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Gill, Lesley

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Disorder and Everyday Life in Barrancabermeja

Lesley Gill
Vanderbilt University

Abstract

This article examines how years of political violence and neoliberal restructuring have disorganized social life in Barrancabermeja. How, it asks, can working people grasp the future without the stability to understand the present and the ways that it both emerges and is different from the past? It explores how an extreme form of neoliberalism fragmented various forms of social solidarity, infused social life with fear, and generated violent, clientelistic networks that flourished in the absence of rights. It argues that unrestrained power and violence deprived people of the coherence needed to take care of themselves and to grasp the connections between the past, present, and future that are necessary “to make history.”

Keywords

everyday life • neoliberalism • political violence • Barrancabermeja

Desorden y vida cotidiana en Barrancabermeja

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo años de violencia política y neoliberalismo han desorganizado la vida social en Barrancabermeja. ¿Cómo es posible, pregunta la autora, que la clase trabajadora capte el futuro sin la estabilidad de entender el presente y la manera en que el presente emerge del pasado pero al mismo tiempo es diferente? Explora cómo una forma extrema del neoliberalismo fragmentó varias formas de solidaridad social, infundó la vida cotidiana con miedo y generó redes violentas de clientelismo que florecieron en la ausencia de derechos. Sostiene que el poder y la violencia descontrolados privaron a los barranqueños de la coherencia necesaria para cuidarse a sí mismos y para captar las conexiones entre el pasado, el presente, y el futuro que son necesarias “para hacer historia”.

Palabras clave

vida cotidiana • neoliberalismo • violencia política • Barrancabermeja

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Lesley Gill es profesora del Departamento de Antropología de la Universidad Vanderbilt, Nashville, Estados Unidos.
lesley.gill@vanderbilt.edu

Disorder and Everyday Life in Barrancabermeja

Lesley Gill
Vanderbilt University



In July, 2010, on the eve of Colombia's bicentenary celebration, hundreds of people from peasant organizations, student associations, labor unions, and human rights groups gathered in Barrancabermeja, the center of the country's conflicted Middle Magdalena region. Unlike government leaders who dominated official celebrations in Bogotá with paeans to the heros of 19th century independence wars, they engaged and updated a historical memory rooted in the labor and popular struggles of 20th century Barrancabermeja and the surrounding hinterland. Their referents included the labor organizers Raúl Eduardo Mahecha and Maria Cano, assassinated oil workers and union leaders Orlando Higueta and Manuel Chacón, and the revolutionary priest Camilo Torres. These individuals represented a long, independent tradition of nationalist, working class radicalism that developed deeper roots in Barrancabermeja than in other working class centers, such as Cali, Barranquilla, and Medellín, because the city's birth as a foreign-controlled oil enclave in the early 20th century undermined the rise of a domestic bourgeoisie. Consequently, the ties of paternalism, authoritarianism, and clientelism that entwined regional bourgeoisies and working classes elsewhere were largely absent in Barrancabermeja. Working class radicalism defined the city's popular majority until the late 20th century, when right-wing paramilitaries decimated the Left and consolidated power through a campaign of terror.¹

During the two days of human rights fora, cultural presentations, and commemorative events billed as the Bicentenary of the Peoples of the Northeast, participants addressed the history of the last three decades, a time in which an escalating campaign of state- and paramilitary-backed

1 Compare, for example, Ann Farnsworth-Alvear's discussion of the intense paternalism that shaped early 20th century labor relations between Medellín textile mill owners and female workers (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000) with the description of worker radicalism in Barrancabermeja's foreign-dominated oil enclave in Vega Cantor et al (2009).

terror killed or displaced thousands of people, converted rural lands into agro-export zones for African palm cultivation, facilitated the violent expansion of drug trafficking, gave free reign to multinational corporations to exploit national resources, and swept in neoliberalism on a wave of impunity.² Colombians, they claimed, were still not independent.

Beginning in the 1980s, paramilitaries, operating first, as adjuncts to the state security forces and then, as private armies, expanded throughout the Middle Magdalena region. They fought a dirty war against left-wing guerrillas and popular organizations on behalf of the security forces and an emergent right-wing bloc of regional elites, politicians, and newly rich drug traffickers in which massacres, extra-judicial executions, disappearances, and torture undergirded the violent dispossession of working people and the transfer of wealth to the paramilitaries and their sponsors. Refugees seeking to escape from the violence headed to Barrancabermeja. Yet because of the city's organized working class, its importance as an oil refining center, its strategic location on the Magdalena river, and the presence of several guerrilla groups, Barrancabermeja became a paramilitary target at the end of the 20th century, when paramilitarism experienced a major expansion.

