

Insurgency, conflict and communalism in Colombia

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In this interview, Janet Biehl discusses with José Antonio Gutiérrez D. — a libertarian activist and author living in Ireland where he lectures at Trinity College — the history of the revolutionary struggle in Colombia, the role of the FARC and the transformation of the peasant movement, which has started to form communal assemblies in the Colombian countryside and is pushing for revolutionary change in new and inspiring ways.

Janet Biehl: What is the basis of the struggle going on in Colombia now?

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.: Colombia has one of the worst distributions of land in the world. It has some 47 million people, and of them, only 3,000 landlords own 53 percent of that land. I don't know another country with such a shocking distribution. The conflict over land has actually been going on for centuries, but an armed struggle has been going on since the mid-1940s. It's not an armed struggle alone — the culture of agrarian resistance started back in the 1930s, so we talk today of an armed and social conflict. There is an important popular revolutionary movement in the countryside.

The large landowners use their land very unproductively, for speculation purposes, or because they want to raise crops for export. Recently, they found that beneath the land, there is a mass of mineral wealth and they are after it, but either way, the rentier mentality is firmly entrenched in this form of capitalism. For decades they have been forcing small independent farmers off the land, using anything from fraudulent legal methods to naked violence.

The landlords traditionally wanted to expropriate them, but they tried to keep them around as laborers. This was hard to do, because the country is so big, and there is always more land in the jungle, so the peasants just move farther into it. They settle a new piece of land, clear it, work it, and become independent farmers again.

But once they settle in, the big landowners walk in and claim that they own the land, that they have property rights. The farmers are driven off once again, and this has been the historical cycle of the land conflict in Colombia. What can they do? They can move still farther into the jungle, but that will just reproduce the same cycle.

At times violence spiraled out of control. So for example in 1946, during a period of violence between Conservatives and Liberals — the two major parties — the Conservatives used massive violence in order to expel small peasants from their land, in areas where majorities were Liberal. This was done with the support of the Church and the State. They killed some of them using right-wing paramilitaries. Sometimes entire families were murdered. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, there is a part where the children of one of the main characters are systematically executed one after another. That reflects very well the tragic history of this country.

But sometimes they resist displacement and expropriation. In 1948–49 Liberal peasants formed a guerrilla force to defend themselves. And in 1949 Communists formed self-defense groups in Tolima and parts of Tequendama in order to prevent peasants from being expelled. Facing this resistance, landlords, on many occasions, got intimidated and fled.

The two sets of guerrillas got in touch with each other. The Communists were far better organized, and unlike the Liberals, they had an ideology and a party that supported them, because the Liberal leadership soon got scared of guerrilla warfare and tried to pacify their constituency, and

entered into discrete alliances, at first, with the Conservatives. So during course of the armed struggle, Liberal peasants got radicalized.

Late 1953, a military dictatorship came to an agreement that if the guerrillas demobilized, they could have amnesty. But the Cold War was in full swing, and the US intervened and said any amnesty would have to exclude the Communists, who were considered unforgivable. So the Communists didn't get the amnesty, and so they didn't demobilize. And some Liberal peasants decided to stay in arms too rather than be expelled or killed by the government. Then, in 1958, the Liberals and Conservatives found a power-sharing formula, and the constant exclusion and proscription of Communists remained in place.

The two opposing parties agreed?

It's a closed political system. Colombia has one of the most exclusionary political systems that you can think of. Almost every president in its history has been related to another one. Father-and-son presidents happened many times. It's more like a political caste system, or a closed social club.

The Liberals and Conservatives formed the National Front to share power, and they took turn governing. The ruling elite maintained this system by violence, smashing every left-wing alternative that came along. Whenever a new political party or a social movement came up, the elites assassinated the leaders.

Although the National Front agreement came to an end in the 1970s, still this rabid opposition to alternatives remains as a heavy legacy. In the 1980s the Patriotic Union leaders, as well as rank and file, were killed, some 6,000 victims in only five or six years. (The Patriotic Union was a left-wing party formed as part of a failed peace agreement with the FARC.) It's been a political genocide — we can expand the definition of genocide to include the decimation of political resistance after this case.

When was the FARC formed, and what are its objectives?

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia, or FARC, was founded 1964. Its *raison d'être* has always been agrarian reform. It stands for socialism too, but that's more aspirational than programmatic. Its program is agrarian, acting as a strong self-defense of the peasants. It's also a guerrilla army, defending peasant land rights through arms.

