti-politics machine" phrase is of course James Ferguson's (1985).
[33] *Guardabosques* is a product of what Peck and Theodore (2010) call "fast" policy. They track the transnational movement of cash-transfers programs from South-South and South-North. Guardabosques shows technocratic fast policy can also move from urban to rural, and from poverty to security issues.

austere, managerial, efficient, and, decentralized. Besides promises about "recovering state authority," the 300-page manifesto also proposed to "recover the *feeling of state presence* in the regions" (DNP 2003, 75, emphasis added). One way that "feeling of state presence in the regions" was to be achieved was through alternative development programs such as *Guardabosques*.

Uribe's plan laid out an unmistakably grassroots vision of the links between development, security, and state-building: "Our Development strategy in conflict zones draws on elements from Plan Colombia … but incorporates a novel aspect by articulating the concept of alternative development with an emphasis on regional development based on increased productivity and the strengthening of institutions and communities as well as the improvement of physical and social infrastructures" (DNP 2003, 68). Besides boosting "state presence" in symbolic and material forms, the alternative development programs also sought to strengthen institutions and communities as well as the relationships between them. One of the ways all of this would be accomplished was through an "emphasis on [drug-related] crop substitution through forestry development projects and environmental services backed by conditional subsidies," or what would become *Guardabosques* (DNP 2003, 55).

Since Sandra Suárez first began publicizing *Guardabosques* back in 2003, more than 100,000 families have "graduated" from the program (they actually receive "diplomas"). As soon as El Alemán heard about the program, he gathered a group of *Junta* presidents from the settler communities in Tulapas and nearby areas. "I'm going to send you all to go see this lady in Bogotá," he told them, offering to pay for their airfare. "Tell her you paid for the tickets selling pigs or something, but make clear that the communities want to eradicate coca."[34] Community leaders admitted to me that the BEC paid for their trip and encouraged them to join the program.[35] When I asked El Alemán why he backed *Guardabosques*, he claimed he had always tried turning campesinos away from coca. But I suspect that with the demobilization looming on the horizon, it was also, if not primarily, a way of shoring up his anti-drug credentials to guard against U.S. extradition

One of the Senators the BEC helped elect through *Urabá Grande* brokered the meeting between Suárez and the community leaders from Tulapas.[36] El Alemán sent along his most trusted PDS, the one known as "Cocinero," who posed as a community leader at the meeting. Further bolstering their grassroots legitimacy, the leaders came under the banner of the *Asociación Comunitaria de Urabá y Córdoba* (Asocomún), the

[34] Author interview with Freddy Rendón, paramilitary chief (alias, "El Alemán"), in Itagüí, Antioquia, September 17, 2012. He has always insisted his only role in the drug trade was taxing the shipments of traffickers passing through his territories, but pending indictments in U.S. courts on drug charges suggest otherwise.

[35] Author interview with anonymous campesinos in Turbo, Antioquia, October 30, 2013.

[36] The *parapolítico* who brokered the meeting was Senator Antonio Valencia Duque: Corte Suprema de Justicia, Sala de Casación Penal, Proceso No. 30126, Acta No. 419, December 14, 2010.

self-styled association of allied *Juntas de Acción Comunal* created by El Alemán's brother. (The brother, Jairo Rendón, who went by the alias of Germán Monsalve, was a fervent evangelical who gave out Bibles at Asocomún's meetings. In 2009, he ended up in a US jail on money laundering charges.) Cocinero said that after 15 minutes of negotiations with Suárez, she agreed to make Tulapas the site of a *Guardabosques* pilot project.[37] A few months later, she made a trip to Necoclí, where she was greeted with a throng of campesinos hoisting coca branches into the air.

More than 3,200 families in Tulapas and its immediate surroundings joined the *Guardabosques* program, uprooting around 1,000 hectares of coca during 2004. Cocinero said that on some days the community eradication brigades were short-staffed, so some of the BEC's soldiers dressed as civilians helped rip out the crops. Although Acción Social and UNODC funded the project, Asocomún and Urabá's regional development corporation (Corpourabá) were contracted to manage the anti-drug project on the ground. In a video shot by Asocomún when the manual eradication began, the campesinos pulling the plants can be heard yelling, "We got a project! The project arrived! [*¡Llego el proyecto!*] We're through with coca in Urabá!"

As intended, the "arrival" of the project was symbolically and materially hailed as a "state presence." In my conversations with ex-combatants, campesinos, landowners, and government officials, the absence or presence of the state was often described through various conjugations of the Spanish verb "*llegar*" (arrive), which can also mean, "reach," so the use of this verb had both temporal and spatial connotations. On countless occasions, I was told some variant of "*aquí no ha llegado el estado*," meaning, "the state hasn't reached here." Besides claiming an historical and geographical absence—an entire region abandoned in both time and space—the phrase also expresses an expectant spatio-temporal inevitability: the presence of the Leviathan *here* is only a matter of *time*. The feeling of state presence only came after the BEC and Asocomún had helped bring a project, which is how one campesina described it:

> El Alemán would come around from time to time, especially during the *Guardabosques* program. Once *Guardabosques* began, he was much more on the lookout for us (*más pendiente*) and brought us lots of projects. At the beginning, the only beneficiaries were going to be the people growing coca. Or, you know, you would only get included because you were friends with so and so in the *Junta*. But, no, he made sure everyone got the subsidies, so there wouldn't be that kind of jealousy.[38]

Another campesino beneficiaries of *Guardabosques* explained, "Asocomún has been really good to us … because the state hadn't wanted to help us and in fact hadn't even arrived yet, so Asocomún arrived instead." Asocomún was registered with Urabá's

[37] Author interview with demobilized paramilitary and former PDS "Cocinero" (pseudonym) in Necoclí, Antioquia, December 6, 2013, and September 23, 2013.
[38] Author interview with anonymous campesina in Necoclí, Antioquia on December 7, 2013.

Chamber of Commerce as an association of *Juntas* "promoting the integral and sustainable community development," making it an ideal "partner" for *Guardabosques* as a local, green, and participatory alternative development project. The arrival of the state was consummated in a combination of stagecraft and statecraft by a personal visit to Tulapas from President Uribe in March 19, 2004. He arrived looking like a wealthy hacienda owner out of a García Márquez novel: dressed in all white linens, sporting a long-sleeve *guayabera* and a folksy *sombrero vueltiao*, a traditional hat from the Caribbean coast. Standing on a stage in front of thousands of campesino settlers, Uribe handed out the first $833,000-peso check ($320 dollars at that day's exchange rate). He was joined on stage with *Urabá Grande*'s Senator and one of the Quadruplets from Congress. In his speech, Uribe said *Guardabosques* was money well spent, preferring that "the little money the state has" (*la platica del estado*) end up in the hands of families rather than "being wasted on state bureaucracies."[39] He invited the *Guardabosques* families to help him "defeat terrorism, corruption, and laziness"

With Asocomún at the helm of the project and El Alemán's PDSs in the shadows, the *Juntas* became the grassroots institutional hubs for *Guardabosques*. Under the program, each *Junta* organized a "Community Control and Social Verification Committee." The job of each *Junta*'s committee was to verify that the jurisdiction of a neighboring *Junta* was staying free of coca. Making oversight once-removed, as one campesina explained, "meant you weren't dealing the chicken in your own yard."[40] Every two months, agents from the local UNODC office would make their own verification visits. When asked about Asocomún's role in the project, some campesinos complained the NGO took a 10 percent cut from the bimonthly checks. But the *Guardabosques* project itself was still seen as unqualified godsend. In one village, a *barrio* of houses built with money from the program still bears the name "El Bosque" in honor of the program.

By the local, green, gendered, and multicultural metrics of the grassroots development apparatus, *Guardabosques* was an unequivocal success story, according to joint-reports from Acción Social and UNODC. The agencies, for instance, lauded how the program made anti-drug efforts and environmental conservation symbiotic endeavors. Reports said that besides keeping four million hectares free of coca nationwide, *Guardabosques* had also helped conserve more than 270,000 hectares of primary forests, reforested another 53,000, and created "green incomes and jobs in socially and environmentally strategic areas."[41] By the 2007 cycle of *Guardabosques*, indigenous and Afro-Colombian families made up nearly a quarter its beneficiaries, but it was the gendered dimensions of the program that were particularly pronounced.

[39] Speech by President Alvaro Uribe in Necoclí, Antioquia, March 19, 2004.
[40] Author interview with anonymous campesina in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 25, 2013.
[41] Statistics from UNODC, "Encuentro PCI 2009: Siete años construyendo legalidad," August 22, 2009. And the quote is from Acción Social (2010a, 16).

After the first year of the program, Acción Social said it began "privileging women as signers of the [cash-transfer] contracts, as a way of guaranteeing better use of the [cash] incentive" (2010a, 18, 31). After the first few years of the program, women made up a two-thirds majority of signatories. Uribe had suggested this focus during his speech in Tulapas, where he recommended "the women of the house handle this bit of money [*la platica*] so it doesn't end up going toward beer and drink." As in the oil palm projects in Chocó, "the family" was mobilized as an implicitly gendered policy framework as well as a way of signaling both the absolute subsidiarity of the program and its incorporation of a "vulnerable" population. In the case of *Guardabosques*, however, the instrumentalization of women as conduits of good governance, the rule of law, and grassroots development was explicit. The project conformed to a broader trend identified by feminist scholarship in which development assistance has been increasingly "channeled through families as the unit of entitlement with women often required to conform to dominant stereotypes of 'good' wives and mothers" (Razavi and Hassim 2006, 26; also Molyneux 2006; Roy 2010). *Guardabosques* was clearly reflective of this problematic trend: it cast women as the responsible, money-saving, micro-enterprising drivers of what it obsessively referred to as a "culture of legality."

Despite taking credit for a blossoming culture of legality, *Guardabosques* served a confluence of interests, most of them serving the drug-trafficking paramilitaries. El Alemán beefed up his anti-drug credentials against extradition. As the site of a multilateral development program, the *paras*' landholdings in Tulapas gained another layer of legitimacy. By backing the arrival of a project, the BEC shored up its support and territorial hegemony among Tulapas' settler communities, who in turn enjoyed the benefits of the program. The Uribe administration, meanwhile, boosted its coca-eradication numbers upon which hung millions in U.S. military aid. And, finally, Acción Social and UNODC could justify themselves with a pat on the back for the multidimensional grassroots success of their alternative development programs, having promoted a culture of legality in a "lawless" frontier zone.

In practice, Acción Social and UNODC tried cultivating this culture of legality by complementing *Guardabosques* with longer-term agricultural projects, which came in the form of strategic alliances supported by Plan Colombia through USAID's alternative development program. The alliances and *Guardabosques* formed the backbone of the Uribe administration's re-emboldened anti-drug "Alternative Development Program." All over the country, money and expertise from government entities, international donors, NGOs, and the private sector were fused in strategic alliance with the land and labor of campesinos organized into cooperatives.

When *Guardabosques* began in 2003, USAID decided Tulapas would make an ideal proving ground for its strategic alliances. Calling it a "co-investment opportunity," USAID proposed that its agricultural projects in Tulapas be jointly financed with its own grants, investments from the private sector, and funds pooled by communities using a portion of their *Guardabosques* payments. The US agency predicted Tulapas' chances of

"early success and demonstration of the benefits" would make it a replicable showcase of national anti-drug programs dovetailing seamlessly with Plan Colombia's alternative development portfolio (USAID 2004, 6).

In theory, Acción Social, USAID, and UNODC claimed *Guardabosques* and the strategic alliances would foster a culture of legality by promoting social capital, entrepreneurship, land tenure, environmental conservation, and local institution building—that is, many of grassroots development's component parts. One USAID report said the programs would "ensure that [recipient] communities effectively transit into legality and reinforce the legitimacy of the State" (2009, 99). Similarly, an Acción Social audit of its projects in Tulapas claimed the programs fostered a culture of legality by "strengthening local institutions"—specifically citing the *Juntas* and Urabá's regional development corporation—while also "boosting the State's credibility and legitimating national, departmental, and municipal institutions among the communities" (2007, 107). In other words, these national and international agencies all viewed their grassroots development projects as vehicles for state-building among communities that lacked a "feeling of state presence." The production of governable spaces was meant to work through the production of governable subjects—docile, cooperative, and entrepreneurial.

The programs were not only designed to strengthen community and government institutions in equal measure, they also aimed to multiply the institutional linkages between them—that is, across civil and political societies. Since combatant groups often positioned themselves as arbiters of those relationships, *Guardabosques* and the strategic alliances were supposed to break the "panorama of illegality" through which groups like the BEC maintained "clientelistic and authoritarian relations" of protection with coca-growing communities (Acción Social 2007, 25). By inciting the creation of community organizations and cooperatives, the government expected its programs would reverse the "low levels of social capital (in some cases negative)" in places like Tulapas by fostering trust, solidarity, and community savings (2007, 26). Expressing its own version of frontier state formation, Acción Social claimed, "Consolidating a culture of legality in these zones depends on the state's presence through the institutional articulations generated by [the programs]" (2008, 25). With an eye on their coming demobilization, the *paras*' embraced these grassroots-oriented development programs, turning them toward their own predatory political-economic ends. The BEC even made grassroots development the foundation of its post-demobilization proposals.

Post-Paramilitary Visions: 'Project for a Social Alternative'

At the first meeting officially commencing the demobilization talks between Uribe's peace commissioner and the national paramilitary leadership in January 2003, El Alemán left the table claiming the other bloc's were ready to sign off on their "collective suicide." By then, he was already on the outs with the majority of the narco-leaning

factions of the central command led by Vicente Castaño—a rift that became irreparable when they murdered his mentor and strongest ally, Carlos Castaño. After leaving the bargaining table, the BEC began separate talks with the government and ultimately negotiated an independent demobilization agreement.

El Alemán's civilian advisor and spokesperson during the negotiations was Juan García, a former PhD student of philosophy and the brother of a slain paramilitary chief (also killed by the narcos). García and El Alemán presented an elaborate post-demobilization plan to the government in 2004 named the *Proyecto de Alternatividad Social* (PASO, Project for a Social Alternative). On paper, the PASO was a wide-ranging even utopian proposal that envisioned displaced peasants, demobilized paramilitaries, landless campesinos, and private agribusinesses all working collectively on "donated" lands toward reconciliation and shared prosperity. Victims groups immediately criticized the proposal, calling it an inversion of justice and arguing that implementation of the PASO would effectively convert victims into hired help on lands stolen from them with their former victimizers as bosses. As it turns out, they were not far off the mark.

When asked what made the BECs proposals such as the PASO different from those of the other paramilitary blocs, García responded, "The [BEC's] process is aimed at the grassroots […*tiene una proyeccion a la base social*]." Explaining what he meant by this, he spelled out the strategic alliance structure:

> The idea is for productive projects to be developed for the communities and for lands to be acquired with the help of wealthy ranchers (*ganaderos*). With the land as capital, the labor will come from campesinos and reinserted [i.e. demobilized] paramilitaries. El Alemán's goal is for the communities to participate in the expansion of palm, banana, rubber, and teak cultivation.[42]

Echoing the grassroots components of the *Guardabosques* program, one of the bloc's communiqués from those days also emphasized that the PASO would promote "community integration" through "peaceful and sustainable development through self-sustainable eco-forestry farms."[43] Built on the foundations laid by the *Guardabosques* program, the PASO sparked the creation of strategic alliances around rubber and teak production.

Working through the grassroots development apparatus, the PASO was the BEC's post-paramilitary vision for Urabá. Unofficially, it became the Uribe administration's policy program for the region. His administration and the UNODC created an initiative called the "*Gerencia Social de Urabá*," which was simply their name

[42] León, Juanita. "El paso del Alemán," *Semana*, September 18, 2005.
[43] Communiqué from the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas to Luis Carlos Restrepo, the President's High Commissioner for Peace, March 24, 2004.

for the coordinated programs originally laid out by the PASO.[44] The head of the UNODC hailed the initiative as "a model that should be … replicated in other parts of the country scourged by criminal organizations."[45] Looking back on the PASO, El Alemán proudly noted, "Our proposals were fundamentally incorporated by the government, putting it at the threshold of a particularly interesting and hopeful process in which our disarmament and demobilization was not an end-goal in itself, but rather the point of departure for a pilot project promoting a genuine reconstruction of the social fabric."[46] But the PASO also served much more deviant purposes. Wired through the grassroots development apparatus, it also helped launder vast landholdings.

The BEC had, in fact, been preparing for this moment. In the years preceding the demobilization, its operatives began a series of legal maneuvers aimed at securing landholdings. And the grassroots development apparatus provided the perfect institutional framework for doing so in the form of strategic alliances. The BEC scrambled its PDSs who began orchestrating a series of land acquisitions and coordinating the grassroots institutions that would form the basis of the PASO (e.g. the *Juntas*, campesino cooperatives, and NGOs). Once again, grassroots development and land laundering went hand-in-hand. One of the BEC's foot soldiers testified El Alemán gave him the order in 2002 to start "resolving the problem with the lands" in Tulapas.[47] By "resolve," they meant legally reconstructing what was until then their illegal and *de facto* possession of the properties. In the end, paramilitary operatives and their allied agribusiness companies "legalized"—that is, laundered—over 20,000 hectares of land in Tulapas, much of which found its way into the PASO's internationally backed strategic alliances.[48]

Although the land grab in Tulapas physically began 1995, when the Casa Castaño displaced the area's native residents, the bureaucratic machinations that "legally" stole the properties took place over the course of a decade. In fact, most of the transactions did not take place—or were not formally registered—until 2002 and tapered off by

[44] Author interview Antonio García, lawyer and paramilitary civilian adviser, in Medellín, Antioquia, September 20,2013. El Alemán has also confirmed the origins of the idea, which is also detailed in an official report (Acción Social 2010b).

[45] "Colombia es líder mundial en erradicación de cultivos ilícitos, destacó la ONU," Secretaría de Prensa, Presidencia de la República, August 22, 2009.