Between 1998 and 2003, paramilitaries took over the city with the active consent of the state's security forces. The violence that accompanied their incursion ruptured individual lives, ravaged the oil workers' union—the Unión Sindical Obrera—, and disarticulated a dense network of urban popular organizations. Paramilitaries attacked unarmed civilians because the guerrillas had advanced their struggle through both war and politics—known as *la combinación de todas las formas de lucha*—and had individuals acting on their behalf in a number of urban popular organizations, trade unions, political parties, and Christian base communities. Privatized terror also generated new divisions and tensions among the working class that broke down old forms of solidarity, and the complete impunity that shielded perpetrators demolished the ability of many survivors to hope that social justice was possible. All of this set limits on the possible futures that working people could create, as they sought to rebuild their lives within and against the neoliberal dystopia that arose from the ashes of popular solidarity. Despite the efforts of Bicentenary participants to claim a history that departed from the official version, we therefore need to ask about the status of this alternative history in contemporary Barrancabermeja, where the concerns about social justice,

2 For more on this process in Colombia and the Middle Magdalena region, see Hylton (2010), López (2010), Bonilla (2007), and Archila et al (2006).

labor rights and public services that animated past struggles remain key issues but in different ways than in the 1920s or the 1970s.

Contemporary Barrancabermeja represents a paradox: despite a period of unmitigated repression, in which thousands of people died or fled their homes and an independent tradition of working-class radicalism withered, the radical tradition survives as a more influential minority political current than in other Colombian cities, in spite of the consolidation of paramilitarism and the destruction of popular organizations. Claiming an autonomous history is one aspect of this enduring history. Yet there is no common memory about the past, just competing and opposed stories about the city's violent history. These stories include dominant media visions of 'dangerous classes' on the urban periphery tied to violent guerrilla militias, as well as subordinate visions rooted in contradictory memories and practices of resistance, accommodation, and betrayal. The violent ruptures that reconfigured social life made it nearly impossible for working people to elaborate a shared understanding of the present that charted a path to the future. At the same time, widespread impunity, pervasive fear, and endemic violence facilitated the continued "accumulation by dispossession"³ of an emergent group of narcotraffickers, politicians, agro-entrepreneurs and neoliberal reformers as the boundaries between the state and privatized political-economic power blurred.

Today, the unmitigated terror of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has subsided, but violence lurks just below the surface of an apparent calm. The city is characterized less by peace than a low-intensity disorder. The violent rupture of social relationships and the destruction or weakening of urban popular organizations made working people available for incorporation into the social relations of neoliberal capitalism on terms to which they never agreed. The state and regional elites, however, could not effectively integrate them into the new neoliberal order in ways that guaranteed their livelihood, and thousands of *barranqueños* were forced to eke out a living in the so-called informal sector, where they were treated as disposable, and where they were forced to struggle with the silences, ruptures, understandings, and ways of living that terror created. How, the paper asks, can working people grasp the future, and what is just ahead, without the stability to understand the present and the ways that it both emerges and is different from the past?

In what follows, I examine the current disorder and its consequences for working peoples' ability to control their lives and livelihoods. I argue that sustained terror has produced an extreme form of neoliberalism in

3 I borrow the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" from David Harvey (2003).

Barrancabermeja that ruptured older forms of solidarity and deepened the incorporation of working people into fiercely undemocratic, mafia-like networks of political and economic power sustained by fear and impunity. Yet the continued survival of Barrancabermeja's radical working class tradition, albeit as a more subdued, minority political current, attests to its deep roots and broad reach. The case of Barrancabermeja illustrates the complex and contradictory ways that reconfigured urban proletariats on the expanding peripheries of Third World cities are negotiating violence, state neglect, and deprivation.⁴

The chaos that has arisen from the neoliberal "order" imposed by the state and its paramilitary enforcers has made it extremely difficult for working people to explain and understand, in shared ways, what has happened and continues to happen to them. Working people must constantly re-create the social, economic and political resources needed to get by today. They must do so within and against the fractures and chaos that power creates in their lives, but the persistent threat and reality of violence and ongoing processes of economic dispossession undermine efforts to craft everyday lives that are truly "theirs." I understand the concept of everyday life to embrace the routines and practices of working people that make social reproduction possible, that give meaning to existence, and that provide enough autonomy to allow ordinary people to shape the future.⁵ Claiming an everyday life—and not just a daily existence of one thing after another—remains a high stakes struggle in Colombia, especially in Barrancabermeja. This is because people's social and material relationships often do not allow them to meet the demands of subsistence, their labor is not always needed, violence remains an ever present threat, and new, authoritarian relationships of power divide people from each other and constrict the boundaries of what is socially and politically imaginable.

The article is organized the following manner. First, it describes how acute violence fragmented Barrancabermeja's militant working class and opened the door for neoliberal economic restructuring, which further disarticulated social life in the city. It then examines how, in the aftermath of the paramilitary takeover, fear, mistrust, and the enduring threat of violence gave rise

4 Davis (2006) sketches in broad outline the rise of an informal urban proletariat in Third World cities and the variety of strategies, both atavistic and avant-garde, that it has developed to contend with marginalization and the withdrawal of social welfare services.

