

# *Advocacy, Misdirection, Protest, and Exit: Strategies of Aspiration and Anxiety amid Crime and Conflict in Putumayo*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines how the inhabitants of Putumayo, a department of Colombia both divided and held together by licit and illicit authority structures and markets, engage with varied political orders as they advance individual and collective economic and political projects. Putumayo's inhabitants adopt four basic strategies to maintain their often illicit livelihoods amid state repression. The first is intellectual resistance, wherein they develop explanations for their involvement in illicit markets that they can use to alter local and national state behavior. The second is protest, through which groups of peasants mobilize to support their illicit but socially normalized economic endeavors. A third is evasion or malicia, in which peasants seek to strategically adhere to state policy to misdirect the state as they continue to grow coca. Fourth, some peasants pursue a strategy of exit, going deeper into the jungle in search of land where they can peacefully grow coca.

*Keywords:* Colombia, drug trade, violence, social movements, insurgency

Asked if coca cultivation endangered growers, Thiago, a leader of Putumayo's Acocalero movement, responded, "From the moment a peasant plants coca, they have problems and they live in anguish. That is why people stopped growing it and joined the [crop substitution] program. People have to worry about fumigation, they have to worry about the harvest, they have to worry about robberies" (Thiago, Puerto Asís, May 1, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Coca farming generates anxiety by bringing peasants into contact with guerrillas, criminals, and police. Of course, growing coca provides a reliable way for Putumayenses to earn income, acquire

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© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the University of Miami. DOI [10.1017/lap.2022.35](https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2022.35)

land, expand homes, prepare for marriage, and educate children. Coca growers, then, use various techniques to advance these precarious economic interests.

This article examines how Putumayenses advance threatened individual and collective economic projects. Some peasants address these concerns by growing coca to improve living conditions, educate their children, and accumulate capital. Growing coca, however, exposes them to violence and uncertainty, which they address through varied future-oriented strategies.

Putumayo's peasants use four strategies or repertoires to address coca-related anxieties. The first is ideological advocacy on behalf of their coca and non-coca-related economic projects. The second is using *malicia* (canniness) to protect their crops, protect themselves, and use government policy to advance their interests. The third is protest to resist government policies detrimental to their economic interests. The fourth involves evading repression by exiting—leaving to pursue economic interests elsewhere. In all, peasants use ambiguities created by inaccessible forest terrain and the region's multiple authority structures to protect their interests. Understanding these strategies is essential for understanding both resistance to state policies amid multiple armed actors and developing effective policies to address cocaine production.

For this study we conducted 79 open-ended, semistructured interviews in lowland Putumayo, where coca growing is based. We selected the interviewees through snowball sampling, starting with local leaders and activists. We conducted interviews with adults from varied backgrounds, including politicians, teachers, bureaucrats, activists, and coca growers. Interviews generally began with broad questions about life histories to open space for more specific questions based on interviewees' particular experiences. During conversations, which focused initially on governance issues, we allowed concepts to emerge organically from our dialogue. Anxiety appeared spontaneously and was a salient adjective for many interviewees for day-to-day experiences in coca cultivation areas. References about feelings were important in recalling differences between an idealized past, a violent present, and an imagined future. Perspectives on temporalities, feelings, or governance varied across municipalities and interlocutor background.

These conversations revealed a consistent set of future-oriented strategies focused on how stunted social spending limits educational and commercial opportunities. Many saw coca as an important income supplement and a means of bettering their families' and communities' conditions. That market's illegal nature, however, generates anxiety that peasants manage through self-protective strategies. This article shows how locals make a living on the land by moving deftly in the interstices of licit and illicit armed power to advance economic agendas to build a collective future.

This article begins with a discussion of research on violence in Latin America and its implications for the anxieties of illicit market participants. Then it lays out the historical context and importance of coca growing in Putumayo. It discusses coca growers' anxieties and peasants' responses and draws some conclusions from the evidence.

## FUTURE THINKING AMID ILLICIT MARKETS AND CONFLICT

Although earlier scholars focused on explaining Latin American violence through institutional failure, more recently scholars have examined conflict through how state and nonstate actors manage violence (O'Donnell 1993; Durán Martínez 2018; Lessing 2017; Yashar 2018; Arias 2017; Idler 2019). These studies offer insights into state limitations, policy effectiveness, and the ways that state-criminal engagements produce violence and order.

This approach, however, tells us little about how ordinary citizens operating in violent contexts engage with those systems. Indeed, a growing literature points to how violence is layered into the lives Latin Americans (Auyero and Berti 2015; Espinosa 2010). In rural Colombia, as Ramírez (2013) argues, economic and political factors drive peasant mobilization. Arjona (2016) and Kaplan (2017) show that underlying structures of peasant villages provide social capital reservoirs that shape responses to violence. Idler, in her analysis of Colombia's frontier, argues that localized governance emerges from armed groups' confluence of interests (Idler 2019). These writings point to the complex dynamics the poor navigate as they seek to survive and build communities.

Yet amid poverty and a lack of state support for basic services, peasants think about and plan their future, considering how to improve their communities, accumulate capital, and provide their children with opportunities. In some ways a moral economy, an expectation that landlords will support a peasant when hard times come in exchange for paying tribute now, is such a future-oriented project (see Scott 1976). But peasants' future-oriented projects are not limited to moral economies. These projects can involve finding ways to insert themselves into global economies to support the private expansion of services or improved living conditions. They also involve political mobilization to change local conditions and expand opportunities. And they can involve striking out to establish new communities. These varied projects have implications for how peasants live today, make decisions, and as a result, interact with the government and its policies.

