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Book Review: 'Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia' by James J Brittain

LSE Ideas

By Victor Figueroa-Clark

'Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia' is set to become a key text for those seeking to understand the Colombian crisis. Overturning many of the assumptions that are made about both the Colombian state and the guerrillas, Brittain has managed to write a book that opens a new window onto the Colombian situation, blowing away the cobwebs of old preconceptions and forcing the reader to re-evaluate their opinions of both the state, the guerrillas, Colombian society, and the role of the United States in the conflict. Brittain's book uses a study of the FARC as a lens on Colombian history and on the current situation. The reasons for the FARC's existence are clearly covered, as is its world view. The chapters on the political economy of rural Colombia, and the role of the Colombian elite in the conflict provide a clear analysis of the roots of the conflict and show that far from being an organisation that has lost its ideology, the FARC are a highly ideological organisation determined to establish an alternative social order. An innovative and indigenously developed version of Marxism, where a development of Gramscian hegemony rather than the conquest of state power is the fundamental, is the basis of this political project.

The book begins with a look at the origins of the FARC, and finds that they lie in pre-Second World War peasant self-defence groups, which had their origins in Marxist inspired peasant organisations dating from the turn of the 20th century. These then developed in conjunction with the Colombian Communist Party, which recognised early on in its existence the different approaches needed to organise in urban and rural areas. Building on this long history, rural areas rapidly became areas of strong communist influence. Brittain explicitly rejects the role of the Liberal Party in the formation of the FARC, claiming that the self-defence groups "were never constructs of social democratic elements of Liberal-leftist factions, but solely from the PCC."

Interestingly, rather than seeing the development of these self-defence communities as reflecting an armed rejection of economic progress, Brittain emphasises that they were in fact established as alternative, indigenous models of development. This view denies the somewhat elitist perception that the peasants merely organised themselves in order to 'escape' and claims for the peasantry the conscious rejection of the economic model that the oligarchic state was trying to implement. It was the success of this alternative model that forced the governing elites to see the 'independent republics' as a threat, thus beginning the long and bloody history of state repression of the peasantry in Colombia.

In his analysis of the structure and growth of the FARC, Brittain states that the FARC has consistently grown over the last few decades. He attributes this growth to economic factors, such as the imposition of neoliberal economic policies in Colombia, and social factors such as the level of mutual dependency and 'reciprocal alliance' between the peasantry and the FARC. This dependency and alliance between the peasantry and the guerrillas is the direct result of the FARC's efforts, not to seize state power, but rather to supplant it in the zones which they control. Brittain uses a wide variety of sources to reference this point, and it has to be said that it is highly convincing.

He underlines this point by describing the military strength of the FARC, despite their undergoing "unprecedented difficulties in 2008", critiquing government statistics on the 'progress' of the war by citing numerous Colombian and international actors who have admitted that these are manipulated and falsified. This could help to explain why the war does not appear to have ended yet, despite years of Colombian government claims that the FARC are finished. Brittain's conclusions are also backed by the recent report by the widely respected Arcoiris NGO, which states that the FARC has actually increased its presence across Colombia in 2009. Brittain specifically links the growth of the rebel organisation to the growth of economic and social inequality, a point also made by former FARC hostage Luis Eladio Perez.

Brittain then goes on to describe the FARC's civilian support in both cities and rural areas, explaining why it has designated itself the "army of the people" since the 1980s, and how this has affected its actions. In the cities, where vast numbers of urban poor receive little if any state attention, the FARC provides free schools and clinics and has networks that led the US embassy to admit in 2006 that it retained "the capacity to launch urban military campaigns". In rural areas Brittain claims that the FARC does not fight for the rural masses, but rather that it is an integral part of rural society. Backing this point of view is the statistic

that during the last peace process, when the FARC were conceded a large demilitarised zone with no Colombian state presence, the population of the region grew from 100,000 to roughly 740,000 over a four-year period. Furthermore, Brittain quotes studies that have shown that when the FARC is forced to abandon an area a large number of peasants leave alongside them. These facts do not chime with Colombian media claims that the FARC has no civilian support.