5 See Sider (2008). In this article, my discussion of everyday life draws on Sider's conceptualization.

to different understandings of the turbulent past and shaped the ways that working people could relate to each other and talk about the past, present, and future.

RUPTURES: THE UNMAKING OF A WORKING CLASS

Nowadays, Barrancabermeja projects a superficial air of normalcy. As it has done for decades, the oil refinery belches noxious fumes into the air, and the clank and bang of its machinery can be heard at night, when a 200-foot flare lights up the nighttime sky. Small wooden boats called *chalupas* do a brisk business, ferrying passengers and cargo up and down the Magdalena River. The streets are jammed with traffic, and throngs of motorcycles clog the bridge that connects poor, working-class neighborhoods of the northeast sector to the city center. The downtown commercial district bustles with people, despite the intensity of the daytime heat. A large shopping mall has recently opened not far from the city center, and a new upscale hotel houses visiting oil company managers and engineers, who no longer face the threat of kidnapping at the hands of the guerrillas. This apparent calm belies a recent history of extreme violence, as well as a profound unease that dwells just below the surface of daily life.

When Carlos Castaño, the now deceased leader of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—a national-level umbrella group that, between 1997 and 2006, united various regional paramilitary organizations—, announced publicly that he would celebrate New Year's Day 2001 drinking coffee in Barrancabermeja, paramilitaries had already taken control of many of the small towns in the Middle Magdalena region. They had also carried out a spectacular massacre in a poor neighborhood of Barrancabermeja, where, on May 16, 1998, they murdered or disappeared thirty-five people. Even though displaced peasants had episodically fled to the city since the 1980s, bringing with them horrific stories of massacres, torture, and dispossession, many urban residents thought paramilitarism would never establish a foothold in Barrancabermeja because of its strong unions, popular organizations, and left-wing traditions, as well as the presence of major guerrilla groups that had grown stronger over the years. Yet it was precisely these organizations and traditions that the paramilitaries sought to eradicate and, in the process, gain control over a strategic oil-refining center and river port.

The emergence of Barrancabermeja's militant working class in the 20th century went hand-in-hand with the growth of the Colombian oil industry. After the government granted a concession to a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey, in 1919, to produce oil for export, migrants poured into the sleepy river port looking for work, and within a decade, they transformed

it into a thriving export enclave that contained the largest concentration of urban proletarians of any Colombian city. Located in a frontier region, Barrancabermeja never developed a prominent local bourgeoisie with well-established ties to the oil workers, and the small, transient group of U.S. oil company managers and their families were unfamiliar with the cultural practices and social mores of the mostly mestizo and Afro-Colombian workers and had difficulty building cross-class relationships of respect and authority with them. Not surprisingly, working class political culture in Barrancabermeja became strongly anti-imperialist and nationalist. It was nurtured by key labor leaders, such as Maria Cano and Raúl Eduardo Mahecha, and found expression through the Unión Sindical Obrera (USO), which began to organize oil workers in the 1920s. The USO played a key part in the government's decision to nationalize the oil industry in 1951 and create the state-owned oil company, Empresa Colombia de Petróleos (ECOPETROL). By the middle of the twentieth century, it had emerged as Colombia's largest and most militant union, and oil workers, who were among the highest paid laborers in the country, won a series of rights and benefits from the state (Vega, Núñez and Pereira 2009).

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the number of people seeking jobs in Barrancabermeja surpassed the capacity of ECOPETROL to absorb them. New immigrant neighborhoods emerged through land invasions on the northeastern and southern flanks of the city, where they were labeled "the other Barranca" because of the near total lack of public services and the poverty of their residents. Despite the divisions and resentments that arose between the residents of "the other Barranca" and the relatively well-paid oil workers of ECOPETROL, the USO downplayed these differences and built solidarity through a political program that contributed to the infrastructural development of poor neighborhoods, backed the civic struggles of the urban population, and opposed persistent efforts to privatize ECOPETROL. At the same time, Catholic clerics, influenced by the rise of liberation theology, and progressive politicians supported an array of neighborhood groups and church-based organizations. The result was a dense network of popular organizations that found its most forceful expression in a series of civic strikes that rocked the city in the 1970s, when residents demanded that the municipality extend public services, especially water, to them.⁶

6 For more on the civic strikes that erupted in Barrancabermeja and elsewhere in Colombia, see Carillo Bedoya (1981) and Giraldo and Camargo (1985). See also van Isschot (2010) for a useful discussion of the social movements in Barrancabermeja from the 1970s-1990s.