Scott's 1976 writing on peasant resistance offers insights into how poor agricultural workers engaged in varied modes of mobilization to protect their future-oriented projects. Under some circumstances, peasants rebel. In others, they pursue everyday resistance (Scott 1985). And under intense repression, peasants' resistance is limited to cultural critique (Scott 1990) or withdrawing beyond the frontier to avoid state repression (Scott 2009).

Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970) also offers partial insights into related behavior under adverse conditions. Individuals can confront difficult circumstances by giving voice to their concerns or exiting the situation, both with an eye to better future outcomes. Hirschman's writing illuminates how protests and renunciation can influence the behavior of states and firms.

In Colombia, complex regional dynamics involve not just state and capital (the interlocuters of peasants and citizens in Scott's and Hirschman's work) but also

insurgents and criminals. Indeed, unlike Scott's Asian peasants, Putumayo's rural inhabitants often operate in illicit markets, expanding the dimensions of their economic anxieties. Similarly, Hirschman focuses on decisions to engage with a single organization, whereas in Putumayo multiple overlapping governance systems point to the multidirectional implications of exercising voice or exit.

Illicit economies are essential to understanding violent social orders (Beckert and Dewey 2017). Licit and illicit opportunity structures, as well as taboos around certain markets, are intimately connected to how people live and how space is governed (Strange 1996; also see introduction to this special section). The government and illicit actors regulate these economies for their own benefit (Idler 2019), affecting how workers interact with illicit markets.

People living in varied conditions, but especially in environments characterized by scarcity, use illicit markets to supplement state services and augment household economies, shaping their family's and community's future. These markets can become integrated into their future-oriented projects as they face often limited life horizons constrained by paltry state services. Therefore they will seek resources and opportunities to build their livelihoods and sustain personal and collective projects through varied means, sometimes outside the constraints of the state and legal markets. As alternative means provide for future projects, peasants will seek to defend those strategies with various individual and collective tools.

### Peasants and Workers on the Margins

Illicit markets, as manifested locally, undergo relatively frequent change because of their often contentious comanagement by varied armed groups (Idler 2019). The administration of these markets depends, as this special section's introduction shows, on the nature of the illegality and how taboo certain products are. Cocaine is illegal but has mixed acceptance. Heroin has less. Illicit markets often emerge where licit economies fail to provide livelihoods, and they change in relation to laborers' ability to achieve livelihoods in licit markets. In these efforts, the state and other armed actors intervene to forcibly extract marginal value and, in the state's case, repress illicit activity.

Latin America's economic and social systems are highly exclusionary, and income often fails to meet basic needs (Vakis et al. 2016). In urban areas, poverty generates land invasions and informal markets (Caldeira 2017). In illicit markets, it also contributes to concatenating violence, including gang conflict, police abuse, and domestic violence weighing on the poor (Auyero and Berti 2015; Pearce 2018).

Rural regions well linked to legal markets often have exclusionary land markets (Tacoli et al. 2008, 47). Ninety percent of Colombian lands are owned by 10 percent of landowners. Colombia has a highly unequal GINI index of .87 (UPRA 2016, 116). In response, the poor migrate to agricultural peripheries with readily available land. Putumayo, for example, has a GINI index of only 0.73. Colombia's rural peripheries, however, are often poorly connected to national infrastructure, which pushes

inhabitants into illicit markets (DANE 2017; Molano 1997; Ramírez 2001; Serje 2012; Armenta 2013).

In locales far from markets and lacking infrastructure, illicit trade can be essential to survival. Small-scale farming offers limited income because food crops may not provide sufficient resources to generate the surpluses needed to acquire land and educate children. High riverine and terrestrial transportation costs exacerbate these problems.

Absent large surpluses, peasants rely on their communities for collective goods. Molano (1997) refers to this camaraderie as a borrowed arm (*brazo prestado*). The national state is seen as a distant notion, while locally led civic groups known as Juntas de Acción Comunal are close at hand, guaranteeing order and providing collective goods (González et al. 2012; Moreno Guerra 2015). In coca production areas, armed actors protect illicit markets. When the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) controlled large portions of the country, in every *vereda* (village), junta and guerrilla commanders together made arrangements about when and how the FARC should intervene (Urdaneta 2017). The FARC and its successors also regulate conservation, fishing, and hunting (Álvarez 2003; Gómez 2018). Peasants in coca production areas must navigate this hybrid governance following contradictory junta, police, and armed actor rules.

States sometimes repress illicit markets, due to national policy and international prohibitions (Gootenberg 2008). Not all efforts to end illicit markets focus on repression, however. In Colombia, the government is implementing crop substitution and rural development programs. Governments also develop strategies to offer work alternatives that provide opportunities but also generate anxiety around official follow-through. According to Arenas and Vargas (2020), six coca substitution advocates were killed in Putumayo from 2016 to 2020. Competition between multiple armed actors exacerbates anxiety (Idler 2019) in a region where FARC dissidents, Mexican cartels, and regional criminal organizations threaten would-be program participants (Defensoría del Pueblo 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). While peasants may worry about threats from criminals for their participation in a crop substitution program, they also worry about the government delivering promised payments. Indeed, the Havana Accords substitution program paid only 85 percent of participants (20,350 families) (UNODC 2020b).

Furthermore, many government agents operate at cross-purposes with policy. This often occurs through corruption, leading to regulatory uncertainty. Armed actors complicate these dynamics with obscure, multistranded violent and collusive relationships with state actors.

## Solutions for Anxiety

Scott's work on resistance provides a roadmap for understanding how Putumayo's peasants, operating in a context different from that of Southeast Asia, address challenges. Putumayo's peasants, Ramírez (2001) writes, have already been pushed

to the national periphery operating in illicit rather than licit markets. Still, broader desperation on the global economic margins and the breakdown in reciprocal norms that Scott observed exist in Colombia and have contributed to 75 years of rebellion. Isolated in a region with limited infrastructure, Putumayo's peasants have integrated themselves into the global economy through the coca trade. (On the global economic integration of borderlands, see Serje 2012). Facing state pressure to reduce coca growing, peasants engage in a repertoire of four tactics: ideological advocacy, protest, malicia, and exit.

