Review: Parainstitutional Violence in Latin America

Reviewed Work(s):

Violence in Colombia, 1999-2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace by Charles W. Bergquist; Sánchez G. Gonzalo; Ricardo Peñaranda

Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability by Bruce B. Campbell; Arthur D. Brenner

From Victims to Heroes: Peasant Counter-Rebellion and Civil War in Ayacucho, Peru, 1980-2000 by Mario Fumerton

The "Sixth Division": Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia by Human Rights Watch

New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era by Mary Kaldor

Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America by Kees Koonings; Dirk Kruijt

Warlords in International Relations by Paul B. Rich

Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror by Jeffrey A. Sluka

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Critical Debates

Parainstitutional Violence in Latin America

Adam Jones


This essay examines parainstitutional violence in Latin America, notably the institutions of paramilitaries, death squads, and warlords, placing them in a global and comparative perspective. It engages in a crit-
itical debate of some recent literature, attempting to clarify key concepts and relationships and to synthesize aspects of the discussion. It focuses on case studies of parainstitutional violence in Colombia and Peru.

Parainstitutionality has been defined by Germán Alfonso Palacio Castañeda, in the specific context of Colombian politics, as "a series of mechanisms of social regulation and conflict resolution that do not rely on formal constitutional or legal means, but are governed by informal arrangements and ad hoc mechanisms." These mechanisms are "manifestations of, and alternatives to, an institutional inability to respond to both social conflict and the State’s need to accumulate capital." Palacio Castañeda’s analysis cites "paramilitary repression [as] one type of parainstitutional expression" (Palacio Castañeda 1991, 106–7).

Recent social-scientific study of parainstitutional violence is the outgrowth of work in two main spheres and by two distinct sets of actors. The first, and probably more important, labor was carried out by non-governmental human rights organizations, notably Human Rights Watch (with its associated bodies, such as Americas Watch and Middle East Watch) and Amnesty International. They were supplemented by, and often dependent on, a host of less visible and much more vulnerable human rights groups in key states, especially Latin American ones. Since the 1970s, these organizations have devoted extensive attention to the role of death squads and paramilitary forces linked to the state security apparatus. In recent years they have been joined by the truth commissions characteristic of transition and democratization processes. The result is an extensive, grim body of documentation of these parainstitutional actors and activities—a foundation essential to comparative research, though nearly all these materials focus on individual countries and cases.

The work of NGOs has been gradually buttressed by an impressive body of scholarship that has strongly influenced evolving perspectives on parainstitutional violence. With rare exceptions, this literature has hailed from the left of the political spectrum, has been heavily concentrated in the United States, and has been spurred by the intimate involvement of successive U.S. governments in countries where death squad and paramilitary activity was rife, especially in Central and South America. The main figures in the English-language literature include Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, writing both together and separately (see, for example, Chomsky and Herman 1979; Herman 1982; Chomsky 1988). Others are Alexander George, with his edited volume, Western State Terrorism (1991); Jenny Pearce, author of a seminal study of Colombia (1990) and many important articles on paramilitarism there and elsewhere in South America; and Michael McClintock, author of a two-volume study of The American Connection to state terror across Latin America (1985). The work of these scholars was vital in broadening definitions of terrorism to focus on state or “wholesale” terrorism,
rather than—or in addition to—the “retail” terrorism of nonstate actors. They also zeroed in on the alliance of domestic states, foreign states, and nonstate actors in perpetrating the kind of death squad savagery and paramilitary marauding that were commonplace in the U.S. sphere of influence, especially from the 1970s on.

**PARAMILITARISM**

“Private organizations that resort to the physical elimination of presumed auxiliaries of rebel groups and of individuals seen as subversive of the moral order.” This is the definition of paramilitarism put forward by the Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia in 1987, and cited by Fernando Cubides in his chapter for *Violence in Colombia* (129). It helps to clarify both the advantages and the pitfalls that accompany efforts to define these varied, highly mutable institutions across Latin America and worldwide.

Three caveats can be raised about the Comisión’s definition. First, the notion of “private” organizations downplays paramilitaries’ links with, and sometimes roots in, the security apparatus of the state. It is not fundamentally inaccurate, because paramilitaries often receive initial and enduring sponsorship from private actors. But those actors, in turn, tend to have close links, or at least strong commonalities of interest, with government authorities and state agents. In the Latin American experience, most important among such actors have been large landowners, who have mobilized paramilitary forces to defend their properties not only against rebel attack, but against any imaginable agitation.

Second, paramilitarism need not necessarily or primarily involve the “physical elimination” of members of targeted groups. While this is frequently the case, murder should be seen as an extreme along a continuum of strategies, from cooptation to intimidation to open violence. Finally, paramilitaries do not necessarily limit themselves to the targets cited in the definition. It is rather the defense of the political and economic status quo that is most important; one does not need to be a presumed auxiliary of a formal rebel organization, merely to adopt—or belong to a collectivity deemed to hold—a rebellious stance toward existing socioeconomic arrangements. This is well conveyed in Jeffrey Sluka’s introduction to *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, a groundbreaking compendium of anthropological essays about paraminstitutional violence and the “culture of fear” it inculcates.