It was this infrastructure of solidarity that the paramilitaries sought to dismantle. Between 2000 and 2003, they murdered over one thousand people and forcibly disappeared three hundred others in Barrancabermeja and the surrounding municipalities (CINEP and CREDHOS 2004). Seventy-nine USO leaders were assassinated between 1988 and 2002 (Ó Loingsigh 2002), and entire organizations, such as the taxi drivers union, ceased to exist. The worst violence took place in the working class neighborhoods of the northeast and southeast, where guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had operated for many years. The brutal force of the paramilitary onslaught, combined with the collusion of the state security forces, overwhelmed the guerrillas' capacity to resist or to protect their support base. Moreover, many terrified rank-and-file guerrilla combatants switched sides and acted as informants, either in a desperate bid to save their lives or because of the perceived benefits that collaboration offered. Because these guerrillas-turned-informants had lived and operated in Barrancabermeja for years, they had contact with a wide range of people, as neighbors, friends, classmates, or lovers, as well as through business deals or casual encounters in the street, and their betrayals generated panic.

To make matters worse, paramilitaries suspected anyone who lived in poor neighborhoods of guerrilla sympathies, and many previously displaced families found themselves obliged to flee again, along with long-time residents, to other cities. As the paramilitaries took up positions in the northeast, they enforced rigid gender and generational hierarchies that included the prohibition of long hair and earrings on men and the public humiliation of gays and prostitutes. They also extorted weekly financial "contributions" from residents for the provision of "security." These contributions, however, were only a partial guarantee against the violence of the paramilitaries themselves. Because of the widespread impunity that accompanied the paramilitary reign of terror, and the harsh control exercised by the mercenaries in the northeastern neighborhoods, it was impossible for victimized individuals to speak out about what was happening to them. The violence, however, did not affect all working class residents equally. Merchants and small business owners had suffered from guerrilla extortion for years, and many were happy to see the insurgents expelled. Some people had also become disgruntled with the guerrillas' heavy-handed tactics, such as attacks on police stations in densely populated neighborhoods, and they initially welcomed the arrival of the paramilitaries, even passing them information about the guerrillas and their sympathizers.

The paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja mirrored similar processes elsewhere in Colombia, where regionally based paramilitary blocs, aligned with sectors of the security forces, politicians, and elites, seized power and effectively became the state in the areas under their control (López 2010; Romero 2007). As paramilitary armies massacred civilians and pushed insurgents out of longtime strongholds, they simultaneously gained control over municipal and departmental state apparatuses through the manipulation of elections. They then robbed government treasuries, distributed municipal contracts to supporters and demanded kickbacks. In Barrancabermeja, they also dominated the cocaine traffic, organized the theft of gasoline from ECOPETROL's pipelines, and operated a series of legitimate businesses, such as transportation enterprises, commercial retail outlets, private security firms, and subcontracting operations. Their control of the northeast sector was so great that local commanders could call residents to large, outdoor meetings without disruptions by the police.

The proliferation of regional sovereignties, or "parastates," blurred the boundaries between politics and organized crime, and it intensified the violent spread of neoliberalism and drug trafficking (Hylton 2010). Paramilitaries in the countryside around Barrancabermeja, for example, forcibly displaced peasants from thousands of hectares of land, which then passed into the hands of foreign investors, domestic entrepreneurs, and newly rich drug traffickers for export agriculture, such as African Palm production, gold prospecting, hydro-electric projects, and conspicuous consumption. In Barrancabermeja, they targeted labor leaders who opposed the privatization of state enterprises and spoke out against the erosion of labor rights through subcontracting and attacks on trade unions (Gill 2007; 2009). Indeed, by the early 21st century, widespread violence against trade unionists had turned Colombia into the most dangerous country in the world to be a union member, and the size of the country's internally displaced population was second only to the Sudan.

The one-two punch of paramilitary terror and neoliberal restructuring dramatically transformed working people's sense of what they could do together and by themselves, and of what was imaginable, improbable, or simply out of the question. The unions and social organizations that had partly shielded ordinary people from the worst predations of capitalism were weakened or lay in ruins, and the forms of collective action, rooted in the left, through which working class barranqueños had understood themselves and their ties to a broader social collectivity were in disarray. By decimating popular organizations and fragmenting working class neighborhoods, the terror reconfigured the way that people thought about themselves and

their relationships to others.⁷ A new political subjectivity emerged from the divisions among working people, as well as the aggravation of old tensions, that violence created. Trust evaporated. Social life grew more privatized and isolated as the left public sphere shrank and a welter of autocratic, personalized relationships displaced the popular organizations, Christian base communities, and trade unions that had shaped politics in the city for decades. People increasingly turned inward or to evangelical churches, and away from politics, to find solutions to their problems. Surviving labor and social movement leaders lived under a shadow of impending death, surrounded by bodyguards and cloistered inside armored vehicles, offices, and homes.⁸ Rebuilding old networks of solidarity and creating new alliances became increasingly difficult amid growing social, economic, and political disorder.