Intellectual resistance is a driving concept in Scott's work. Putumayo's peasants frequently discuss the economic importance of coca relative to legal economies. These conversations form an ideological resistance in which peasants express norms at variance with the law, norms grounded in the experience of Putumayo's peasantry and its struggles. These peasants, however, also express adherence to broader social norms, even as they grow coca. This ideological positioning is like the claims of the poor urban Bolivians Daniel Goldstein (2004) observed, who engaged in vigilantism at least in part to show their good citizenship. In Putumayo, peasants argue that they grow coca to participate more fully in the economy and educate their children.

Another form of resistance involves evasion strategies, locally referred to as malicia. This can involve strategic adherence to state policies, like taking payments to eliminate one coca field while replanting another, or publicly supporting narcotics control or counterinsurgency policies even as they privately undermine them. Another strategy might be finding alternate, less taboo illicit activities, such as unlicensed gold mining. Peasants might also seek to keep both guerrillas and the state unaware of how much coca they grow. This approach roughly corresponds to the less publicly confrontational "weapons of the weak" strategies Scott (1985) examines.

Most press and state attention, however, focuses on open resistance. Facing repression, peasants demand that state or illicit actors limit that repression through protests, strikes, and negotiation. Inasmuch as these efforts are confined to public protest, this strategy is closely aligned with Albert Hirschman's idea of voice or elements of Scott's 1976 analysis of rebellion. Putumayo has a long history of contentious pro-coca politics as peasants have blocked roads and protested, often with FARC support (see Ramírez 2001). Between 2016 and 2019 alone, 94 such protests took place (CINEP 2019; see table 1).

Exit is a final response consistent with Hirschman's notion of exit (1970) and also with the refusal of state power by upland peasants in Scott's *Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). This may involve running their farms from the relative safety of a town. In other cases, peasants may move to more distant areas where they can make money growing coca more peacefully.

The conditions Scott and Hirschman analyze in other contexts and those in Putumayo have two key differences. First, there is a powerful guerrilla army in Putumayo that has long partially governed the region in conjunction with the state (see Ramírez 2001, 167–82). Second, the coca trade integrates these peasants into

Table 1. Timeline: Protests and Clashes in Putumayo

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July 2016	Government (environmental authority ANLA) authorized manual eradication of coca crops
August 2016	Clashes between cocaleros and police in San Miguel, Orito, Puerto Caicedo, and Puerto Asís Blocking roads to oil production center Puerto Vega-Teteyé
March 2017	Leaders of substitution process are threatened (El Afilador) and some are killed in San Miguel (Oswaldo Solarte and Alvenio Isaías Rosero)
July 2018	Putumayo border mobilization blocking Puerto Vega-Teteyé connecting road and international road to Ecuador
August 2018	Government resumes manual eradication of coca crops
March–October 2019	Protests and clashes between <i>cocaleros</i> and police
February–April 2020	Cocaleros resume protests and call them off due to pandemic

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the global economy (Idler 2019). These dynamics, both in how peasants engage with guerrillas and the state and how they engage with the economy, help explain how forms of resistance change under the conditions in Putumayo. Our model does not seek to confirm the applicability of Scott's or Hirschman's work in Colombia, but in the context of robust illicit economies, examines the paths peasants follow as they seek to survive in very different contexts. This model then uses insights from Scott and Hirschman to understand peasant survival strategies in Colombia's highly violent illicit marketplaces.

## PUTUMAYO'S CONTEXT

The nature of illicit markets and nonstate control of territory shapes Putumayo's social and economic geography. Indeed, the relationships they maintain with illicit markets define many Putumayenses' lives (Cancimance 2014; Flórez 2009; Ramírez 2001; Torres 2011).

Western settlement and economic exploitation shifted in Putumayo with the late-nineteenth-century rubber boom. This gruesome episode involved the enslavement and murder of thousands of indigenous people (Tausig 1987; Kuan-Bahamón 1977; Villegas and Botero 1979). Some Colombians migrated from other regions

to profit from the boom, and after the invention of synthetic rubber in 1909, stayed to hunt exotic pelts.

There is a general conception of Putumayo, and many other rural Colombian regions, as ungoverned (Aguilera et al. 2013, 248; Palma and Kleinschmidt 2020). For most of the last century, however, this has hardly been the case (Buchely 2010; Martínez Basallo 2015; Serje 2012). Putumayo has been a focus of a variety of both highly militarized and economic state policies at various moments. Indeed, the state has used extractive industries and settlement policies to link borderlands with national and international markets, as would eventually take place with the rise of the local petroleum industry (Serje 2012).

The Colombian state has been present in the region at least since the Colombo-Peruvian War (1932–33). Its operations, however, have focused on Colombia's broader state strategy rather than the population's social interests. Thus, since that period, Putumayo has had a considerable military presence, including Colombia's third-largest naval base at Puerto Leguizamo and, more recently, intensive counternarcotics operations. As a result, Putumayenses worry about the state's presence but largely do not expect it to solve their problems.

Although Colombian state presence expanded after the war, the population grew in earnest in the 1960s as a result of state policies, as the Frente Nacional governments, responding to La Violencia, settled peasants there as part of that era's modest land reform efforts (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica Nacional 2015; DNP and Proyectamos Colombia 2016; Fajardo 1996; Legrand 1988; Molano 1997; Salgado 2012).<sup>2</sup> This dovetailed with the advent of Putumayo's petroleum industry. Between 1951 and 1973 the population tripled, to 67,000 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica Nacional 2015, 79).