Terror states who practice extrajudicial execution or political assassination of their opponents have seen “subversion” in any activity or idea that challenges the status quo—including organizing peasants, unions, Bible classes, proposals for land reform, or tax increases on the rich. Anyone engaged in such activities—clergy,
labor organizers or trade unionists, human rights activists, indigenous peoples and minorities asserting their rights, teachers, students, health and social workers, journalists, and so on—are defined as subversives, terrorists, traitors, or communists, and this is used as the rationalization and justification for killing them without even due process of law. No one is safe; the victims have included men, women, children, and old people, activists, relatives of activists, and witnesses of state abuses. "The target," as one U.S. diplomat described death squad operations in 1984, "is anybody with an idea in his head." (Sluka, 5)

In this light, we might rework the Comisión definition as follows: paramilitaries are those private and/or state-affiliated organizations that use violence and intimidation to target and/or eliminate groups and individuals seen as subversive of the social, political, and economic order.

Mary Kaldor's work *New and Old Wars* has established itself as a core text of the "new agenda" in security studies. It devotes substantial attention to the phenomenon of parainstitutional violence. Her readable account places such strategies in the context of a shift to "new wars," based on military "units that . . . include a disparate range of different types of groups such as paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups and also regular armies including breakaway units of regular armies." Such forces are "highly decentralized" and "operate through a mixture of confrontation and cooperation even when on opposing sides." They also secure financing "through plunder and the black market or through external assistance," including "illegal trade in arms, drugs or valuable commodities such as oil and diamonds" (Kaldor, 8–9).

Kaldor's emphasis on the economic foundation of paramilitaries and warlords is entirely justified. One cannot understand the survival and strategies of right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia, for example, without reference to the drugs and other illegal contraband that have long supported their murderous activities. Nevertheless, Kaldor runs into a predictable problem when she analyzes these institutions closely. Her work relies heavily on case studies drawn from the Balkans and, to a lesser extent, Africa. Thus she defines "paramilitary groups" as "autonomous groups of armed men generally centered around an individual leader" (93, emphasis added), which precludes construction of an analytical continuum ranging from tight affiliation with state structures to active competition or conflict with them. Likewise, her description of such groups as "mostly composed of redundant soldiers" and as "rarely wearing uniforms" (93) may be valid in the case of Bosnia or Congo but does not travel well, as anyone who has examined the composition and comportment of the Colombian AUC or the Peruvian *rondas campesinas* quickly realizes. The heavy emphasis she places on the role
of "identity politics" in fuelling the new wars and their decentralized institutional underpinnings, moreover, is much less relevant in the Latin American context.

Another definition of paramilitarism, offered by Edelberto Torres-Rivas in his epilogue to Koonings and Kruijt's *Societies of Fear*, expands our understanding of these institutions and provides a different lens through which to view their activities. The name generically applied to "paramilitary" groups, according to Torres-Rivas, "reflects the function they carry out rather than their structure. Paramilitary groups are, then, military bodies" (292). This draws us toward a common use of the word *paramilitary*, to designate unofficial security forces that serve a military or quasi-military function. Here we confront the prefix *para*-, meaning beside, beyond, modification of (Concise Oxford Dictionary). For convenience we might say that *para-* in this usage equals *quasi-*.

The Spanish language may offer another entry point: the preposition *para* (for) "refers to aims or objectives" (Harrap's 1998, 31; emphasis in original). Paramilitary forces can be defined by their service to military interests. Thus we speak of paramilitary police, paramilitary riot police, paramilitary officers, paramilitary internal security forces—referring to overt and uniformed state agents who perform a military or quasi-military function on behalf of the state. The Nazi SS—separate from the army—also have been designated as "paramilitary" forces. Nor do we have to posit an official integration into state ranks usefully to deploy the idea of *paramilitary* activities in this sense. Regional and local authorities may themselves define "military" interests, to a considerable degree independently of the central state. Thus we note the stark contrast between Guatemala-style "civil defense" formations, on the one hand, and the Peruvian *rondas campesinas*, which qualify as "organic" paramilitary forces.

Having noted the state-centric usage of *paramilitary*, I intend to abandon it for the rest of this essay. I find little that is useful in identifying uniformed state agents, acting in an official capacity (rather than as off-duty death squads, for example), as "paramilitary" forces. Whether this distinction is defensible or not, the remainder of this essay focuses on institutions from which the state maintains a formal distance. Often these paramilitary forces are at least nominally illegal; sometimes they are actively pursued and suppressed.

**Death Squads**

In his introduction to *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, a wide-ranging selection of essays about death squad activity around the world and throughout the twentieth century, Bruce Campbell describes the subject of study as
clandestine and usually irregular organizations, often paramilitary in nature, which carry out extrajudicial executions and other violent acts (torture, rape, arson, bombing, etc.) against clearly defined individuals or groups of people. Murder is their primary or even sole activity. Except in the rare case where an insurgent group forms them, death squads operate with the overt support, complicity, or acquiescence of government, or at least some parts of it. In many cases, government security forces have participated directly in the killing. Yet at the same time, death squads may be privately constituted, almost always involve the support and participation of elements outside the government, and develop considerable independence from their backers. (Campbell, 2)

Campbell’s definition has the considerable advantage of making clear the link between death squads and paramilitarism—that is, that death squads are a form of paramilitarism, generally (not always) linked to the state security apparatus or “rogue” elements of it. They focus wholly on murder and other atrocities. Difficulties arise, however, when Campbell seeks to distinguish death squads “from three other distinct but closely related phenomena: assassination, vigilantism, and terrorism.” He argues convincingly that unlike ordinary assassinations, death squad killings tend to be carried out on a large scale, with “their victims typically number[ing] in the thousands” (Campbell, 2). More questionably, he seeks to distinguish death squad activities from terrorism, arguing that “death squads may well be a part of a government strategy of state terrorism, and they very often attempt to use terror themselves”; thus, “the two concepts easily exist simultaneously” (4). Campbell distinguishes between them, however. He stresses that in the case of terrorism, “targets are largely instrumental or symbolic and the main effect is intended to be felt elsewhere. To put it another way, in terrorism, murder and other dreadful acts are committed to send a message, while for death squads, murder is the main point” (4).