DISORDER AND DAILY LIFE

Today, Barrancabermeja is still not at peace. Following the 2003 paramilitary takeover and the expansion of paramilitarism into former leftist strongholds in other parts of Colombia, mercenary organizations entered into “peace talks” with the administration of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, even though they had never been at war with the state. The result was a government brokered amnesty program, condemned by human rights groups for institutionalizing impunity, that sought to incorporate the mercenaries into society and dismantle their armies. The paramilitaries, however, never completely demobilized nor were their illegal networks broken up. They regrouped under new names and continued to target trade unionists, peasant leaders and human rights defenders, while the government claimed that ongoing violence was the work of “emergent bands of criminal delinquents” whose activities were not politically motivated.⁹

A deceptive calm hangs over the city, despite the much heralded success of former President Álvaro Uribe’s “Democratic Security program,” a hard-line strategy to defeat the FARC guerrillas that involved large segments of

7 For a comparative Colombian example, see Aviva Chomsky’s discussion of the paramilitary takeover of the Colombian banana zone in the province of Urabá (Chomsky 2008, 181–221).

8 Barrancabermeja mirrors in many ways similar phenomena in post-war Guatemala. See Grandin (2004, 180–198) for an excellent discussion of the impact of counterinsurgent terror in Guatemala on the insurgent self and the reshaping of political subjectivity in the aftermath of violence.

9 For more discussion of post-peace accord paramilitarism, in which criminality remains tethered to a defense of the status quo and the suppression of dissent, see Romero and Arias (2010) and Restrepo (2010).

the civilian population as army informers and the clandestine backing of paramilitary groups. Civilian massacres do not occur, and firefights between paramilitaries and insurgents no longer erupt on the streets. A former mayor is currently under investigation for ties to the paramilitaries, and residents of the northeast report that the ravages wrought on ECOPETROL by the so-called “gasoline cartel” have diminished. Yet beneath the tranquil veneer, there is widespread malaise.

The social decomposition generated by years of impunity-fueled violence and economic restructuring is not completely controlled by the state, neo-paramilitaries, or the private sector, which have been unable and unwilling to incorporate poor urban residents into the neoliberal order in ways that insure their social reproduction. The rise of subcontracting and temporary work have not only eroded the economic security of many working people; part-time and temporary work are not even always available to residents. The un- and underemployed, for example, complain bitterly about ECOPETROL subcontractors who bring workers from other parts of the country instead of hiring them for temporary jobs with the oil company, and small, local subcontractors who once serviced the oil company now assert that larger national and international firms have replaced them. Moreover, the weakening of organized labor has made the strike an ineffective weapon of resistance; the last strike led by the USO, in 2004, resulted in defeat.

Indicative of the social unease are the tensions that have shaped relations between unlicensed, motorcycle taxi drivers and the licensed drivers of taxicabs. The ranks of both groups swelled with the downsizing, labor outsourcing, and trade union decline that accompanied the violent imposition of neoliberalism in the city and the massive displacement of peasants from the countryside. In 2000, some 1,123,764 motorcycles circulated in Colombia, but by 2004, this figure had increased to 1,787,947, and sales of motorcycles experienced an increase of 65 percent between 2003 and 2004 (Hurtado Isaza 2007). Discontentment among Barrancabermeja’s urban transporters then deepened in the wake of the partial paramilitary demobilization, after hundreds of young, rank-and-file mercenaries found themselves in need of employment and took to the city streets on motorcycles to offer their services as unofficial drivers. Unlike the city buses, which were desperately slow and made numerous stops, the *mototaxistas* took passengers directly to their destinations for approximately the same fare as a city bus, one that undercut by 50 percent the rate licensed cabbies charged. To further complicate matters, these unlicensed drivers were not all independent operators. Some were controlled by paramilitaries who had not demobilized and who obliged them to hand over a percentage of their income for the right to operate.

Paramilitary patrons further demanded that the mototaxistas use their positions to collect intelligence on the ebb and flow of social life in the city. Such behavior threatened the security of urban residents and made it relatively easy to stigmatize all mototaxistas. As one licensed cabbie complained, “they are criminals who steal money from people and abuse women.”¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the licensed cabbies demanded that the municipal government do more to control the proliferation of the mototaxistas, and they staged a series of protests that resulted in clashes with the security forces. Following one of these skirmishes, in August 2007, the mayors office emitted a decree that excluded the mototaxistas from the crowded center of town, where prospective passengers were abundant, but did nothing to address the economic issues at the root of the problem. This, in turn, sparked counter protests by the mototaxistas, many of whom argued that public space could not be restricted in this way. Municipal officials then resorted to force to control the disorder created to a considerable degree by the state’s own policies.

It should come as no surprise that the growing vulnerability and marginalization of ordinary people have made clientelism and patronage politics more important to the economic well being of many poor residents of the city. The absence of rights, regulations, and bargaining power has characterized the worldwide explosion of the informal sector, where exploitation has become a defining feature of social life (e.g., Davis 2006; Seabrook 1996; Gill 2000). As impoverished people with few rights and protections are increasingly unable to provide for themselves with their own resources, the importance of obscure, often clandestine, relationships of power has intensified.¹¹ Personal networks have long been necessary to secure a job, a house, and other opportunities in a city characterized by persistently high levels of un- and underemployment, but the paramilitary takeover incorporated intense fear and uncertainty into emergent, new authoritarian networks that created an ever present sense of menace for those dependent on them for their livelihoods.