Although the author does not claim that the FARC has universal support and acceptance, he does challenge the government's rival claim to the same. He debunks the idea of anti-FARC demonstrations being true expressions of popular anger at the FARC, saying that state and elite controlled media widely broadcast news of the upcoming demonstration, and that the idea of an internet-driven campaign being truly popular is ridiculous in a country where less than 5% of the population have regular access to the internet. Furthermore, he explains that the opinion polls so regularly quoted in both national and international media are suspect, being based on landline interviews with 1000 or so inhabitants of the four largest cities. In the context of widespread paramilitary terror it would be foolish to assume respondents being honest in a telephone interview with an unknown interlocutor. That most Colombians do not own landlines is another factor making these polls unreliable, according to the author, in addition to the fact that the polling companies refuse to poll in rural areas. Convincingly he quotes a poll that was taken in 17 cities, which showed support for Uribe dropping by 20% compared to the standard four-city poll.

One of the most interesting aspects of this work is the way in which Brittain analyses the role of the Colombian elite, the state and international factors in the internal conflict. Describing how the internal desire of the Colombian elite to expand their power coincided with North American efforts to avoid another Cuban-style revolution to create a state that ignored the interests of the majority of the population. Brittain describes how various initiatives were either co-opted by the rural population, or were put in place legally, but never acted upon by the state, as in the example of the 1960s land reform which merely reinforced the position of the Colombian landowning oligarchy with regard to the peasantry. This situation was then further entrenched by the appearance of the coca industry in the 1990s, at the same time as neoliberal reforms made the production of coffee and other products uneconomic, and forced hundreds of thousands of small producers into ruin. Together they have resulted in 1.1% of the population controlling over 55% of the land, while 97% of the population have access to only 25% of the land. Such incredible inequality speaks for itself.

Another profoundly interesting aspect of the book is the way in which it forcibly rejects the widespread notion that the FARC is involved in and profits from the drugs trade. This, according to Brittain, is not the case. He argues that the FARC reject the coca industry because this industry replicates capitalist relations of production, and because its cultivation corrupts the alternative social order that the guerrillas seek to defend. In fact, the FARC and the narco-traffickers are enemies precisely because the huge profits that the narco-traffickers make from cocaine are recycled into land acquisitions which replicate and deepen land concentration at the expense of the FARC's peasant social constituency. The opposition of the FARC to the narco-traffickers then led these to establish alliances with the armed forces and large landowners in order for them to expand territory used for coca cultivation.

Brittain describes how the FARC have been forced to accept some cultivation of the coca crop in areas under their control because they "must support the class that produces it". Rather than profit from the drugs trade the FARC has decided, in cooperation with the peasants, to establish fair market relations governing the production of what is in effect Colombia's main export crop. The FARC ensures fair prices for small-time producers, protects the peasants from paramilitaries and the armed forces, and, through taxation of the production and movement of coca, provides funding and resources for self-managed social services for the rural population. Thus, the FARC's relationship with the coca trade is similar to its relationship to the economy and Colombian society as a whole. The FARC doesn't profit from coca because it isn't interested in money, it is interested in the creation of a revolutionary social order that will replace the Colombian state.

The author then uses this to explain the state's relationship to narco-traffickers and the paramilitaries. The FARC is a threat to the Colombian state because it successfully establishes a fully functioning and legitimate alternative social organisation that fully compensates for the absence of the Colombian state, and is moreover, more democratic and more just than the state. The forces of the state have proved inadequate in destroying this alternative, and therefore the elites and the Colombian drug trafficking 'nouveau riche' have joined forces, combining the violence of the state with that of paramilitary groups in an effort to destroy the FARC and the social basis for political and economic change. Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the description of the FARC's fostering and cultivation of an innovative form of social and economic organisation in the areas it controls. With an emphasis on popular, grass roots participation, these forms provide all the services of a normal state, as well as creating democratic political institutions, which the FARC hopes will allow it to overcome the Colombian state 'from below' rather than through the military conquest of the institutions of state power, as previous revolutionaries have attempted to do.

This book is one of the few studies of the Colombian conflict that, through a systematic and thorough analysis, allows the reader to perceive its driving forces. The analysis presented by Brittain helps in comprehending why the Colombian state and its paramilitary allies have been responsible for the killings of so many trade unionists, human rights defenders and political and social organisers. It is clear that they also represent alternative visions of Colombia, and are therefore seen as an "internal enemy" to be dealt with as such, rather than as members of civil society.

By clearly outlining the causes of the conflict, and by clarifying many of the preconceptions around the FARC, this book helps to make a clear case for resolving the Colombian conflict through negotiation and demonstrates the futility and injustice of simply labelling one of the actors 'terrorists' while uncritically assuming the state is a fully functioning representative democracy

that operates under the rule of law and in the interests of the majority of its people. For anyone seeking to understand Colombia today, this book is a 'must read'.

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