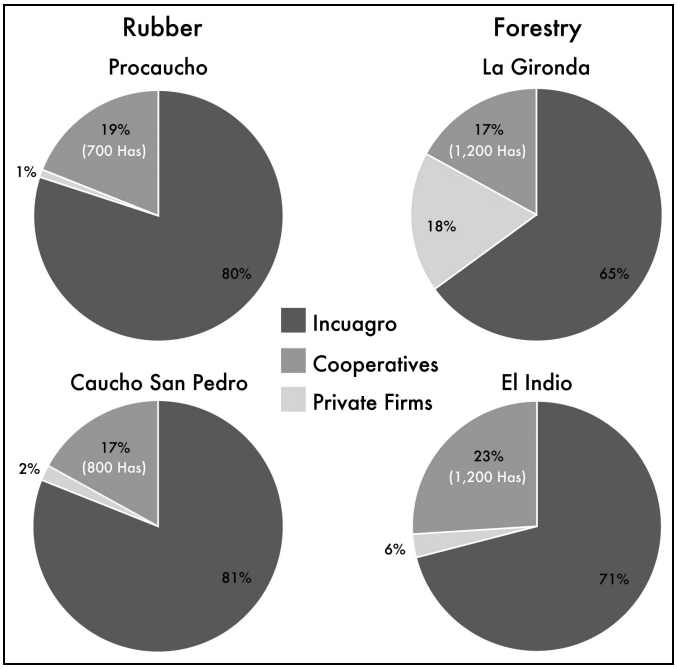
[46] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 6, 2007.

[47] Audencia Cancelación de Títulos Fraudulentos, Postulado Fredy Rendón Herrera, Tribunal Superior de Medellín, Sala Justicia y Paz, September 16, 2011.

[48] I reconstructed the details of the land grab in Tulapas by triangulating information gathered from government investigations, paramilitary testimonies, court transcripts, publicly available land documents, and interviews. All sources are cited when relevant. The most useful document for these purposes was a August 11, 2011, report from the Superintendencia de Notariado y Registro auditing the Urabá branch of the Oficina de Registro de Instrumentos Públicos (ORIP) in Turbo, an government institution that registers properties and property transactions. Across its more than 500 pages, the report tracks suspicious land transactions overseen by the ORIP in Turbo. Some of my findings have appeared as journalistic pieces on Verdad Abierta (http://www.verdadabierta.com), a news website all about the armed conflict sponsored by Colombia's main weekly newsmagazine.

2006, a time period coinciding with the *paras*' slow-motion demobilization. As with the oil palm projects in Chocó, the *paras*' main agent for "negotiating" the land deals in Tulapas was Doña Tere. From her position as the director of Funpazcor, the NGO created by the Castaños, she developed an elaborate set of legal maneuvers for laundering the land seizures.

First, she enlisted a handful of intermediaries, one of them a well-connected resident of Tulapas, to set up the deals. Through these intermediaries and with the complicity of corrupt public notaries, she gained power of attorney from the displaced peasants. Legally empowered, she then sold the lands to third-party individuals, some of them supposedly affiliated with Funpazcor, which had a "membership." Many of these new landowners then immediately resold the properties to paramilitary-linked agribusiness companies, while others signed usufruct concession contracts giving the firms exclusive use-rights over the lands. By keeping the massive land seizure split among several front "owners" (*testaferros*), Doña Tere avoided raising flags with the authorities. In money laundering, this practice of keeping amounts small enough to fly below radar is called "smurfing." As she had done in Chocó with the oil palm project, she also parceled out or agglomerated properties as a way of cutting up the paper trail. El Alemán, meanwhile, sent out a handful of PDSs and intermediaries who applied the same formula for "resolving the problems with the lands."



The initial source of shareholder equity in the strategic alliance companies (Has = Hectares).

In the process, four companies all of a sudden became major landholders in Tulapas and its immediate surroundings: two rubber companies (Procaucho and Caucho San Pedro) and two forestry companies (La Gironda and El Indio). All of the companies, except for one, were established in December 2005, just three months before the BEC's

demobilization. Covering almost 4,000 hectares of land, the rubber and teak projects followed the strategic alliance model dictated by the PASO with orthodoxy. Between them, the four companies received a total of $11 million dollars in start-up capital from Incuagro, a mixed company bankrolled through Acción Social with loans from the Inter-American Development Bank.[49] Through its alternative development program, USAID donated $445,000 in grants to the forestry companies.[50] As for their part in the strategic alliances, campesinos' stake in the alliance was exercised collectively through newly formed cooperatives. Each cooperative's stake in the company was determined according to the land-acreage that its respective members' ceded in usufruct to the ventures.

The people registered as members of the cooperatives were a mix: some were campesinos that had resettled Tulapas after the paramilitary incursion, while the others were soon-to-be-demobilized paramilitaries. On paper, the PASO was shaping up exactly as the BEC had proposed at the negotiating table: "With the land as capital, the labor will come from campesinos and reinserted [i.e. demobilized] paramilitaries. El Alemán's goal is for the communities to participate in the expansion of palm, banana, rubber, and teak cultivation." Just days before the legal constitution of the rubber and teak companies, Secretario, the "general coordinator" of PDSs, put a bunch of land titles in the name of the future members of the cooperatives. Asocomún then assisted the new "landowners" through the process of creating the cooperatives. In other words, rather than landowners fabricating cooperatives, the cooperatives were made up of landowners fabricated by the BEC. The promotional materials of the companies and their agreements with funders describe the rubber and teak plantations as environmentally friendly, bottom-up, and cooperative-driven projects that help avoid the spread of illicit crops. Asocomún boasted in a press release that its "model" in Tulapas had "become a laboratory of peace and social inclusion where excluded groups had used the power of collective action for generating peaceful spaces of coexistence through new sources of economic production that are both self-sustaining and environmentally friendly."[51]

The largest new landowner in Tulapas was the Fondo Ganadero de Córdoba, a mixed private-public company involved in the cattle trade. Partly owned by the national Ministry of Agriculture, the company also counted the Castaño brothers as shareholders. After stacking the board of directors with their cronies, the Castaños lobbied the Fondo Ganadero into buying the properties in Tulapas with Doña Tere's help.[52] In 1996, for

[49] Information on the companies was culled from publicly available corporate documents on file at the Urabá Chamber of Commerce.

[50] Despite having interviewed USAID officials in Bogotá for past projects, they refused my request for an interview on this subject, insisting I send my questions about the projects by email. After sending my list of questions, USAID again declined to respond. The grants appear in "Second Quarter Report FY 2007: MIDAS Program," April 30, 2007.

[51] Carlos Alberto Bohórquez, "Tulapas: Horizonte de esperanza," Asocomún, press release, January 10, 2006.

[52] "Compra irregular de tierras en el Fondo Ganadero de Córdoba," *Verdad Abierta*, January 7, 2014.

instance, with Doña Tere's mediation, the campesino-owner of one of the larger properties in Tulapas "sold" his farm to a third-party—in this case, a mid-level paramilitary commander—who, a year later, then resold the land to the Fondo Ganadero.[53] From the first transaction to the next, the resale value of the property shot up by an astronomical 2,000 percent, usually a telltale sign of money laundering. This farm, appropriately named "*El Engaño*" (The Fraud), ended up forming part of Fondo Ganadero's massive 3,600-hectare spread in Tulapas.

In another case, the original owners of a property told me Doña Tere sought them out after their displacement from Tulapas in the mid-1990s. Giving them a lowball offer for their 34-hectare farm, she said the sale could be done "*por las buenas o por las* malas," the easy way or the hard way.[54] Rather than buying the farm in her name, Doña Tere used the power of attorney they gave her to sell the land—in their name—to the Fondo Ganadero. In 2006, with Tulapas' strategic alliances in full swing, the company ceded the 34-hectare property in usufruct to the one of the rubber companies The small farm was part of a package of 622 hectares of ill-gotten lands that the Fondo Ganadero lent to the rubber projects, making it a major shareholder in the companies.

The land documents of La Gironda, one of the forestry-oriented strategic alliances, tell a similar story. The company received 1,200 hectares in usufruct from its associated cooperative. A sample of its land registry certificates—representing over 75 percent of La Gironda's 1,200 hectares—shows that the members of the cooperative all "bought" the land from a single seller who amassed the lands at the height of the paramilitary dispossession. Moreover, all the members of the cooperative made their purchases on a single day, just two months before the company's creation and six months before the BEC's demobilization—again, a premeditated invention of landowners. Inexplicably, in the following years, almost all of the land-owning members of the cooperative ended up taking the usufruct arrangement a step further, selling their properties outright to the companies—in some cases, at a loss. The stated purpose of the USAID-backed strategic alliance was for the members of the teak cooperatives to eventually buyout all the other investors in the company once the venture became profitable, but the end result was the exact opposite: investors bought out the campesinos.

By spreading their land acquisitions in Tulapas through front-owners and cooperatives, the companies were able to skirt a law that would have otherwise limited their accumulation of these lands. For decades, the central government has used the titling of *tierras baldías* (unclaimed lands) as a tepid substitute for genuine agrarian reform. Trying to preserve the distributive intent behind the program, Congress passed a law in 1994 (Ley 160) that restricted the amount of newly titled *baldíos* a single owner could accumulate—the size of which varies depending on local conditions. For instance, in the north of Urabá, where Tulapas is located, the law dictates that a single person or

[53] Property number, 034-13068, Oficina de Registro de Instrumentos Públicos (ORIP), Turbo, Antioquia.
[54] Author interview with displaced campesino couple in Turbo, Antioquia, October 2, 2012.

entity cannot own more than 68 hectares of *baldíos* titled in the last 15 years. Since some of the land in Tulapas was titled in the 1990s, dispersing the legal ownership of land among the members of the cooperatives, the PASO's strategic alliances became the perfect institutional vehicle for "smurfing" a massive accumulation of land. The cooperatives were yet another node in the grassroots development apparatus for laundering usurped lands. As in the case of the oil palm plantations, the discourses, practices, and institutional formations of the grassroots development apparatus were much more than the dissimulating accouterments of the land grab. They were its conditions of possibility.

As in the "co-investment opportunity" foreseen by USAID back in 2003, the campesinos put up more than "their" land for the projects. Several locals told me that Asocomún deducted a portion of their *Guardabosques* checks and supposedly invested the money into the rubber and teak projects. Even a campesina who still expressed deep support for the BEC admitted, "Yes, well, there were some little angels who flew away with some of the payments—not here, of course, but with other communities."[55] But, as one campesino settler maintained, Asocomún stiffed them in the end: "When harvest time came around, we received a measly pittance [*una miseria*] of the winnings."[56] Some locals said the cooperatives really only existed on paper: "What did they [the *paras*] do? They simply said: 'We'll put one cooperative over here covering these lands, and another one over there covering those.' But it was all a farce."[57] Yet another campesino claimed the cooperatives did in fact exist, but that they only made up "maybe five or 10 percent" of the crops.[58] He said that one reason most of the settlers in Tulapas avoided the cooperatives was because it was a collective project ("*un proyecto global*"). He said the campesinos proposed the projects be carried out individually, with each person working their own portion of land. He said, "We didn't want to leave our own parcel or community [*vereda*] to go and work somewhere else for a forestry project."

By the time I began visiting Tulapas in 2012, the teak had grown thick and high and the rubber trees had been tapped, latex already oozing out of the spiral cuts along their trunks. When I asked locals about who owned the projects, the replies were either vague or contradictory: some simply said, "the companies" or "those people," others suspected they still belonged to El Alemán. The only thing that could be said with certainty was that the only people that never benefitted from the strategic alliances were the original owners of the lands. The PASO became the contorted inversion of justice that victims' groups predicted it would: the lands of the victims ended up in the hands of the victimizers and their allies in the private sector.

[55] Author interview with displaced campesina in Necoclí, Antioquia, September 3, 2013.
[56] Author interview with displaced campesino in Cartagena, Bolívar, October 2, 2013.
[57] Author interview with displaced campesino in Medellín, Antioquia, March 13, 2013.
[58] Author interview with campesino in Turbo, Antioquia, October 30, 2013.

When confronted in court about the lands and the agribusiness plantations in Tulapas, El Alemán confirmed that the strategic alliances were supposed to be part of the PASO.[59] But he pointed out that some of the lands involved in the projects were turned over to the government by the BEC when it demobilized in acknowledgment of their illicit origins. Another one of El Alemán's favorite refrains was: "I left the war without a centimeter of land." However, he also insisted that the cooperatives made up of his former troops had legitimately bought the land for the PASO projects with the subsidies they had received through the government's demobilization program. When I asked the UNODC's agronomist about this, he said, "We're not interested in going around asking about where the land came from."[60]

Paramilitaries succeeded in putting the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—to work in the execution and ratification of their land grab. Even programs aimed at securing "culture of legality" became an instrumental part of the illicit networks articulated by these drug-trafficking militias. Washington, too, negligently put drug-war dollars into the hands of the very groups it claimed to be fighting against. For El Alemán, however, the projects are evidence of the bloc's magnanimous transition into civilian life. He even described the PASO in the roseate terms of post-conflict reparations: "Some people understand reparations as just money. Reparation is also that the state *arrives*. And not just with police and soldiers, but for *all the state to arrive* in those far off regions of our national geography—with health, with education. So that our campesinos finally *know* the state—*know what the state actually is*."[61]

The PASO was supposed to be the *paras*' final masterstroke at frontier state formation, while simultaneously ensuring their lasting territorial control over their erstwhile strategic strongholds. Still, he complained that most of the PASO's projects had fizzled out because of the government's faltering support. The projects lacked institutional "*padrinos*" (godfathers) was how he described it. The one project borne from the PASO that still received robust support from multiple government agencies, USAID, and UNODC was the "Guardians of the Gulf" (*Guardagolfos*) program. "But even *Guardagolfos* is drowning," said El Alemán. He told me the government and international agencies like the UN needed a new approach. Elaborating, he said, "I'm going to throw out a term that maybe you've heard of lately."

"Resilience. Resilience is like someone who has suffered a lot, who's had a hard time in their life, and then decides to stop being the victim." I nodded along trying to hide my surprise at his use of the latest development buzzword being applied to everything from human security to climate change. "Resilience, because the person stops and says, 'What has happened, happened, so I'm going to get on with my life and

[59] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 11, 2010.
[60] Author interview with UNODC contractor (anonymous) in Necoclí, Antioquia, Feb 20, 2013.
[61] Freddy Rendón, Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz, Medellín, June 6, 2007.

liberate myself—liberate myself from the victim.' "[62] Absolving himself as victimizer and denying his survivors the moral ground of victimhood, he had already resituated his political imagination through "resilience," the latest mutation out of the development apparatus—albeit, one with deep roots in a number of scholarly and professional fields. As we finished, El Alemán suggested, "You should go meet my lawyer friend and few demobilized friends of mine." The next day, I met these friends of his at the NGO they founded: it was called, "*Fundación Pro-Resiliencia*." As discussed in the next chapter, the BEC's counterinsurgent politics and its vision of Urabá have taken on new forms amid the ongoing mutations of the development apparatus.

Resilience and Post-Development

As James Ferguson once wrote about "civil society" (2006, 91), the only question to be asked of "resilience" today seems to be: How can we get more of it? Resilience has become an increasingly powerful bonding agent capable of configuring pliable apparatuses of security around an ever-growing and disparate menu of threats to life itself, from terrorism and climate change, to financial crises and critical infrastructures.[63] From a resilience perspective, everything becomes a threat. Its creeping ubiquity, Neocleous argues, is "nothing less than the attempted colonization of the political imagination by the state" (2013, 4). So much so that "sustainable development is now virtually synonymous with the idea of 'building resilience' " (Watts 2014, 146; Reid 2012). Indeed, resilience talk has striking family resemblances with what I have been calling "grassroots development." The elective affinities between them are all the more apparent around concerns over "human security," such as those expressed in the *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*, a document that portends subtle shifts within the World Bank (Watts 2012b).

The report's main conclusion is that the only way for "fragile or conflict-affected states"—including those with high levels of criminal violence—to breakaway from recidivist cycles of violence is by building "resilient" institutions (broadly understood). In this iteration, grassroots development translates into hyper-localized "best-fit" approaches that create quick-impact economic opportunities and help restore public confidence in collective action. Alongside the political participation and subsidiarity evident in the Bank's reinvigorated bottom-up neoliberal localism, the gendered and ethno-cultural dimensions of grassroots development for reducing vulnerabilities to violence are also on full display in the report.

[62] Author interview with Freddy Rendón, paramilitary chief (alias, "El Alemán") in Itagüí, Antioquia, September 17, 2012.

[63] In staking out his own critique of the "catastrophist thinking" driving "resilience as a way of life" and a technology of neoliberal government, Watts (2014) offers a wide-ranging overview of research on resilience—old and new—that orients my perspective here alongside others (Walker and Cooper 2011; Neocleous 2013).

Foremost among the Bank's prescriptions for ending cycles of violence are "programs that support bottom-up state-society relations" and "multisectoral community empowerment" with an emphasis on security, justice, and jobs (2011, 18, 255). The Bank calls for approaches that combine government-led programs with local grassroots initiative: "Top-down programming through the state can help build technical capacity, but may be misaligned with the process of forging and reforging trust in state institutions and in state-society relations. Bottom-up program design works with community structures to identify and deliver priorities for violence prevention" (2011, 255). Almost all of the Bank's recommendations mirror the precise forms through which Urabá's paramilitaries worked the grassroots development apparatus toward their own predatory ends. Indeed, *Guardabosques* and the strategic alliances in Urabá are perfect examples of the kind of "top-down" and "bottom-up" programming that the Bank is calling for. The paramilitary-backed programs in Urabá combined national and international funding with community initiative and institutions.

The *paras*' involvement in the projects could be easily interpreted as just a case of corporate players and their armed accomplices trying to whitewash their malfeasance with the development-speak *du jour*. But the problem is actually deeper and more serious. The grassroots development apparatus not only became the means through which the land grab was executed and laundered, it also helped make paramilitaries' violent forms of accumulation and rule compatible with projects of liberal state-formation normally associated with the imperatives of institution building, good governance, and the rule of law. In short, Urabá shows how the grassroots strategies being endorsed by the World Bank in the name of resilience can in some cases actually facilitate dispossession, illicit economies, and violent political projects.

Grassroots development in Urabá also provides a sobering case study for scholarly debates about "post-development." Proponents of the post-development agenda argue that social movements have built formidable political strategies aimed at forging "an alternative *to* development" by subverting the operative field of what I have defined as grassroots development: the local, political subsidiarity and participation, biodiversity conservation, as well as ethnic and women's empowerment (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997). Other scholars have launched wide-ranging critiques against advocates of post-development.[64] Detractors generally target post-development's romanced conceptions of the local, its conceptual dichotomies, its flimsy engagement with political economy, and its affinities with neoliberalism's more populist tropes.