The paramilitaries initially rewarded collaborators with jobs in road construction, park maintenance, transportation, and a range of illegal activities (Loingsigh 2002), as they created autocratic, clientelistic networks. Some residents found that their physical survival and their ability to work depended on finding someone known to the paramilitaries to vouch that they were upstanding members of the community and not guerrillas. An

¹⁰ Interview, Barrancabermeja, July 2007.

¹¹ See Auyero (2007) for a good discussion of clientelism and violent criminal networks in Buenos Aires.

employee of the state telecommunications company, for example, was summoned to a meeting in a northeastern neighborhood, where a paramilitary commander wanted to question him. He decided to attend because he feared the consequences of refusal, but after arriving at the appointed location, it quickly became apparent that the mercenaries intended to kill him. He credited his survival to a woman, known to his captors, who insisted that he had no ties to the insurgency.¹²

Aspiring job seekers with trade union backgrounds or residences in neighborhoods stigmatized for left-wing sympathies were either excluded from paramilitary controlled networks of clientelism or risked physical harm if their personal histories were revealed. One unemployed worker explained how paramilitaries assumed control of much of the labor subcontracting in the city, and described his fear of seeking work through the so-called worker cooperatives and subcontracting agencies that they controlled. “The victimization of many people [by the paramilitaries],” he said, “has been because of the information that [the paramilitaries] have obtained about people through rumors and innuendo, even the unguarded comments of someone who says unknowingly in the presence of a paramilitary informant that ‘ah, that guy was a guerrilla, or a guerrilla supporter.’ So you see, there is this kind of indicating, even though indirect, and the information gets back to them. They have even this kind of information.”¹³ The threat posed by rumor and gossip aggravated fear and, when combined with the imperative to find work, focused people on the immediacy of personal survival.¹⁴ The ability of the paramilitaries to control the labor market in contemporary Barrancabermeja highlighted the fragility and contingency of past labor victories in which workers largely succeeded in improving wages, winning benefits, and controlling the hiring process through their unions.¹⁵

Nowadays, even though the extreme violence of the past has subsided, neoparamilitary groups that reconstituted in the wake of the demobilizations continue to manipulate clientelistic networks in a context of widespread impunity. Challenging the impunity is difficult because of the

¹² Interview, Barrancabermeja, March 2007.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Narotzky and Smith (2006, 56–74) for an interesting discussion of how fear and uncertainty regulated social life in Spain during the Franco regime.

¹⁵ See Berquist (1996, 161–209) for a comparative discussion of labor struggles in the United States and Latin America. The violence required to undo the labor and popular organizations in Barrancabermeja attests to the strength, interconnections, and legitimacy of these groups and contrasts with the relative ease that capitalists and neoliberal government officials disciplined organized labor in the United States.

absence of clear cut distinctions between organized crime, politically inspired neoparamilitary violence, and state institutions, and because of the generalized social and economic insecurity that infuses every corner of social life. The threat of selective assassinations remains a terrifying, albeit little mentioned, aspect of daily life. Residents of the northeast describe in hushed voices how hooded men patrol their neighborhoods at night, and, unlike the recent past, they are uncertain about the provenance and identity of these nighttime marauders. The uncertainty heightens a sense of dread, undergirds the privatization of experience, and deepens the recourse to personal strategies to negotiate the hazards of life. All of this is reproduced and maintained by official denials about what is happening. Despite the murder of two union leaders and a rising number of homicides in the first half of 2009, a representative of the mayor's office could still assert that unionists and human rights workers were not at risk in Barrancabermeja. He insisted that ordinary criminals posed the biggest threat to public safety. The city's rising death rate, he said, was either the result of the settling of scores among criminals or people getting caught up in the competition among them for control over a wide range of profitable activities.¹⁶

As Pablo Lucerna,¹⁷ the besieged president of a neighborhood junta communal, exclaimed, "The big question is who can you trust?" Lucerna is a closeted gay man who has contended with fractious neighborhood politics as junta president for years, during periods of both guerrilla and paramilitary control, and like many neighborhood residents, he does not have a job. He can therefore devote much of his time to the unpaid community duties of a junta president. In 2010, however, he faced a difficult dilemma, when his terrified sister came to his house and informed him that paramilitaries threatened to kill her and an aunt, if he did not hand over community development funds earmarked for a new soccer field to them.

Too frightened to take the matter to the police, whom he mistrusted, Lucerna consulted two other junta presidents who told him that they, too, had experienced extortion demands and that, out of fear for their lives, they had acceded to the demands and surrendered the money. Lucerna then decided to approach the paramilitary "político" who was threatening him in the hope of resolving the problem. At the meeting, he sat at a table next to a teenage hit man who described himself as "the business's best killer" and

16 See the Colombian journal *Arcanos* (#15, 2010) for a series of articles that describe how a new wave of paramilitary violence and criminality has affected Colombian cities, such as Medellín and Bogotá, in the aftermath of the demobilizations.