While Campbell wisely adds that “the distinction between the two remains an academic one; in practice it is often much less clear” (4), this does not tackle the core problem of the distinction. It lies in the reality that death squads clearly do intend to broadcast a wider message through assassinations and other atrocities. The macabre character of death squad murders in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, was meant to terrorize broad social sectors—and succeeded in doing so, to the extent that a volume on the postterror era can be titled Societies of Fear. Accordingly, I lean toward a definition that does not distinguish death squad activities from terrorist ones, but recognizes death squads as a form and strategy of terrorism.

The major comparative studies to date of the form of paramilitarism known as death squads—the Campbell-Brenner and Sluka volumes—theorize the squads as “subcontractors” of state terror, a pattern that often
holds true for wider paramilitary forces as well. This subcontracting allows "legitimate" state authorities (and powerful private actors) to avoid association with atrocities committed on their behalf. Campbell expertly links this phenomenon to the rise of increasingly powerful norms and international regimes in the human rights sphere, which, "if respected," impose "strict limits on a state's range of options." "Domestically," Campbell writes, "citizens expect the rule of law, adherence to certain norms of behavior, or at least predictable behavior from their governments." In this way, "states may engage in covert violence in order to protect the sensibilities of domestic populations and thus preserve state legitimacy." The international context is no less significant. States today find themselves under scrutiny from foreign governments, both allied and enemy; semigovernmental agencies such as the World Bank; and a multitude of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) . . . not to mention the international media. Failure to meet international norms of behavior can have all sorts of serious repercussions today, including loss of foreign loans and investment, diminution or loss of foreign aid, loss of tourist revenue, trade boycotts, etc. States wishing to use extreme forms of extralegal violence thus have every reason to appear uninvolved. Though the charade doesn't usually last very long, it is difficult to prove government complicity in death squad actions—such proof usually comes at great cost to local human rights organizations and monitors, who are themselves often among the prime targets of the death squads. (Campbell, 4)

The concern with deniability is also evident in a key paramilitary and death squad strategy that has lent a chilling edge to a familiar word: disappearance. As Kay B. Warren notes in her introduction to the Sluka volume, while garish acts of terror regularly figure in these campaigns, the opposite of public proclamation is also employed. "Without bodies as evidence, states can continue repression in ways that allow 'plausible deniability'" (Sluka, 227).²

**PARAINSTITUTIONALITY IN COLOMBIA**

In few countries of the world in recent decades has parainstitutional violence been so pervasive as in Colombia, and in few other instances have paramilitary formations amassed so substantial a share of territorial control and political power. Parainstitutional violence is a longstanding tradition in Colombia. It received a quantum boost during *La Violencia* in the 1940s and 1950s, when rural supporters of Liberal and Conservative factions renewed their decades-old hostility by waging war in the countryside.³ It was not until the mid-1980s, however, that the phenomenon became almost ubiquitous throughout both rural and urban Colombia.
The initial spur appears to have been dissatisfaction among Colombian military leaders, economic and political elites, and narcotraffickers with the amnesty granted to guerrillas belonging to the EPL rebel group. According to Jenny Pearce, “paramilitary death squads” launched a savage campaign against alleged activists of the ELN and M-19 guerrillas. The most prominent squad, Death to Kidnappers (MAS), was launched in 1981. It “became an infamous agent of summary right-wing justice, based in the Magdalena Medio [region] but with influence in a number of other departments where popular unrest and guerrilla forces threatened the local elites. . . . When the attorney general investigated MAS in early 1983, 59 members on active military service were accused of belonging to it” (Pearce 1990, 177).

Pearce writes of a “functional alliance” . . . that emerged in the 1980s between the drug barons, sectors of the army, businessmen, landowners and political bosses to eliminate suspected guerrillas and left-wing civilian activists” (1990, 195). As is typically the case, death squads were used as a means of guaranteeing impunity and deniability: they could “do unofficially what cannot be done officially” (1986 human rights report, quoted in Pearce 1990, 246). In the latter half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, it was the Unión Patriótica, a party that included many former guerrillas who had laid down their arms after the amnesty, that became the primary target. An astonishing one thousand UP leaders and rank-and-file members were assassinated between 1985 and 1990, including two of the party’s presidential candidates. Trade union members became another favored target, with Colombia accounting for more than half of all unionists killed worldwide from January 1990 to March 1991, according to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. As paramilitary and death squad activity increased, so the element of social vigilantism—against “petty thieves, prostitutes, homosexuals, and other undesirables” (Bushnell 1993, 264)—grew more prominent in its activities, with the same core alliance of drug traffickers, security forces, and right-wing economic elites orchestrating the carnage.

The genesis of the most prominent umbrella association of Colombian paramilitary forces, the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), lay in the tumultuous, longstanding conflicts over land, which received a crucial injection of material support from the rising Colombian narcotraffickers. The drug cartels ploughed much of their vast earnings into investments in land and property, and as the guerrilla threat to established social relations in the countryside increased, the agrarian old guard and the arristé narcotrafficking elements banded together to mobilize paramilitary forces and death squads against perceived “subversives” in both rural and urban areas. The Peasant Self-Defense Force of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU) in northern Colombia was the largest of these private armies. When it was taken over by Carlos Castaño, it was
“transformed [from] a regional force into a national political movement,”
taking the form of an association called the AUC (Wilson 2001). The
organization’s roots in the landholding oligarchy, both old and new,
have remained strong: Castaño claimed in 2001 that about 80 percent of
AUC income derived from such actors, and acknowledged that the
remainder consisted of taxes from the trade in illicit drugs.

