

Preface

Several years ago, at an academic conference in Calgary, Canada, where I presented a paper on the structure of the Colombian state's coercive apparatus and its paramilitary ally, one Colombian academic responded to my presentation with the remark that the overall theme of my talk seemed to be 'the same old story: the rich against the poor' – a theme which, according to her, was outdated and no longer reflective of the multiplicity of social actors on the Colombian landscape today. This was just one tiny example of the many different tactics used by those in support of the status quo, among them academics and politicians alike, all of which are aimed at discrediting, dismissing, delegitimizing and ultimately silencing those of us who seek political and economic transformation. We have been labelled as anything ranging from ignorant and naive, to old-fashioned Marxists, to guerrilla spokespersons.

But how can we desist from the struggle for social justice when the faces of poverty and the forces that sustain it are horrifying? While Western headlines on Colombia revolve around sensationalistic accounts of 'narco-guerrillas' and FARC hostages, a two-month-old baby inside a precarious rat-infested dwelling in a poor neighbourhood in Cali was eaten alive by rats after his mother had left him in the care of his six-year-old sister, while she was on the street selling candy to earn a living. This story did not even make the local headlines. How can we believe that the past is really past and Colombia has entered a new era of post-conflict when the paramilitary's surmounting debt with humanity is nowhere close to being paid? Today the families of the victims of paramilitary violence are encouraged to be content as long as the assassins of their loved ones reveal where they buried the chopped up corpses. They can either self-induce a general amnesia and be grateful that they are still alive, or witness the naturalization of the most dehumanizing and cruel acts of violence. The rulers of Colombia tell us that paramilitarism no longer exists, even when masses of people continue to be violently displaced to make way for agribusinesses and resource extraction industries, when those seeking to recover the land that was violently expropriated from them are now murdered, when the extermination strategies against labour unionists have not ceased. In fact there is no better opportunity to demonstrate

the relevance of Marx's description of capital as 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt'. The unchallenged strength of paramilitary organizations reinforces a message of fear for many and a go-ahead for existing and future groups of paramilitary nature to satisfy their ruthless appetite for resources by following confidently the recipe for guaranteed enrichment through the conversion of human blood into capital. It has been eight years since the demobilization of the AUC. This number has a great significance since it is the maximum sentence under the Justice and Peace Law for those who have committed crimes against humanity. They are now done serving their jail time. This book is the product of a mounting indignation at all this impoverishment and injustice. But it is also an act of resistance against something perhaps even equally tragic, but more subtle.

So far the working majority in Colombia have been losing their land, their natural resources, their labour and civil rights, and increasingly their human rights. But today, Colombia is on the brink of losing its critical consciousness and erasing its collective history. Two major threats are a cause of concern here. First, President Santos' administration is trying and quite successfully managing to completely distance itself from the forces that cause violence and human suffering and has declared that it is working to combat these forces. Former President Uribe's explicit *mano dura* ideology has in the past three years been replaced by a discourse in which the state presents itself as socially progressive, on the side of the people, trying to address the needs of the most disadvantaged sectors. In reality, the essence of the free-market paradigm, which consists of privatizing the gains while socializing the costs, continues with full steam leaving behind wreckage and death. Secondly, the capitalist classes of Colombia (especially the narco-bourgeoisie) have nowadays managed somehow to become the object of admiration, attention and recognition, and serve as a role model for many youths of any social class. The very fabric of popular culture and history is increasingly coming under the influence of the narco-narratives – mostly in the form of books and soap-operas which claim to be based on true stories where the main protagonists are drug-traffickers and those implicated with them. Over the past seven years the despicable popularity of these has pushed into obscurity the ordeals of the assassinated union leaders and their families, the Afro-Colombian families displaced by the oil-palm agroindustry, or the artisanal miners of Cauca violently attacked by state forces. The most fascinating and talked about women are those who have converted themselves into playthings of the

patrones (narcos / paramilitary / cattle-ranchers). They are the 'heroines' whose biographies are sold by book vendors, not the courageous selfless women of the OFP, or the leaders of the victims' movements, or all those who continue to put their lives at risk on behalf of the excluded and the marginalized. The perverse glorification of armed and wealthy men who seek to increase their fortune even further through violence has become the reference point for what constitutes success and one which thousands of youth aspire to reach either by working for a *patron* or by becoming his mistress. The objectification and commodification of womanhood has become an integral part of this system of domination. Who is going to validate the ideas and painful reality of the multitude which constitutes the unattractive but true Colombian experience?

What is urgently needed in Colombia and what constitutes at the same time a formidable challenge is to launch a counter-ideological campaign of conscientization that can revive once again the dialogue about social inequality, injustice, poverty, ignorance, neglect and the loss of dignity. The voice of existing social movements can be strengthened if millions of other voices join in and collectively renounce the forgetfulness and the erasure of history that the powerful are seeking to impose. The writing of this book is an act of resistance to these deceptions and an attempt to keep alive the struggle for justice by revealing the continuities and novelties of the engine of dispossession, repression and dehumanization. By deconstructing the dominant ideological facade and delving into issues of violent dispossession and paramilitary activity in the 'post-paramilitary' era, the writing of this book is also a practice of freedom. Naming and theorizing paramilitarism is an act of empowerment that speaks directly to the pain of the lived reality of millions of Colombians because it gives expression and meaning to their experience. We cannot let the dictates of the privileged, the violators and the expropriators determine the course of Colombian history and condemn millions more to death or a life without dignity. As Paulo Freire believed, to speak a true word is to change the world. The time has come to build a new Colombia, *una Colombia sin patrones*.