17 This is a pseudonym.

who bragged that he had murdered the leader of a fisherman's association a few months earlier. Lucerna explained to the young man's boss that the funds were for community development projects, that he did not have access to them, and that the budget at his disposal was smaller than the político believed. None of this convinced his tormentors, who gave him a few days to come up with the cash. Terrified about the consequences of refusal, Lucerna delivered the money on the appointed day but then faced a series of new problems. Paying off the extortionists was no guarantee that they would not return and threaten him again; indeed, widespread suspicion among residents of the northeast that junta leaders colluded with paramilitaries suggested that willing or coerced cooperation with them was common. Furthermore, Lucerna's long tenure as junta president raised the possibility that he had already made concessions and accommodations with the powerful to keep his position and guarantee his relative safety. His more immediate concern, however, was that he could neither complete the construction of the soccer field nor account for the funds to local residents and the mayor's office. His only recourse, he decided, was to explain to the mayor what had happened, but to his shock and dismay, the mayor did not believe him. He accused Lucerna of embezzling the money and demanded that he repay it.

All of this raises disturbing questions about the ways that fear and uncertainty become embedded in social life. In addition to the neoparamilitary threats against his family, Lucerna may well have feared his public outing as a homosexual, because paramilitaries have long targeted homosexuals in their so-called social cleansing campaigns, calling them "disposable." In addition, why we might ask, did the mayor refuse to believe Lucerna's story, given a long history of extortion by both paramilitary and guerrilla groups in the city? Could the mayor's silence reflect pressure that he, too, was under? Was he also colluding with restructured paramilitary groups? In light of the city's past, such collaboration, either voluntary or coerced, was entirely within the realm of possibility. But had Lucerna actually stolen the money? The mayor's charges had the ring of plausibility, especially since Lucerna was unemployed. Municipal positions that provide access to public funds beckon urban residents like ATM machines, given the high level of un- and underemployment in the city. They not only allow the occupants of these key posts to pilfer municipal coffers. They also enable the distribution of favors and jobs to family and friends. As one local resident complained, "Nobody talks about corruption because everyone is either stealing or hoping to steal when it is their turn to control the public till."¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview, Barrancabermeja, July 2010.

Answering these questions is nearly impossible. Lucerna's case, however, highlights the fuzzy lines that distinguish institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics and points to the operation of clandestine networks that are knowable but, at the same time, too dangerous to openly challenge or acknowledge. It also underscores the ways that patronage systems play a key part in the livelihoods of urban residents, especially in a time of economic distress. And most importantly, Lucerna's experiences speak powerfully to how violence, fear, and uncertainty infuse opaque, authoritarian relationships of inequality. These relationships are not only crucial for the survival of poor people; they pose considerable economic and physical risk to those who try to separate from them. Moreover, they are indicative of how shadowy mafias and emergent elites are even better placed than in the past to accumulate wealth and power in contexts where the boundaries between the legal and the illegal are unclear, and the distinction between the state and neoparamilitaries and criminal mafias remains opaque. Because of the ways that violence and insecurity continue to shape how people can talk about what is happening, and about what has happened in the past, making collective claims for jobs, services, justice and accountability remains extremely problematic.

The impunity, social fractures, and precarious economic situation have generated different personal experiences and understandings about the violent past and the still violent, disordered present. Despite the overwhelming military force that accompanied the paramilitary takeover of the northeast, and despite the reports of numerous national and international human rights organizations that attribute the vast majority of human rights violations to the paramilitaries, there are many residents of the northeast who blame the intense violence of the early 21st century on the guerrillas.¹⁹ Residents describe how their children were trapped in school or between school and home when firefights erupted out of nowhere; they explain the dilemmas that arose when they woke up in the morning to discover wounded guerrillas lying in the interior patios of their homes; and they recount the harsh guerrilla treatment of individuals suspected of collaborating with the security forces. Yet these stories and assertions are interwoven with deafening silences. A

¹⁹ These views reflect less past realities than the victory of the counterinsurgency, the defeat of revolutionary hopes, and the widespread social malaise that emerged in the wake of the paramilitary takeover. They echo assertions made in post-war Guatemala that the guerrillas were complicit in the Mayan genocide because they provoked state violence. Yet as McAllister notes, such claims not only ignore statistics; they also ignore the chronology of revolutionary struggles and the vicissitudes of insurrectionary revolutionary movements (McAllister 2010).

resident of a neighborhood that had once been a guerrilla stronghold, for example, says that she welcomed the paramilitary arrival because it put an end to the violence in her neighborhood, which guerrillas had controlled for at least a decade. The violence that she describes—a stray bullet hitting her husband in the leg, persecuted guerrillas seeking refuge in her daughter's school, and episodic firefights that erupted in the streets—is, she says, entirely the fault of the guerrillas, even though it took place between 2000 and 2002, when the paramilitaries abetted by the police and the military were pushing the guerrillas out and not during the previous decade in which guerrillas had controlled her neighborhood with a considerable degree of popular acceptance. Significantly, too, in her recounting of the violence, she mentions nothing about a paramilitary massacre of several alleged guerrillas that took place in a house directly across the street from her home.

