



## The frontier effect: state formation and violence in Colombia

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**The frontier effect: state formation and violence in Colombia**, by Teo Ballvé, Ithaca, London, Cornell University Press, 2020, 212 pp., US\$ 27,95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5017-4754-0.

In 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla ended the 50-year-old armed conflict between them. Strangely, two peace agreement's signature ceremonies were necessary that year: the first in Cartagena and the second, and definitive, one in Bogotá. This succession of events is explained by the plebiscite outcome through which the government sought the peace agreement endorsement. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, after a quarrelsome campaign, 50.21% of the voters rejected the agreement signed weeks before in Cartagena, forcing the parties to renegotiate. Regional differences marked the plebiscite's results: in many territories greatly affected by political violence, overwhelming majorities approved the peace accord. Yet, in the departments historically considered conservative fortresses, as in Antioquia, most voters opted for rejecting the peace agreement endorsement. However, at the sub-regional level, important differences appeared. In Urabá, a frontier region located within the borders of Antioquia, voters distanced themselves from the departmental attitude and supported the peace agreement.

*The Frontier Effect* is the result of Teo Ballvé's engaged interdisciplinary research in Urabá and Antioquia. The political, economic and social processes behind the production of frontiers and their implications are the central area of inquiry of the book, and Urabá is a noteworthy case for analysing them. Following the author, the historical production of Urabá as a frontier zone is not only determined by its geographical distance from the centres of political and economic power in Colombia. It is mainly the expression of a racialised form of internal colonialism (p. 18) that marked the subsequent historical tensions of the enforcement of regional and national efforts towards Urabá's political and economic integration. In Colombia, these tensions developed throughout the different stages and episodes of the political violence and the internal armed conflict that marked the contradictions towards peacebuilding.

For addressing these problems, the author employed a wide assortment of methodological tools. The deep ethnographical research through which the author approaches some of the protagonists and places of the recent regional political history – particularly demobilised of paramilitary combatants – is contrasted throughout the book with documents found in historical archives, judiciary files and hearings, interviews and field diaries of the many trips conducted by the author to multiple locations in the region. The result is an outstanding well-written book that should be consulted not only by scholars interested in Colombia

but also for those interested in peacebuilding, state formation, and agrarian political economy.

In the book, frontier is the central notion that articulates interdisciplinary approaches to state formation and violence. Since it is a highly-contested term within social sciences scholarship, addressing this notion from an interdisciplinary perspective is precisely one of the book's virtues. Ballvé employs the conception of frontiers and social production of spaces for analysing the interactions between the historical process of incorporation of Urabá (located in the Caribbean coast) within the political borders of Antioquia, the different waves of capitalist accumulation, land and resource grabbing, and the escalation and de-escalation of political violence through different periods. Throughout the book, the author engages with the work of Henri Lefebvre, highlighting how frontiers and social spaces are both real and imagined, both a medium and an outcome of social relationships and scenarios where they take place, and both produced and maintained. Ultimately, he concludes that the historical process of production of frontiers and social spaces reveals how 'the hypercomplexity of the frontier's multiple overlapping and interpenetrated territorial arrangements have been both a medium and a result of ultraviolent forms of capitalist extraction and state formation in the region' (p. 166).

For many of the actors interviewed, statelessness stands as the underlying cause of political violence. Ballvé's critical and historic reconstruction of the political trajectories in Urabá reveals the limits of claiming statelessness as the source of political violence. For discussing the traditional conceptions on state formation and the alleged problems of statelessness, the author surveys classical definitions from political science and distances himself from Hobbesian and Weberian positions. Following earlier arguments developed by leading Colombian political scientists such as Fernán González (2014), Ballvé contends that state formation takes place not despite, but as an effect of the violent disputes among armed actors through which they seek to consolidate each one's hegemony. Throughout the book, theoretical debates around state formation and consolidation are confronted with opinions of former combatants, social leaders, victims, human rights defenders and officials. As a result, reflections on statelessness, state formation and its implications for the life of ordinary people in Urabá are well-articulated.

Furthermore, Ballvé questions mainstream recipes of articulation between state formation, development and peacebuilding that assume that interventions such as infrastructure, capitalist agriculture enlargement, and employment creation are the solution to bring about peace in conflict-affected zones. The Urabá experience highlights precisely the opposite: development-oriented interventions might be one of the sources of the escalation of violence. Capital accumulation could nourish the reproduction of cycles of violence instead of preventing the emergence of new ones. The succession of development endeavours in Urabá amid persistent political violence is a testament to this conclusion.

The book chapters follow a chronological order. Chapter one focuses on the disputes around the highway construction between Medellín, the departmental capital ruled by white-conservative elites, and the not-so-white Urabá. This road materialised the economic interests of *Antioqueño* elites to gain access to the Caribbean Coast and control over those areas. To explain the relationship between both regions, Ballvé introduces the concept of internal colonialism, revealing how regional integration is mediated by uneven development dynamics, which are defined by racialised forms of territorial control. Chapter two covers the formation and arrival of leftist guerrillas in Urabá during the 1970s and 1980s and the conformation of paramilitary groups in the late 1980s, revealing how these actors embodied competing state projects in territorial control disputes among them. Chapters three and four reconstructs the genesis, growth and consolidation of paramilitary rule, which paradoxically

took place amid the demobilisation of the guerrilla fighters that had the largest operation in the region, the Maoist-oriented Popular Liberation Army. According to Ballvé, paramilitary groups in Urabá developed a sophisticated form of agrarian populism that allowed them to engage in massive land grabbing gained through violence and coercion. Such feeble legitimacy was gained by providing access to land and resources to some rural poor people while keeping control over the territory, and reinforced through controlling the state infrastructure, covering instances of political representation and administration from the grassroots levels (community councils) to the highest instances (parliament members). These chapters introduce an inconvenient truth: paramilitaries were supported not only by traditional and emerging rural elites but also by segments of the rural poor. Despite being victims of the crudest violence perpetrated by these armies, they eventually supported them amid patron-client relationships.