With Alfonso López Michelsen's 1974 election, the government pursued fiscal adjustment that ended agrarian reform and subsidies, creating a crisis in Putumayo (Castaño Álvarez 2007; Martínez 1978). Interviewees recalled an era of state subsidies before 1974 when they could survive by growing food crops. Carlos, a Puerto Leguizamo schoolteacher, recalled:

I lived in Leguizamo at the time when we produced rice, meat, and milk; that was before coca. The seventies were the best moment. Young people were hired to work. Everything changed when IDEMA [the national agricultural marketing institute] was closed . . . After that, no one bought agriculture production in distant places such as Leguizamo. Elites governing the state feel that they are governing for Europeans. There is no sense of belonging. (Carlos, Puerto Leguizamo, July 18, 2019)

Similarly, a former official mentioned that in the 1970s, before coca arrived, "There were no [armed illegal] groups. We lived from corn and rice harvests and there was an IDEMA collection center and that was the state presence. Peasants brought their products by boat. At that time the whole production was legal. There were big mills, threshers" (Pedro, Puerto Asís, May 2, 2019).

In a region lacking infrastructure, government agricultural supports were important for household survival. Coca provided Putumayo's peasants income after



these subsidies ended. The Medellín Cartel brought commercial coca production to Putumayo in 1977. The El Azul vereda of Puerto Asís became an operations center for Gonzalo “El Mexicano” Rodríguez Gacha, a powerful Medellín-connected trafficker who developed coca growing and a security force.

During the 1980s, FARC presence increased, eventually dominating coca production. In La Dorada, San Miguel’s municipal seat, FARC units patrolled and extorted money from merchants. A politician from a town in the San Miguel Valley, in southwestern Putumayo, reported that mayors accounted for their spending to guerrillas and the FARC checked it with junta presidents (Mateo. La Dorada, San Miguel, Putumayo, August 9, 2019). Along the Caquetá River the FARC’s 32nd Front undertook kidnappings and commercial extortion. Guerrillas regulated peasant life. A Bogotá periodical reported,

According to the manual, no inhabitant of the rural areas of the municipalities of lower Putumayo can travel to the municipal seats or host visitors without an authorization approved by the guerrilla and the Juntas de Acción Comunal. They can also not have any type of relationship with members of the state’s security forces, and those who have family members in these forces should leave the zone. (*Semana* 2015)

The FARC communicated these norms at village offices (Urdaneta 2017). At Mecaya, a pamphlet was posted indicating penalties for certain behaviors. Knifing someone would cost an inhabitant COL\$200,000 (about US\$57) (Carlos, government official., Puerto Asís, Putumayo, April 3, 2019). Violations of other norms led to forced labor. In the Caquetá Valley, the FARC regulated hunting, lumbering, and fishing (Gómez 2018). Despite sanctions, most inhabitants we spoke with supported the rules. Samantha, a peasant leader, said she “found the FARC manuals to be good because they did not permit fishing, killing animals. There were fines when rules weren’t followed, and if those violations were repeated, they forced people out of the territory” (Samantha, Puerto Asís, April 30, 2019).

The coca trade enriched the FARC, expanding its operations dramatically and prompting state responses. Initially, elements of the military and landholders, along with rival gangs, supported the paramilitaries. In Putumayo, the military was closely linked to the paramilitaries (*Verdad Abierta* 2010b). The FARC-paramilitary conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s was characterized by intense brutality, most notably in the massacres in El Placer and El Tigre, as paramilitary groups forced the guerrillas out of towns. The AUC’s Bloque Sur, based in Puerto Asís, murdered 2,500 people, and another 5,000 have claimed national victim status (*Verdad Abierta* 2010a). These killings led to self-protective strategies, including strategic silence, misdirection, and neutrality (Blair Trujillo 2004; Cancimance 2015; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2012).

This war left the paramilitaries dominating municipal centers where cocaine was traded, while the guerrillas controlled cultivation zones. The guerrillas and postparamilitary criminal groups divided control of Putumayo along these lines, each profiting from their portions of the trade. Peasants were caught in the middle.

The government's second response to the FARC's cocaine profits was aerial fumigation. This process destroyed many coca fields and food plantings, but amid so much land, peasants moved their cultivation. (On fumigation's ineffectiveness, see Moreno Sánchez et al. 2003; Lyons 2016.) The FARC denounced fumigation, increasing peasant support. The complex multiactor coalitions that controlled the coca trade, combined with state repression, established the context for the challenges peasants face today.

The Havana Accords changed territorial control and augmented anxiety. In the Caquetá River Valley, the dissident FARC 1st Front has taken control illicit markets. In the Putumayo Valley, elements of the 48th Front are allied with La Constru and the Sinaloa Cartel to manage the market and defend territory from the 1st Front (Defensoría del Pueblo 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). Mexicans control the drug trade below Soplín Vargas, a Peruvian town an hour downriver from Puerto Leguizamo (Fabio, Puerto Leguizamo, July 18, 2019). The peace process's failure in Putumayo and the growth of the cocaine market under FARC-related organizations and criminals has generated uncertainty about who has authority and about the sanctions related to the cocaine market (Fabio, Puerto Leguizamo, July 18, 2019).

In 2019, Putumayo, with 350,000 inhabitants, had 24,973 hectares of coca cultivation (UNODC 2020a), accounting for 16 percent of Colombia's coca production and 10 percent of global production, equivalent to Bolivia's total coca production. Putumayo's peasants face immense challenges in making a living. The precarious road system only partially connects Putumayo to the rest of the country. Access to the closest markets in Nariño and Cauca Departments is possible only via a dangerous mountain road (Uribe 2020). Beyond the eastern third of the department, boats, a costly means, dominate transport. Much of the department remains without electricity, sanitation, or running water. Conflict hampers opportunity by limiting road expansion and broader investment. Furthermore, the coca trade contributes to violence and uncertainty and causes inflation. (On the impacts of cocaine on growth see Thoumi 2004). All of this makes it hard to earn money growing food crops and makes coca economically important.

