

difference with other contemporary verticalist, bureaucratic labour organisations that share a legacy of state corporatism, such as the Mexican unions.

However, in this interpretation of identity-building in a bureaucratic and traditional Peronist union the book may leave some questions unanswered. Lazar's ethnography is smart and rigorous enough to acknowledge that the UPCN is essentially a verticalist, problem-solving, social-service union, whose grass-roots leaders are more worried about defending labour insiders than in waging broader political struggles. However, even if sometimes the UPCN may be unenthusiastic in its defence of temporary employees or of those workers not directly affiliated to the union, the period under study is, overall, one in which workers as a class advanced their material and symbolic interests. What happens, however, when the same union tolerates unilateral state down-sizing and a severe fall in real wages without major protest, as occurred after 2015 under the new right-wing administration? How can a union whose grass-roots leaders preach a 'sense of vocation, passion, commitment, rage against injustice' (p. 137) make an accommodation with a government that unleashes massive state layoffs, curtails collective bargaining and causes a major downturn in workers' incomes? Probably other mechanisms – less directly related to past symbolic struggles, kinship and containment, and more with coercion, organisational payoffs and lack of union democracy – are also at work. Of course, Lazar's approach does not neglect these more regressive elements present in the Argentine bureaucratic Peronist unions. However, in the period covered by Lazar's analysis – one of a general labour offensive – such mechanisms of coercion were less noticeable because the union leadership did not need (or was not pressed by the government) to restrain rank-and-file demands. Likewise, and from an opposite point of view, Lazar possibly overestimates the left-wing and 'autonomous' character of the ATE unions and their national confederation, the Central de Trabajadores de Argentina (Workers' Central of Argentina, CTA). If Lazar had chosen some other sections/provinces of ATE, or the CTA-dominated public teachers' union, she would have found a strong Peronist identity (less organic, and of a different, progressive bent from that in the UPCN), perhaps even more *kirchnerista* than the Peronist public union. However, every ethnography is probably prisoner of its object. These questions, the coercive mechanisms of mainstream Argentine unions, and the varieties of Peronist labour identities, constitute avenues for future, empirically-grounded research rather than real shortcomings of the book.

To sum up, this is a very important book, useful not only for Argentine and Latin American specialists, but also for all social scientists interested in the empirical forging of political identities, and in labour mobilisation. What is thoroughly clear from Lazar's book is that the understanding of the perennial fight of ordinary people for labour and social rights is a complex endeavour, one that is hardly reducible to a set of maximising assumptions.

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Aldo Civico, *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), pp. xxiii + 236, £22.95, pb

In *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads*, anthropologist Aldo Civico aims to explain the violence committed by paramilitary groups in Colombia. He explores three themes: the motivations of young men to become involved in

paramilitary violence, the meanings of the practice of violence, and the discourses employed to justify this violence. These themes are critical to a differentiated understanding of the Colombian armed conflict, and of conflict and violence more broadly.

Drawing on challenging multi-year ethnographic research in insecure spaces, *Cívico* takes the reader to Medellín and other parts of Antioquia to portray everyday life in the midst of conflict, and to narrate his encounters with perpetrators of paramilitary violence. The book's first chapter focuses on his meeting with El Doctor, a powerful supporter of the paramilitaries, followed by the life histories of three demobilised paramilitary members in the second chapter. *Cívico* then discusses the practice of social cleansing, and provides what he calls an 'ethnography of cocaine'. These more descriptive parts are followed by an analysis of the intertwining of the paramilitaries with the state, and the demobilisation process of the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, AUC).

Ethnographic approaches to the study of conflict offer insights into the subject that often remain obscured when drawing on other methodological approaches. As *Cívico*'s book attests, one of these insights is the frequent blurring of lines between victims and victimisers. He powerfully argues that understanding the motives for men to get involved in paramilitary violence requires humanising them. This would necessitate listening to their stories. Indeed, the paramilitary testimonies reveal the often limited choices they had when deciding to join the organisation.