Chapter five examines how both violent land dispossession and peacebuilding-oriented development strategies consolidated transitions towards agrarian capitalism in Urabá, regardless of being driven by violent armed actors or within peacebuilding initiatives supported by international development entities. Chapter six considers the challenges and implications of the enforcement of land restitution policy in a context marked by the territorial control exerted by illegal armed actors. The author explores the emergence of poor-poor land disputes, taking place when land restitution claims by victims of dispossession confront the land rights aspirations of peasants using the same farms. In the case analysed by Ballvé, the latter gained access through clientelistic relationships with paramilitaries.

Chapter seven concludes the book and situates once more Urabá within the departmental scenario. The author revisits the tensions between regional centres of power and regional peripheries amid the construction of the frontier and the spaces and reconfirms how the regional elites have transformed and updated this form of racialised internal colonialism over a century. The successive waves of capitalist endeavours in the region demonstrates how the frontier effect enables competition between different actors pursuing state formation and legitimating different waves of land and resources dispossession. This included the highway construction, the expansion of banana plantations amid the international boom and the construction of the port previously; and currently, the expansion of oil palm plantations, cattle-ranching and more recently, what could be characterised as forms of green-grabbing.

The book addresses at least three cutting-edge debates across the social sciences, relevant for any scholar interested in understanding the interfaces between violence, state formation and capitalist accumulation. First, a political science debate on the contradictions between state formation and peacebuilding; second, the ongoing agrarian studies debate about the transformations in the countryside triggered by the development of capitalist agriculture; and third, critical geographical debates around how frontiers are being constructed amid power dynamics. In the Colombian context, these three debates reveal the urgency of enforcing the 2016 peace agreement for the Colombian society.

For addressing the first debate, Ballvé hinges upon a well-developed theoretical discussion within the Colombian scholarship. His work addresses something that has been raised by political scientists in Colombia for decades, but that is not considered thoroughly either by state officials and politicians, or by development practitioners: that political violence is not one of the consequences of alleged statelessness; but the result of the social and state actors struggles over the state formation and legitimation. Critical Colombian scholarship insisted

for decades on the importance to stop labelling the political issues in the country as a consequence of an absent or a failed state, mainly because of the policy implications of such assumptions. To some extent, the notion of territorial peace that orientates the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the former FARC-EP responds partially to the development of such debates, that state formation in Colombia is uneven across the national territory, and the peace and stability could not be the result of central interventions on peripheral territories.

Second, the book addresses crucial debates on agrarian studies, particularly for scholars interested in considering the interactions between the global land rush and the commodity boom with historical trajectories of violence, land dispossession and further concentration. Urabá has been the site of a succession of different forms of capitalist development, from frustrated infrastructure initiatives to oil palm plantations sowed in violently dispossessed lands, to forest conservation schemas and carbon bond trade. As such the region served the accumulation interest of succeeding elites. Scholars interested in agrarian change and capitalist transformation in the countryside will find in *The Frontier Effect* a thrilling study of the interconnections between these processes with political violence and state formation.

Third, the book addresses geography debates on frontiers and the social construction of spaces. Ballvé demonstrates that frontiers are created as spaces in which powerful economic actors deploy their projects of domination and capitalist accumulation legitimised by ideals of progress, civilisation and welfare. The notion of frontier is particularly relevant for understanding how power dynamics recreate imaginaries about civilisation and progress that in Colombian history have been enforced through violence, dispossession and repression.

Finally, the comprehensive and detailed research work conducted by Theo Ballvé is not exempt from disregarding important details of the regional history that challenge the central arguments developed by the author. According to the author, armed actors competed to expand their social legitimacy among peasants in Urabá. In this view the paramilitaries were the most successful actors, because they articulated violent threats with armed clientelism. In return, peasants offered them conditional cooperation (p. 82). However, in 1997, in the rural area of Apartadó, Urabá's most important province, and after multiple violations of the human rights of their community members, a group of peasant organisations declared themselves a Peace Community. Since then, they resisted the rule of all armed groups, including the Colombian army. This declaration is one of the responses of rural dwellers in these territories to the violent victimisation perpetrated against them (Giraldo, 2010). Compared to the peasant villages surveyed by Ballvé, the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó has even renounced the use of legal institutions that could facilitate a dialogue between them and the state, such as the declaration of their territory as a Peasant Reservation Zone (Courtheyn, 2018). The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó is one piece that does not fit entirely in Ballvé's puzzle.

Overall, Ballvé offers outstanding research that will catch the attention of scholars interested in analysing the territorial contradictions of the relative stability of Colombia's democracy and the different forms and stages of the country's protracted political violence. This book permits us to understand the conflicting and diverging results of the 2016 peace agreement's plebiscite and the reasons that could explain its precarious enforcement in regions such as Urabá, which regrettably seems to trigger emerging cycles of violence and dispossession.

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