From the Colombian context, Escobar offers a detailed ethnography on the knowledges and political strategies of one group of Afro-Colombian activists trying to resist the complicity of development with "modernity's displacement-producing tendencies" (Escobar 2008, 65). He argues that activists have tactically repurposed many grassroots development discourses and by doing so have achieved an incipient

[64] Detailed surveys of these critiques can be found in (Watts 1993; Blaikie 2000; Hart 2001).

"alternative *to* development." Analyzing the work of the same Afro-Colombian activists, Kiran Asher contends that Escobar's emphasis on resistance *against* development leads him toward an overestimation of social movements' success and autonomy in crafting an alternative politics (2009). Both scholars are weighing how fluid hegemonic struggles surrounding development in Colombia (and beyond) create constantly shifting political openings and closures. Considering the closures represented by paramilitaries' use and abuse of grassroots development, it is not surprising that agrarian social movements in Colombia are trying to articulate their political projects through practical idioms that are seen as lying outside of—or at least standing at rather awkward angles to—the established conceptual universe of development thinking and practice (Escobar 2008; Aparicio and Blaser 2008).

Although grassroots discourses remain ongoing sites of struggle, some social movement groups in the countryside have crafted novel political horizons around interdependent ideas of territory, autonomy, and self-management (*autogestión*) that hang together through a broad understanding of "life" itself. But with the biopolitics of risk, security, and uncertainty as an increasingly powerful field of governmental intervention in Colombia and beyond, this subaltern appropriation of the politics of life itself, as El Alemán's closing suggestions indicate, is already coming up against the turn toward resilience.[65] To its credit, post-development oriented scholarship has done the most creative work in analyzing these emergent political horizons and in trying think through how key techniques of the development apparatus can be repurposed toward more favorable ends (Escobar 2008; Ferguson 2010). But these analyses should not disregard the ways in which potentially promising alternative paths can also be steered toward deeply reactionary directions.

[65] Although not explicitly in reference to resilience, Austin Zeiderman (2016) shows that the mobilization of a "politics of life" in Colombia is in no way the sole provenance of subaltern groups and that it has all kinds of indeterminate and contradictory political effects. O'Malley (2006) edited a useful collection on the links between risk, security, contingency, and biopolitics (cf. Dillon 2007; 2008).

Chapter 6

The Pre-Postconflict Negotiation of Rule

On January 5, 2012, a Thursday, nobody went to work in Urabá. Outside the towns, the banana plantations and roadways were desolate. In the towns, the streets, normally clogged with motorcycles, were empty. Not a single storefront drew up its metal shutters that day. The hustle and bustle of the early morning hours was replaced with an eerie silence. *Los Urabeños*, the armed group that took control of the drug trade in the wake of the paramilitary demobilization, had called a "*paro armado*," an armed general strike. With Urabá as its epicenter, the 24-hour armed strike affected a total of six departments across the country, including almost the entirety of the Caribbean Coast as well as parts of Medellín and Chocó. Through a flyer, the *Urabeños* said the general strike was in "retaliation for recent events," which it claimed exposed the farcical status of "the state and its rule of law."[1]

The "recent events" being referred to in the flyer occurred just a few days before as the sun rose on New Year's Day. A commando unit from the national anti-drug police raided a lavish party just a few miles inland from Playona, the famous nesting ground of the leatherback sea turtle in Acandí. During the raid, police shot and killed Juan de Dios Úsuga, better known as "Giovanni," a top leader of the *Urabeños*. The flyer alleged he had been captured alive and then executed in front of his family. On the day of Giovanni's funeral, which was a multitudinal event held in Necoclí, an *Urabeño* foot soldier manning a roadblock told a reporter, "We're doing this so it's clear to the authorities who is really in charge in the region."[2] The armed strike was a contorted version of Walter Benjamin's claim that "the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying state power" (1996, 246). By temporarily suspending if not supplanting the presumed legal order of the state, the *Urabeños* effectively decided a "state of exception," exposing the pretense of the state's political sovereignty for what it is: a brittle, superficial, and contingent claim.[3]

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[1] "Paz, justicia y libertad: Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia," one-page flyer dated, "January 2012."
[2] "Desolación en Córdoba," *El Espectador*, January 5, 2012.
[3] In his essay "Critique of Violence," Benjamin described the proletarian general strike as "pure means… non-violent" and "law destroying," making it antithetical to the inextricable nexus between (state) violence and the law (Benjamin 1996, 245–249). Besides identifying the sovereign, the state of exception in Schmitt's framework is the suspension of the legal order as a means for its reinstatement and preservation (Schmitt 2005). It is supposed to reset the conditions through which the political can proceed without putting the state and the state system itself at risk. The armed general strike combines parts of both: its sole task is a show of the "true" sovereign, so it is law-destroying in so far as the point of the performance is to undermine the pretense of state's legal order. In the case of counterinsurgent paramilitaries, however, the situation would bear closer to Agamben's reapplication of Schmitt: "the modern state of exception is … an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide"(2005, 26). It is at this point of indistinction,

The counterpoint to the armed strike came a month later when President Juan Manuel Santos made a visit to Necoclí. The visit was the public launch for the flagship legislation of his first year in office: a law on victims' reparations and land restitution (Law 1448 of 2011). Santos had served as Uribe's Minister of Defense and was his chosen successor, but once in office President Santos began distancing himself from his former boss. The land restitution law was one of the ways Santos marked out that distance. As would later become apparent, it was also a way of laying the foundations for future talks with the FARC. Since Urabá had become a national symbol of violent dispossession, it was an obvious symbolic choice for the stage-managed introduction of the law. Necoclí had the added plus of being the heartland of *Urabeño* territory. The group had turned Urabá into the most dangerous place in the country to be a land rights activist.[4] So the President's visit both defied the *Urabeños*' authority and helped cast a national spotlight on land-related violence in the region.

President Juan Manuel Santos on stage in Necoclí, February 2012. (*Photo by Felipe Ariza - SIG*.)

The event was a carefully choreographed combination of stagecraft and statecraft. Before a crowd of nearly 40,000 people, President Santos said, "All the violent groups have been here: the FARC, the EPL, all the guerrilla movements, paramilitaries, and now the criminal bands," meaning the *Urabeños* among others.[5]

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writes Agamben, that the "exception becomes the rule" and the reformulated political-juridical order becomes "a killing machine" (Agamben 2005, 86)—a phrase that perfectly describes Colombia's paramilitary moment.

[4] A survey of journalistic reports on violence associated with the restitution process shows that of the 70 land activists killed nationwide since 2008, nearly a quarter of these murders were in Urabá.

[5] "Palabras del Presidente Juan Manuel Santos en la marcha encuentro de apoyo a la ley de víctimas y de restitución de tierras," Presidencia de la República, Necoclí, Antioquia, February 11, 2012.

After leading the throng of supporters in a march through the streets of the town, Santos asserted, "This is not a struggle between campesinos and huge landowners, this is not a class struggle. Plain and simple, this is a crusade of the legal against the illegal… We have to go back to a fundamental respect for the rule of law." But he also promised that the land restitution program would be more than just a legal restoration of properties to their rightful owners: "More than a piece of land, we're going to come in with all the help the State can bring: with technical assistance, strategic alliances, and infrastructure… which is why all of the State is represented here at this event." Santos motioned behind him at the entourage he had brought with him on stage: cabinet ministers, judges, senators, military brass, local mayors, and Antioquia's governor.

The juxtaposition of the land restitution program and the *Urabeños*' armed strike reflected a broader contradiction coursing through the country during my fieldwork: the implementation of postconflict initiatives amid ongoing low-intensity conflict and a raging drug war. Besides the land restitution process and the transitional justice program underway since the paramilitary demobilization, the Santos administration also began formal peace talks with the FARC. In Urabá, the political imaginary or expectation of a future postconflict scenario became the latest crucible for the region's frontier state formations. This chapter explores the contradictions of this pre-postconflict conjuncture through an ethnographic account of the early stages of the land restitution process in Tulapas.

On stage in Necoclí, President Santos described the legal restoration of properties to their rightful owners as a reassertion of state authority, a "crusade against illegality," in a lawless frontier zone. As many scholars have shown, the administration of property rights and its accompanying grids of legibility are key modalities for the territorialization of state power.[6] But the ethnographic portrait of state power presented in this chapter is not that of a preformed state descending from on high into the mucky realm of civil society with an all-powerful toolkit of legal, calculative, cartographic, and classificatory techniques. Although this repertoire of high-modernist *techne*—to use James Scott's conceptual vocabulary (1998)—was certainly part of the process, land restitution was a motely negotiation of rule between multiple actors that repeatedly laid bare the fiction of the state as a sovereign unitary entity. Indeed, the implementation of the land restitution program in Tulapas was not only tacitly negotiated with the *Urabeños*; it also worked through the social-institutional infrastructures left behind by El Alemán. The campesino beneficiaries of the restitution, meanwhile, shrewdly exploited the cracks and contradictions the program exposed in the thin façade of the state.

[6] The scholars making these arguments about how the territorialization of state power and the management of property rights work in dialectical association have also documented the inevitable limits of such strategies (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Scott 1998; Craib 2004; D. Moore 2005; Sikor and Lund 2009). Here, I share Donald Moore's (2005) critique that the arguments made by some of this scholarship depend on dichotomous framings of state/non-state spaces. In practice, Moore argues, property and legibility are always entangled with far more complex spatialities.

The Politics of Land Restitution

One of the people joining Santos on stage that day was Carmen Palencia, the director of an activist NGO called *Tierra y Vida*. Carmen is well known for her relentless, some might say reckless, activism. A former militant of the EPL's legal political party, she arrived to Urabá in 1989 from Valencia, Córdoba—the Castaños' home turf. She fled Valencia after the *paras* killed her husband. Barely escaping with her life, she settled in Urabá, where she met up with other EPL sympathizers, many of whom had also been displaced from Córdoba. Together, they formed the main nucleus of a huge rural land invasion supported by the EPL.

Through her political work in several *Juntas de Acción Comunal* associated with the EPL's land occupations, Carmen became a respected grassroots leader. But she ran afoul of her former comrades in the 1990s by railing against the budding anti-FARC alliance between rearmed factions of the EPL and the *Casa Castaño*.[7] In response, paramilitary gunmen showed up at the school where she was taking night classes and riddled her body with bullets. Despite being shot five times and spending two months in a coma, she survived the attack—the first of many.

She regained local notoriety years later after the passage of the 2005 Justice and Peace Law that legislated the paramilitaries' demobilization. As Colombia's first major experiment in transitional justice, the law created a legal foothold for peasants' reclamation of stolen lands. So Carmen and a group of campesinos in Urabá founded an organization they named *Tierra y Vida* as a vehicle for collectively pushing the land reclamation process forward. The NGO became all the more relevant with the implementation of the land restitution law as my fieldwork began in 2012. And for this work, too, she has received multiple threats and assassination attempts. In fact, just nine days after being on stage with President Santos in Necoclí, a pipe bomb exploded at the doorstep of her home.[8] Away on a trip, she was unharmed. Under Carmen's leadership, *Tierra y Vida* has become a nationwide organization advocating on behalf of displaced communities seeking the return of their lands. Among those who have counted on the organization's help are the native residents of Tulapas.

The first time I met Carmen was outside the Mayor's office in Turbo. She had arrived in a bulletproof SUV with her two armed bodyguards—all provided by the national government. Joining her was *Tierra y Vida*'s local representative for Urabá, Carlos Paez, who came with his own security detail. They were there to speak with Turbo's Mayor who had scheduled a meeting with them about the land restitution in Tulapas. Also invited to the meeting were the representatives of the two main stakeholders of the land restitution: the people displaced by the paramilitary incursion,

[7] Author interview with Carmen Palencia, land rights activist, in Turbo, Antioquia, September 3, 2012.
[8] "Atentan contra Carmen Palencia, líder campesina en Urabá," *Semana*, February 20, 2012.

who I'm calling "natives," and those that subsequently resettled the lands, "settlers." The settlers were still residing in Tulapas at the time. They lived in tiny villages working the adjacent farmlands. Further afield from the villages were the massive tracts of paramilitary-linked agribusinesses, including rubber, teak, and cattle. The natives, meanwhile, were still scattered across Urabá's urban centers, where they had spent the last 17 years since their displacement in 1995. The relationship between these two groups of campesinos—natives and settlers—was surprisingly amicable.

Elsy Galván, who had arrived to the Mayor's office in Turbo on behalf of the dispossessed natives, assured me, "[The settlers] have never opposed our return. They just want the government to respond with some kind of relocation program, so that they don't suffer the same displacement and abandonment that we've faced all this time."[9] Following *Tierra y Vida*'s suggestion, everyone agreed I accompany them into the meeting. The hope was that my presence as "a foreign observer" might strengthen their position vis-à-vis the Mayor. Though skeptical my presence would make a difference one way or the other, I was eager to witness the action and happily agreed.

Although the restitution process for Tulapas was still inching its way through the courts, the settlers knew they would eventually have to vacate the lands unless the government provided for their relocation. Besides wanting to finish harvesting the huge investment of maize they still had in the ground, the settlers also held out the hope that the land restitution process would include provisions for their relocation within Tulapas. In some cases, a *de facto* relocation had already taken place. Many settlers had arranged rental deals or even full-fledged purchases with native landowners. Natives like Elsy, longing for the return of their farms, had no problem with the idea of the settlers staying in the area. "There's enough land for everyone," she figured. "But when we return, we're not going to just give away parcels for free." Her hope was that Incoder, the national government's rural development agency, would purchase small parcels for the settlers.

These were precisely the kinds of prickly details that were being ironed out at the time with various government entities at meetings like the one scheduled with Turbo's Mayor. After having us wait for hours, the Mayor finally had his assistant waive us in.[10] Upon entering his office from the overbearing heat outside, we were instantly hit with the frigid chill blasting from an air conditioner. Amid the pale glow of fluorescent lights, the room's walls were plastered with banana industry posters. Most of the posters were aerial views of the plantations carpeting this part of Urabá. The Mayor, William Palacio, was seated at the head of a rectangular meeting table.

Already annoyed, he claimed the meeting was not on his day's agenda. Whether this was a deliberate omission, a clerical oversight, or a negotiating tactic was not clear,

[9] Author interview with Elsy Galván, displaced peasant and land rights activist, in Turbo, Antioquia, September 3, 2012.
[10] The meeting was in the Mayor's office of Turbo on September 3, 2012.

but it set the tone of hostility that permeated the rest of the meeting. With the Mayor at the head, his cabinet ministers and the campesinos took seats along opposite lengths of the table. Letting everyone else chose their seats first, I accidentally ended up directly across from the Mayor at the other head of the table. The Mayor opened the floor, making no attempt to hide his irritation: "Well, here I am, go for it [*hágale*]."

The side of the table with the campesinos and *Tierra y Vida* gave an overview of the situation in Tulapas. With the national government's land restitution process moving ahead, they said, the residents of Tulapas—both old and new—hoped the Mayor's office would pitch in for things like a school, a clinic, strategic alliances, and above all road construction. They said *el retorno*, meaning the return of the rightful owners, would be pointless without this "municipal accompaniment." Both natives and settlers emphasized the friendly relations between them, making clear they were working together for the success of *el retorno*.

After hearing their pitch, the Mayor reminded everyone that Turbo was a legally bankrupt municipality. He also pointed out that during his last visit to Tulapas he had reached an agreement at an assembly with nearly 70 community leaders from the area. He promised these leaders Turbo would build a school and a clinic in the village of Paraíso at the far northern edge of Tulapas. As soon as the Mayor mentioned this gathering of 70 local leaders, Carmen audibly scoffed. Interrupting, she said, "But those leaders don't represent the real owners of the land." Her comment clearly made the settlers in the room uncomfortable, since she had just reiterated their illegitimacy. Before anyone could interject, Carmen and the Mayor got into a heated exchange. At one point, she argued the site of Paraíso for the proposed education and health facilities made no sense because the village was several hours away from the places where most people lived in Tulapas. The Mayor took her objection as an appeal for special treatment.

"I'm not just the Mayor of Tulapas," he said. "I'm the Mayor for all of Turbo."

"I thought the whole point of this meeting was to plan *el retorno* to Tulapas," said Carmen, raising her voice.

The Mayor grew equally aggravated: "This meeting wasn't even on the books! I accepted as a show of good will."

"Look, you're not doing us any favors here Mister Mayor. This is your *obligation* under Law 1448."

Having the land restitution law wagged in his face—by a woman no less—was apparently the final straw. Darting up from his seat and slamming his hands on the table, the Mayor thundered, "No one comes into my house imposing anything on me!"

Now, they were both on their feet, yelling. At well over six-feet-tall, the Mayor towered over the barely five-foot Carmen, but she held her ground as they debated the finer points of administrative responsibility spelled out in the transitional justice and land restitution laws. Fed up, the Mayor cut her off, demanding that everyone from *Tierra y Vida* leave his office, saying he would only talk to the campesino representatives without the NGO's intrusions. He waived off Carmen with a flick of his wrist: "I'm not getting into any more of your byzantine conversations." Putting away my notebook, I beelined for the door behind Carmen and something awkwardly possessed me to waive at the Mayor as I stepped back into the midday heat closing the door behind me.

Outside, we rehashed the meeting. Still full of nervous energy from the dust up, Carmen argued the reason the health and education facilities were going to Paraíso was because the *Urabeños* controlled the village. "That's their territory and they want to strengthen it," she said. Her theory was that the *Urabeños* had pressured the assembly of community leaders who had met with the Mayor into ensuring Paraíso ended up with the projects. Her thinking was that the *Urabeños* had helped steer the projects toward the village as a way of building up their local "*base social*"—that is, their territorial hegemony. Carmen supported her argument by noting Paraíso was also right next to the rubber plantations El Alemán had lined up for his demobilized troops. "Paramilitaries, neo-paramilitaries, *bandas criminales*, it's all the same thing," she continued. Grabbing her bicep where combatants don their identifying armbands, she quipped: "Same dog, different collar." For her, the line between demobilized and active combatants was a thin one.

Her read on the situation was entirely plausible, but the Mayor's choice of Paraíso was at least partly motivated by more pragmatic geopolitical concerns. Paraíso is right up against Turbo's border with Necoclí, an area sometimes disputed between the two municipalities. Two times during the meeting, the Mayor made a point of saying, "Turbo is the largest municipality in all of Antioquia, and we have to maintain an effective presence across the territory." From this perspective, his choice of building the school and the clinic in Paraíso was a way of staking out Turbo's effective sovereignty over the area and building local loyalty. With the municipality's territorial integrity at risk, the projects were intended as symbolic, material, and everyday spatial manifestations of the municipal government's "effective presence" in this potentially liminal space.