Ironically, it was only after the Colombian government banned
“self-defense” groups that the transition to full-fledged paramilitary for-
mations, bleeding into warlordism, gained momentum. Cubides writes
that the paramilitaries “benefited from legal ambiguity, but once they
were freed of all legal protection, and consolidated themselves as clan-
destine movements...they entered into a stage of rapid expansion”
(Bergquist, 132). Wholly new political opportunities opened up, as the
paramilitaries’ “instrumental origins . . . [as] simple tools in the process
of hacienda expansion” gave way to “longer-lasting effects” and
“unforeseen possibilities” (134). In short, the paramilitaries “discovered
that an organization is a structure of power and that diversification
within it yields multiple additional advantages,” not least the chance to
establish a state-within-a-state.5 This has endured to the present day,
though its status is liable to change if the current process of rapproche-
ment with the Colombian state continues.

How extensive are the links between the paramilitaries and Colom-
bian security forces? To what extent have the paramilitaries truly served
as “subcontractors” for the violence of the Colombian state? The most
detailed recent investigation into such linkages is Human Rights Watch’s
lengthy 2001 report, The “Sixth Division.” The title contains a wry twist:
Colombia has five official military divisions; the implication is that the
paramilitaries effectively constitute another.

Paramilitaries are . . . fully integrated into the army’s battle strategy,
coordinated with its soldiers in the field, and linked to government
units via intelligence, supplies, radios, weapons, cash, and common
purpose. . . . At their most brazen, the relationships . . . involve
active coordination during military operations between government
and paramilitary units . . . [as well as] the sharing of intelligence . . .
[and] the sharing of fighters, including active-duty soldiers serving
in paramilitary units and paramilitary commanders lodging on mili-
tary bases. . . . Heavily armed paramilitaries move virtually unim-
peded, captured paramilitary leaders elude detention with ease, and
government forces make no more than token efforts to pursue or
capture paramilitaries even when they are in major cities, footsteps
away from military or police bases, and engaged in macabre carava-
vens of death. . . . Meanwhile, paramilitaries give exclusive inter-
views to dozens of journalists, address presidents, international aca-
demics, and European government ministers, meet with high-level
government officials, and even claim responsibility for their crimes
and promise more, methodically expanding a reign of fear town
after town, street after street, home after home, heart after heart.
(Human Rights Watch, 2)

A sense of how such linkages work in a given case can be gleaned from a *New York Times* account of a three-day massacre in February 2000 of some 36 peasants in El Salado, a village in Bolivar Department. “During the three days of killing, military and police units just a few miles away made no effort to stop the slaughter, witnesses said.” The senior military officer in the region at the time, Col. Rodrigo Quiñones Cárdenas, “was identified by Colombian prosecutors as the organizer of a paramilitary network [in the early 1990s] responsible for the killings of 57 trade unionists, human rights workers and members of a left-wing political party [the UPL]” (Rohter 2000). Operational linkages and coordination were mirrored by extensive crossover between paramilitary and state security institutions, largely as a result of the luring of “discharged active duty military officers” for paramilitary service with blandishments such as “generous salaries, cars, cellular telephones, and even land” (Human Rights Watch).

The ascent to power of President Alvaro Uribe in August 2002 ushered in a new era of state-paramilitary relations. Rhetorically, Uribe denounced all purveyors of parainstitutional violence as equal threats. Rumors had long swirled, however, about his alleged sympathy for paramilitary formations recruited to root out left-wing guerrillas, sympathizers, and anyone else who got in the way. As governor of strife-torn Antioquia Department, Uribe had experimented with civilian security groups that “allowed armed civilians to patrol and gather intelligence under the control of local military commanders.” Once in power, he extended the system nationally, drafting some one million citizens to serve as the state’s eyes and ears. Crackdowns on left-wing guerrillas versus right-wing paramilitaries mysteriously concentrated on the former, particularly in neighborhoods of Medellin, Uribe’s power base, which was divided between guerrilla and paramilitary control.

The tone of the government peace initiatives launched in early 2003 also seemed more congenial as far as the state’s paramilitary “opponents” were concerned. In July 2003, nine groups composing the AUC agreed to demobilize some 13,000 fighters. Jeremy Lennard’s comment that “the paramilitaries have enjoyed a quiet, cozy relationship with Colombia’s ruling class for decades. There’s not much peace left to be made” (Lennard 2003) seemed warranted. Uribe not only parroted paramilitary claims that Colombian nongovernmental organizations were playing into the hands of leftist terrorists (BBC Online 2003), but announced that paramilitary leaders might receive a pardon in return for paying compensation for their atrocities. In a scathing briefing paper, Human Rights Watch followed up its “Sixth Division” investigation with the allegation that Uribe’s government was engaging in “checkbook
impunity." "Allowing known criminals to evade any real punishment for their crimes does not promote peace, but erodes the rule of law and encourages further violence" (Human Rights Watch 2003, 1).^6

**WARLORDISM AND THE COLOMBIAN PARAMILITARIES**

We don’t have a government in this country anymore. Carlos Castaño is our president.

—**Peasant survivor of AUC massacre at Chengué village, January 2001 (quoted in Wilson 2001)**

We started out as a reaction to the guerrillas, but we have evolved and now represent the social interests of big sectors of this country. We now have a concept of what the state should be in terms of economy, human rights, and justice. . . . We are now in the larger scene because there are no leaders who think this way.


