

changes promoted by President Aylwin. In Mexico, decentralisation was the result of political changes made from the top by the dominant hegemonic PRI party, following the same political expectations of gaining higher local support by relinquishing some power at the centre.

O'Neill has provided us with an accessible and innovative comparative analysis of decentralisation in the region which will complement existing individual country studies examining this process.

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Michael Taussig, *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xiii + 208, \$15.00, pb.

William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. x + 192, \$60.00, hb.

These two new contributions to the English language literature on Colombia offer very distinct angles on the paramilitary problem of that country. Taussig's is a micro level view, a diary of this distinguished anthropologist's two weeks in a town he had first visited in 1969 and which by 2001, the year of this return, is in the midst of a paramilitary *limpieza*, literally a cleansing of 'undesirables', the beggars, delinquents, dissidents to their authority and of course, anyone remotely suspected of sympathies with the guerillas. The second offers a macro level political economy of the paramilitary-military-civilian nexus in Colombia. Together both books offer yet more evidence of the complex and insidious ways the armed right have over the last two decades penetrated into the everyday life of many parts of Colombia. But in addition, they indicate how this penetration has been aided and abetted not just by traditional agrarian elites in the defence of their lives and property, but by the most modern and transnational of technocratic elites.

The latter, as Aviles demonstrates, have held key positions in all recent governments; indeed he traces the educational background and transnational relations of the key ministers of the four presidential administrations between 1990 and 2006 (Gaviria, Samper, Pastrana and Uribe). The Universities of Los Andes, Oxford, Harvard, MIT, together with the IMF, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, all figure prominently in the cvs on display. Uribe's is arguably the only presidency which represents traditional agrarian as well as technocratic and transnational elites; but the evidence of serious dispute between them is not very apparent, a topic that Aviles could have explored in greater depth.

The commitment of these presidencies to neoliberal adjustment and global competitiveness is a common thread, as is their anti-paramilitary rhetoric and initiatives as well as their failure to translate these into any serious state control over groups dedicated to brutality and terror in their war against Colombia's guerillas. Colombia's guerillas are also responsible for atrocities, although no human rights monitoring puts this on the same scale as those perpetrated by the armed right. What is important about Aviles' book is that it is not a crude account of direct collusion by elites in the rise of the paramilitary right. There is some of this, in the form of well known data on drugs, landowning and army funding and support. Yet it is more focused on the failure of the most globalised elites to implement initiatives

to deal with military impunity, paramilitary massacres and criminality. This is because this right wing private army so effectively took on the guerillas in the 1990s where the state army failed. And here is the paradox. Colombia liberalised politically and the transnational elite set about modernising the state with the 1991 Constitution; it is one of the most democratic charters in Latin America today, at least on paper. The elite forced the armed forces to come under increasing civilian control, but they could not defeat the guerilla insurgency without the help of the paramilitary. Debates will continue about whether the guerillas abused a serious opportunity for peace, when under Pastrana (1998–2002) they used the demilitarised zone to expand militarily, or whether the failure to control the paramilitaries and deal with army impunity justified their lack of faith in Pastrana's peace offer. What is clear is that under President Uribe, a blind eye is being turned nationally and internationally to the primitive and cruel methods of capital accumulation and social control of the paramilitaries of Colombia in the name of democratic security. As this force is demobilised with minimum cost for past atrocities, it appears almost to be rewarded rather than punished; many doubt that top leaders are seriously giving up any economic or military power. What message does this give to Colombia's left insurgents? Is this the cost of Colombia's entry into the global economy?