## COCA-GROWING ANXIETY

Sitting amid state, guerrillas, and criminal power, coca growers face threats. Efforts by nonstate armed actors to control the coca-buying market threaten peasants. In Putumayo, coca paste is purchased through violent monopsonies imposed by territorial armed actors that buy it below market prices. Luciana, from Valle del Guamuez, noted, "Before, we grew [coca] but [not] as much as today. People would go to town to sell the 50 grams and the paramilitaries would kill them" (Luciana, La Hormiga, July 23, 2019). Jerónimo, a Puerto Asís cocalero leader, said, "They would kill people to control whom coca was sold to. There was competition between the FARC and the paramilitaries over the price of coca. A kilo cost \$2 million in the village and \$2.3 million in Puerto Asís" (Jerónimo.

Puerto Asís, May 1, 2019). Juan Sebastián, a government official, said, “When I was a boy, you knew that those who got involved in the business didn’t get out, because if you left, the same groups would kill [you]” (Juan Sebastián, Mocoa, May 7, 2019).

Peasants also worry about crop destruction. Thiago noted,

Fumigation has created great damage here in this region. I haven’t done a study, but I have seen people affected. I have seen the damage it does to their skin. I have seen animals die. I have seen water contaminated. I have seen birds and animals and people displaced . . . . Fumigation affects their subsistence crops, animals, but the coca plants, people find ways to make them survive. People go and cut the plants. They wash them before pouring sugar cane, the poison adheres to the sugar, and the plants survive. (Thiago, Puerto Asís, May 1, 2019.)

While fumigation can affect extensive acreage, the coca plants may survive because growers wash away the glyphosate, saving the plant. The eradication process, which is slower, tears the bushes out by the roots, destroying current and future crops. Martín, a rural worker, noted that peasants feared eradication more as a result (Martín, Puerto Asís, April 2, 2019). Samuel, a peasant who served in the military in the 1960s, reported that eradicators came to destroy his coca. He told them he had a hectare but asked them to let him harvest. They eradicated the plants, lost his investment, and prevented him from paying his *raspachines* (Grillo 2014).<sup>3</sup> He said, “When they destroyed the cocaine fields, they destroyed my house and my laboratory . . . . After that I didn’t have money to pay the workers” (Samuel, Puerto Asís, May 3, 2019). Eradication and fumigation thus create uncertainty and anxiety.

Coca growing and guerrilla-grower contact also increase other risks. Many growers are arrested. Matias, a Puerto Leguízamo peasant leader, said, “The weakest link in the chain is the producer, they put him in jail because it is a way of showing results” (Matias, peasant leader, Puerto Leguízamo, July 18, 2019). Samantha recounted her husband’s harrowing imprisonment. The military invited him to a meeting and jailed him for three years for suspected FARC ties (Samantha, Puerto Asís, April 29, 2019). Because he lived in a FARC-controlled coca-growing area, security forces believed that he and others were FARC members (Lohmuller 2015; Flórez 2019).

Other peasants become addicts. Alejandro, a Puerto Leguízamo politician, said, “Since coca leaf arrived here, people no longer grow plantains. Coca has made everything more expensive and brought drug addiction” (Alejandro, politician, Puerto Leguízamo, July 16, 2019). Peasants become prisoners to coca growing because of their connection to the land. Matias said, “The cultivator always has been the most affected because the bushes and the lands are his. He is the owner of the plants and cannot run away” (Matias, July 18, 2019). Passing the coca trade, with all its danger, on to their children is a final source of anxiety. Juan Sebastián noted, “The children do what their parents do. The parents grow coca and then they would go and drink a beer in town and that is what the kids wanted to do” (Juan Sebastián, Mocoa, May 7, 2019).

## PEASANT RESPONSES

Colombia's peasants, like many of Latin America's impoverished, experience low-intensity citizenship (O'Donnell 1993), meaning that they can vote but state nonfeasance attenuates other rights. Putumayo's peasants are connected to the land in that they derive income from farming often informally held property. They are not, however, serfs subject to the power of landowners. Indeed, many inhabitants of Putumayo moved there in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century to access available land away from the population centers and ownership patterns in other regions of Colombia. 52.7% of land property rights in Colombia are informal (UPRA, 2019 and Duica y Prieto, 2021) limiting the access to public infrastructure and services. Instead, land ownership and concentration are limited on this periphery, in contrast to, for example, much of Colombia's Caribbean coast, where armed actors support land consolidation in the service of agroindustrial plantations. Amid seemingly endless territory and variable state presence, peasants willing to survive through illicit economies have options to maintain their economic activity amid state repression by taking advantage of their position both as citizens and as inhabitants on the national margins, often beyond the interest of the state, to advance their collective interests. This points to a nuanced political subjectivity that has implications for coca control policies.

Peasants respond to these uncertain orders with four strategies: ideological advocacy, malicia, protests, and exit. Each builds on overlapping authority structures and the region's difficult physical terrain.

### Ideological Advocacy

The first strategy peasants use is to portray themselves as participants in the broader moral and economic order. Putumayo's peasants, in particular their associational leaders, have developed a rough but systematic analysis of local politics and economics, which they use to frame their participation in coca harvesting and base paste production and their advocacy both for more permissive state policies toward coca and for other policies, such as infrastructural development and crop substitution, that benefit peasants seeking to reduce their dependence on coca. Away from town centers, rice or plantains provide little income. Peasants make the case for why growing coca is good for the local economy and argue that through their hard work, they use that income to support themselves and their communities. This highlights their responsibility as market participants meeting local needs with little official support.