The amount of territorial and political power that key paramilitary leaders now command truly qualifies them as warlords. Warlordism is a feature of many classical and modern societies, and Latin America offers one of the best and most enduring examples of it with the institution of *caudillismo* in the postcolonial era. Still, only recently has the phenomenon begun to evoke interest among scholars of comparative politics and international relations. Paul B. Rich’s edited volume, *Warlords in International Relations*, is the first to explore the subject in a comparative context and in some detail. The present discussion seeks to explore the framings presented by key authors in the Rich volume by applying them to the case of paramilitarism in Colombia.

As Rich notes in the introduction, the term *warlord* has yet to acquire “any great analytical precision,” though it “remains . . . a word with considerable emotive connotations."

The word has been particularly popularized by the international media as a general term [to] explain the fissuring of nation-states and the emergence of militarized subnational groupings. . . . Beleaguered state administrative machines in a number of different countries have been found incapable of containing threats to their authority from various clan, tribal and ethnic factions, while the legitimacy of national leaders is continually threatened by local and regional strong men. (Rich, xi)

This may underestimate the difficulties. In some usages, the “warlord” is stretched not only to include Rich’s “militarized subnational groupings,” but national leaders as well. This is the approach adopted by
William Shawcross, for example, in his recent study of global conflict and U.N. performance in the 1990s, *Deliver Us from Evil* (2000). Shawcross lists as two of the “warlords who have dominated the 1990s” Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, stating that “their behavior is aped by many lesser warlords, satraps, dictators and demagogues around the world” (2000, 26)—many or most of them apparently official state and governmental actors. If warlord merely means “particularly bellicose national leader,” we are in the realm of metaphor and myth, and the analytical utility of the concept is diminished.8

The most ambitious attempt to define warlordism in Rich’s volume is that of Stephen Chan, in his chapter, “The Warlord and Global Order.” For Chan,

Warlords are . . . defined as those prepared and able, by force or its threat, to deny ideological and operational space to a state and who put forward, to the populations under their control, an articulated alternative to citizenship and who secure allegiance through a combination of that force and articulation, allied sometimes with charisma or claims to certain ancestries more compelling to their adherents than affiliation to a state. (Rich, 164)

This definition is certainly apt in the case of Latin America’s early experience with warlordism under the caudillismo of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It illuminates, moreover, important intersections between paramilitarism and warlordism. But at least one element seems arbitrarily constraining. There is no reason that warlords should necessarily seek to “put forward . . . an articulate alternative to citizenship.” Indeed, they may present themselves and their activities as encapsulating what it means to be a citizen of a given state. This is the propaganda approach adopted by the AUC paramilitaries, who standardly depict themselves as the guardians of Colombian sovereignty and representatives of the desires of “true Colombians.” Nevertheless, Chan’s emphasis on state breakdown, the use of force, and charisma are all vital to any effort to understand warlordism and its complex links with paramilitarism.9

If the assertions of Human Rights Watch and others that the Colombian paramilitaries are predominantly “subcontractors” of state violence are accurate, then it was precisely, but paradoxically, the subcontracting that tipped paramilitarism over into warlordism. Campbell notes that “subcontracting can occur even at the risk of diminishing the state’s legitimacy by violating the law, or by compromising its monopoly on the use of violence,” and therefore surrendering one of the definitional features of the modern state (Campbell, 17). To generalize from this development, paramilitary and death squad activity may, and frequently does, lead to a situation in which such organizations come to contend for institutionalized power and to compete with the authority of the cen-
tral state. (The process is not unidirectional; warlordist formations may also return to the state fold, as appears to be occurring in Colombia.) The ambiguous positioning of such actors in regard to the state—with their origins and often their membership rooted in the state security apparatus, with a high degree of practical cooperation with security agencies in the field, but also with frequent tensions and clashes over issues and territories in which each side claims predominance—accounts for the complexity and fractiousness of relations between official and parainstitutional purveyors of violence and social control.

AN “ORGANIC” PARAMILITARISM: PERU AND THE RONDAS CAMPESINAS

The role of “civil defense” or “self-defense” forces in recent Latin American politics and social conflicts is both notable and notorious. For the most part, such parainstitutional formations have been depicted—quite rightly—as supine agents of the state. They have been imposed in standard fashion on hapless peasant communities (and sometimes urban neighborhoods) in a context of civil war against guerrilla forces. They are designed (a) to extend the control exercised by the state to the local level, especially in conflict zones; (b) to provide conscripted carne de cañon (cannon fodder) for military actions against rebel forces; and (c), typically for agents of parainstitutional violence, to lend the state a measure of deniability for the atrocities it inflicts (often against members of the same ethnic group from which the “civil defense” or “self-defense” forces are conscripted). A classic and well-studied example is the patrullas de autodefensa civil, or civil self-defense patrols, instituted by the Guatemalan army during the 1980s. This form of “paramilitary service” had “the goal of consolidating the military domination of rural communities and separating civilians from the leftist insurgents in the highlands.” Kay Warren writes,

By 1983, a million Mayan men from twelve to seventy years of age were forced to patrol their own rural communities in twenty-four-hour shifts one day a week or every two weeks, depending on the size of their community. Their charge was to search for guerrillas and monitor their neighbors as potential leftist sympathizers or insurgents and report their findings to the army through locally appointed military commissioners. Three years later there were still 600,000 active civil patrollers although no guerrilla presence was apparent in most areas. It was only in anticipation of the signing of the final peace accords that patrols throughout the highlands were disbanded. (Sluka, 236)

Such patrols “committed 18 percent of the human rights violations and acts of violence during the war period as a whole,” posing a diffi-
cult problem for analysts: "how to portray the civil patrols whose members were both victims and victimizers" (Sluka, 236). It is a problem that arises regularly when considering such "self-defense" formations around the world. (Dirk Kruijt also contributes a comparative study of the Guatemalan *patrullas* and the Peruvian *rondas campesinas*, "Exercises in State Terrorism: The Counter-insurgency Campaigns in Guatemala and Peru," in the Koonings and Kruijt volume, pp. 33–62.)