Another insight relates to the meaning of violence from the perpetrator's viewpoint. Building on Michael Taussig's *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), *Cívico* skilfully illustrates how demobilised paramilitaries consider social cleansing – the removal of undesired individuals through violence – a purifying act. Understanding killing as a form of extreme cleaning produces dialectic spaces, as Taussig argued, that are either impure or clean. Security presupposes 'clean' spaces. The practice of social cleansing thus contributes to a moral economy of violence in which the perpetrators of violence not only decide on what constitutes purity and, by extension, security, but also explicitly exclude their own practice of violence from the possibility of a 'depurifying' effect.

The third theme, the discourse employed to justify the violence, links to the role of the state in violent contexts. *Cívico* reveals instances where state weakness becomes the scapegoat for paramilitary violence. According to his interviewees, paramilitaries had to step in where the state was not capable of ensuring order and security. Yet he also depicts the state's complicity according to which the state deliberately uses the paramilitaries as an extension of power.

While the book's main strength lies in these exclusive insights into the experiences of former paramilitaries, it is also these accounts that trigger important further questions. For example, to what extent are these narratives shared by female (ex-) combatants and what would a female perspective on the motives of these men look like? Where are the counter-narratives of nonviolence? Are these stories distorted by the prominent presence of *Cívico* himself in them? Bias and subjectivity are serious concerns that ethnographers must address carefully; the book would have benefited from a more explicit discussion of these concerns. Such a discussion, coupled with the triangulation of perspectives with accounts from other stakeholders in Colombian society, would also be conducive to a more critical lens on the justifying discourse of state weakness used by the paramilitaries and state officials. Questioning this 'innocent convergence' (p. 175) based on the existing evidence and scholarly treatment of the direct complicity between state actors and paramilitaries would also serve this purpose.

It is indeed the contribution of *Cívico*'s argument about the state–paramilitary relationship to the existing work on this complicity that could have been specified further. To be sure, in a novel way, the fifth chapter starts with an intriguing analogy that promises to shed light on the entanglement of the paramilitaries and the state: between the Sicilian Mafia and the paramilitaries. However, the chapter falls short of specifying the particular elements of this analogy, and of recognising the limitations of it. On the one hand, *Cívico* argues that both the paramilitaries and the Sicilian Mafia would have emerged from the need to establish order and provide protection in a context in which the state was not capable of assuming these governance functions. On the other hand, he argues that the paramilitaries and the Mafia operate both within and outside the state. The argument somewhat conflates *origins* and *modus operandi* and leaves one wondering how the paramilitaries' ideological motivation comes in. The goal of counter-insurgency is essential to the circumstances under which the Colombian government encouraged the establishment of self-defence groups *and* to the relationship between the state and the paramilitaries in subsequent decades. Against this, the Mafia's *modus operandi* focuses on protection, yet does not explicitly engage in such ideologically motivated activities. Furthermore, in Colombia, paramilitaries have not been the only non-state actors to provide protection: guerrillas and drug cartels have replaced the state in certain regions to provide such governance functions. Later in the chapter, *Cívico* himself introduces the history of Pablo Escobar and refers to the drug cartels' 'Mafia-like power centers' (p. 166). He also defines the Mafia as the 'social phenomenon in which a criminal organization has a strategic alliance with legal institutions, as is the case in Colombia' (p. 219). It thus is unclear how the paramilitary–Mafia analogy is singled out. In this regard, lenses such as Federico Varese's conceptualisation of the Mafia and states on a continuum, with hybrid actors such as paramilitaries and insurgents in between, can be useful for enhancing analytical clarity (Varese, 'What is Organized Crime?', in Varese (ed.), *Organized Crime*, Routledge, 2010, pp. 1–35).

Overall, the book and the additional questions it raises are welcome contributions to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the Colombian conflict. In the current context of the implementation of the peace deal between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) and the Colombian government, yet continued insecurity in the country, the book is an urgent reminder that ending violence through more violence can easily backfire. It also emphasises that public discourses do not always reflect activities and experiences on the ground. Finally, it highlights that solutions to conflict are not necessarily found in the central state by default, but also require including voices at the margins of the state.

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Miriam Seemann, *Water Security, Justice and the Politics of Water Rights in Peru and Bolivia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. xviii + 226, £13.60, hb

The formalisation of water rights is widely regarded as the panacea to the looming water crisis brought about by climate change and other socio-environmental calamities. However, fewer questions have been asked about the effects of such formalisation initiatives. Why are policy-makers so keen to formalise water rights? What does it