Where produce earns little, coca pays growers COP\$530 per kilo of base paste. Samantha said, "The coca culture allows that every 42 days you already have cash. Pancoger [subsistence crops] can take up to 2 years [to harvest]. I can take two kilos of coca and carry them myself. I can't do that with a bale of corn" (April 30, 2019). She continued: "Here, no one can say that they don't live off coca, pay for their food, the hairdresser, the notary. Here, everything is paid by coca. There is

no crop that will substitute for it.” A peasant from Puerto Asís said, “Here in Putumayo someone who doesn’t have coca is not a farmer. Coca arrived here in 1986 and I bought a building in Santana and there I grew coca in 1987 . . . . The people who bought came to my building to buy the base and they paid me in cash” (Mathias, May 2, 2019). An international organization’s representative added, “Here, the majority of the people live from the production of coca base” (Terrance, Puerto Asís, April 5, 2019).

Beyond survival, growers argue that coca helps planning their economic future. Coca income enables peasants to expand their property. Juan Sebastián noted, “Many people invested the money that they earned with coca in buying properties and homes.” He continued that peasants used profits to launch legitimate businesses: “There were people who succeeded in getting out of the coca business, and they built well-known businesses, and you know they made a ‘fortune’ in that business; well, at least they made it to the highest strata in Mocoa. (Mocoa, May 7, 2019).” Moreover, coca helps fund children’s education. One La Hormiga merchant noted, “My parents worked with coca and with that they paid for my university education. It is the best business” (Miguel, La Hormiga, May 9, 2019).

Peasants argue that coca income enables their communities to supplement inadequate state services. Samantha said, “The government has abandoned Amazonia, and that was the reason that coca was privileged . . . . The children were raised with those ideas. Coca is a culture. Coca is the plant that replaced the state.” She continued, “Their homes, the roads, all of that has been built with cash from the coca” (Samantha, peasant leader, April 30, 2019).

A leader of the coca growers’ movement said, “The problem is political and social. Coca is the way that people solve their problems, especially in commercialization and production. We signed a pact [with the government] during the coca marches, and it still has not been abided by” (José, Puerto Asís, May 1, 2019). Santiago, an engineer, said, “The zones of production are marginal and very distant. Like Puerto Guzmán . . . . People have great needs for infrastructure, roads, and electricity” (Santiago, agricultural engineer, Puerto Asís, April 3, 2019). One Puerto Caicedo inhabitant said coca was essential for development. “The coca crops generate economic growth . . . . Coca generates remittances, people buy their clothes, their home, construction materials, they build businesses . . . . The father grows one part of the leaves and the son the other” (Puerto Caicedo, April 2, 2019). These statements reflect Putumayenses’ belief that coca is important for the region’s communities.

This discourse has multiple audiences. First, it provides self-justification, which, as Scott notes in *Hidden Transcripts* (1993), can be key in desperate situations as a form of self-affirmation and the maintenance of resistance in difficult times. This discourse, amid targeted state repression, can help maintain solidarity in vulnerable communities. This discourse, however, also targets state agents and others who can influence the state. Eradication, but particularly fumigation policies are highly destructive to peasant livelihoods. Peasants seek support at the national and international levels against these policies. Those we interviewed were talking to us

about these ideas because they believed that we could promote this idea more broadly. But this argument was clearly also targeted at government officials. Indeed, several are cited in this section, reflecting some of the ways these ideas have gained purchase, at least with government and international organization officials working in Putumayo.

The advancement of these ideas, at least among frontline bureaucrats, provides important though far from decisive support for the types of policies local peasants need to protect their livelihood. Not all local bureaucrats believed this. Others were committed to fumigation programs. Thus this ongoing advocacy is at least partially addressed to this debate within the local bureaucracy and among politicians at the regional and national levels.

This discourse reflects an ideological response to antinarcotics policy, and thus resembles the peasant resistance ideologies Scott analyzes (1985, 1990) and those of urban migrants seeking to prove their good citizenship through vigilantism discussed by Goldstein (2004). It also reflects a use of voice (Hirschman 1970) to shape policy responses. Coca growers espouse many of the same concerns as the country's largely neoliberal governing elites do. The importance of coca for regional development, keeping shops running, and building needed infrastructure, for educating children and accumulating capital to shift into legitimate businesses, reflects a self-help ethic to improve conditions without state assistance, squarely positioning Putumayense coca growers as rugged but norm-abiding agrarian capitalists.

This kind of ideological advocacy is an ongoing process. These strategies are used when there is a clear space for dialogue rather than during moments of heightened violence or repression. Peasants, their organizations, and even local government officials recognize the importance of coca to the local economy. This positioning advocates for changes in government policy with limited individual costs.

## Malicia

Yet ideological advocacy has limits in the face of state and insurgent force. To survive, peasants seek to avoid confrontation with armed actors while simultaneously supporting their households; they do this by employing malicia. This complex basket of strategies involves misdirection or studied neutrality, strategic policy adherence, or sidestepping repression by moving into less-policed illicit businesses.

Peasants sometimes manage danger with studied neutrality and misdirection. Alejandro, a peasant leader in Puerto Asís, said, "Here the peasants have malicia. A group arrives [in a village] and they listen to them attentively. They ask for food, or a cow, and they give it to them. Later another group arrives and says the same thing and they also give them food. Nobody makes an enemy of anyone" (Alejandro, Puerto Asís, July 26, 2019). Peasants engage with various groups, listening and providing support, all while avoiding committing themselves and minimizing their involvement in conflict. Evidence we gathered suggests that the FARC accepts this to protect its village-level supporters.