The Colombian government calls the FARC terrorists and bombs the guerrilla camps in the jungle. Usually the war against FARC goes hand in hand with mass displacement of the peasantry, as happened during the Plan Colombia-years, at the start of the millennium.

Speaking of Plan Colombia, how much military aid does the US give Colombia?

Colombia is third-biggest recipient of US military aid, after Israel and Egypt. Dana Priest reported in the Washington Post that the official funding amounts are actually only the tip of iceberg, that there's lots of black funds, so we don't know the full amount. It's amazing how little people in

the US know about Colombia — they don't take it seriously, but the US sustains the war here. They associate Colombia with drugs and drug cartels and nothing else.

How does the drug trade intersect with the agrarian struggle?

The peasant farmers grow coca in order to survive, because no other crop grows so well there. The infrastructure is poor, and by the time they can bring other kinds of produce to the local market, it's rotten. But coca leaves don't require a trip to the market — a guy comes to pick it up, sometimes even in helicopters — and they get several harvests per year. So the coca leaf gives them an income that allows them to stay on the land.

You have to understand, the narcotics industry isn't just these farmers plus a couple of gangsters. It's a huge enterprise, involving police, politicians, government officials, lawyers, submarine pilots, airplane pilots, financial advisers, people in real estate, money launderers, professional chemists, enforcers, and more.

Let's take the example of the Cauca region in southern Colombia, a big cocaine producer. There a kilogram of coca base is worth \$2,000. Once it's processed into cocaine, it's worth around \$3,500. By the time it gets to the southern coast of Mexico, it's valued at around \$15,000. In northern Mexico it's \$25,000. By the time it hits New York, it's worth \$98,000 or \$100,000. Everywhere along the way, the middlemen take their cut. By far the largest share of the profit goes to the US middlemen.

Now, most of the efforts to eradicate coca are made in Colombia, because it's considered okay to gas and bomb peasants there. The US gives money to Colombia for eradication purposes, but the government mainly uses it against insurgents, in the areas that are under FARC influence, and not in areas controlled by right-wing paramilitaries, who operate in compliance with the national army more often than not.

The point is, it's the lower chains of production that absorb the risk; the peasants in Colombia and, the small-time street dealers in the US. They bear the brunt of the War on Drugs. The cocaine users on Wall Street are never touched. Nor are the financial advisers, the real estate dealers, all the rest who participate in the most profitable activities in this industry. It's the peasantry that carries the burden. The narcotics mirage distorts our understanding of the basic reality of class struggle.

Judged by its own stated objectives, the War on Drugs has been a failed policy. But judged by its unspoken objectives, as Noam Chomsky would say, it's been very successful. It succeeds in driving drug prices up. And being a criminal operation is part of what makes the drug industry profitable. It also helps drive peasant farmers off the land, and it allows the US to meddle in Latin American affairs with absolute impunity, as some form of moral crusader.

If the US really wanted to get rid of the drug industry, it would support viable economic alternatives, but obviously those who profit are not really interested in stopping the narcotics industry. Meanwhile the peasants themselves want alternatives to coca. They don't want to be fighting eradication programs all the time. We need a new nonrepressive approach that decriminalizes them. And that requires developing viable alternatives for the peasantry.

I'm strongly for legalization. I don't do drugs myself — my opinion is purely based on moral, social, political, and legal arguments. Back in 1920s when cocaine was first made illegal, the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta said it should be legalized. Instead of banning it, he said, we

should educate people about its effects so they can make an informed decision. That was such a progressive view for back then! It makes you wonder that we should listen more to the anarchists!

What is FARC's involvement in the drug trade?

The FARC taxes coca production because it has to feed a guerrilla army of many thousands of men and women and keep them in arms. It taxes and regulates all economic activity in territories of their influence – coca, coffee, mining-extractive activities everything.

It has powers of taxation – does that mean it controls certain areas?

Yes, and in these areas many perceive the FARC as the legitimate authority. That's a fact. The government, which is now involved in peace negotiations with the FARC, is starting to acknowledge that for the first time.

Can state police go into those areas?

There are areas where the police can go sometimes, other times they can't. But even if they go, they encounter massive opposition – the communities are hostile to them. Like Sumapaz, which is very close to the capital Bogotá. It is a peasant area. Police can go there, but because of massive operations in 2008–9, people wouldn't give them water or sell anything to them, and the shops closed when the army walked by. Their hostility to the soldiers makes it clear they're not welcome, which has a huge impact on their morale.

