gangs have undergone a sustained trend towards criminal specialisation (notably drug trafficking) and adopted a hierarchical leadership, typically exercised by imprisoned *veteranos* (senior gang members). A minority of Central American gang members and cliques has developed ties to DTOs, but gang crime continues to be versatile and independent. Similarly, gang leaders are better understood as shot-callers who enjoy influence but can be replaced. For example, Lara highlights the emblematic case of 'el Viejo Lin', identified by the Salvadorean authorities and mass media as the national Dieciocho leader, but following internal disputes the gang has removed this member from his post and sentenced him to death.

Central America serves as a drug transit zone, and Lara narrates how the Central American gangs have come to conduct low-level criminal activities, protect territories and facilitate drug trafficking activities on behalf of Mexican and Colombian DTOs. Paid in drugs designed for local distribution, gang members have gained significant control over domestic drug markets and have arguably begun to compete with the DTOs. Lara acknowledges that MS-13 and Dieciocho have not yet acquired the dimensions of drug cartels, but he perceives a growing integration between the gangs in Central America and their counterparts in the United States. There, he adds, Dieciocho has reportedly also begun to import drugs. Again, this analysis shows a lack of nuance. First, there is reason to question the extent of street gang involvement in drug trafficking. In Central America gang members and drug traffickers constitute two different groups, with the former typically purchasing drugs from the cartels for street-level drug sales rather than sourcing them independently. Second, US-based MS-13 and Dieciocho have recently upgraded their involvement in drug distribution from retail-level to wholesale-level activities, but there is no evidence that they have turned to imports; the US drug trade is dominated by Mexican DTOs, and Central American trafficking networks are not required to source drugs.

Overall, this is a comprehensive assessment of MS-13 and Dieciocho that draws on a wealth of sources. It lacks conceptual grounding, however, and leaves the reader in doubt about the nature of the threat and ultimately the policy responses it requires. The book will undoubtedly be consulted by many students of Central American gang transformation, but readers would do well to peruse its pages with a healthy dose of scepticism.

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Jennifer S. Holmes, Sheila Amin Gutiérrez de Piñeres and Kevin M. Curtin, *Guns, Drugs and Development in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. xiv + 192, $55.00, hb.

In a country with a flourishing illicit drug trade, one would expect that in some way the national economy would benefit from it. But the situation in Colombia, as Jennifer Holmes, Sheila Gutiérrez and Kevin Curtin argue in their book *Guns, Drugs and Development in Colombia*, is that despite initial economic benefits, the long-term effects are negative as the drug trade imposes high costs, such as for security. Negative effects include the concentration of land ownership, deterrents to foreign investment and a capital inflow leading to an appreciated peso that in turn harms exports. Drug traffickers often launder their money by purchasing goods abroad and

selling them in Colombia below market prices, and this affects legitimate business sectors including producers of textiles and household appliances.

The theme of this book, which focuses on the 1990s, is the Colombian triangle of drugs, violence and economy. Illegal armed groups such as guerrillas and paramilitaries obtain revenues through the illicit drug trade and in this way cocaine fuels the Colombian conflict. Both the drug trade and the violence have a direct impact on the Colombian economy. The first chapters outline the geographic and historical context and the emergence of armed groups. Geography and history contribute to explain the lack of national integration and state building, which has facilitated the advent of armed groups in Colombia. Left-wing guerrilla groups emerged in the 1960s when the Conservative and Liberal parties agreed on a power-sharing deal – the National Front – that excluded left-wing groups from politics. Paramilitary groups were formed in the 1980s to protect landowners against guerrilla attacks. In recent years most of the paramilitaries have laid down their weapons during a demobilisation process, but new, similar armed groups have emerged throughout the country.

