

Book Review

Jasmin Hristov

Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia

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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Whether in the blood and glory days of European imperialism, the post-1960 era of neocolonialism or the ongoing and ill-defined pursuit of a new world order, relations between metropolitan and hinterland countries have been a source of economic, political and ethical consternation and concern. Nowhere is this highly contested history more in evidence than in North, Central and South America. From the time (1823) when the Monroe Doctrine simultaneously proclaimed the support of the United States of America for national self-determination and also asserted its rights over a hemispheric sphere of influence, the fates of what were often condescendingly called “banana republics” were largely in the hands of American diplomatic, military and corporate policy.

The paranoia stirred up in the post-World War II era put its own indelible stamp on these affairs as the US chose to support vicious dictators in preference to democratically elected progressives and nationalists who were deemed to be “soft on communism.” Case studies abound: the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala (1954), the overthrow of the Bosch government in the Dominican Republic (1965), the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile (1973) and the illegal (even by the standards of US law) attempt to overthrow the government in Nicaragua during the Reagan administration (roughly 1981-1988) punctuate a history of poverty and repression. US-Cuban relations since 1959 are, of course, their own special story.

Of course, things have now changed some. Though still fragile, democratic governance has become the norm from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. Arguably fair elections regularly take place and, sometimes, even liberal progressives and outright leftists are allowed to win. True, they may also be kidnapped and exiled – President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti and President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras come prominently to mind. As well, efforts (one of which was briefly successful) have been made to remove President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela from office by force. Still, the overall pattern is an improvement over the torture chambers and death squads that made area politics toxic and, too often, lethal throughout the twentieth century.

Less systematically covered in the popular and professional press are the regimes that win American favour, the indulgence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the plaudits of the corporate media. One such regime is in place in Colombia, the headquarters of the illicit drug industry, arguably the worst human rights offender in South America, and a nation approved and assisted by both the Obama and Bush administrations in the United States. It is also endorsed by Canada’s neoliberal prime minister Stephen Harper who, on a contentious visit in 2007, made it clear that economic considerations took precedence over concerns about human rights. In light of the increasingly apparent urgency in the choices ahead for both advanced and underdeveloped societies in the region, the country and its current leader, Alvaro Uribe, merit attention.

Jasmin Hristov is well placed to instruct us in Colombian affairs. She is close to completing her PhD in sociology at York University in Toronto, and a Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Latin America. She has already produced an impressive inventory of publications. *Blood and Capital* is an excellent “first plateau.” As Matthew Behrens has commented: “since last-year’s [2008] Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was inked – in blood, some would say – reports of grave human rights abuses continue to emerge, receiving little or no Canadian media coverage.” He adds that Hristov’s narrative belongs “on the Prime Minister’s reading list, and would no doubt be helpful to those Canadian business executives who remain clueless about (or willfully blind to) the human costs of high returns on Colombian investments.”

I disagree. I do so, not because I don’t value Hristov’s contribution, but because I cannot imagine that either Mr. Harper or the corporate executives are unaware of the reality or that they much care, nor would they be much inclined to read *Blood and Capital* unless it was to gather “intelligence” on the opposition.

For more sensitive readers, Ms. Hristov’s book presents a detailed look at a country that belies its democratic constitution by relying on a catalogue of coercive institutions ranging from death squads to paramilitary organizations to the formal military, government intelligence, police and criminal justice systems. Their power is formidable. Their enemies are academics, students, journalists, workers, peasants and human rights activists. Dissent in Colombia can get a person arrested, assassinated or simply “disappeared.”

The description and analysis Hristov provides will immediately strike some as “biased.” Others would call her work engaged and activist. Unlike the North American corporate media, she does not represent the violence in Colombia as the outcome of a typical Latin American civil war between the left (revolutionaries) and the right (pro-American bastions of law and order). That is the sort of yin-yang rivalry that is the stock-in-trade of “fair-and-balanced” newbroadcasters and “objective” journalists trained to see both sides (there are necessarily only two) of *every* story, and to report each with equanimity.