Another approach to *malicia* involves strategic adherence to government policies. In these cases, peasants may participate in eradication programs, but rather than desisting from coca growing, they use state resources to shift their cultivation or to reestablish their plantings. Danny, an NGO worker, said, “Also there are people who have various [coca] fields in different places. Many of the people took the money [for eradicating the crops] from the PNIS [National Integral Crop Substitution Program] . . . . They . . . turned in one field to get the government money and they would keep the rest [of their fields], and with the money they received . . . they renewed their other coca crops” (Danny, Puerto Leguizamo, July 15, 2019). Alejo, a Puerto Leguizamo educator, said,

The state comes here with little crumbs of programs giving people four seeds and bye-bye. The people here also learned to take advantage of the state’s offers. They bring programs here that have no follow-up, no evaluation. They give a cow [as part of the milk production program], they take a photo, and then [the peasant family] eat the cow . . . . People take the money, they drink it, and they continue asking for gifts from the state. The worst-developed projects are the [crop] substitution programs and not one of them has functioned. (Alejo, Puerto Leguizamo, July 15, 2019)

These conversations show that coca growers frequently participate in crop substitution programs but do not necessarily stop growing coca. This adherence can show officials that they are eliminating some coca plants while secretly retaining others. Materially, participating in these programs provides growers with income to improve remaining crops by replacing old bushes with newer, more productive ones. In short, these programs enable government officials to show eradication while providing growers resources to farm coca elsewhere.

Peasants may also shift among illegal activities. Mariangel, a coca grower’s daughter and university student, said, “When Plan Colombia took place my family was the last one that had coca, we had a laboratory . . . . In the village only two families continued with the coca . . . . We had cattle, pigs, chickens. That wasn’t sustainable. Mining came back (Mariangel, Mocoa, August 6, 2019). Mariangel’s experience crystallizes peasants’ self-protective economic shifts. While she comes from a poor coca-growing family, they saved to educate her. Since legal crops were not “sustainable” income sources, they shifted into gold mining, another often illicit endeavor that pollutes Putumayo’s rivers (UNODC 2020a).

The shift to illicit mining reflects another avoidance strategy that evades state repression and connects the peasant to the global economy. Compared to drug prohibition, the government devotes few resources to gold smuggling.

These approaches reflect what Scott refers to as weapons of the weak, which involve such activities as work slowdowns or rice gleaning. Through them, the disempowered engage in asymmetric nonconfrontation. Through these strategies, peasants adopt postures acceptable to powerholders while quietly advancing their interests. These strategies take advantage of powerholders’ desire to maintain peasant compliance at some times but not at others. Guerrillas need certain types of support when they are in a village but not at other times. State forces demand

that peasants deny their support for insurgents as a way of protecting loyalty reserves. Alternatively, government officials are often more interested in enrolling peasants to meet program metrics than in ensuring long-term program adherence.

The avoidance strategy emerges when powerholders engage peasants in constructive but incomplete ways. Malicia provides a ground for at least apparent cooperation. The result is often the failure of coca control policy while producing data that reflect peasants' positive adherence to the policy's mechanics.

## Protest

Putumayense peasants have regularly protested to protect crops and change policy. Activists have engaged in strikes and road closures to prevent oil exploration or draw attention to fumigation (see Ramírez 2001). One cocalero leader discussed a 2019 blockade of troops deployed to eradicate coca (Ramiro, San Miguel, Junio 19, 2020).

One of the complexities of protest in Putumayo is their historical proximity to FARC cadres. When discussing one protest, a participant noted that protestors adopted confrontational strategies, knowing that FARC units operated behind them, offering protection against state forces. Indeed, the FARC, which long depended on coca for funding, has varied involvement with the cocalero movement. The FARC supported protests, coordinating with protesters. One movement leader reported his anger at another who was later revealed as a FARC member, a compromising situation that could have led to additional state repression.

In the context of Scott's framework, this strategy reflects a more adversarial approach to survival needs. These confrontational conditions have emerged after avoidant behavior has failed. For example, increasing fumigation, an effective coca reduction strategy even more successful at killing subsistence crops, generates protests. Scholars believe that glyphosate is carcinogenic, and peasants worry about its effects on their communities' health (Cohen 2020; Grillo 2014; Lyons 2016). Similarly, the expansion of petroleum production, which has environmental effects, increases tensions. Facing a crisis that could undermine their livelihoods and impose health risks, peasant leaders may have felt, like Scott's rebellious peasants in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), that they had few options other than confrontation.

Protest also offers a clear example of voice as developed in Hirschman's 1970 work. From this perspective, these acts of advocacy seek to change state policy rather than simply extend illegal activity, and should be seen as a dialogue over the limits of legitimate economic activity.

Protest occurs when the government seeks to destroy the coca crops. As coca eradication teams are deployed, they often attract protest. After destruction starts, protests may continue, though some cultivators will find other careers or safer places to grow the crop.



## Exit

Another strategy, somewhat consistent with the actions of peoples in upland Southeast Asia described in Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, is to move away from organizations endangering their livelihood. Minoru, a former Puerto Guzmán coca grower who had enrolled in a crop substitution program, said,

the FARC would say that they were poor and that they needed [help] and asked for a *vacuna* [extortion payment]. If you worked in [gold] mining you must give 200,000 [pesos, about US\$57] monthly to live. Being fearful, you couldn't hide anything from them because one of your neighbors would inform on you. At that time, coca paid good money. Two or three sown hectares gave you 6 million [pesos] free and clear every two months. That is why we are in this process, and there are others that went deeper into the mountains because they don't believe in the government, and they are going to grow more coca. (Minoru, Puerto Gúzman, August 7, 2019)

Similarly, Laureano, a La Hormiga merchant, said, "The best thing is to compete economically with coca. If you develop a profitable business, it isn't so hard. Eradication is a corrective action . . . but it doesn't go to the root of the problem. The way to do it is not to eradicate or fumigate because if people can't do it in one place, they go somewhere else to grow [coca]" (Laureano, La Hormiga, May 9, 2019).