The most interesting chapters of the book analyse how economic and political factors influence the national conflict, and how illegal drugs and violence have their impact on the Colombian economy. The authors develop and test a number of hypotheses, using quantitative data at the level of departments (obtained from governmental institutes and non-governmental organisations). The most remarkable conclusions concern paramilitaries. The paramilitaries claim to replace the state where the government is unable or unwilling to intervene, but the research shows that when government spending on justice and security is relatively high, paramilitary violence is more likely the occur. A possible explanation, the authors suggest, could be the existence of direct or indirect cooperation between the military and paramilitary groups. Another hypothesis, positively tested, associates paramilitary violence with areas that have a relatively high gross domestic product (GDP). This is, as the authors argue, consistent with the theory that paramilitary groups protect resources. The outcome suggests that paramilitaries operate less in poor areas or areas without resources. In their final chapter the authors mention four cornerstones for pacification: strengthening of the military and police, an increased state capacity, a strong political community, and economic reforms. These are general recommendations on which many scholars in conflict studies would agree, but they still raise many questions on how they should be implemented.

In a country like Colombia with a vast informal economy, ranging from non-registered micro-enterprises to the enormous illicit drug trade, the use of statistics evokes some questions. What is included and what is not? When small peasants produce less fruits and more coca their income generally will increase, but how is this reflected in the figures of the GDP? How reliable are statistics at the department level when, as the authors correctly state, the government is still virtually absent in important parts of the country? Statistics on the department level, moreover, do not take into account huge internal differences: the poor countryside of Antioquia is another world compared to its capital Medellín, where most of the GDP is generated. It is not useful to relate the GDP (in this case mainly of the city) to the violence level of the department as a whole. For such reasons political scientist Stathis Kalyvas has proposed (in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 2006) that conflict research be focused on the local level or that local case studies be added, and this could also have been a useful addition to this book.

The more descriptive chapters are not always profound. Besides the short history of armed groups, I had expected some historical insight into the development of the cocaine industry. I was surprised that in a book about drug trafficking in Colombia the name of Pablo Escobar is missing. With his infamous drug cartel, Escobar set the stage for future illicit networks, and his influence is still widespread – many former members of his Medellín cartel take part in new networks for illicit drug trafficking or in paramilitary groups. Nor does this book does contain quotes from Colombians with experiences in conflict areas. With the recent demobilisations of armed groups, there are now many interesting opportunities to talk to former combatants or other key figures. Especially because the authors advocate a broad methodological approach, personal interviews would have been a valuable addition.

The book provides interesting insights into the economics surrounding the Colombian conflict and the illicit drug trade, and in this sense it is a useful contribution to the existing literature.

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Rory O'Bryen, *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture: Spectres of 'La Violencia'* (Woodbridge: Tamesis Books, 2008), pp. ix + 212, £50.00; $95.00, hb.

It is undeniable that *La Violencia* has left a scar in Colombian history that has yet to heal. Historians tend to study La Violencia as the civil armed conflict that occurred in certain rural areas of the country during the 1940s and 1950s and which was responsible for the biggest rural exodus towards the cities that the country has ever experienced. However, the remnants of La Violencia are still tangible in today's Colombian society: the ongoing war between the *paramilitares*, the guerrilla groups and the national army forces, as well as the high degree of social and civil insecurity and unrest suffered as a result of the drug cartels that proliferate in the country. In this light, O'Bryen's book offers an in-depth examination of La Violencia beyond its historical specificity, and demonstrates that the impact of this historical episode can most definitely be found in cultural texts (in this case literature and cinema) that have emerged in Colombia long after the 'official' end of the violent conflict. The book engages with a series of texts that do not necessarily deal with La Violencia as a historical moment but instead examine national themes that both derive from and are a direct consequence of the national traumas left by this episode.

The author engages with European and Latin American theory and articulates the idea of memory (individual and social) not only as a product of past, lived experiences, but also as an ever-evolving entity that responds to social anxieties caused by people's understanding of contemporary national issues that, on the surface, seem to be detached from certain historical episodes. The choice of texts for analysis is both eclectic (it was always going to be an impossible task to deal with all the texts that may touch upon this issue) and accurate, as they all deal effectively with La Violencia and its different forms of representation within a society that seems willing to forget its violent past in an attempt to deal with its current violent present. The central question to this book is that of how La Violencia becomes a phantasmatic entity (borrowing from Derrida), as it has the ability to transcend beyond the social moment in which it originated, and permeates into cultural texts that see this as