The meeting *about* the projects in the Mayor's office in Turbo that day was as much a frontier state formation as the projects *themselves*. In crude anthropomorphic terms, civil and political society sat across from each other at the negotiating table, haggling over exactly where and in what form the relationship between them would become an "effective presence." While Carmen marshaled the letter of the law to pressure the Mayor, he cited the political authority of his office—not in "my house," he had objected. From his perspective, the implementation of the projects in Paraíso addressed the demands being made by the other civil society leaders who had already

met with him. Carmen, of course, questioned the legitimacy of these leaders as lawful interlocutors. For the Mayor, the projects also doubled as a form of flag planting, an attempt to dispel any geopolitical ambiguities and securing Turbo's territorial integrity. Even my own physical presence as a "foreign observer" was deployed in this dialectical tug of war between civil and political society.

Eventually, the campesinos who had stayed behind emerged excitedly from the municipal office. The Mayor had agreed to one of their long-standing and most-pressing demands: the completion of a road between Tulapas and Turbo. The natives had been demanding the road for years, even decades before their displacement. After their arrival, the settlers, too, had pleaded for the road and actually made some headway towards its completion. During the *Guardabosques* negotiations in 2003, they successfully pressured the national government into building the road, but all they got were three bridges along the projected route of the road. For years, they have made do with three bridges connected by a network of rutted footpaths. Now, finally, someone had promised to finish the job.

After *Tierra y Vida* was expelled from the meeting, the campesinos told the Mayor that their top priority for the moment was the road. The Mayor called up the commander of Urabá's Army base and cut a deal: the military would provide its engineering team and machinery for a couple days as long as Turbo paid all the expenses. The campesinos proudly told us how they had cajoled the concession by turning the Mayor's arguments about Paraíso against him. They had stoked his geopolitical anxieties over Turbo's territorial integrity by arguing the road would draw Tulapas more strongly into Turbo's orbit and away from Necoclí. Without the road, the only access point into Tulapas from Turbo's municipal seat required driving far out of the way through the rival municipality. The new road was going to turn the circuitous 100-mile journey, which can take three to four hours on unimproved roads, into a straight shot of 16 miles.

Elsy, the representative of the natives, came out of the meeting daydreaming about the road: "Can you imagine? We could even work our farm while still living here in town, where we've grown so accustomed [*amañados*]." For most of the displaced natives of Tulapas, their children and in some cases their children's children had by now lived their entire lives in the towns. Few from the younger generations had any interest in moving back to the countryside. For Elsy, the road would allow families to keep a foot in both worlds. Víctor Martínez, one of the settlers at the meeting, predicted the road would open up new market opportunities, reduce transport costs, cutout intermediaries, and make Tulapas a more attractive site for aid projects. He predicted, "Once we get the road, all kinds of projects will start arriving."

Víctor later mentioned another detail about the meeting with the Mayor. He said they had also made their case by describing Tulapas as an emerging success story,

proving that natives and settlers could work together in "rebuilding the social fabric."[11] But the campesinos knew better than to count on the Mayor's promise alone. So they hedged their bets by clamoring for the road via other institutional openings created by the pre-postconflict conjuncture. Víctor explained, "We've also been knocking on the doors of a project from the departmental government for collective reparations. And what are we asking for? The road."[12]

The campesinos were shrewd political operatives. They knew exactly how to position themselves before each governmental entity, exploiting concerns and contradictions of each institution. Besides working across scales and asking the same thing from different agencies, they also massaged the inter-municipal rivalry between Turbo and Necoclí as a tactical advantage. Rather than reifying the state as a monolithic entity, they displayed a keen awareness of—and fully exploited—its disaggregated complexity and internal contradictions. Navigating these political relationships required a careful combination of hardnosed tactics and lowly supplication. As for the latter, the campesinos also knew that Carmen's belligerence made their own position seem all the more reasonable. As one campesino from Tulapas criticized, "Doña Carmen doesn't know how to ask for things, but she knows how to open the way."[13]

The campesinos' tactics relied on their own essentialized presentation as a single collective subject. The public script of a united front, however, papered over simmering tensions between natives and settlers. For many natives, the settlers who arrived following the displacement were still seen as paramilitary proxies. "Of course they collaborated with the *paras*!" contended one native resident. "How else could they have lived there without a care [*tranquilos*] for the last 15 years?"[14] When I mentioned the settlers had arrived to Tulapas after having been displaced from their own homes, she interrupted me with what she called "a small correction." Twice straining her voice for emphasis, she offered, "They *say* they were displaced. That's what they *say*."

"If they were really displaced, why haven't they gone to reclaim their own lands like we are doing in Tulapas?" she asked. When I presented settlers a subtler version of this question, the responses varied: most said they simply didn't want to leave a place they now called home, others said they still faced threats back home. Many campesino settlers evaded the question altogether, while others pointed out the restitution process was too long and complicated. The natives of Tulapas, after all, had been clamoring for almost ten years for the return of their lands—two of those years with the land restitution law actually on the books. The displaced natives sometimes lashed out with blanket accusations against the settlers about being paramilitary collaborators. But, more often, they recognized the settlers were a mixed bunch: everything from landless or displaced campesinos who arrived haphazardly looking for opportunities, to others

[11] Author interview with Víctor Martínez, campesino leader, in Turbo, Antioquia, July 31, 2013.
[12] Author interview with Víctor Martínez, campesino leader, in Turbo, Antioquia, October 30, 2013.
[13] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Apartadó, Antioquia, September 3, 2012.
[14] Author interview with anonymous campesino in Apartadó, Antioquia, March 23, 2013.

who arrived at the explicit invitation of the *paras*. In either case, however, the natives knew—in part, from personal experience—that accusations of "complicity" with the armed groups are often gross simplifications of the complex and fluid relationships between communities and combatants.

Víctor, the most prominent leader of the settler communities, was usually evasive when I asked him about how they had managed daily life under paramilitary rule. The closest he came to a direct answer about the nature of the relationship was a wrapped in a metaphor: "You have to live wherever it is that you are," he began. "But if you swim against the current of a river you drown. If the river runs that way and you swim this way, the current wears you down, you get tired, and then you drown. But if you calmly go with the current, then nothing happens to you, and that's how it is with these things."[15] Víctor knew a thing or two about swimming with the current: he had been one of the key leaders of the coca eradication process brokered by the BEC and had traveled to Bogotá as part of the delegation El Alemán sent to negotiate the program. Once *Guardabosques* began, Víctor worked closely with Asocomún, the paramilitary-backed NGO that managed the project. By the time I met him, he was the president of a campesino cooperative called Uprurac, made up of 800 members, mostly from families that resettled Tulapas after the mass displacement.

Although never disputing the ownership of the land, Víctor and the other settlers whose lives were being upended by the restitution process obviously harbored some resentment against the natives. But the distrust between settlers and natives was often overcome by pragmatic alliances such as the one that secured the promise of the road from Turbo's Mayor. And, in many ways, the land restitution program had in fact helped seal these instances of pinpointed unity. The president of the largest *Junta* of the settler communities in Tulapas said they had slowly built more trust between them and the native landowners. "When the returnees first began wanting to comeback, they treated us like paramilitaries," he said.[16] But as the restitution process gained greater momentum, he noticed a shift toward greater collaboration. He believed the budding cooperation was helped along by a complementary division of political labor at different governmental scales between the two communities:

> There's been a lot of collaboration because internally we had already been seeking support and organizing projects [*gestionando proyectos*] through our community organizations, not with the national government, but with the local and municipal level. Whereas the people displaced from Tulapas brought another level of organizing work [*gestión*], but they were doing it with the national government… We settled these lands, but like [the natives] we're also displaced people [*desplazados*], so we're in the same situation. At first, there was a lot of mistrust, but we started linking up, working together to bring resources, to push the area forward, to bring development. And our hope is that

[15] Author interview with Víctor Martínez, campesino leader, in Turbo, Antioquia, July 31, 2013.
[16] Author interview with *Junta* President (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, March 18, 2013.

> [the natives] will keep this in mind in the future, so that we'll eventually get some land of our own.

His comment again reflects how campesinos in Tulapas worked different political relationships and scales in strategic and nuanced ways. Although the land restitution obviously aggravated existing schisms, it also sealed some tenuous alliances that became points of articulation across civil and political society.

With the turn toward transitional justice and land restitution as the subtext, the *Junta* president carefully positioned himself and the other settlers saying, "we're also *desplazados*." Regardless of the truth behind the claim, which the natives often questioned, his positioning reflects how the social categories of "*desplazado*" and "*víctima*" had gained powerful ethico-political force along with high material and symbolic stakes. He was strategically situating the settlers within the pre-postconflict's moral universe, a constellation formed by the politics of victimhood and accompanying hierarchies of suffering. The complexity of these pre-postconflict politics come through clearly in a critique voiced against the settlers by one of the natives:

> [The settlers] are just waiting for us [natives] to get some benefits from the government, so that they too can benefit, and that's the kind of behavior we don't like. I'm representing my family and my community and fighting for the lands, and they are just waiting for their relocation to fall out of the sky. No one knows when it will happen, but it will happen. Those are the kinds of things one sees and doesn't like—it doesn't seem very honest or fair to me… The state has a moral debt with Tulapas, but not even 10 percent of the people living there right now are actually from the area... If the state is going to give out benefits, then they should go to the people that lived and suffered through the conflict.[17]

I heard this complaint often from the natives: while they wallowed for years as refugees in their own country, the new residents of Tulapas enjoyed all kinds of development projects, including *Guardabosques* and the strategic alliances. For the natives, this contradiction was all the more flagrant in the case of their confessed victimizers, who received aid for agricultural ventures under the demobilization provisions of the Project for a Social Alternative (PASO). During my fieldwork, the latest group receiving aid for agricultural projects was the 800-member-strong Uprurac cooperative composed overwhelmingly of settlers. Víctor Martínez, the cooperative's president, told me that maybe 600 of its members were farming land that was not theirs.[18] And yet, through an alliance between Antioquia, Turbo, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Uprurac received multiple streams of support for a handful of agricultural ventures as part of an initiative for "the victims of the conflict." Another entity receiving support for a strategic alliance from local and international agencies, including USAID, was one of the rubber cooperatives set up under the auspices of the PASO.

[17] Author interview with displaced campesina (anonymous) in Apartadó, Antioquia, November 9, 2013.
[18] Author interview with Víctor Martínez, campesino leader, in Turbo, Antioquia, September 3, 2012.

Unlike previous aid projects in Tulapas, these newer initiatives took place amid a diversified institutional ecology. During the days of *Guardabosques* and the PASO, government agencies had described Tulapas as a barren wasteland of civil society organizations, but field dispatches from these newer projects depicted a flourishing institutional landscape. "All kinds of institutions have a presence in the territory, offering a menu of programs and projects," celebrated a UNDP report. "On top of this, most of the projects, especially those focused on the victims of the conflict, come from the national level and are operated through local municipal ministries and other decentralized entities" (UNDP 2013, 56). Coming on the heels of the BEC's grassroots state-building efforts, the new pre-postconflict development programs plugged into the meticulously constructed social-institutional infrastructure left behind by the *paras*: the *Juntas*, the NGOs, the cooperatives, and the established linkages with municipal government. Also repurposing these same relationships and institutional forms was another fixture of the pre-postconflict landscape: the *Urabeños*, which in many ways was also a product of El Alemán's *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*.

Almost immediately after the BEC's demobilization in 2006, a few of the bloc's mid-level commanders abandoned the disarmament process and reorganized under the command of El Alemán's older brother, Daniel Rendón, more widely known as "Don Mario." As they began filling the territorial vacuums left by the *paras* and swallowing up weaker drug-trafficking groups across the country, Don Mario's men became known by their rivals as *Los Urabeños*, meaning "the ones from Urabá." During my fieldwork the *Urabeños* were the undisputed kings of Urabá's underworld and had become Colombia's largest drug-trafficking syndicate. The security establishment categorized them as an entirely depoliticized drug-trafficking organization—in official terminology, a "*banda criminal*."

Blind Negotiations, Unseeing Like a State

As an outgrowth of the BEC, the *Urabeños* quickly consolidated control over their namesake region by remobilizing the political relationships, practices, and institutional arrangements constructed by the BEC. The territorial transition was especially smooth in Tulapas because many of the *Urabeños* top leaders were actually from the area. The cadre of leaders who assumed control of the group after Don Mario's capture in 2009 had been warring since their teens: first with the EPL, then with the *paras*. Once they assumed control of Tulapas, they used all the same tried-and-tested territorial practices learned throughout their long criminal careers. The *Urabeños* wielded their power through the same *Juntas* established under the BEC; and what the BEC called "*Promotores de Desarrollo Social*" (PDSs) were again known with the simpler name of "*políticos*." Although the settlers in Tulapas acknowledged the presence of the armed group's institutional structure, they were tight-lipped with me about its daily workings. But I was far from the only one left in the dark.

Officials from the local branch office of the *Unidad de Restitución de Tierras*, the national agency tasked with managing the land restitution process, grappled with the same opaqueness and uncertainty. Created in 2011 by the land restitution and victims' reparations law, the *Unidad de Restitución de Tierras* has 17 offices across the country in the main hotspots of dispossession. Only two years into its existence, the *Unidad de Tierras* was already working nationwide on the restitution of almost 2.4 million hectares—and growing. On my trips to the region, I always checked in with my contacts at the *Unidad* about what was happening in Tulapas. Soon, however, I was the one being pumped for information. Although I was only marginally more informed, officials from the *Unidad* would ask me about "what was really going on" between natives, settlers, and the *Urabeños*. I rarely had the answers. The extent to which the *Urabeños* held the sovereign power of decision over the spatio-legal order in Tulapas became much clearer once the restitution process began.

In April 2013, the local branch of the *Unidad* in Urabá was not even a year old. Although it lacked a full staff and even adequate office furniture, Tulapas was already designated a top priority. That month, the office sent one of its teams into the area along with a group of native campesinos—all under a heavy police and military escort. When the convoy rumbled into the village of San Pablo, the situation immediately grew tense. As soon as the police officers descended from their trucks, they began frisking villagers and crosschecking their ID numbers against a criminal database. Police ignored complaints from the *Unidad*'s employees that the visit was taking on the appearance of an intelligence-gathering operation. And then chatter from the *Urabeños* began crackling on the radios. "It gave us the feeling that we were surrounded," an official from the *Unidad* later told me. "Because you have no idea how close or how far the people on the radio might be." The team hastily decided it was time to leave, feeling their trip had been compromised by the behavior of their security detail.

Making matters worse, in the days after the incident, a commando unit from the anti-drug police raided a ranch in the heart of Tulapas, killing the *Urabeños*' second-in-command. The slain capo was "El Negro Sarley," whose real name was Francisco Morela. A native son of Tulapas, Sarley had not only passed through the ranks of the EPL and the paramilitaries, he had also been part of the hit squad that killed Carlos Castaño. During his tenure with the *Urabeños*, his main job had been moving cocaine out of Urabá and over to Central America—at which point the product became the custody of Mexican cartels. Police discovered Sarley's hideout after they intercepted one of his shipments near a beach in Turbo: three tons of cocaine with an estimated street value of $75 million.

"Sarley and his people were practically part of the community," said a demobilized paramilitary, who was living in Tulapas at the time. "He moved around like he was in his own house. With his experience in the armed groups, he still had that characteristic—an almost instinctual ability I'd say—to build friendly relations with the communities." As examples, the former paramilitary noted the *Urabeños* did many of

the same things as the BEC had done in the past: they paid for medical treatments, provided transportation, and sponsored community events. "Sarley and his people didn't need to threaten anyone, they didn't kill anyone," he continued. "Here, in this area, for instance, it's been years since a dead body has turned up—there are no displacements, no disappeared. What I mean is that the community lives very relaxed with those guys."[19]

"El Negro Sarley" in Tulapas. Police released photos from a computer found at his hideout.

Cesar Acosta, the director of the *Unidad de Tierras* in Urabá, feared the *Urabeños* would blame his team's brief visit for Sarley's death since the two incidents were just days apart. In retrospect, Cesar thought his team had overreacted and gotten spooked during the field visit, but he now worried Tulapas posed a real danger for his staff. A few weeks later, the *Unidad* received a letter penned by a group of native campesinos reclaiming their lands. The campesinos began the letter by mentioning they had recently visited their old farms. "Some of the lands are just abandoned," noted the letter. "Others are cultivated with rubber and teak."[20] But the main point of the missive was in the first paragraph: "The people currently living in the area have expressed their support for *el retorno* of the displaced communities, guaranteeing favorable conditions. They have assured us there are no threats of reprisals and that current conditions in the area present no dangers of any kind for the [returning] communities."

After the aborted field visit, the aspiring returnees had grown afraid the restitution process would be suspended because the law stipulates the *Unidad* should only sponsor the return of displaced communities in places where they do not face inordinate security risks. Coming on the heels of the aborted visit, the letter was clearly aimed at dispelling the existence of any immanent threats. By noting both the support of "the people currently living in the area" (i.e. the settlers) and the unlikelihood of violent reprisals, the letter implied the settlers had direct lines of communication—if not

[19] Author interview with demobilized paramilitary (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, May 22, 2013.
[20] Letter, one page, dateline "Apartadó, July 11, 2013," obtained by author.

an intimate relationship—with the *Urabeños*. In itself, such a relationship would have hardly surprised anyone at the *Unidad*. What surprised them about the letter was that, without too much between the lines, it was a formal-written assurance that the *Urabeños* had given a green light for the land restitution process to go ahead.

Even before the *Unidad*'s initial visit, several campesinos had assured me they had "permission" from the *Urabeños*. When I asked about how this kind of permission was secured, one campesina was matter of fact about it: "You go to a *político*—one of their people out there [*que anda por ahí*]."[21]

"A *político* is someone from the [armed] group?" I asked for confirmation.

> Right, a *político* is one of their people that lives in the village; that knows who such and such is, about who comes and goes; that knows everything about what is going on. So I asked the guy, and he said, "You have nothing to worry about, we know you have good intentions. And if there's anything we can do to help, all you have to do is tell us. Those lands are yours. If there's someone there on your land, it's only because they needed a place to work. We have nothing to do with that."