Exit can also be seen as an act of advocacy (Hirschman 1970). One of the main challenges in Putumayo is to encourage legal agriculture. As María recalled, "in Putumayo it is easier to sell a kilo of coca than a kilo of plantains . . . [unfortunately] here the people rely mainly on oil, coca, or the government (María, Mocoa, May 7, 2019). As oil industry or government employment is limited, coca is accepted as a cash crop. One official said, "Many had a home in the city and a rural plot to cultivate coca for extra income" (María, Mocoa, May 6, 2019). Moving beyond the settlement frontier constitutes rejection of policies limiting development and signals demand for policy changes.

Sitting on Colombia's edge, coca growers have many places where they can cultivate illicit products while facing only transient state repression. Indeed, a great deal of coca growing occurs within 2 kilometers of the border with Ecuador, where fumigation is prohibited under a Constitutional Court edict. Amid repression, coca growers move to secure their business.

In Putumayo, this strategy adds dimension to Scott's anarchist analysis of communities that have withdrawn from territory to avoid state obligations. In Scott's telling, this move is dramatic and can include populations' giving up literacy as they adapt unconventional subsistence agriculture practices and set up political systems reflecting their norms and aspirations. Conditions in Putumayo, however, reveal a more modest pattern of separation. Here, peasants move deeper into the countryside, away from state power but still subject to partial FARC governance. These peasants do not necessarily give up speaking Spanish or create political systems. Indeed, moving farther into the countryside to sow coca does not necessarily mean dissociation from the village, just working farther away.

Moreover, the move into the countryside is designed to sustain illicit engagement with the global economy rather than to reject commercial agriculture, as is the case with Scott's peasants. In this context, this strategy also reflects the consumer exit envisioned by Hirschman (1970), wherein a peasant refuses to continue to do business in a particular locale where they may be dissatisfied with state policy or protections offered by illicit actors.

Exit is a suboptimal outcome for Putumayo's peasants, since it involves abandoning fields and sometimes community relationships. It involves growers moving away from existing supply chains, introducing some uncertainty. Coca growers' exit to isolated areas occurs under distressing conditions, such as aerial fumigation. Alternately, it also occurs when armed groups are charging high fees, generating violence, or during peasant competition.

### Policy Implications

The strategies that Putumayo's peasants use to address their anxieties have implications for state policy. Critically, peasants are not helpless in the policy realm. Each strategy aids in evading, blunting, or changing policies. Via malicia, peasants can work with local policy implementers to collaboratively avoid reducing coca crops while still profiting from coca control policies. In these cases, peasants strategically comply, often with the passive knowledge of implementers, who are content to achieve local metrics, such as cows distributed or hectares eradicated, without achieving meaningful change. This disconnect results in serially failed policies, as peasants have benefited from programs without markedly reducing production. Local policy implementers, meanwhile, can report hectares destroyed or program adherence.

Policies should be advanced that account for these underlying practices. This means developing meaningful metrics for policy success beyond hectares destroyed or total hectares in production and that consider evasion strategies. These should focus on how many peasants can develop wealth growing something besides coca.

Alternately, the evidence presented here shows how important it is to take seriously what peasants say in protests and in their ideological positioning. Peasants protest and make arguments about how the state should behave. Some of this includes an affirmation of neoliberalism, and alternately, an expectation of state-facilitated basic service provision. The state should build policies around these claims. The policies should include improvements in infrastructure and services as part of wider policies to increase economic opportunity. They also should include some limited state supports for legal agriculture beyond crop substitution programs.

In addition, the government needs to take the complexities of exit seriously. On the one hand, effective policy responses must consider the opening of the frontier of coca production, in terms of both controlling coca production and shaping other elements of policy to control the expansion of settlements. On the other hand, the government needs to take seriously the question of why peasants choose to stay.

This can include efforts by armed actors to restrict adherence to crop substitution and those programs' limitations.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have shown that peasants use the ambiguity of living in the Amazonian borderlands amid state and guerrilla authority structures to protect their engagement with the global cocaine trade in four ways. The first is to position themselves as self-supporting economic actors who protect economic survival strategies. These are all issues that Colombia's state has formally advocated but never delivered to this population. They show, in their self-advocacy, the importance of Putumayo peasants' engagement with the coca trade to achieve improvements in the face of generations of state ineffectiveness, even amid heavy state repression. The second is to exercise malicia by offering tactical support to both guerrillas and the state, strategically adhering to policies while continuing coca growing or becoming illicit miners. The third is protests. Here, peasants confront the state to protect crops with sometimes secret support from armed groups. Finally, some peasants move away from state power to grow coca in inaccessible places. Considering these strategies is important in developing more effective coca control policies.

## NOTES

The research reported here was funded in part by the Minerva Research Initiative (OUSD [RandE]) and the Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory via grant #W911-NF-17-1-0569 to George Mason University. The research was also funded by the Marx Gift to the Baruch College Fund. Any errors and opinions are not those of the Department of Defense and are attributable solely to the authors.

1. All interview subjects are identified by pseudonyms.

2. La Violencia was a civil conflict that dated roughly from 1948 until 1958 between Colombia's two major historical political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. The Frente Nacional was a series of governments between 1958 and 1974 in which the Liberals and Conservatives shared power and patronage as part of the 1957 Sitges pact which negotiated a conclusion to La Violencia.

3. Coca pickers are usually paid in wages. *Raspachin* is a noun derived from the Spanish verb *raspar* (to scrape) and refers to the modal picking style of the laborer moving their hand along the coca branch to scrape away the leaves.

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