Aviles aims to make such a connection. The book does offer insights and a general argument about the relationships between Colombia's efforts to enter the global economy, the reform of civil military relations, and the rise of paramilitarism. It is enough to convince the reader disposed to believe. However, this key argument could have been further developed. Aviles' book is much stronger on the history of civil-military relations and on the arguments above, than it is on the economic relationships and connections. No book can cover everything, and Aviles offers us good empirical material on the way successive administrations have tried to bring the military under civilian control in line with prevailing global norms of a neo-liberal and minimally democratic state. However, we could do with more detail on the economic groups and elites and their relationships with traditional agrarian elites and the newly enriched through drug trafficking and land seizure (those who have helped actively to promote the paramilitary phenomenon). We also need to understand better how Uribe, a mixture of cattleman and bureaucrat, has managed to persuade Colombians and the international community that a peaceful and democratic Colombia can be built on violence and impunity.

Taussig gives us insights using a very different method, that of the anthropologist's field diary. Taussig offers us a very readable, often amusing and at the same time disconcerting insight into what it means to live in the midst of the paramilitary. His sojourn is in the Valle del Cauca, the sugarcane valley which enriched a Cali elite in the mid 20th century. This beautifully observed account is given depth by Taussig's three decades' knowledge of the locality. His old friends keep popping in, some in uncomfortable guises, such as the gang leader who he thinks is the son of an old informant and who now agrees to take him to the much feared rubbish mountain where the poorest and the most vilified hang out.

Taussig's account is as interesting for what it tells us about the author himself as much as it is about the environment he observes. We gain insights into the anthropologist's craft, his need to get under the skin of the social processes he observes, even to the point of endangering himself. We learn of the anguishes of the anthropologist with integrity, who seeks to get to the core of things but is aware of

the risks not only to his life, but to the life of others, to the tricks of memory and the way past images from his own life pop into the mind of the observer who is suspended between cultures and worlds: the intellectual and the poor, the city person and the peasant, Colombia and the United States. If only others were as self-reflective when they claim to understand the multi-dimensional realities of Colombia. But what does he tell us about Colombia today?

In 2005, I was also in paramilitary and drugs trafficking controlled towns of Colombia, of the Atlantic Coast and the Valle. Taussig captures the assault on one's rationality when one visits an urban centre which is ruled more or less overtly by armed right wing men:

'In *Prisoner of Love*, Genet writes that 'essence of theater is the need to create not merely signs but complete and compact images masking a reality that consists in absence of being. The void'. And that's how the paras come across in this town. A void that kills. The brazenness of the killing today takes your breath away, in broad daylight, in the street – the exact opposite of anonymity. This is not some remote hamlet where there are no police or law courts. This is a town just forty-five minutes by road from Cali, with 40 police, 5 judges, 3 district attorneys, a jail with 120 prisoners, and an elaborate judicial system. The triumph of the paras over all this is extraordinary' (p. 133).

Taussig wrote these words in 2001. By 2005 what he witnessed has spread to many other places and embedded itself so that the paramilitaries are not just a void which kills, but a void which controls often mundane forms of social interaction. Even as they were gathering in the demobilised camps created by President Uribe, the evidence I found of their social control and political influence in 2005 in Sincelejo, not a small village but the departmental capital of Sucre on the Atlantic Coast, was resounding in the silence.

It is good to read these two books together. We need Aviles political analysis, and we also need Taussig's observations in the field. What does it mean to be a citizen living in the midst of a violence which the state (and a modernising state with strong aspirations to credibility in the global economic and political arena) fails to address and even tolerates in the name of what it considers a greater evil, in other words the guerillas. In Taussig's diary we understand better the 'multiple realities' of lived experience in Colombia's war torn towns. We understand how an ordinary person can welcome the paramilitaries when 'the Colombian state cannot protect them from anything, not just from the guerilla. From murder to traffic accidents, kidnapping or being mugged for your tennis shoes, the state is powerless whether you are rich or poor' (p. 30). The paramilitaries are a cheap source of *de facto* security and summary justice. But what monster has been created in the bowels of society and state, and how much will it prolong the anguished search for a real peace in Colombia?

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Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, *Popular Injustice: Violence, Community and Law in Latin America* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. xvii + 233, \$50.00, \$19.95 pb.

Despite the fact that virtually all nations of Latin America are formally democratic, having left behind systems of authoritarian rule and institutionalised violence