Políticos, as he comments suggest, are key nodes in the local surveillance network. Tulapas, like any other territory of an armed group, is tightly policed. Whenever I was taken there by a local contact in the communities, we would pass a series of what are called "*puntos*" (points) along the road. *Puntos* simply consist of a person, usually a young man or teenager, with a cellphone or radio, whose job is to monitor the road, calling ahead about any suspicious activity.

When another displaced campesino sought permission for his land reclamation, he said the *político* told him, "You're welcome to come back just don't make too much noise [*mucha bulla*]."[22] Yet another returnee, a woman, stated, "They told me there was no problem with reclaiming my land as long as I didn't bring *la institucionalidad*."[23] People rarely referred to the *Urabeños* by name, preferring the more ambiguous "they" (*ellos*).[24] When I asked the woman returnee what she meant by "*la institucionalidad*," she replied almost confused by the obviousness of my query: "Well, the state, especially, the police and the Army."

The campesinos had maintained all along they had permission from the *Urabeños* for the restitution. The letter swayed the *Unidad* toward the same conclusion.

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[21] Author interview with displaced campesino (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, March 19, 2013.
[22] Author interview with displaced campesino (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, May 25, 2013.
[23] Author interview with displaced campesina (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, May 21, 2013.
[24] In my conversations, locals always referred to *Los Urabeños* as "they" or, even more vaguely, as "*los grupos*" (in the plural). Beyond its vagueness, the plural also doubled as a safety mechanism of distributing blame in a context where critiquing any single group is often interpreted as support for its rivals.

As one staff member said, "One way of looking at it is that the intellectual author of the letter was the armed group."[25]

"So they were giving *you* permission?"

"Basically, yes."

About a week after the letter, the *Unidad* began preparing a second visit to Tulapas. A team of surveyors was supposed to go map the properties under reclamation. But they were worried about a rumor going around. Guido Vargas, a longtime resident of Tulapas who had helped the Castaños make their land "purchases" during the displacement, was reportedly telling locals the *Urabeños* were not going to allow the visit. But Urabá's regional police chief told the *Unidad* there was nothing to worry about. Apparently, police had intercepted communications in which the *Urabeños* were ordering their minions not to mess with land issues. Still, the rumor Vargas was spreading about a possible retaliation cast a cloud over the *Unidad*'s preparations. When the survey team arrived in Tulapas, however, Vargas actually ran around helping the *Unidad*'s representatives track down some of the campesinos they were looking for. I asked Cesar Acosta, the *Unidad*'s director for Urabá, what he made of Vargas' dramatic about-face.

"My suspicion is that the *Urabeños* neutralized him so that the restitution wouldn't cause them any problems with the authorities," he speculated.[26]

"Do you think that allowing the land restitution was also a way for them to build support among the returning campesinos?"

"Without a doubt, because the land restitution is happening one way or another," he reasoned. "The process has already gained too much force at every level, so they are accommodating themselves to the process."

The second visit went smoothly. The police and military escorts kept to themselves and mostly stayed huddled under the shade of the village clinic—basically, a tin roof and a half-empty medicine cabinet. And this time, a humanitarian peace-building mission sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS), which has maintained a presence in the country since the *paras*' demobilization, sent along the two people making up its regional field office. They were surprised by the amount of help local settlers gave to the *Unidad*'s surveyors. But she felt the *Urabeños* had kept a close watch over the whole visit through their eyes and ears in the community. As evidence, she said that no matter where she went in the village a member of the local *Junta* would suddenly appear. "It was magical realism [*macondiano*]," she joked. "The

[25] Author interview with *Unidad de Tierras* official (anonymous), August 2, 2013.
[26] Author interview with Cesar Acosta, director of the Unidad de Tierras, in Apartadó, Antioquia, August 1, 2013.

people from the *Junta* were everywhere. We could actually see them running from place to place as we went around trying to talk to people about their situation."[27]

What all these stories revealed for me was that the land restitution process was not the territorialization of an all-seeing panopticon, reorganizing an unruly space into governable gridlines of legibility. Officials from the *Unidad* knew admittedly little about, as they put it, what "was really going on" in Tulapas. Nor was land restitution the orderly return to legality envisioned by President Santos on stage in Necoclí. It was a motely negotiation of rule in which the *Urabeños*, for the moment, maintained the upper hand. Far from being powerless pawns, both groups of campesinos—natives and settlers—were party to the multilateral negotiations, steering things as much as they could in their own interests.

In one interview, I asked a returning campesina, whom I'll call Eugenia, whether the *Urabeños* were harassing her or her fellow returnees for reclaiming their lands. "No, all they ask is that we don't make any problems with the people living there [i.e. the settlers]," she responded.[28] And she explained why: "Because the people there now are [the *Urabeños*] point of support. If I put you somewhere so that I can hide behind you, then I'm going to take good care of you, right? That's the way it works." While the settlers had to walk a careful line of not antagonizing the incoming natives—a move that could jeopardize the potential of a government-sponsored relocation—Eugenia's comment implied the returnees were also walking a razor's edge in returning to their lands. The *Urabeños* were allowing the natives to reclaim their farms, but they had to accommodate the people who formed an already-secured "point of support" for the armed group. Eugenia explained, "For example, if a *político* comes and says, 'Look, why don't you give this little old lady a small parcel of land for a little house.' You have to be flexible."

"We can't come back into Tulapas leaning one way or another—neither friend nor enemy, neither here nor there," she added. "Knowing how things really are, you have to just be like that, neutral."

Cued by her openness, I pried more than usual, wondering about a rumor I had heard: "And do you think [the settlers] get economic support from the group?"

"¡*Ave María*! Do they receive economic support! I'd be lying if I said they didn't," claimed Eugenia. " 'Oh, you need something? Look, *m'hijo*, why don't you go talk to the *político*?' And the *politíco* comes up with the money." The rumor I had heard was that the Urabeños had bankrolled some of the settler's agricultural projects—but that's what it was, rumor.

[27] They asked that I not mention them or their institution by name, but gave their consent for publishing this information. Author interview with anonymous in Apartadó, Antioquia, August 1, 2013.
[28] Author interview with displaced campesina (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, March 19, 2013.

Whenever I asked campesinos and members of the *Unidad* why the *Urabeños* allowed the restitution process in their territory, the overwhelming answer was that the *Urabeños* simply wanted to keep things quiet enough to keep moving drugs through area. As an organization mostly (though not only) driven by the drug trade, all else was secondary, so their main concern was preserving Tulapas as a strategic corridor. And this set the bar for territorial hegemony at a much lower level than what the counterinsurgent paramilitaries had required. With President Santos and the *Unidad* turning Tulapas into the flagship of the restitution law, the *Urabeños* could not block the process altogether. Trying to do so would have been both futile and counterproductive since it would have drawn in the government security forces. By allowing and even welcoming the native campesinos, as long as they made room for the settlers, the *Urabeños* preserved their territorial hegemony.

The restitution law had changed things dramatically. Before the legislation, the *Urabeños* retaliated violently against those clamoring for their farms. For example, David Góez, a native of Tulapas and one of the founders of *Tierra y Vida*, fled to Medellín in 2010 after receiving death threats for his organizing efforts. A year after arriving to the city, a fellow activist and native of Tulapas, who the *Urabeños* had paid off, lured him into a shopping district where the waiting gunmen casually strolled up behind Góez and shot him in the back of the head. But since the passage of the law, Tulapas has been an exception amid the generalized climate of violence around land that persists in Urabá.

Tierra y Vida, which represents several other communities of displaced campesinos in Urabá, has been the most targeted. Since 2008, when the organization began, hit-men have killed at least nine of its leaders. During my fieldwork, the flyers from the *Urabeños* threatening the members of *Tierra y Vida* often ended with the same refrain: "You sons of bitches want land? You'll have it: six-feet of it on top of your head." And one morning, when *Tierra y Vida*'s staff opened their office, they realized someone had slipped a letter under the door. It was a murder threat and the *Urabeños* had physically signed the letter with blood. The violence directed at *Tierra y Vida* made it an increasingly problematic ally for the campesinos in Tulapas and they began distancing themselves from the organization as the restitution process gained momentum. "Lets just say that it's not a very welcome organization in Tulapas," said one returnee.[29]

According to Cesar Acosta, the local director of the *Unidad de Tierras*, the variability in violent opposition against land restitution had more to do with regional agrarian elites than with the *Urabeños* themselves. His theory was that in places such as Tulapas, where local elites could no longer operate with absolute impunity because of the national spotlight, the *Urabeños* acquiesced making a pragmatic calculation. In other, lower-profile parts of Urabá, where the power of local landowners remained intact, land rights activists faced much more dangerous conditions. In Tulapas, one

[29] Author interview with displaced campesino (anonymous) in Turbo, Antioquia, March 26, 2013.

resident told me the only reason the Urabeños had not yet lashed because the restitution program had not yet reached the bulk of the lands controlled by the rubber, teak, and cattle operations. "You think they'll just stand around when that gets touched? That's when you'll see they're all the same *paracos* [paramilitaries]."

Cesar disagreed. "The paramilitaries were the armed wing of a *clase emergente* interested in protecting its assets and amassing more wealth," he said. "Whereas *bandas criminales* like the *Urabeños* care more about their narco-business. They are not so interested in accumulating lands and fighting guerrillas, so they have more autonomy from regional elites who are the real enemies of the restitution."[30] In any case, the unevenness and inconsistencies of the *Urabeños* actions in Urabá made them much more of a black box than their paramilitary predecessors. The group actively stoked this uncertainty through carefully managed public relations. Indeed, since their formal coming out in 2008, the *Urabeños* have been actively disputing the claim that they are simply an apolitical *banda criminal* driven entirely by greed without any legitimate grievances.

***Los Urabeños*: Building the Brand**

Los Urabeños first coalesced in 2006 under the command of Vicente Castaño and El Alemán's brother, Don Mario. They were one of a handful of groups made up of former *paras* who began vying for control of the drug trade when the bulk of the movement demobilized. The security establishment branded them with the official category of "*bandas criminales*," a term used to deny them the political status of an actor in the internationally recognized internal armed conflict.

As "*banda criminales*" became a recognized security threat and the term gained greater institutional cache—including its own composite neologism, "Bacrim"—Don Mario began rebranding the group.[31] The *Urabeños* launched the brand on October 15, 2008, through a declaration of an armed general strike in Urabá and an accompanying communiqué:

> In light of the of the government's failure to fulfill the terms of the peace process with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the advance of the guerrillas into areas that had been under our control for years, we have been forced to continue our anti-subversive struggle. We will fight to defend the interests of the most vulnerable communities who remain abandoned by the state and victimized by its politico-administrative corruption.

[30] Author interview with Cesar Acosta, director of the local Unidad de Tierras, in Apartadó, Antioquia, August 1, 2013.
[31] Many other Bacrim engaged in similar efforts, the *Urabeños* far outdid these other groups.

The communiqué was signed with the group's new name: the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*. They said that naming the group after Jorge Eliécer Gaitán—the martyred left-leaning populist whose murder exploded into *La Violencia*—was "in honor of that great leader assassinated for defending the country's most vulnerable classes." Townspeople across Urabá woke up that day to graffiti on the walls and flyers at their doorsteps signed, "*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC)."

Despite being the country's largest drug-trafficking syndicate, the *Urabeños* have insisted they are yet another politically motivated actor of the armed conflict. Their political rhetoric is widely dismissed as a façade designed to keep open the possibility of a negotiated demobilization with the government, an exit-strategy that would potentially also save them from U.S. extradition. The group deploys much of the same populist discourse used by El Alemán, sometimes word for word. Although they have insistently plugged their brand at every opportunity—in flyers, death threats, graffiti, and communiqués—everyone still calls them "*Los Urabeños*."

The branding effort reached a crescendo in 2014 once the Santos administration's peace talks with the FARC gained momentum. The *Urabeños* came out with a (now defunct) website and then launched a newspaper titled *El Gaitanista* with an initial print run of 20,000. The opening editorial stated, "The government says we have no ideological principles and that personal enrichment is our only interest… Besides being a gigantic error with tragic consequences, it also disregards the day to day struggle of the people that live in the far-flung regions of our homeland." Besides repeatedly expressing support for the peace process with the FARC, the *Urabeños* also said they had tremendous "respect for the campesinos making their legitimate [land] reclamations." In their statutes, which they also published, they declared themselves "a politico-military organization of civilian resistance temporarily at the margins of the law" and pointed out their eagerness "for dialogue with all the actors of the conflict—both legal and illegal—in the hope of reaching a definitive solution to the country's social armed conflict." Although the *Urabeños* political overtures are widely dismissed as posturing, their territorial imperative has slowly drawn them into political relationships with civilian populations. In this regard, their populist rhetoric is not completely disingenuous. If in the past, paramilitary politics had been productive of statehood, the pre-postconflict was now producing paramilitary politics.

In August 2014, as President Santos was being sworn-in for his second term, Urabá was rocked by massive protests led by thousands of angry *plataneros* (plantain growers). The *Urabeños* openly backed the strike. The plantain sector, made up of the region's smallholding underclass, is the poor and neglected sibling of the powerful banana industry. Enjoying a veritable monopoly through their private ownership of Urabá's export infrastructure (ports, canals, etc.), the banana companies are the sole buyers of plantains destined for foreign markets. And the companies had just announced they were lopping a dollar off the purchase price they were willing to pay for

each box of plantains. Already eviscerated by the valuation of the peso against the dollar, the *plataneros* were also facing rising costs for farming inputs.

Incapable of breaking even, they announced an agrarian strike. For three days, the Highway to the Sea was shutdown, blockaded at multiple points by protestors, felled trees, and burning tires. In the town of Mutatá, the municipality lent riot police a backhoe for removing one of the makeshift roadblocks and, that night, a group of 400 livid protestors retaliated by attacking the Mayor's house. The protests left one *platanero* dead and several dozen wounded. Through their website, the *Urabeños* lauded the *platanero* struggle, putting the blame squarely on the "state's abandonment" of "humble campesinos." According to police and military intelligence, the *Urabeños* were encouraging farmers to join the strike and providing them logistical assistance transportation, food, etc.).[32] President Santos dispatched his Minister of Agriculture to cut a deal with the strikers. Through the negotiations, the *plataneros* turned back the one-dollar price cut, secured some indirect subsidies, and gained promises of a nationally backed investment plan for their industry.

The *platanero* protests came a few months after Santos had visited Urabá to take part a roundtable event called "Land Restitution: A Path for Reconciliation." He noted that Ban Ki-Moon, then-Secretary General of the UN, had recently congratulated Colombia for "moving ahead with reparations and land restitution in a country still in conflict." On stage with President Santos celebrating his government's pre-postconflict initiatives was a representative cast of local victims. One of them was Elsy Galván, the leader of the returning campesinos of Tulapas. With Urabá's verdant banana trees behind him, Santos cited Elsy as an example of a victim who was making a resilient comeback.

"I asked her, 'What is it you're growing? What are you harvesting?' And she said, maize," Santos told the crowd.

"And she rightly told me, 'But I need to move that maize and the entire community wants access roads.' And that's something this government is doing like no other before it."

More than a year and a half since Turbo's Mayor had promised to build the road into Tulapas, the communities still had nothing more than the three lonely bridges.

Santos continued, "Never before has a government invested so much money in infrastructure so that families like Elsy's have the possibility of taking their products to market, getting better prices, and living a more dignified life."

[32] "'Clan Úsuga' infiltró a sus miembros en el paro platanero, asegura Sergio Fajardo," *BluRadio*, August 8, 2014.

"And Coronel," said the President, turning to the Army's commander for Urabá, "Get to it. If your machines breakdown, tell the head of the Army to replace them immediately—on my orders—and do whatever you have to do to finish that road."

The crowd broke into applause. Elsy had heard this promise before. "It could be pure show," she later told me. "We'll see."

The Headlong Rush into the Interregnum

Even before the start of formal peace negotiations with the FARC, the Santos administration made a headlong rush toward crafting a post-conflict future for the country by deepening existing transitional justice initiatives and introducing the land restitution program. Rather than criticize these efforts as premature or misguided in light of continuing warfare, rights abuses, and drug violence, this chapter has examined how the expectation of a postconflict future has become a productive source of novel political assemblages. The pre-postconflict interregnum, I have argued, has become a crucible of Colombia's frontier state formations. Building up the state in frontier zones such as Urabá, the thinking goes, is what will make or break Colombia's chances for peace.

The land restitution program, besides reversing one of the greatest injustices accompanying the armed conflict (violent displacement) and laying the groundwork for talks with the FARC, was supposed to be an instrument of statecraft in the country's most conflictive zones. President Santos' choice of Necoclí for the ceremonial launch of the land restitution law was a blatant symbolic and material projection of state power into one of Colombia's most infamous frontier zones. A month before, Necoclí had been the epicenter of the *Urabeños*' armed strike, which had shutdown nearly half the country. The performative theatrics of the event was not lost on a journalist who reported, "His presence represented an attempt to show the inhabitants of the region that the State is present."[33] On stage, Santos himself described how "all of the State is represented here at this event." And when Antioquia's Governor took his turn at the microphone, he described the restitution law as "an obligation, an ethical imperative for, some day, making us into a society in every sense of the word.[34] The government officials sitting on the stage understood the restitution law as means for resealing the marriage of civil and political societies in places where it had never existed or where the armed groups had breached it.

Santos predicted the land restitution would help kindle a "fundamental respect for the rule of law," but, as Tulapas makes clear, the implementation of the program worked through and came up against the living legacies of the paramilitary movement

[33] "Las dos caras de la marcha de Necoclí," *Verdad Abierta*, February 12, 2012.
[34] Ibid.

and the hegemony of the *Urabeños*' current territorial formations. In this case, the territorialization of state power through the administration of property rights and its accompanying grids of legibility, was deeply contingent, contested, and incomplete. The Santos administration's attempt of "brining the state back in" worked in and through the same violent and illegal structures it was supposed to be guarding against. Indeed, as a frontier state formation, the national government's flagship land restitution process was not that of a preformed entity (the state) "descending" into the "lowly" world of civil society with an all-powerful toolkit of legal, calculative, cartographic, and classificatory techniques. As heirs of the BEC and its territorial formations, the *Urabeños* had decisive power over the presence, the scope, and the terms of the program. In practice, the land reclamation in Tulapas was a motely negotiation of rule involving national institutions, municipal government, the *Urabeños*, settlers, and natives.