Yet there is also an organic form of this type of paramilitarism. Although rare, it differs dramatically from its state-instituted and -directed counterpart—at least at particular stages of its development. Such organic paramilitarism can be predicted to arise where preexisting parainstitutional formations, whether rural or urban, make such recourse more likely in moments of crisis; and where external, nonstate actors create a politicoeconomic crisis, especially in the countryside. (Of course, such a crisis is more likely to be generated by state rather than nonstate actors; but if the crisis leads to popular rebellion against the state, it is better classified as a guerrilla rather than a paramilitary movement.)

Organic parainstitutional formations are also likely to assume prominence when rebel forces, instead of seeking to mobilize popular elements through persuasion or limited coercion, impose a reign of terror that threatens to turn the world of these popular (mostly peasant) forces upside down. Mario Fumerton's theoretical framing of this proposition is as follows:

If a guerrilla movement applies a revolutionary strategy that includes a major restructuring of the peasants' livelihood practices, and their actions and strategy are perceived as critically disrupting and exacerbating the peasants' established livelihood strategies and insecurities, thus objectively worsening subsistence conditions, the peasants will be likely to assess the revolutionary movement's course of action and blame it. The actions and strategy of guerrilla movements thus become an important component of peasant disaffection, and of the counter-rebellion equation (Fumerton, 299–300, emphasis removed).

This is a counterproductive strategy at best, but it was followed by Peru's *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) through much of the 1980s. The result was the emergence—or reemergence—of the *rondas campesinas*, peasant paramilitary formations that successfully confronted the Shining Path insurgency, at first with little direct support from the state. (The Peruvian government and military originally viewed the *rondas* as most governments and militaries view most mobilized peasants.) Not only did the *rondas* confront the rebels; they were arguably the single most important factor in defeating them, politically and militarily, by the mid-1990s.

This fascinating case has already sparked considerable scholarly interest—indeed, the *rondas* are probably the best-studied paramilitary
movement in contemporary history. Carlos Iván Degregori contributes an excellent overview chapter in *Societies of Fear.* (See also Degregori et al. 1996; Tapia 1997; Starn 1998.)

We are fortunate, though, to have Fumerton’s new monograph, *From Victims to Heroes.* It provides the most detailed and informative portrait yet painted of the *rondas* emergence and subsequent activities. Based on Ph.D. research in the Ayacuchan community of Tambo, Fumerton’s study analyzes the *rondas* experience in the context of theories of peasant revolution, specifically “what causes peasants to become actively and violently counter-revolutionary” (19).

According to Fumerton’s account, Sendero originally “enjoyed a great deal of sympathy (if not actual commitment or active support) from the rural population . . . moving fluidly through the countryside, striking targets when and where they pleased, cunningly eluding the police with ease” (74). Increasingly, though, the rebels imposed a reign of intimidation and eventually outright terror on the peasant communities where they exerted influence, forcing peasants to boycott local markets and fairs and inflicting summary justice not only on “the archetypal villains of Andean society: bandits, thieves, and livestock rustlers,” but on other “enemies” and “bad people” down to the level of the village drunk or alleged homosexual. As mass killings became ever more common, the “social fabric of communities” began to be rent asunder (76–77).

Peasants who had originally sympathized with Sendero became disillusioned both by the atrocities and by the rebels’ failure to protect sympathizers from retribution at the hands of the Peruvian army. But the army itself appeared unable to protect communities from Sendero. The only option remaining was organic parainstitutionality. Reworking the traditional peasant institution of the *ronda,* which was aimed especially at the “archetypal villains” just mentioned, peasants began to band together in parainstitutional formations. Gradually these succeeded in pushing Sendero away from the populous river valleys, though not without great suffering and sacrifice, including deadly conflicts between the *rondas* of rival peasant communities. It was members of the *rondas* who suffered the worst of the casualties inflicted by Sendero, and under the regime of Peruvian President Alan García, they received little support or protection from the Peruvian state. What arms they could secure were obtained with difficulty and for the most part illegally, leaving the *rondas* extremely vulnerable to Sendero attack and resulting in heavy casualties.

It was not until Alberto Fujimori took power in 1992 that the military potential of the *rondas* was recognized and they began to be increasingly armed, coordinated, and integrated into the official defense strategy. “By 1993,” Fumerton writes, “the government’s new pacification strategy involved repopulating abandoned areas of the countryside with communities organised into self-defence committees, and through them
expanding the presence and influence of the State" (258); that is, moving the rondas in the direction of traditional "civil defense" and "self-defense" formations in Guatemala and elsewhere. Commentators began to describe the Self-Defense Committees (as they were officially known) as "having been 'interiorised,' 'assimilated,' 'integrated,' and 'institutionalised' into the social life of the Andean communities from which they came" (281), partly because of the state's parainstitutional drive; party because of the original organic character of the self-defense formations.

In 1998, with the Sendero insurgency all but vanquished, Fumerton returned to Ayacucho and found "clear signs everywhere . . . of the general decline of the peasant militias"; "they were proving to be both redundant and an unnecessarily prolonged economic burden on their communities" (282, 288). The institutions—and the traditions that underpin them—nevertheless remain ready to be reactivated. Challengingly, Fumerton asserts that the rondas served to increase the empathy of the urbanized Peruvian population for the highland peasantry, previously viewed as backward and sympathetic to terrorist insurgencies. The ronda reaction to Sendero terror resulted in "the unprecedented and uncontested extension of citizenship to the peasantry by virtue of their patriotic defence of the Republic," with the result that "the indigenous peasantry of Peru are more integrated into Peruvian national identity and culture now than at any other time in Peruvian history" (332).