And in other areas the FARC have tried to enter but they can't, because the people don't want them. In some areas, the FARC never could get in because the people are too Catholic, too conservative. The FARC have guns, but they can't get a foothold there. Mao said the power comes from the barrel of a gun, but he was wrong, particularly in the Colombian case. You can have the guns, but if the people don't accept you, you're gone, whether it's in the short, mid, or long term.

The FARC's presence varies from region to region. There's a constant negotiation between the insurgents and the communities. They don't bring the same policies everywhere. Legitimacy comes from a kind of tit for tat. That's how they've managed to maintain their hold of some areas of Colombia for fifty years.

Is the FARC Marxist?

Yes, officially. But its practice is far more important than its ideology, and far more interesting.

This is an important point, because the government propaganda has tried to show them as nonideological bandits bent on the destruction of civilization and everything sacred. Academics have even used the so-called “economic theory of conflict” to prove that they're just greedy rebels trying to cash in the cocaine money.

They're ideological, but it's a peasant guerrilla army — it's a very practical approach. Its ideology is influenced by some readings, but mostly they work on things as they go along. The original leaders of the FARC were peasants who didn't even go to secondary school. Whatever they knew ideologically was what they got from Communist Party. They never had anyone like Abdullah Öcalan for ideological formation, although some cadres were educated, ideologically speaking.

In 2008 an important intellectual, Alfonso Cano, became a FARC commander. He was educated as an anthropologist. He was intellectually restless. He was genuinely asking, what is the way forward? He is the one who said, we have to rebuild relations with the communities in areas where the war effort and a number of mistakes had strained them. We have to listen more, take a step back, leave more space for autonomy. He was killed in 2011. At the time he was killed, he was reading Chomsky, for instance, according to some media reports.

The peasant movement is receptive to new leftist ideas — they want to see alternatives. But sometimes they don't have the political or ideological element. I think the Kurdish movement's Democratic Confederalism could be very useful as communities are trying to build autonomy in many territories and as the vertical methods within the revolutionary movement are becoming more flexible.

What are the FARC's relations with other groups on the left?

The FARC is just one form of resistance out of many. People who don't agree with it but want to reform the land can work alongside it. In spite of a lot of sectarianism in the left, you can see them making a genuine effort for its relations with different sectors to be cooperative. Some leftist sectors condemn out of hand certain ways of resistance or isolate them, but this is wrong because we are all part of the struggle to change the structures of inequality and oppression. People will resist in any way they can.

I'm an anarchist, and I can work with people who define themselves as Marxist-Leninist because the land problem is such a big problem, and because of the problem of dismantling state terror in Colombia. We can all contribute something. But sectarianism remains a big challenge in some quarters.

The government has been demonizing the peasants for centuries and condemns the FARC as terrorist. But the FARC exists because the government has been exterminating the opposition. We should never forget this and we should be careful not to take at face value all the propaganda, which in Colombia is as big as with other struggles, such as the Kurdish struggle.

We may or may not take part in the armed struggle, but without the FARC, there will be no solution to this massive problem. The FARC is integral to the struggle. And whether we like it or not, it is through armed force that the peasantry still exists in Colombia. Otherwise they would have become agricultural laborers or moved to the cities to live in shantytowns.

When the FARC is in control of an area, does it run things democratically?

Traditionally the FARC would be the de facto rulers, as the political class. They'd run the justice system, arrange things, decide on land redistribution, and organize society in a sort of military

communism. But for the last ten years there's been more space for communal forms of association.

That implies horizontality.

Yes, timidly, a new way of doing things is coming into being, although I wish it were more horizontal. But each struggle is what it is, and you have to work with what you have and try to improve every day. But there's a lot of participation today, far more than in traditional politics. The guerrilla force has taken a step back, and that space has been reclaimed by communities working in a more autonomous way. That is starting to happen in many parts of the country. People come to meetings. They can speak freely in the assemblies.

What assemblies?

Communal assemblies, called *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, something like local action committees. They were created by the state back in the 1950s — the government said we have to organize the country, and people have to form communal associations to be a direct link with state. They did so for counterinsurgency purposes. But people came in, and they eventually became sympathetic to left-wing ideas or to the rebels, and they became communal assemblies, a form of local government.