The case of Tulapas also exposes some of the problematic assumptions written into both the restitution law and much of the scholarship on the ties between conflict and displacement in Colombia. First, as officials from the land restitution program increasingly realized, paramilitary-claimed territories in Urabá and elsewhere were not always—or even mostly—depopulated tracts of land reserved for large-scale agriculture. As I have repeatedly argued, territory is a necessarily social phenomenon. Tulapas certainly had its huge tracts of paramilitary-backed agribusiness, but it was also a thriving community of campesino settlers. The other myth that Tulapas dispels is the notion of "community" itself as a warm and idyllic social formation. Tulapas shows the sinister and sometimes vicious "antinomies of community" (Watts 2006). When subjected to ethnographic scrutiny, the dichotomy between victims and victimizers, which form the basis of Colombia's pre-postconflict initiatives, become much fuzzier when subjected to ethnographic scrutiny.

The motley negotiation of rule induced by the land restitution both tore and tightened the relations within and between the two camps of campesino communities (natives and settlers) involved in this story. Both camps engaged in simultaneous negotiations with both the municipal government—an instance of common cause for soliciting the road construction—and the *Urabeños* who controlled the area in day-to-day life. The restitution also forced settlers and natives into situations of accommodation and compromise between them. The natives had to tread lightly and accommodate the settlers without making "too much noise," as they had been warned, lest the *Urabeños* revoke the tenuous permission they had given for the land reclamations. The settlers, meanwhile, welcomed the returnees hoping this cooperation would improve the chances of the national government providing for settlers' relocation within the area.

Finally, the story of the land restitution process in Tulapas also undermines the pervasive assumption made by scholars about popular reifications of the state in everyday life (e.g. Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991; Taussig 1992; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). At every turn, as best exemplified in the heated encounter at the Mayor's office

in Turbo, settlers and natives displayed a nuanced understanding of statehood. They wielded the "absence of the state" and a unified subjectivity as strategic essentialisms as tools for the exploitation of the political openings created by the land law. With keen sense of political-administrative scale in both discourse and action, they worked the fractured and contradictory nature of statehood, as a political assemblage of practices, discourses, relationships, and institutions, toward their advantage: stoking the geopolitical anxieties of Turbo's Mayor over the encroachments of a neighboring municipality in one instance, while lobbying on multiple scales in a sophisticated division of political labor between settlers and natives in another. The frontier state formations produced by the government's headlong rush into the interregnum of the pre-postconflict gave campesinos all kinds of new political footholds.

Chapter 7

Urabá: A Sea of Opportunities

"With this law, the National Government through its respective ministries will craft a 'Strategic Plan' for Urabá that will promote the region's integral development."[1] This one sentence may have changed the future trajectory of the entire region. Or, at least, that's the hope of those now tasked with designing and implementing the "Strategic Plan." Buried in a piece of legislation authored by Jesús Enrique Duval—one of the "Quadruplets" elected to Congress with El Alemán's help—those 24 words have ballooned into a massive regional planning apparatus under the auspices of the "*Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién, 2011-2020*" (PEUD).[2]

Laid out in a series of government reports, spreadsheets, slideshow presentations, and concession contracts, the Plan is a coordinated strategy for the definitive territorialization of the state in northwest Colombia—an area it describes as "*la mejor esquina de América*," the best corner of the Americas. As a crucial piece of Urabá's pre-postconflict conjuncture, its proponents even portray it as a "Marshall Plan" for the region. The PEUD enlists government entities and agencies from all scales working in partnerships with the private sector through contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars for a slew of projects—from the construction of large-scale infrastructures and educational facilities, to microcredit programs and everything in between.

Being pushed most powerfully from Medellín, the Strategic Plan is in many ways a revival of the high-modernist fixations (infrastructure, roads, etc.) and frontier imaginaries associated with the Highway to the Sea—a continuity even suggested by the Plan's tagline, "Urabá: A Sea of Opportunities." But the PEUD also marks a concerted shift toward a more biopolitical modality of territorialization that takes "population" as its "technical-political object of management" (Foucault 2007, 70). As Foucault conceptualized it, "population" is not simply a sum of individuals, but a complex of people and things with variables and relationships that can be tinkered with through the technical interventions of political economy—or, for the contemporary context, "development." As a instrument of biopolitical government, the Strategic Plan's orientation is toward "[people] in their relationships, bonds, and complex involvement with things like wealth, resources, means of subsistence, and, of course, the territory with its borders, qualities, climate, dryness, fertility, and so on" (Foucault 2007, 96).

[1] Law 935 of 2004, which began as Proyecto de Ley 233 de 2004 Cámara, *Gaceta del Congreso*, 90/04, March 25, 2004.

[2] The bill also received sponsoring support from three other congressmen and Senators accused (or now convicted) of paramilitary ties: Luis Alfredo Ramos, Oscar Suárez Mira, and Manuel Ramiro Velásquez.

As a calculative set of "strategic interventions," the PEUD certainly displays the tendency for politics to get sucked out of social problems when they are "rendered technical" (Li 2007). But, as Timothy Mitchell has shown (2002), technocracy and the rule of experts—despite all their pretensions of being grounded in objective seemingly indisputable techno-scientific knowledge—are also elaborate feats of the imagination. In the case of Urabá, planners combined biopolitical calculation with the creative power of the technocratic imagination, which was stoked by assumptions about the region as a space that has yet to be fully made, a frontier; a place where the absence of the state had left an indeterminate social space open to limitless possibilities.

During my time in Urabá, the PEUD was as much a material force physically reshaping the landscape, as it was (and remains) a work of the imagination. But for government planners, the point is to produce the state not as a work of the imagination but as a practical-material "reality." In its own words, the Plan is "an ensemble of strategic interventions in the territory … [including] short, medium, and long term projects capable of detonating a transformation of the region's *reality*."[3] The objective is to finally make the state *a reality*—a concrete abstraction—*en territorio* (in territory). I heard this phrase, *en territorio*, often from government officials in Bogotá and Medellín. Its meaning is similar to "on the ground" in English, but "*en territorio*" refers to spaces out there beyond major metropolitan areas. The architects of the Strategic Plan define "territory" as a space produced by the relations between state and society as independent entities:

> Territory is, in its essence, a human social space: geography molded by culture and ruled by relations of power (economic, social, political, religious). Within it, the State makes a presence for the fulfillment of its functions: securing the life and assets of the population, defending its fundamental rights, maintaining a juridical and democratic order, while promoting and supporting development and well-being… But the real protagonists of territorial life and the agents of its development are the human groups inhabiting the territory.[4]

With references to development, well-being, and securing life, the Strategic Plan's definition of territory practically assumes "population" in Foucault's elaborate sense. The irony is that, according to Foucault, territory—being the problematic of sovereignty—is precisely what gets overshadowed (though not entirely supplanted) by the shift he traces in modern rule toward "population," as the object of governmentality (B. Braun 2000; D. Moore 2005; Elden 2007). As he defines it, governmentality is "the

[3] "Urabá, Antioquia Caribe: Un mar de oportunidades," Gobernación de Antioquia, 10 pages, undated document, p. 2.

[4] The original Spanish reads (DNP et al. 2006, 16–17): "Territorio es, en lo esencial, un espacio humano y social: geografía moldeada por la cultura y pautada por relaciones de poder (económico, social, político, religioso). En él hace presencia el Estado para cumplir con sus funciones propias: asegurar la vida y bienes de la población, defender sus derechos fundamentales, mantener el orden jurídico y democrático y promover y apoyar el desarrollo y el bienestar… Pero son los grupos humanos que habitan el territorio, los verdaderos protagonistas de la vida territorial y los principales agentes de su desarrollo."

ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics … that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument" (Foucault 2007, 108). According to Stephen Collier, if governmentality designates a "genus" of political government, then identifying its variety of species requires examining how sovereignty, discipline, and security are configured into patterns of correlation "in which heterogeneous elements—techniques, material forms, institutional structures and technologies of power—are taken up," recombined, and redeployed (S. J. Collier 2009, 22). In fact, as a frontier state formation, the PEUD takes up and recombines a series of techniques, calculations, institutional forms, and material practices first deployed in Medellín.

The Blueprint: From Murder Capital to Model City

Although the *Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién* enlists national government ministries and local municipal administrations, the driving force behind the project is undoubtedly Medellín. The main architects behind the PEUD, for instance, are the technocrat-planners of the "Tripartite Commission," a group appointed by the Governor of Antioquia (based in Medellín), the Mayor of Medellín, and the board of the Aburrá Metropolitan Area (i.e. Greater Medellín). As an entity with the sole mission of ensuring the city's global competitiveness, the Tripartite Commission has seized on Urabá as a critical geopolitical piece for the metropolitan region's future success in the global economy.

But another reason for Medellín's strong imprint on the Strategic Plan for Urabá is the city's experience with its self-styled model of "social urbanism," which planners are now rescaling and redeploying as a blueprint for Urabá's regional development. A catchall term, social urbanism generally refers to a set of policies enacted in Medellín since the 1990s aimed at reducing violence, poverty, inequality, and exclusion in the city (Maclean 2015). The policies have been widely credited with the city's dramatic security turnaround, giving policymakers for Urabá a "proven" success story—and, moreover, one that seemed just as farfetched when it began.

Social urbanism is most closely associated with the administration of Sergio Fajardo, who served as Mayor of Medellín from 2004 to 2007. It was under his administration that the city became famous for the "Medellín Miracle" in which it had gone from "murder capital of the world" to a world-famous model of urban transformation. Besides showing the security makeover was in many ways cosmetic, critics have also noted its accompaniment by a unique economic configuration, in which Medellín shifted from an industrial model toward a "new economy" based on a constellation of narco-capital, construction, real estate, insurance, and financial services (Hylton 2007). In any case, Fajardo's award-winning brand of social urbanism—and *it has* become something of *a brand*—is now firmly institutionalized in the city and is even

being exported abroad as a "replicable model" and "international example" of urban transformation (OAS 2011).[5]

Fajardo, a former mathematics professor at the country's most elite private university, has always positioned himself as a technocratic political outsider free of all the compromised commitments and horse-trading of a machine politician. His technocratic persona is built around the argument that he can objectively prioritize problems and allocate scarce resources in strategic, calculative ways. Through rigorous technical analysis, social urbanism ostensibly directs funds where they are needed the most and where they can have maximum collateral effects.

One of the undeniably transformative aspects of social urbanism was its huge investment in social infrastructure projects: from the cable cars and electric escalators connecting the city's hillside slums with a world-class metro system, to the "library parks" and other kinds of public spaces now dotting poor neighborhoods. It helped that these were boom times in the city: from 2000 to 2011, Medellín's economy grew at average rate of 10 percent a year.[6] The city also counted on the extraordinary financial muscle of its public services conglomerate, Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM). Despite being a municipally owned company, EPM operates independently and has holdings across Colombia and, increasingly, Central America. In 2014 alone, the firm raked in $900 million dollars in net profits, a mandatory 30 percent of which goes to municipal coffers.[7] With the rollout of the Strategic Plan for Urabá, EPM has also expanded its interests into the region's public services (electricity, gas, sewage, and water).

Mayor Fajardo made education another keystone of social urbanism under the banner of "*Medellín: La más educada*." In 2007, the final year of his term, Fajardo noted, "We've invested 40 percent of our budget in education and this year, among many other things, we've built 10 new schools for Medellín with beautiful buildings and equipment in some of the most neglected parts of the city" (S. Fajardo 2007, 67). He also expanded the city's extant participatory budgeting system, while also boosting support for small and micro enterprises. Although many of these policies predated his administration, it ended in 2007 with one of the lowest murder rates ever recorded in the city. From an all-time high of 381 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991, the homicide rate had plummeted to 34 per 100,000 by the time he left office, a rate significantly lower than those of several U.S. cities.[8]

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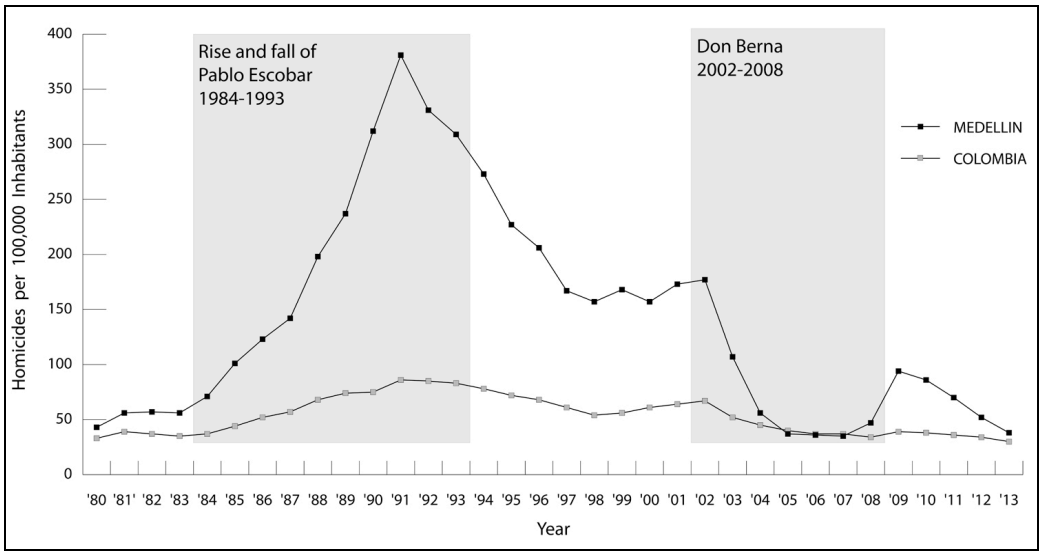
[5] UN Habitat, arguably the world's leading urban policy institution, called Medellín an "international example of urban transformation" in its promotional materials when the city hosted UN Habitat's World Urban Forum in 2014.

[6] "La ciudad como escenario para la transformación ciudadana," Alcaldía de Medellín, May 21, 2013, p. 7.

[7] "Balance Grupo EPM 2014," Press Release, Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM), March 18, 2015.

[8] At 34 per 100,000 in 2007, Medellín's murder rates was less than the 2014 rates of Baltimore (37), St. Louis (38), Newark, NJ (40), New Orleans (41), and Detroit (45).



Homicide rates: Medellín vs. Colombia under Escobar and Don Berna. (*Data from Medicina Legal*)

Although social urbanism deserves its due credit, fluctuations in the murder rate also bear strong correlations with shifts in the city's thriving criminal underworld. For instance, Pablo Escobar's warpath against U.S. extradition was largely responsible for the wave of murders that crested in 1991. Homicides dropped sharply after police killed Escobar in 1993 and then leveled off at still-astronomical rates in subsequent years as his lieutenants vied for control of his criminal empire. But eventually, one name reigned supreme, Don Berna. Diego Murillo, his real name, cut his teeth with an urban wing of the EPL and then earned a low-level spot in the Medellín Cartel. From there, he worked his way up the ranks of city's mafia networks until becoming *il capo di tutti capi* by the end of 2002. Murders dropped sharply under Don Berna's uncontested rule, but they spiked when the Uribe administration extradited him to the United States in 2008 and settled back down after *Los Urabeños* secured their dominance three years later.

In his bloody climb to the top, Don Berna drew on the alliance he had forged with the Castaños during their war against Pablo Escobar. Through the Castaños, he also gained a working relationship with the state security forces, which were beginning to move on the urban militias of rebel groups that then called the shots in the city's poorest *comunas* (districts). For Don Berna, seizing territorial control these hillside *comunas* would clinch his position as Medellín's top drug lord. And, in 2002, with the start of police and Army operations in the barrios, he got his chance.

The most violent siege was "Operation Orion," which took place in the impoverished *Comuna* Thirteen, a district with about 140,000 inhabitants. For five days in October 2002, the military pounded the area with helicopter gunships, armored vehicles mounted with .50 caliber machine guns, snipers, and thousands of heavily armed troops. According to Don Berna's own admissions, Operation Orion was an Army-paramilitary joint venture and claimed the lives of 300 people, who were reportedly

disposed of in mass graves.[9] So when Fajardo took office as Mayor in 2004, Don Berna was the undisputed capo of Medellín. Lacking any serious contenders, he oversaw a mafia-style Pax Romana guaranteeing the city's *gobernabilidad* (governability)—or as Fajardo's critics called it, "donbernabilidad." But by then, social urbanism was already winning international prizes for its innovative strategies of urban transformation discussed in more detail below.

Building on his success as Mayor, Fajardo became Governor of Antioquia in 2012. From his new position, he started rescaling social urbanism by injecting it into the content and programming of the *Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién*. He turned the governor's office into the motive force behind the Strategic Plan, but he has also counted on the support of Medellín's new Mayor, Aníbal Gaviria.[10] Besides being the new torchbearer of *urbanismo social* in the city, Gaviria is also the scion of an elite Medellín family who helped establish Urabá's banana enclave back in the days of the United Fruit Company. Together, Fajardo and Gaviria control two-thirds of the Tripartite Commission—the quasi-governmental group tasked with ensuring the metropolitan area's global competitiveness—and they have made Urabá's transformation along the lines of the "Medellín Miracle" one of the Commission's top priorities.

As a rescaled adaptation of social urbanism's techniques and built upon a similar layer of cadavers, the *Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién* incorporates the same biopolitical modality of territorialization pioneered in the *comunas* of Medellín. One celebratory article on social urbanism, for instance, defines its core objective as the "resolution of specific problems and the betterment of social conditions in a designated territory characterized by *the generalized absence of the State*" (Giraldo 2010, 52 emphasis added). From this perspective, social urbanism and the PEUD are both frontier state formations. But, in Urabá, the scale of the Plan, the baggage of the region's frontier history, and the idea of *la región* as a space that has yet to be made stoked the technocratic imagination to new heights. By 2020, the national government will have destined $480 million toward the PEUD, while Antioquia will have invested an additional $260 million.[11] Add to this the hundreds of millions dollars from private sector investments, loans, and international aid, and the Strategic Plan will ultimately count on more than a billion dollars for an area the size of Indiana.

Rescaling the 'Medellín Miracle'

[9] Lemoine, Maurice, "La verdad sobre la Operación Orión," *Las 2 Orillas*, June 12, 2013.