Throughout his book, Fumerton provides an extraordinarily detailed picture of ronda formations, their members, and their day-to-day activities during the long years of insurgency and counterinsurgency. He concludes, memorably, with the words of a main informant, a ronda leader, who urges him to "write this history down in you[r] book," so that "my kids . . . [will] know their history, what their father and their uncles did in defence of the Patria. When we are old or dead, hermano, it is important for them and their own children to remember that we defeated Sendero" (333).

**Future Directions**

Some avenues can be proposed for future research into the parainstitutional formations examined in this essay. A key subject for exploration is the relationship between paramilitarism and death squads, on the one hand, and centralized structures of governance and administration, on the other. Are parainstitutional formations more likely to flourish at times of an absence or a crisis of governance? It seems that such institutions can become entrenched both in a context of marginalization from central authority (as with paramilitary formations sponsored by landowners in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas), and that of a progressive breakdown of authority in the face of armed opposition (as in Colom-
bia). The latter situation—a "power vacuum" at the heart of the polity—is tailor-made for the semiprivatized, subcontracted activities of paramilitaries and death squads. On the other hand, the link between state authorities and paramilitary or death squad formations is often both intimate in character and critical to the functioning of parainstitutional bodies. Paramilitaries and their death squad variant often serve to free the state from direct security responsibilities and the anathema that may attach to them, protecting the state to some degree from oversight and protest by domestic and international actors. In such an instance, there is a powerful connection between the rise of parainstitutional agents and forces of violence and the supportive role of the official state authority.

A related line of inquiry involves the development of a more rigorous typology of both paramilitary movements and warlordism. In the case of paramilitaries, the need for such careful categorization is demonstrated first by the absence thus far of a serious comparative study of these institutions, and second by anomalous cases, such as the Peruvian rondas, which appear to have been largely "organic" in their evolution.

How do paramilitaries, death squads, and warlords fit into a reconceptualization of global and human security? These institutions are clearly relevant for revisionist scholars who have moved away from the state-centered security approach, emphasizing instead nontraditional actors (such as individuals and communities) and nontraditional security threats (such as those arising at the hands of the state itself, or in a context of "failed" and "quasi"-states). The literature in these areas is expanding but is notable for the infrequency and superficiality of its treatment of the parainstitutional formations examined here. For instance, Barry Buzan's classic work on human security, People, States, and Fear (1991), includes not a single index entry for paramilitaries, death squads, or warlords. Kaldor's New and Old Wars does explore paramilitaries' functions, and cites the atrocities they regularly commit. But as noted, the author has difficulty incorporating cases beyond her limited regional studies. For its part, contemporary warlordism has only recently received comparative study within and between regions. But it has been addressed overwhelmingly in an African context, leading to questionable assertions such as Paul Rich's that an "ethnic base" must underpin warlord institutions.

It is also worth examining possible links between the institutions examined here and the broader globalizing trend in world politics, economics, and culture. How does globalization affect patterns of central, regional, and local governance? What are the implications for the growth or survival of paramilitaries, death squads, and warlord formations? Does globalization promote greater involvement of foreign state and nonstate actors, whether to support parainstitutional forms of violence or to suppress them? How do paramilitary movements and war-
lords use globalized economic relations and communications to fund and publicize their activities? (The Colombian AUC’s determined resort to both international drug trafficking and Internet propagandizing would make an interesting case study.) Sluka argues provocatively that “there appears to be a direct correlation between the increasing power and wealth of the elite [within and between countries], the steadily increasing gap between rich and poor, and the growth of state terror, perhaps the three most obvious global characteristics of the last quarter of the twentieth century” (32).

The gender dimension of para-institutional violence deserves closer attention. It is obvious that these institutions are almost exclusively composed of males, mostly younger men and adolescent boys, and that they promote a steady flow of recruits through offers of material wealth, social power, and masculine status. The limited literature on paramilitarism has already produced a revelatory study of “paramilitary culture in post-Vietnam America” that emphasizes masculine crisis as an explanation for the rise of paramilitarism in the United States (Gibson 1994). The modernization of gender relations may not be as helpful an explanation in the case of para-institutional violence in Latin America and elsewhere in the Third World. Nevertheless, the economic aspects of such violence (offering young men an entrée to a materially more prosperous life) can be a strong incentive. As Daniel Pécaut writes about Colombia in his chapter for the Koonings-Kruit volume,

Not only do [the Colombian paramilitary groups] provide an income and a means of living; they also provide access to higher status, expressed in symbolic form through the uniforms and weapons of the organization concerned. Above all, through such organizations, the [male] individual can become part of a large unit. . . . For young men of fifteen years of age or younger, the authority of their commanders replaces the failed authority of their own fathers. The same is true of the urban militias that bring together youth from a particular district.” (Koonings, 148–49)

The rewards of social standing and access to women and the Guignol-style brutality of many paramilitary and death squad formations are also strongly gendered phenomena that cry out for detailed comparative investigation.11

Finally, how might the deprivations of paramilitaries, warlords, and death squads best be confronted? It may appear a truism that human rights investigations of the “Sixth Division” variety and the ground-level reporting of numerous national and international NGOs are indispensable to confronting paramilitary activity (where it needs to be confronted) and death squad depredations. Certainly, one must stand in awe of the heroism that often characterizes the actions of NGO actors in countries like Colombia today, or Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s, when
those parainstitutional forces were running amok. Likewise, one should respect and applaud the actions of the international NGOs that disseminate their own findings and those of others and pressure governments to rein in the violence that the governments themselves orchestrate or tacitly endorse.