Jasmin Hristov has lived in Colombia and with the people of Colombia, and it is her firm and well-supported conviction that the much maligned FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is a national liberation army dedicated to both functional autonomy and social transformation. In the alternative, the coercive apparatus of the state, linked inevitably to the ruling class and most virulently expressed in the “informal” military arms of the state, is the primary cause and perpetrator of violence.

If this sounds like the predicable framework of an impending Marxist screed, that is as may be. Hristov’s judgement, however, is neither formulaic nor cast in the dense jargon of either scholarly or “revolutionary” writing. She is attentive to detail, thoughtful and given to an accessible and engaging style of writing. She also has a purpose beyond that of taking up the cause of oppressed people in what some describe as a modern “narco-state.” Jasmin Hristov’s chief theoretical focus is to generate a template for a contemporary model of state coercion which not only has historical roots but, perhaps more importantly, has the “capacity to evolve into new forms.”

Innovation in the developing countries usually involves transformational adaptations to the market economy and to democratic political institutions as well as technological initiatives in energy production and distribution, increased literacy and mass media of communications, and efficient instruments for the transportation of goods and resources – both human and natural. These changes are commonly applauded in modern liberal democracies. They offer constructive alternatives to command economies, tyrannical regimes and traditional (i.e., “backward”) cultures. They promise “rational” alternatives to fundamentalist ideologies and religions as well as to tribal or kinship loyalties that are held to stand in the way of market considerations.

This perspective prompts a call for action, a roadmap to development and the importation of entrepreneurial spirit and a desire for advancement and modernity; however, it often underestimates or simply denies another alternative to the cheerful whiggish narratives of progress in the post-communist world. Hristov does us a service by showing, in what is called “real time,” the elements of a noxious third choice.

The description of Colombia that Hristov provides is expressed in an almost “structural-functional” account of the way in which neoliberalism and paramilitarism are mutually supportive, how large numbers of marginalized and disadvantaged people are dispossessed and forcibly removed from their subsistence economies, where they are replaced by the exploitation of Colombia’s ample natural resources by dominantly foreign capital ably abetted by cunning comprador elites. Whether we are interested in political maturation, economic development or basic human rights, the implications of the emerging situation in Colombia has implications for the entire region.

There are some quibbles, of course. Karen Faulk of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania seems generally sympathetic to Hristov’s project and purpose, but she also complains about Hristov’s reliance on “facts that are so hard to come by and so easily manufactured.” Faulk insists that she is not doubting the “veracity” of Hristov’s evidence especially, she says, “since the sources [Hristov] draws on have undertaken the dangerous and essential task of documenting cases of violence perpetrated by powerful actors.” Nonetheless, one senses that the book does not rise to the level of scholarship that is possible when the subject matter has long since put down its weapons and turned to dust.

Another possible criticism is that Hristov does not press far toward a contribution to theory. It is true that she traces connections between foreign and domestic capital, the operation of the state as not merely the “executive committee,” but also the armed “enforcer” of ruling interests and the instrument of the immiseration of the majority of the Colombian people who remain poor, even by “Third World” measures. Still, these threads are not wound tight with elegant verbal or graphic models of empirically testable (preferably statistical) relationships.

Nonetheless, even if one were to try to denigrate *Blood and Capital* as little more than a sophisticated piece of journalism, possibly rising to the level of an “in-depth” study, it would still stand out as a commendable work in its field, and a spur to further thinking, writing and very possibly political action.

It is not merely an insightful backgrounder and a compelling account of contemporary events; to me, one of its greater virtues is the manner and extent to which it demystifies, discredits and debunks the standard version of Colombia's structural troubles. Whether undoing the disinformation about the allegedly current transition from a coercive state to a pluralist democracy, or deflating the mystique of the phony "war on drugs" (or the equally phony "war on terror"), Jasmin Hristov has presented us with a readable and a plausible book that tells a larger part of the truth about Colombia than we normally acquire. And, if we have the wit and the will to think about it, she tells us a good deal about ourselves, as we watch approvingly the military and economic initiatives undertaken by President Obama and, to a lesser extent by Prime Minister Harper, to keep President Uribe sailing safe and secure on his chosen course.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Science at Seneca College, Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at: howardadoughty@yahoo.ca