[10] While Fajardo served as Mayor of Medellín (2003-2007), Gaviria was Governor of Antioquia. So beginning in 2012, they effectively switched and served in each other's seats. As mentioned in Chapter Five, Gaviria won the governor's office in 2002 at the height of *Urabá Grande*, but he has vehemently denied accusations of having made deals with paramilitary chiefs.

[11] Urabá sigue adelante de la mano del Proyecto Regional Integral para la zona," Gobernación de Antioquia, press release, December 19, 2013.

As is often the case in Urabá, everything about the PEUD comes back to "the road." All of the Plan's moving parts hinge on the refurbishment and expansion of the Highway to the Sea. For promoters of social urbanism, revamping the Highway is what they call a "*proyecto detonante*" (detonating project), a pinpointed and strategic intervention with all kinds of positive collateral effects.[12] As Federico Restrepo, the PEUD's main director, told me, "The road is a detonator, a structuring axis, a detonator of development. A good quality connection to the rest of Colombia will necessarily induce more industry and more commerce in the region." He noted Medellín has never wanted more out of the highway because its extraction of wealth from Urabá has never needed "more than a dock, not even a port." And all the banana industry's inputs have always been locally sourced or imported from abroad duty-free thanks to the region's special economic status. "Once the road is done, imagine, why not move the Governor's office of Antioquia to Urabá?" he mused. "A kind of Brasília for the twenty-first century."[13]

The suggestion immediately conjured a mental image in my mind of a god's eye view of a high-modernist city hugging the shores of the gulf. But the unlikelihood of such a move snapped me back to reality. "You're saying this seriously, or just to imagine?"

"No, just to imagine," he clarified. "My point is that turning the political and administrative attention of the center toward an area that's not the capital of the department is also a way of inducing the development of the region. It opens all kinds of opportunities."

Restrepo himself embodies the PEUD's combination of biopolitical calculation and unbounded imagination. His constant references to "structures" and "axes" divulge his background and multiple degrees in engineering. For most of his career, he worked for an engineering firm specializing in hydroelectric projects—many of them, contracted by EPM, Medellín's public services conglomerate. When Fajardo launched his campaign for Mayor, Restrepo became a faithful campaigner and lobbied tirelessly for the candidate, especially among the business sector. Once in office, Fajardo appointed him to the critical position of director of City Planning, making him a key framer of social urbanism. After his stint in the public sector, Restrepo spent four years as the CEO of EPM. Under his watch, the company posted record profits, gained greater autonomy from the municipality, and expanded into Central American markets.

Restrepo's background in the highest strata of Medellín's corporate world gained him the respect of the "*Sindicato Antioqueño*," a formal alliance of companies headquartered in the city. The *Sindicato* formed as a "defensive" measure in the late 1970s when Bogotá elites led a wave of aggressive takeovers of Medellín-based

[12] Manuel de Solà-Morales, the planning guru associated with the "Barcelona Model," coined the same idea as "urban acupuncture"—pinpointed strategic interventions with systemic effects.
[13] Author interview with Federico Restrepo, director of Plan Urabá, in Medellín, Antioquia, July 23, 2013.

companies—an intense intra-elite rivalry that persists to this day.[14] So when Fajardo began looking for someone with proven business savvy and an established reputation among Medellín elites, Restrepo made an obvious choice. By chance, President Santos also named Restrepo as the director of the national "Highways for Prosperity" program, a multiyear $7 billion dollar expansion of Colombia's road network.

Wearing both hats—lead regional planner and highway czar—Restrepo insists on the reconstruction of the Highway to the Sea as the detonating spark for the entire Strategic Plan for Urabá. "The structural axis of the Plan is the new highway," he repeated. "Without it, everything else falls apart." In Medellín, social urbanism's *proyectos detonantes*—the cable cars and libraries, for instance—formed the core of broader development plans that went by the name of Integral Urban Projects (PUIs). The PUIs introduced a series of physical-spatial transformations (e.g. housing, public spaces, or other concrete amenities) in parts of the city with the lowest scores in the human development index. In the process, the PUIs promoted community participation, multiply scaled institutional linkages, and partnerships with the private sector.[15]

As Restrepo describes it, the Strategic Plan for Urabá takes what social urbanism did with the PUIs at the scale of the neighborhood and extrapolates it to the scale of the municipality. "We have what we're calling Integral Municipal Plans, which are a lot like the PUIs, but in Urabá it's the municipality as a whole, including urban and rural areas, that plays the leading role," explained Restrepo. "If in the PUIs, the main structuring axes were the library parks, the cable cars, or other modes of transportation, then for Urabá's municipalities the main axis is going to be the education parks."

Built with slick architectural designs, the parks function as more elaborate and better-equipped versions of a community center. Urabá will have six of them. Vigía del Fuerte, a municipality of 7,500 people without sewage and only reachable by river or air, received the first education park in the region. The area's mostly Afro-Colombian and indigenous Emberá christened it, "The Ancestral Knowledges Education Park." The park is the centerpiece of the broader "Integral Municipal Plan," which counts on $13 million dollars in funds provided by the Governor's office, private foundations, and international donors such as USAID.[16]

Finished in 2014, the $2 million dollar park includes classrooms, computers, and a sports complex with a full-size running track. Multiple times in interviews, government planners claimed Urabá's multiracial makeup made for exceptional athletes and

[14] Franco (2005) analyzes the role of the Sindicato and its role in Medellín's regional hegemony.
[15] The human development index, first devised under the auspices of the UN Development Programme, is of course a composite measure combining health, education, and income indicators. The broad strokes of social urbanism and the PUIs are usefully summarized in Medellín's winning entry to the Veronica Rudge Green Prize overseen by the Harvard University Graduate School of Design: http://urbandesignprize.org/medellin/.
[16] "Parque Educativo abre la puerta de las oportunidades en Vigía del Fuerte," Gobernación de Antioquia, press release, May 7, 2014.

highlighted the Strategic Plan's sports component. They said that besides being a source of recreation, the sports facilities will allow aspiring athletes to stay put in the region saving them from moving to cities such as Medellín for training. "*Negros* with *chilapos*, and *paisas* with *chilapos*, we're such a mix that it's generated a human biotype with tremendous athletic abilities," one official assured me. Chigorodó inaugurated Urabá's second education park in January 2015.

The "Ancestral Knowledges" education park in Vigía del Fuerte. (*Photo by Taller Sintesis*.)

As he did as Mayor in Medellín, Governor Fajardo has also pushed the expansion of additional educational institutions across the department under the banner "*Antioquia: La más educada*." At the university level alone in Urabá, the Governor's office spent $30 million dollars on three new branch-campuses of the University of Antioquia, which is consistently in the top tier of national rankings. The national trade school network and polytechnic institute have also boosted their presence in the region. Another *proyecto detonante* is the "Clínica Panamericana," a $23 million dollar hospital that opened its doors in 2014. For now, the hospital is the only major building on the grounds of Urabá's duty-free special economic zone, but, with the clinic opening the way, Restrepo predicts industry will soon follow.

Describing the new health and educational facilities, he painted a vivid image of the biopolitical imperative to *make live*: "On average, a youngster born or living in Medellín has a backpack filled to the top with opportunities, but for a youngster born or living in Urabá that same backpack has 75 percent less opportunities—that's an enormous difference in their life chances." The good news, he said, is that in such a dire situation public investments have high returns. Drawing a graph on a piece of scrap paper to illustrate the point, Restrepo said that public spending garners diminishing returns as the human development index increases. So in Medellín investments translate into modest gains in human development, but in relatively less developed Urabá they make a dramatic difference. "You have to be strategic," he concluded. "In Medellín, we did the same thing: we focused on the most abandoned neighborhoods."

Soldier at the entrance of the Clínica Panamericana in the *zona franca* (duty-free zone). (*Photo by ZFU*.)

Public works like the hospital do not mean that governmental concern for the life of population has supplanted the sovereign power to take life. The photo above graphically represents the coexistence of these different modalities of power. The soldier embodying the sovereign power of death stands before two key formations of biopolitical government, or "apparatuses of security," as Foucault called them. The image symbolically bears out his observation: "In fact, we have a triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management, which has population as its main target and apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism" (2007, 107). While both social urbanism and the Strategic Plan configured the elements of this triangle into formations of rule, their scale and scope in Urabá far exceeded anything attempted in Medellín.

A Sea of Opportunities

The main framing document of the Strategic Plan spends almost 30 pages reviewing all the major government-sponsored studies and plans developed for Urabá over the last several decades. The grand total almost averages out to a major new planning document every two years since 1978—none of which ever lived up to their stated expectations. "So why do you think this Plan is going to be different?" I asked Restrepo, as my conversation with him began winding down."Because we're taking a top-down approach, not a bottom-up one," he replied. "Urabá is the most over-diagnosed region of Colombia, so there have been other top-down, macro-level visions, but they have all put the development of the region as something that's supposed to be at the service of Medellín."

"What's needed," Restrepo continued, "is a vision of scale, not simply a something from below that simply extrapolates all the problems of the status quo." He meant "a vision of scale" in both a temporal and spatial sense: Urabá's success depended on planners taking in the long view and the big picture. For instance, the PEUD's planners are trying to balance the region's potential as a regional, national, and international entrepôt with more endogenous and value-added forms of "socially responsible" development. Restrepo loaded a slide on his computer from a PowerPoint presentation, which is second only to maps as the preferred communicative medium of the Plan's proponents. The slide spelled out the main components of the PEUD. He explained:

> We're trying to have a different vision that breaks with a ton of paradigms that have caused the region's lethargy, so we designed a series of components: One is taking advantage and protecting the region's biodiversity, and since we want an industrial region, then of course we need a port—a port that promotes responsible social development. We also want an educated region, but more than anything we want a legal region that bets against the criminal economy and promotes a culture of legality.

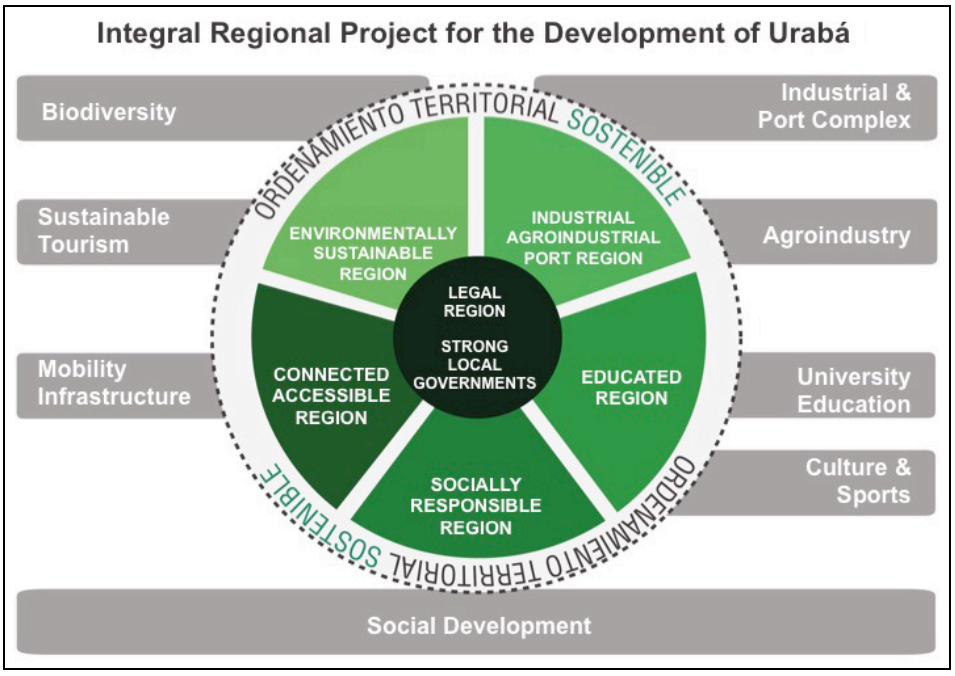


Diagram of the PEUD translated from the Spanish. (*Gobernación de Antioquia*)

On paper, all these components form interlocking parts of a "sustainable *ordenamiento territorial*" (territorial order/ordering). Above all, planners hope the PEUD will successfully reconcile the region's geostrategic potential as a regional, national, and international entrepôt with more endogenous and value-added forms of "socially responsible" development. The main detonators for the process are (again) the Highway to the Sea and the construction of what Restrepor says will be "un puerto de talla mundial," a world-class port.

The idea of building a port in Urabá has been on the books since at least 1927 when the Governor of Antioquia contracted a viability study from Siemens, the German engineering firm.[17] But in 2014, a private company with the help of one of the founding families of Urabá's banana industry broke ground on a $350 million dollar in the southeast corner of the gulf where the Río León spills into the sea. Planners' favorite statistic for justifying the Highway and the Port is that Urabá is the closest point on the Caribbean coast for a swath of the country that constitutes 70 percent of its GDP. They also like to cite the raft of free trade agreements signed by Colombia in recent years and the gulf's proximity to the Panama Canal.

Urabá's "future urban pole" is the rendering of a project in Brazil. (*Broadway Maylan*)

With the highway and the port projects underway, the Governor's office is also making a push for the expanding Urabá's free-trade area into a genuine export-processing zone of maquiladoras. According to the PEUD, "The area will attract national and international industrial sectors who want to take advantage region's coastal location and its competitive offer of public services and infrastructure."[18] The architects of the PEUD predict the new industry-port complex will "induce the consolidation of a mid-sized Regional Urban Pole" in Urabá, a continuous urbanized corridor along the eastern coast of the gulf.[19] The main PowerPoint presentation used to advocate for the Strategic Plan contains a slide of what this future urban corridor would look like. The wild expectations of this modern city-region strongly echoes "Ciudad Reyes," the city

[17] "Informe de la Siemens-Bauunion, Presentado por la Comisión de estudios del Golfo de Urabá," Archivo Histórico de Antioquia (AHA), Folder "Carretera al Mar," May 7, 1927.
[18] Gobernación de Antioquia, "*Urabá: Antioquia Caribe, Un Mar de Oportunidades, Estrategia Regional Integral*," slideshow presentation, 90 pp., 2012, p. 54.
[19] Ibid, p. 56.

the builders of the Highway hoped would spring forth at the road's terminus. The slideshow, however, fails to mention the graphic is an architectural firm's rendering of an urban development project near Recife, Brazil.

The new urban corridor, which is expected to have 400,000 inhabitants by 2022, would be surrounded by "sustainable" agribusiness developments of cacao, pineapple, oil palm, and forestry plantations (mainly, teak) as a way of reducing Urabá's agricultural dependence on bananas.[20] According to Restrepo, diversifying the agribusiness sector—especially when steered by "strategic alliances" between small landowners and well-heeled companies—is also a way of tackling the region's still thriving illicit economies and environmental degradation. "The banana industry is a necessary but insufficient driver of development," said Restrepo. "And the gap between 'the necessary' and 'the insufficient' is being filled by the criminal economy, which is a particularly destructive force for the environment." He argued the lack of viable alternatives pushes the region's impoverished campesinos toward cultivating coca and illegal logging or, worse, illegal mining.

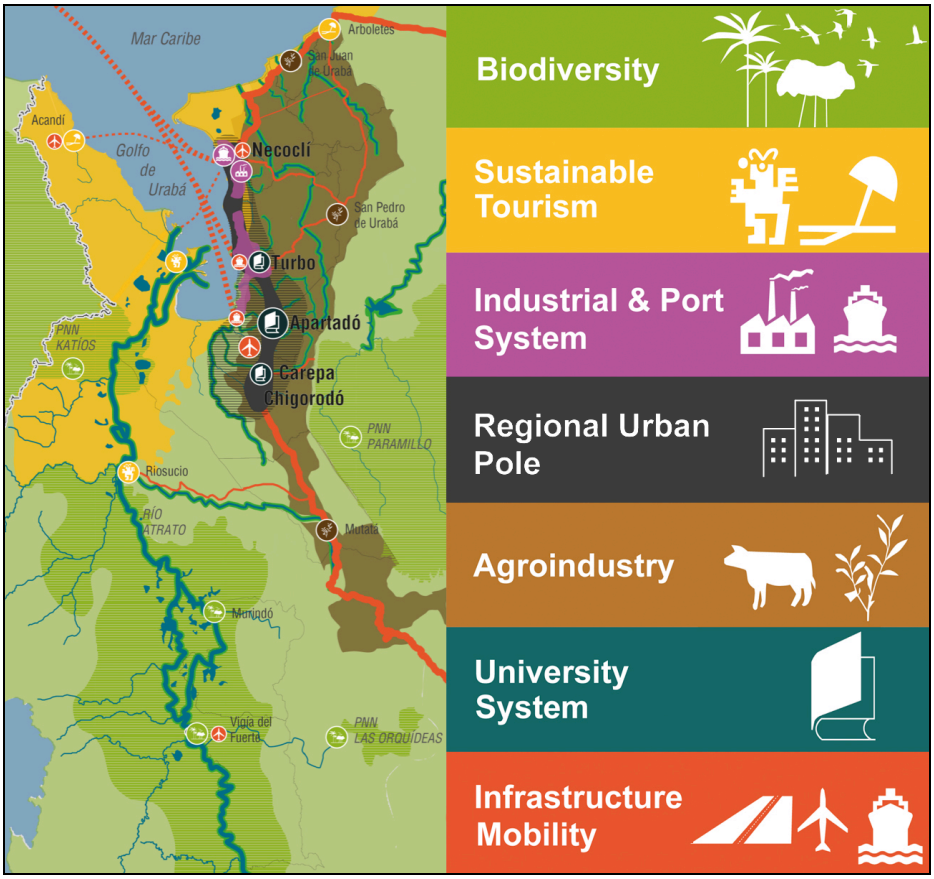
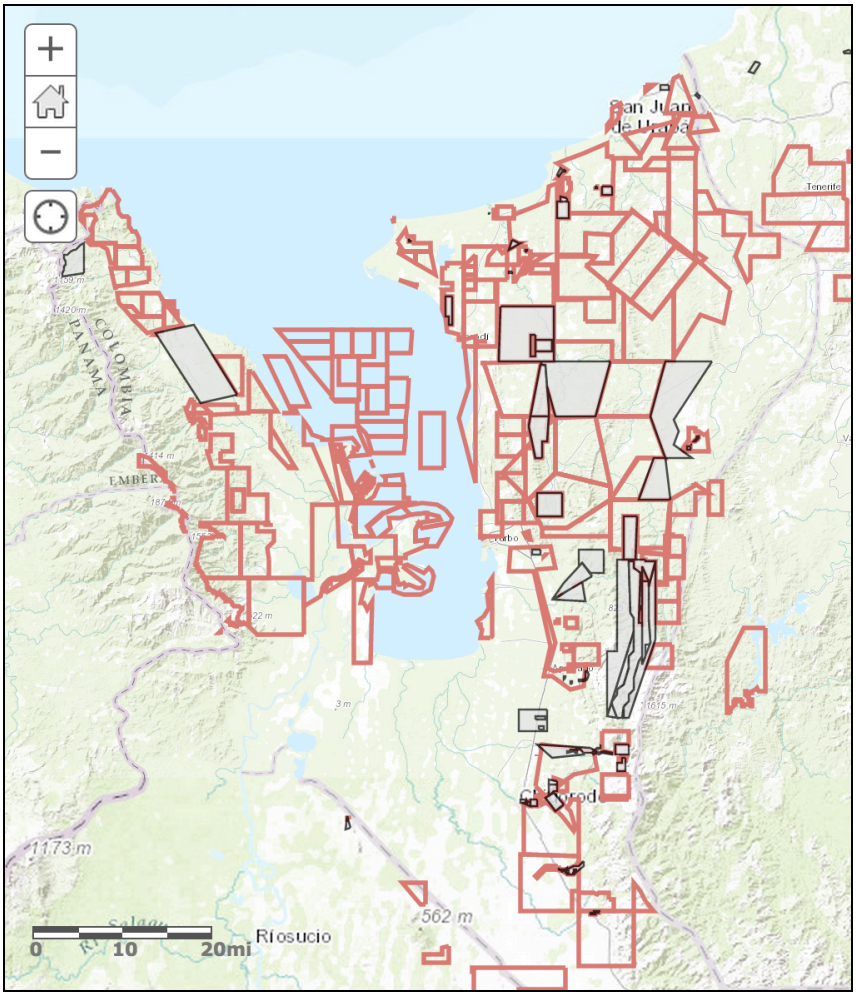


Chart from the *Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién* summarizing its "strategic interventions." (*PEUD*)

[20] In 2005, year of the last official census, Urabá had 509,409 inhabitants of which 56 percent lived in urban areas and 43 percent in rural zones.