If the paramilitary takeover of the northeast represented an end to an acute period of unpredictable violence for this woman, it represented the beginning of a long period of constant anxiety and fear—one that has still not ended—for others, such as trade unionist Guillermo Romero who has survived over the last six years in the custody of two body guards, who constantly monitor his movements and activities. The paramilitary takeover ended the dreams of social change that he and other trade unionists and human rights defenders had nurtured for many years. It also ruptured the way he lived his life and turned the lives of his friends, workmates and family members upside down. The botched kidnapping of his 4-year old daughter, in 2004, forced the family to severely restrict the freedoms and independence that they had once accorded to their children. Meeting in public places with workmates to enjoy a beer became too dangerous for several years, and an unaccompanied walk down the street was out of the question. The constant stress exacted a heavy toll on his marriage, which ended in divorce.

The stress and fear that labor leaders have confronted everyday for several years not only wrecks havoc on their domestic relations. It also isolates them from an increasingly fractured rank-and-file and raises questions about how connections between collective memories of the past, understandings of the present, and visions of the future might emerge, when people are forced to live within a sequence of events that they do not control. Targeted individuals and working people in general cannot publicly situate their stories within the context of past political struggles for fear of reprisals. The experience of terror, constant threats, narrow escapes, and the continuous worry about what might lurk around the next corner or befall a vulnerable family member also impose an oppressive “presentism” on their lives. Daily life, as opposed to an everyday life, is experienced as extremely unpredictable and

de-centered. People lack the autonomy, the physical security, and the time needed to rebuild horizontal forms of social solidarity. Moreover, along with the state's unwillingness to investigate threats and attacks against activists, the Colombian state's maximum law enforcement organization—the Department of Administrative Security—has handed over lists of unionists to the paramilitaries, who have then targeted the individuals for assassination.

In addition, false allegations made by demobilized paramilitaries in public court testimony are the latest installment in Barrancabermeja's long running dirty war. Several mercenaries have agreed to testify about their criminal activities in exchange for lighter sentences, and some mid-level BCB commanders have, indeed, exposed their ties to politicians, businessmen, and the military. Yet the paramilitaries have also frequently withheld information about human rights violations and ties to local elites, military officers, and government officials. They have, however, sought to stigmatize social movement leaders with unproven allegations made in court that activists collaborated with the guerrillas or cut deals with the mercenaries themselves. These claims then raise the possibility of criminal investigations. Politically motivated criminal investigations have in fact become common in Colombia. They mark activists as terrorists, force them to spend time and money on defending themselves, tarnish their reputations, and have a chilling effect on their activities (Human Rights First 2009). All of this points to the complex and uneven ways that the paramilitary project has been legitimized in contemporary Colombia.

CONCLUSION

Years of political violence and economic restructuring, undergirded by widespread impunity, have disordered social life in Barrancabermeja, forced residents to seek individual solutions to collective problems, and precluded the formation of broad coalitions, such as those that have enabled social and political transformations in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America. Contemporary Barrancabermeja represents an extreme form of neoliberalism, one in which many forms of social solidarity have been fragmented, fear and insecurity infuse social life, and the rise of violent, clientelistic networks flourish in the absence of rights and collective bargaining power. Within this context, ordinary people must constantly contend with the ways that power and violence generate ruptures, discontinuities, and silences in their lives. Unrestrained power and violence have deprived working people of the coherence required to “make history,” i.e., to grasp the connections between the past, present, and future in ways that are widely shared, easily stated and understandable. They have created a range of obfuscations,

assertions, and incomplete forms of knowledge that undermine the ability of people to take care of themselves and each other, and they have facilitated the accrual of wealth by an unaccountable group of drug traffickers, neoliberal entrepreneurs, and agro-exporters.

Yet despite this nightmare scenario of neoparamilitary mafias, insecurity, and mistrust, the continued dynamism of Barrancabermeja's social movements, after decades of repression, distinguishes the city from others in Colombia and underscores the depth of Barrancabermeja's radical working class tradition. The activist groups that came together for the Bicentenary of the Peoples of the Northeast, for example, were not content to inhabit the vision of historical reality created by more powerful groups. The alternative histories of Colombia and the Middle Magdalena region celebrated by them represented not only a claim on the past but also an assertion about the connections between the violent past and the disordered present. They challenged dominant historical narratives, as well as the historical amnesia and impunity that have made social life in Barrancabermeja so volatile and dangerous. As ordinary people struggle to rebuild ties to each other and create new forms of solidarity, developing shared visions of the past will be crucial to their ability to forge a vision of the present that enables them to reach toward the future.

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