For a long time, in some areas, the FARC would have the upper hand, but today they have some autonomy. And they're taking a more central role in local affairs. They're taking over infrastructure, administering justice, organizing recreation and sports. They're becoming basically a form of self-government.

In these experiences of more autonomy, the peasantry in some traditional areas of resistance are starting to constitute Peasant Reserve Zones (*Zonas de Reserva Campesina*). This is a constitutional tool, that the peasantry have adopted and modified to fit its own interest of protection of a peasant economy and to keep levels of autonomy within the country.

These experiences are incipient, but some of them are very interesting and could be the seeds of a new more horizontal and more self-managed project in the making, although there are forces pulling in all directions, from the government that accepts a limited role for them as a means to provide cheap labor to nearby agribusiness, to social democratic and authoritarian sectors that see them in terms of electoral base of support and a means to channel some funds for "peace building", to those who genuinely see it as a way to build autonomy.

Can the communal assemblies make decisions about land?

Of course. The state is not present. In many areas there is this self-government, and people take matters into their own hands.

What is the FARC's role?

The FARC, first of all, have allowed the peasantry to exist in many regions because of a strong resistance. As I said, traditionally they'd constitute the political class, but not anymore, not to the same extent anyway. Now they can act as activists, but they're not running the show on their own.

In the 2000s the FARC came to realization that they weren't necessarily the best people to solve problems when it came to internal quarrels, for instance. Because if they make a mistake, the people take it out on them. But if someone within the community makes a mistake, the people can sort it out.

Does one have to join FARC to participate in assemblies?

No, you have to be a member of the community. In fact, people don't accept free riding. If you want to be in the community, you have to participate on it.

It is a mistake to think that any of these organizations, whether it is Peasant Reserve Zones, Agrarian Unions or Local Action Committees, as mere facades of the insurgency, of the FARC or any other of the two guerrillas which also exist in the country — the ELN and the smaller EPL.

Organizations are autonomous although they co-exist and there are organic links that have grown over years of resistance and over shared territories, spaces and social fabric. The people are not mere stooges, but they are actors in a very broad process of resistance and creation of something new.

Have the FARC formed its own landed elite?

No, and that's because they have organic links with communities. They're not saviors from outside — they have community ties already. This is why they are often called simply "the lads". They operate in the regions they come from. They can't exist without the people's consent. This is the reality, whether you like them or not.

It is important to emphasize this point, because the government has started a campaign to try to portray FARC as land expropriators, when in reality, whatever land they have taken, they have distributed among the people. And now, in areas like Llanos del Yarí, Caguán, and Planadas, the government is accusing the local peasantry of being stooges minding the lands of guerrilla commanders, when the land has been worked and owned by them for decades because of the realities of conflict in Colombia.

Funnily enough, the government has turned a blind eye to the more than six million hectares expropriated to small peasants by cattle ranchers and landlords in the last twenty years, through paramilitaries with organic links with the army!

Does the FARC try to expand areas over which it has control?

Sometimes when there's a strategic interest in blocking the army, they will try to go into a place militarily. This can end badly, because a lot of mistakes have been committed, such as authoritarianism and militaristic deviations, a heavy-handed approach against communities that have not

had much exposure to them in the first place, and other times there have been sectarian killings or violence carried because of misinformation. This harmed them in some places. But they prefer to expand politically and are most successful when they do it this way.

As I said, in their case, power doesn't come from the barrel of a gun. The FARC contacts other communities organizationally, sends organizers, builds alliances. But when they go to a new area where they don't have much of a history and make one or two mistakes, the people immediately shut their doors to them. The FARC depends on consent. It's constant bargaining, constant negotiating.

What does the FARC do to be accepted?

It brings community stability and creates order. That's very important when you have a floating population like in Colombia. In the 1980s there was a lot of migration from the cities to the countryside — people came to pick coca leaves and brought all these vices with them. There might have been a surge in criminality, thievery, alcoholism, prostitution — social problems typical of modernization and rapid growth, so prevalent in mining centers or areas of quick expansion and floating populations.

But the FARC keeps social order, it sets rules, and people appreciate that. For example, you can't drink after certain hours, you can't carry weapons on the street, you can't go into a pub with a machete. These are coexistence rules. Communities appreciate them. If we are to live together, we have to abide by the rules. FARC negotiates with the community what's important to it. A lot of this is negotiation.