Besides industry and agribusiness (both large and small), ecotourism forms the third pillar of the PEUD's economic vision for Urabá. Repeatedly citing the region's cultural, racial, and biological diversity, the Plan says improved transportation access to the region and institutional support for the hospitality industry will help create an international tourism hotspot. The Governor's office has already helped establish a ferry service that connects Antioquia's side of the gulf to Chocó's more famous beaches in Acandí. Finally, with the help of private sector "partners," especially the Medellín-based EPM, the PEUD is investing millions of dollars for the expansion of public service coverage and public housing.



Urabá: Granted minining concessions in gray; solicited concessions in red, 2013. (SIGAC)

The final three and less tangible elements of the PEUD are integral security, legality, and institution building. Integral security, according to Restrepo, implies more than just the physical presence of the national security forces: "It also means struggling against impunity through the presence of judicial and investigative institutions. We also have to provide more support to local governments, which are very vulnerable and weak when confronted with the economic power of the armed groups and other forms of corruption." He also added that promoting a culture of legality in the region must

begin by formalizing property rights. According to the PEUD, only 30 percent of landholdings in Urabá have formal titles. Beyond the national land restitution program and whatever land-related reforms are part of an eventual peace agreement with the FARC, Restrepo argued the national government should help formalize these properties. Moves toward defining property rights by the Santos administration must be understood as part of its efforts at turning mining into what Santos called a "locomotive" of the economy. Urabá is currently covered in mining concessions and explorations. Tulapas, for example, is in the middle of a 30-year coal concession still in its exploratory stages.

The Paramilitary Victory

The implementation of the "*Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién, 2011-2020*" is the culmination of more than five decades of violent accumulation and bloody political struggles in the region. Besides building on the Highway to the Sea and the United Fruit Company, the PEUD also works through the network of public service infrastructures and institutional formations put into place by popular struggles and armed insurgencies. The frontier state formations produced by the dialectic of insurgency and counterinsurgency—from the integrated rural development projects, to the 1991 Constitution—are also formative strands of the Strategic Plan's genetic code. More recently, Urabá's pre-postconflict conjuncture, including the land restitution program and other transitional justice initiatives, also helped set the conditions making the PEUD possible.

But, more than anything else, it was the paramilitary movement that made Urabá safe and available for the government-led transformation of the region. The paramilitaries counted on a favorable national and international coincidence: the implementation of Plan Colombia and the concomitant rise of Alvaro Uribe, first as Governor of Antioquia and then as President of the republic. The fact that the PEUD bears striking parallels to many of the ideas proposed by El Alemán at the time of his demobilization is not a coincidence. From its early days, the paramilitary movement combined counterinsurgency and plunder with a politics of regional vindication. Put simply, the paramilitaries won the battle for Urabá and, arguably, the war for Colombia as a whole.

Although the PEUD is already transforming the region, its broader strategic objective of definitively securing the hegemony of state territory in Urabá will remain contingent, contested, and incomplete. In fact, as the PEUD kicked into high gear in mid 2014, President Juan Manuel Santos announced a major military offensive against *Los Urabeños*. From its early days as the vestiges of the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas* (BEC), the *Urabeños* had blossomed into the country's largest drug-trafficking syndicate and the second-largest armed group after the FARC. While the government estimates their

membership at about 2,500, the *Urabeños* themselves claim they are "7,000 men in arms with a presence across the national territory."[21]

Announcing the military offensive, President Santos suggested the group be renamed, "el Clan Úsuga," after the family name of its top leaders. "For Urabá, it's a disgrace that the *Urabeños* are using the region's name," said Santos. "They are stigmatizing all the good people of this area, so we've decided to rename them." At the beginning of 2015, the President stepped up the offensive and sent 2,200 police and military along with nine helicopters into Urabá with the sole mission of killing or capturing Dairo Úsuga, alias "Otoniel," the leader of the *Urabeños*—a manhunt on a scale not seen since the one that killed Pablo Escobar. But Otoniel is on his home turf, so finding him proved difficult. He grew up near Tulapas and has been warring since he joined the EPL in the 1980s as a teenager.

One intelligence report noted the municipalities immediately surrounding the gulf "have become the support network of [the *Urabeños*] criminal operations, a comfort zone and longstanding refuge for the leaders of the group."[22] The Minister of Defense claimed local communities were giving cover to the *Urabeños* "either out of fear or for money," but the fact that the Army began traveling with a tanker-truck of potable water to supply isolated communities near its operations implies a deeper territorial relationship. Citing the tanker-trucks, the Minister of Defense said, "We are not just attacking a criminal band, we are also trying to provide solutions to communities that are highly exposed to the power of the criminal economies."[23] Indeed, despite the ongoing conspicuous investments and symbolic power of the PEUD, the *Urabeños*' influence over communities in some geostrategic areas remains stubbornly intact. Alfredo Molano, a veteran war correspondent with a doctoral degree in sociology, reported from Urabá:

> Some of the *Urabeños* don uniforms and weapons; others, the majority, are informants and collaborators. They have three branches: the military wing patrols with pistols and machine guns; the political wing controls votes and, as a result, elected officials; the social wing is in charge of community-oriented work through the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, sports groups, and other civic organizations. They recruit youths through these same means and have also found a new one: student loans.[24]

Molano's account reveals that the *Urabeños* have already accommodated some of the PEUD's hallmark social initiatives (sports, education, community participation). The group even finances students who are taking advantage of the wider menu of educational options provided by Fajardo's "*Antioquia: La más educada*." The *Urabeños*

[21] "Nuevas autodefensas piden ser tenidas en cuenta en proceso de paz," *El Espectador*, June 28, 2013.
[22] "2200 hombres le siguen el rastro a 'Otoniel'," *El Colombiano*, March 10, 2015.
[23] "'Otoniel', auge y crisis del capo más buscado del país," *El Colombiano*, March 30, 2015.
[24] Molano, Alfredo. "El caso Arboletes," *El Espectador*, October 14, 2012.

have secured their territorial hegemony by remobilizing the same practices, institutional formations, and even the same personnel used by the BEC. For instance, in 2013, authorities arrested "Grumpy," one of El Alemán's *Promotores de Desarrollo Social* mentioned in a previous chapter, for leading the new group's political dealings in Urabá.[25] A government investigation claimed that no other group "has the corrupting power of the *Urabeños* inside the institutions of the state."[26] In other words, the Strategic Plan coexists with—and in some way works through—the very problems it is meant to resolve.

Posing Urabá itself as a problem of government, the PEUD is an attempt to governmentalize the state in a place where it has supposedly not yet arrived. As a frontier state formation, the Plan is an ensemble of strategic social-spatial interventions that take up and redeploy many of the techniques, institutional forms, and rationales of social urbanism with the objective of definitively establishing a self-sustaining form of governmentality in Urabá. In a liberal vein, the Plan tries to set the conditions of possibility for Urabá to become a self-governing territory of civil society constituted by rights-bearing individuals and economic processes in which political society is limited to "governing just enough" (Foucault 2008, 17).

The PEUD's establishment of the conditions of possibility for this liberal form of government, however, is a herculean effort that is repeatedly constrained by the limits of state power—whether in the form of the *Urabeños* or simply because of the enormity of the task. While tacking between its micro and macro strategic interventions, the PEUD is constantly rubbing against the grain of the region's historically sedimented territorialities. As a planning effort by multiple agencies of government to retake the reins of frontier state formation in the region, the PEUD strives for the production of what Lefebvre called "abstract space": the lifeless, instrumentalized, and homogenized spatiality upon which the social relations of both capitalism and statehood depend for their reproduction (Lefebvre 1991; 2009, 187).

The entire history of Urabá, however, can be read as a story about the impossibility of abstract space. Even the ultra-violent attempt by the paramilitary movement to bulldoze the region into a blank slate for capitalist development and modernist statehood had to contend—and actually worked through—the insurgent territorialities that came before. Capitalism and statehood, in other words, do not necessarily railroad existing spatialities, barriers, and challenges to their development; they work through much more supple means of accommodation and incorporation. Urabá never was and never will be a *tabula rasa*.

[25] Grumpy ("El Escamoso"), whose real name is Hermes Rebolledo, mentioned in Chapter Four, helped coordinate "Urabá Grande" and became overseer of its elected officials.
[26] "'Otoniel', auge y crisis del capo más buscado del país," *El Colombiano*, March 30, 2015.

Conclusion

Territorial Masquerades

> "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce…. Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language."
>
> —Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

In May 2015, prison guards handed El Alemán a letter that had come for him in the mail. Signed by a group calling itself "the new EPL," the letter began, "Allow us this opportunity to introduce you to our new revolutionary movement. The EPL has resurged, restructured, and reorganized." Just a few days before, an appeals court had approved El Alemán's release from jail, deciding he had complied with the terms of the demobilization and had served his sentence. He was hoping to be on the outside in just a few weeks. But the New EPL promised it would "rain down" violence upon him if he did not leave the country as soon as he was out of jail.

"The hostilities are coming… all it takes is one shot. For your security and that of your family, leave, go and spend your millions in some other country," said the letter. The New EPL had announced its creation a few weeks before in a communiqué that railed against "the state," calling it "*un engaño*," a ruse. "We're not interested in taking power by force of arms," claimed the group. "We're beyond that stage in the revolutionary struggle. Our political actions will be limited to the clandestine support of political projects that are committed to bettering the life of communities."

The New EPL was a mystery in Urabá. The flurry of dispatches signed "From the mountains of the Nudo de Paramillo," the EPL's original birthplace in Córdoba in the 1960s, was all anyone knew about it. Most people I spoke with were skeptical: they believed the announcement of a resurgent EPL was itself a ruse. Their theory was that the New EPL was simply another rebranding effort by the *Urabeños* or, perhaps, a breakaway faction of the drug-trafficking group trying to stake out its own organizational identity. Almost the entire leadership of the *Urabeños*, after all, had

served as mid-level commanders in the EPL and the communiqué had claimed, "Almost all of us began in the combatant ranks of the EPL." Regardless of whether New EPL—if it even exists—is a genuine guerrilla group or a bunch of drug-traffickers masquerading as rebels, the announcement was a reminder that Urabá remains a contested land of overlapping, converging, and clashing territorialities.

Urabá's frontier state formations—the sometimes fleeting, the sometimes more durable articulations between civil and political society at the imagined limits of statehood—emerge from the frictions between these political spatialities. Frontier state formations mushroom from the tenuous ties that rival sources of political authority must forge with civilian communities in the process of producing territorial control. As I have argued, even in Urabá's violent context, territories are never maintained by force alone; they are careful choreographies of coercion and consent. Territories, as fundamentally political and strategic formations, always maintain their dimensionality as social-spatial processes through the workings of hegemony.

Within these spaces, hegemony must be understood within the rubric of how civilian communities negotiate their relationships to the various groups fighting in the armed conflict. I have shown how these relationships are polyvalent and contradictory; they are shaped by always shifting degrees of complicity, convenience, resigned accommodation, and, of course, in the last instance coercion. It is amid the complexities and ambiguities of these territorial masquerades that civilians must make do. Within these arrangements, however, civilians are not the unwitting dupes of populist patronage or passive political subjects; they are active political agents who are simply trying to get by in the midst of an overbearing armed conflict.

I have made these arguments by relying on Lefebvre's theories about the production of space and on Gramsci's understanding of hegemony. Together, these thinkers have helped me theorize territory as a collective social process, rather than a "top down" imposition by calculative and classificatory political technologies wielded by a preformed centralized authority (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Elden 2010; 2013; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). Gramsci and Lefebvre are also crucial for understanding the logic of violence in armed conflicts. The body of literature on civil wars is unanimous in citing territorial struggles as a defining feature of irregular warfare, but the concept of "territory" itself is left woefully unquestioned and under-theorized (Kalyvas 2006; Arjona 2010). A major reason for this conceptual blind spot is that civilians only enter into the analysis as passive victims; a view that is utterly at odds with the human agency at the core of a properly Gramscian notion of hegemony.

Emphasizing the role of hegemony in the social production of space (Lefebvre 1991, 10), reveals the ways in which an armed group's territory can really only be said to exist in any meaningful sense in so far as it is socially and collectively produced as such through the discursive and material practices of everyday life, a process that necessarily enlists combatants and civilians alike—however imbalanced the power relations

between them. A social understanding of space allowed a fine-grained analysis of paramilitary territory—from zone breaking to state-building—that demonstrated how political struggles and economic violence formed inseparable dynamics. This is another crucial point because it challenges much of the "New Wars" literature and dichotomous understandings of "greed versus grievance," which tend to place a wedge between the political and economic dimensions of contemporary conflict (Kaldor 1999; P. Collier and Hoeffler 2000; P. Collier et al. 2003). In the case of Colombia, the New Wars framework not only perpetuates problematic notions of statelessness, it also over-emphasizes the economics of the drug trade (e.g. Angrist and Kugler 2006; Firchow 2005). From the New Wars point of view, paramilitaries end up standing in for depoliticized "warlords" and cocaine becomes an avatar of the "resource curse."

Instead, my theoretical framework and my historical-ethnographic approach have enabled me to argue that Colombia's armed groups—and the conflict in general—are not anathema to projects of liberal statehood and capitalist-oriented development. In fact, in the case of paramilitaries, I showed how they were deeply tied to initiatives aimed at making spaces governable, expanding global trade, and attracting capital. Massive paramilitary-led plunder and political violence worked right along side (and even through) internationally supported government projects aimed at institution building, good governance, political subsidiarity, and the provision of agrarian livelihoods. Even efforts aimed at shoring up the rule of law, as in the case of *Guardabosques* coca-eradication program, became an integral part of the *paras*' frontier state formations.

Lefebvre's analytical framework for social space as simultaneously a physical materiality, a discursive construct, and a everyday lived experience enabled a historically nuanced account of Urabá's production as a stateless frontier zone. I retraced how the production of the frontier was a process in which material constructions, like the Highway to the Sea and the banana enclave emerged in mutual constitution with the ideologies driving Medellín's neocolonial relations with region. Through this approach, I was able to show how multifaceted and multiply scaled forces—geopolitics, capitalism, and cultural politics—all conspired in the production of Urabá's frontier status. As for the third and most important leg of Lefebvre's triad—space as an everyday lived experience—I focused on the way in which primitive accumulation touched off violent economic relations between land, labor, and capital. Rather than taking Urabá's economies of violence as an index of state failure, I argued they formed the defining contours of everyday statecraft in this frontier space. It was these economies of violence that pushed the wheels of insurgency and counterinsurgency into motion—a dialectical territorialized struggle that quickly became the motive force of Urabá's frontier state formations.

Finally, Gramsci's concept of the integral state as a dialectical unity of civil and political society allowed me to disentangle the perplexing nature of the state and popular claims of statelessness while avoiding the analytical closures of ideal-type

definitions of statehood or of what "counts" as state formation. In the revanchist paramilitary war of position, for example, the form and content of "the state" was precisely what was at stake. Throughout my analysis, I demonstrated how the presumed absence of the state was a productive ideological and material force that shaped all kinds of political relationships, discourses, practices, and institutional formations. Amid the long ghostly shadow of state absence, insurgents, paramilitaries, campesinos, and government planners all got into the "business" of state formation; all of them tried to give concrete coherence to the inherently unwieldy idea of the state in a place where it supposedly did not exist.

I named these efforts, "frontier state formations," a concept referring to the multiple, unruly, violent, para-legal, and sometimes fleeting political formations collectively produced at the perceived limits of "the state." In proposing this term, I sought to capture the dialectical relations being configured and disfigured between civil and political society without resorting to teleological, irreversible, singular, and reified understandings of state formation. In doing so, I challenged the conventional view among critical scholarship that we are all always under the misty spell of the state fetish (Abrams 1988; Taussig 1992; Mitchell 1991; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). The pervasive claim of state absence in Urabá certainly exhibits the mystified statolatry criticized by so many theorists and scholars.

Throughout this story, however, residents of Urabá often revealed themselves to be perfectly capable of parsing and, indeed, exploiting the cracks and contradictions of the state as a violent political abstraction. "The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice," wrote Philip Abrams in his influential article on studying the state. "[The state] is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is" (1988, 82). From this perspective, the presumption of statelessness in Urabá means political practice is already "unmasked," exposing the state for what it is: a political masquerade.

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