

Book Review by Annette Idler

Winifred Tate, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Colby College, challenges the widely held claim that the aid package “Plan Colombia” was a success. In her “anthropology of policy”, Tate traces the transnational policy-making of this assistance. Initially including counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, peacebuilding and the strengthening of democracy, Plan Colombia essentially became a military effort. Tate reveals the multiple origin stories that explain the emergence of Plan Colombia. She shows how existing political action was re-categorised to produce policy, how different actors intended to shape it, and how narratives were used to unite activities that were otherwise considered incompatible.

Having formerly worked as an activist in Washington, Tate combines her practitioner knowledge with her training as an anthropologist to reveal the questionable assumptions about Colombia that have shaped the policy-making process. Tate reveals – and challenges – the black and white thinking inherent in policy-making. Three simplistic dichotomies stand out: about state and non-state, legal and illegal, and peace and war.

First, Tate questions the dichotomy between what is “state” and “good” on the one hand, and what is “non-state” and “bad”, on the other. As human rights became a central issue for US foreign policy, US legislation intended to impede the Colombian state forces from doing the “dirty work” many other Latin American militaries were involved in to fight insurgencies. In Colombia, the perverse logic of the human rights discourse led to the strengthening of the paramilitary forces, notorious for brutal massacres, disappearances and torture. Not only has it been proven that the paramilitaries had links with the Colombian state forces and politicians, politicians actively forged alliances with the paramilitaries to increase their power.

Tate shows how US policy-makers have largely turned a blind eye on the intertwining of armed state actors and armed non-state actors while blaming the guerrillas for most of the violence. Separating the paramilitaries – downplayed as localised forms of power – and Colombian state forces in the imaginaries of US policy-makers made military aid to Bogotá possible. Similarly, Colombia’s official state policy was one of denial which upheld the narrative of the “good state” fighting against the “bad rebels”.

Tate therewith touches upon a larger theme. What if there are not just two parties involved in a conflict, but various groups across the political spectrum with varying degrees of affinity with the state? As an interviewee told me during my own fieldwork in marginalised Colombia, to his community guerrillas, paramilitaries or state forces are all just “another armed group”.

When should assistance be channelled through state institutions if state officials are undermining security? As Tate reveals, one comfortable way of dealing with this issue in the case of Plan Colombia was to claim that the state was absent in Putumayo and therefore needed assistance to be strengthened. While civilian institutions have been largely absent indeed, this discourse ignores the presence of the military which, rather than being absent, was complicit in human rights violations.

The second dichotomy is between the legal and the illegal. Activists in the US found it hard to sympathise with farmers in rural Colombia who cultivate coca, and process the leaves into paste, used to produce cocaine. Being involved in the illicit economy makes them *de facto* criminals regardless of alternative livelihood options – even if these are near to zero. Indeed, it felt bizarre when I walked into a local grocery store in southern Putumayo and there were no fruits or vegetables on offer, despite the favourable climate. Farmers had turned to the more profitable coca. As Tate rightly explains, this is the result of a complex history of long-standing demands by local communities for legal economic opportunities, unfulfilled promises from Bogotá, and silenced voices who realised that keeping quiet and continuing illicit business as usual allows them pay for their children to go to college. What is illegal for the state is often legitimate in the eyes of those farmers. Navigating these spaces and accounting for the challenges the farmers face, rather than labelling them “criminals” or stigmatise them as FARC collaborators, is one of the book’s central implications.

The third dichotomy is less explicit: between war and peace. Tate argues that Plan Colombia resulted partly from the militarisation of drug policy, which can be traced back at least to former US President Richard Nixon's declaration of the "War on Drugs" in 1971. Tate links this militarisation to the inflation of the US's defence budget due to the perception of growing national security threats. "The number of musicians employed in military bands is larger than the total staff of the State Department", as she highlights on p. 31. Similarly, the military assistance to Colombia led to an increase of Colombia's defence sector.

Colombia was considered a war country. Accordingly, local activists were brought to Washington to narrate their stories of war time suffering to convince policy-makers of the necessity of the aid package. Yet why not listen to peace stories within that war? Tate tells the stories of brave women who fought for improving their lives in the midst of war; there are examples of peace communities such as San José de Apartadó, cited by Tate, and others such as Samaniego, which confronted the war with peacebuilding initiatives. Instead of promoting such efforts, the militarisation of Plan Colombia led to a focus on the belligerent, the wiping out of the enemy. Such an approach conceals how closely war and peace lie together. It also neglects the invisible side of war, often more traumatic than facts of violence. Fear, terror, and social control are elements of war that cannot be confronted with military force. In order to be addressed and transformed constructively, they require a deep understanding of the local context. The book's analysis of Putumayense life contributes to such an understanding by unpacking the many shades of grey between the black and white of war and peace.

The book's strongest contribution to the field of Latin American studies, anthropology and related disciplines is its persuasive demonstration of the sharp contrast between the US policy-making machinery in distant Washington in the first two chapters and the reality of Putumayense life in the third and fourth chapter. The book would have benefitted though from looking beyond what almost appears as a dichotomy between Washington and Putumayo. The ripple effects on the neighbouring department of Nariño, for example, which Tate mentions briefly, are considerable. Nariño only became a centre of gravity of the conflict after Plan Colombia pushed coca cultivations and armed actors westwards. It also could have included a more detailed explanation of why other Colombian neglected regions, such as Catatumbo, were not the focus of Plan Colombia.

Similarly, understanding how various actors tried to shape Plan Colombia requires accounting for Ecuador which has been affected by and influenced the aid package's implementation. Not only entailed Plan Colombia toxic spraying on Ecuadorean soil, due to which, as Tate mentions, Quito demanded the prohibition of fumigations close to the border. It also triggered massive refugee flows, producing a humanitarian crisis in the Ecuadorean northern border zone; an increase of violence resulting from the presence of Colombian (state and non-state) armed groups in the Ecuadorean border provinces; and a strain on the government's budget as funds were used to thwart the spill-over effects. This included the border zone's militarisation, but also policies to improve civilian infrastructure. This developmental "Plan Ecuador" was framed as a "Peace Plan" in response to Colombia's "War Plan".

Overall, the book is a crucial contribution to the discussion of how the US shaped Colombia's security landscape. It provides valuable insights for scholars interested in applying ethnographic methods to policy matters, and for policy-makers, allowing them to put into perspective their own influence and its unintended consequences on the ground. It is a must-read for those who aim to avoid Colombia's violent history from repeating itself.

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