These NGO activities may also have an ironic aspect, however, and so might the broader development of international norms derived from pacific and cosmopolitan values. According to Bruce Campbell, the irony resides in the likelihood that “increased concern for human rights has itself inadvertently been a contributing factor in the use of covert violence by governments, and in particular, in the use of death squads” (Campbell, 12–13). This contention is necessarily impressionistic, but it encourages caution in speculating about the future of parainstitutional violence.

Whatever the unanticipated consequences of such actions, it appears unlikely that parainstitutional violence can be confronted without a forceful assertion of civic, pacific, and cosmopolitan values, of the type that Kaldor proclaims in the conclusion to *New and Old Wars*. Kaldor, citing the work of Richard Falk, calls for cosmopolitan governance, or humane governance . . . which derives from a humanist universalist outlook and which crosses the global/local divide. It is based on an alliance . . . between islands of civility . . . and transnational institutions. There are no boundaries in a territorial sense. But there are political boundaries—between those who support cosmopolitan civic values, who favor openness, toleration and participation, on the one hand, and those who are tied to particularist, exclusivist, often collectivist political positions, on the other. (Kaldor, 147)

Kay B. Warren in the Sluka volume similarly points to the potential of “peace processes that force a reexamination of the structures and legacies of political violence” (Sluka, 232), a theme that also dominates large swaths of Koonings and Kruit’s collection. Warren acknowledges that such “peace processes are inherently contingent and political,” but can nevertheless accomplish “a nonviolent transition to a more inclusive political order” (233). In this process, international actors may be able to make an indispensable contribution—even if only by withdrawing their support for parainstitutional formations or the state structures that regularly sustain them.

**Notes**

I am grateful to Alfred Montero at *LAPS* for his receptiveness to the idea of a critical debate on parainstitutional violence. Thanks also to Eleanor Lahn for her scrupulous copyediting and to Jo and David Jones for their usual ruthless proofreading.
1. Sluka credits Chomsky and Herman for their "pioneering work . . . reporting] that the global rise in state terror [in the 1970s and 1980s] was concentrated among Third World states in the U.S. 'sphere of influence,' and providing] extensive information on the terror occurring in the United States' client states in Latin America" (Sluka, 8).

2. Other aspects of state and paramilitary violence may similarly aim to blur, confuse, disempower. "House searches and arrests, followed by lack of information about the prisoner's whereabouts and by apparently random accusations, torture and the widespread knowledge of indiscriminate torturing of captured victims, contribute to a generalized climate of individual weakness, of permanent alertness without the possibility of escape, of collective powerlessness, of lack of control over daily life and the near future, and of a distorted perception of reality. Facts and certainties become blurred" (Koonings and Krujt, 18–19).

3. For an excellent recent account of La Violencia in what is still the heartland of Colombian political violence, see Roldán 2002.

4. For another overview of the emergence and evolution of the paramilitary "self-defense groups," see Gonzalo Sánchez's introduction to the Bergquist volume, pp. 20–25.

5. Palacio Castañeda writes (1991, 117–18) that "little by little, a type of parasitomutilational parastate has emerged in Colombia," although, as befits the time at which he published his essay, the focus is on the role of "coca entreprenuers" and their desire to protect "land investments threatened by guerrilla activity," a cause and a relationship that diminished somewhat following the period of explosive growth (1970s–1980s) of narcotrafficking cartels.

6. According to the Human Rights Watch 2003 briefing paper, "The bill [presented to Congress by Uribe] would empower the president to designate who among the paramilitaries who have committed atrocities qualifies for a suspended sentence. In return, the convict would agree to some restrictions on personal liberty. . . . Most importantly, however, individuals convicted of serious human rights crimes would be allowed to pay an amount of money or transfer other assets to victims of atrocities or into a government fund for victims in return for spending no time in jail" (2003, 2).

7. Both caudillismo and caciquismo are ably analyzed, in the Mexican context, by Alan Knight in chapter 5 of Societies of Fear, titled "Political Violence in Post-Revolutionary Mexico." Knight's analysis of caciquismo, however, suggests that it should not be included under the warlord rubric: "Caciquismo—or, if you prefer, 'boss' politics—forms part of a national political structure" (Koonings 122, n. 43).

8. The use of warlord is patchy but consistent throughout Shawcross's book. And although he goes so far as to mention warlords in his subtitle, he offers no formal definition of the term.

9. The charismatic dimension of warlordism, often stressed, should not be overlooked in the Colombian context. The AUC paramilitaries benefited substantially from the national profile of their leader, Carlos Castaño—an enigmatic figure whose reclusiveness gave way in the late 1990s to virtual "media star" status. Castaño's "life story . . . [is] a baroque family saga of suffering and revenge," which saw Castaño's father kidnapped and killed by guerrillas in 1980.
The story “captured the nation’s imagination,” elevating Castaño to folk hero while the paramilitary leader’s “populist reforms—including the distribution of 14,000 hectares of ranch land to peasants—have won him support in the territory he controls” (Hammer 1997). A book that is effectively Castaño’s autobiography, Molina 2001, has sold tens of thousands of copies in Colombia since its publication.

10. Previous studies of warlord institutions have concentrated heavily on the Chinese variant of the 1920s and 1930s. See, for example, Bonavia 1995; McCord 1993.


REFERENCES