Now recently, in the last 10 or 15 years, FARC has been taking a step back from controlling communities, telling them they should organize themselves. And some communities will say, "Now we need to be left alone, we need to run our own spaces, we want our own autonomy, own kind of communal assemblies."

But many people still see the FARC as the ultimate enforcer of collective decisions. If I steal a hen, the communal assembly will come and tell me to give it back. If I don't agree, they will give me two warnings. And only the third warning is given by the FARC. The FARC steps in only at the request of the communal assemblies.

What about gender issues? Do women fight in the FARC guerrilla army?

Yes, 40 percent of the FARC are women. That's a new development, since the early 1980s. Very recently women are starting to have their own spaces, again, very slowly.

You have to understand that these are still traditional peasant societies where women have not been treated the best, but through the course of the armed struggle, the situation of women has started to change. Women are starting to become leaders in communities, and they are respected. The agrarian union of Colombia has recently set up a women's section and this is all part of a broader struggle.

Going back to the guerrillas, women have even become commanders, which changes totally how the community sees them, as people with capacities. In those communities you can't mistreat a woman.

There are two capital offenses. One is being a police informer, and the other is rape. The FARC can be ruthless in dealing with sexual offenses. It imposes a death sentence for rape and they don't mess around with it.

Why?

Because in the 1940s the Conservatives practiced rape to intimidate the opposition, and there's a deep trauma about it. Domestic violence is also seriously treated. If they catch a husband beating his wife, he has to leave. They won't kill him, but they'll force him to leave the community. And some patriarchal elements resent this.

Does this enlightened attitude also come from the participation of women?

It helps. But when I mentioned the ban on rape, I meant rape as such, including the rape of men. Right-wing paramilitaries used to execute gay men brutally, by putting a stick in their anus till they bled to death.

You know Latin America is far more open when it comes to sexuality — it's more visible, including for LGBTI. It's easier to be out of the closet here than in other places. Some community leaders happen to be LGBTI, as some farmer leaders in communal assemblies in Putumayo who are gay. They are respected. Of course there's still a lot of machismo, but the culture is changing.

The FARC takes a strong line that LGBTI must be respected, even if not everyone would fully understand it, even within their ranks. But if you're found mistreating a gay person, you can be expelled from the community. At the request of the community, the FARC will intervene. Say there is a case of rape or police informing, a community will not administer the death penalty, they can't and they won't. The FARC will come to village and sort it out. In some cases, it's a negotiation, like if a community says, "Just expel them, don't kill them", then they'll just be expelled. There's a lot of space for negotiation and this needs to be stressed.

Is there any Zapatista influence?

None. Developments have been mostly domestic. The FARC is a strong guerrilla movement, and they tend to see the Zapatistas as not really fighting the state, but as more a social movement from a faraway land, and they can't relate to that experience really. But the FARC would have a lot of time for the Kurdish movement, for instance. In my opinion, the Colombian people in general, but particularly rural movements, have so much to learn from Kurdistan.

How do you, as a self-defined anarchist, assess the FARC overall?

They're a peasant resistance organization quite maligned by the media. They're not angels but are trying to defend the peasantry in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In a very patriarchal and authoritarian society, they are trying to create a revolutionary structure to the best of their capacities.

It's been a learning process. They have authoritarian and hierarchical vices. But the mass struggle has brought together many communities. There have been attempts to democratize, to create real participatory politics with direct democracy. This has not been easy, for cultural, social, and all sorts of reasons.

Sometimes social democrats in Colombia say that right-wing paramilitaries and FARC resemble each other, but that's rubbish. The FARC have clearly tried to have a different kind of relationship with communities, a respectful one. They've tried to organize and bring about meaningful social change. They've tried to do criticism and are questioning gender stereotypes, maybe not to the extent that we'd like to see, but they're trying. It's a work in progress. There are forces going in all directions. But in rural communities they have tried to create a better world. In general, they're not people trying to have power for power's sake.

It is important to support efforts for a peaceful negotiation out of the armed conflict and to support the efforts of countless popular and agrarian organizations trying to denounce the difficulties of building an alternative in Colombia.

There is a vibrant popular movement working around issues such as human rights, land rights, food sovereignty, workers' rights, environmental justice. I think so much can be done in terms of international solidarity with Colombia. If the conflict comes to an end, we can leave communities on their own, and we need to guarantee that their basic rights are respected and that they can keep fighting for a better world without being massacred by the State.

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