

Guerrilla marketing counterinsurgency and capitalism in Colombia

by A. L. Fattal, *University of Chicago Press, 2018*

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Every year, scholars add a significant quantity of academic production to the already long list of publications on the Colombian conflict. For this reason, the media anthropologist Alexander Fattal, author of *Guerrilla Marketing: Counterinsurgency and Capitalism in Colombia*, started his book's introduction discussing his initial doubts about embracing another academic project on the political violence of that nation. The complexities he found at first glance around the Program for Humanitarian Attention to Demobilized, or PAHD, persuaded Fattal to pursue this academic project, resulting in the publication of one of the most awarded scholarships in the areas of Anthropology, Latin American Studies and Media Studies in 2018.

The PAHD program, sponsored by the US Department of State and implemented by the Colombian Ministry of Defense, sought to decimate the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, by motivating individual desertions from the ranks of this Marxist guerrilla organization. The core of this program was a series of international awarded multimedia marketing campaigns designed by the multinational advertising company Lowe/SSP3. Rather than appealing to dehumanizing messages or the traditional anti-communist propaganda, the Lowe/SSP3's multimedia campaign called "Operation Christmas" attempted to persuade individual guerrilla fighters to give up weapons by exploiting traditional cultural Colombian trends, such as family unity and Christmas spirit. In addition to promoting demobilization, Fattal explains, this "humanitarian" counterinsurgent campaign also aimed to clean the tarnished image of the Colombian military forces for their conspicuous involvement in human rights violations. These violations include what ended up euphemistically known as "false positives," or the assassination of thousands of civilians later reported as "guerrillas combatants" during the presidency of the right-wing populist and denier of the Colombian armed conflict Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–2010).

The PAHD's "humanitarian counterinsurgency" demobilized thousands of guerrilla fighters – many of them pushed to join the FARC since its foundation in 1964 because of the conditions of poverty, violence, and lawlessness in the Colombian countryside. The Colombian State program promised to restart former combatants lives by cleaning their legal records, changing their identities, and relocated them to one of the main Colombian cities. In exchange, the reintegrated guerilla fighters, especially those who had high ranks, needed to collaborate with the State's counterinsurgency efforts

performing different tasks, from appearing in videos that targeted specific guerrilla commanders to identifying FARC collaborators during military operations. The expected collaboration also included a system of economic incentives to those who surrender FARC's war material and strategic information. In the past, Human Rights Watch denounced these recompenses as one of the principal causes of the infamous "false positives" -the assassination of thousands peasants and working class of young to be falsely presented as guerrilla fighters killed in combat.

Fattal also documents how, despite becoming involved in compromising collaboration, the majority of former guerrilla combatants ended up trapped in a civilian life full of economic strife, institutional abandonment, social stigmatization, and mental distress. This is the case of Luisa (Chapter 4), who after deserting from the FARC and moving to an undisclosed city, became tangled in a web of corruption and deception from the entrepreneurship program offered by the High Presidential Advisory for Social and Economic Reintegration, one of the many bureaucratic offices with flamboyant names created to support PAHD's mission. After a failing café internet business resulted from the dishonesty of the State's programs contractors – who, for instance, inflated prices of obsolete equipment among other frauds, Luisa and her boyfriend became indebted with a paramilitary organization for a 1,600 US dollars loan at 20% of the interest rate. Similar to Luisa, many other demobilized people ended trapped in this "debt cycle through 'the drip-drop' system in which loan sharks recover their loans in daily sums that amount to usurious interest rates" (171). Ironically, one of the few alternatives for Luisa, and many others affected by the corruption of economic reintegration State programs and the avarice of informal lenders, is to join the paramilitary groups who control "the drip-drop" loans and other illegal business with the complicity of the police and military forces in the Colombia urban working-class neighborhoods.

Only a few of the former guerrillas and now entrepreneurs had a previous experience and social connections to keep their business projects afloat despite odds, including the unfulfilled promises and the corruption of State agencies, the social stigmatization against former guerrilla members among potential business partners and customers, and the lack of opportunities for commercialization. Perversely, the State agencies used those rare cases of success, resulted more from the entrepreneurs' tenacity and effort than from the support of the State, to publicize the success and merits of the State's demobilization program. This is the case of Ciro (Chapter 4), who, along with some other ex-combatants and now clothing designers, launched a fashion line in an event called "Chance." Sponsored by the State's reintegration agency, "Chance" counted the presence of high-rank members of the establishment, including the Ministry of Defense, Juan Carlos Pinzón, renamed Colombian artists, and journalists from the principal Colombian media. The State agencies used the attention around this event to "demonstrate" the effectiveness of the State's reintegration program in providing new life opportunities to former FARC combatants. Months later, however, Ciro reported how all the promises made that night by State functionaries became unfulfilled, how in the following weeks some of his former employees joined narco-paramilitary groups seeking a the more profitable source of revenue, and how he continued struggling to maintain his business despite losing money every month. In other words, after the Colombian State used Ciro's history as part of its "guerrilla marketing," it abandoned him to his luck.

In addition to describing, in detail, the backstage of the Lowe/SSP3 “Operation Christmas” campaigns and the dramas endured by former members of the FARC in their process of resocialization, Fattal also provides a very insightful description and analysis of controversial actions related to Colombia’s “humanitarian counterinsurgency” efforts. He describes, for example, the planning and execution of “Operation Genuine,” a strategical procedure that sought to disband the FARC’s Martin Caballero bloc that operated in Colombia’s northeastern Caribbean region (Chapter 3). Initially a member of the military seduced and then persuaded the sister of “Pablo,” the bloc’s commandant, to bring him various “gifts,” including a tapped cellphone, to the FARC’s clandestine camp with the idea of contacting him to negotiate the bloc’s demobilization. Once the cellphone provided the location of Pablo and his men, higher rank military officials changed the original plan and decided to launch a heavy airstrike against this FARC’s bloc. As a result, a FARC combatant died, the others dispersed, and Pablo decided to turn himself into the army. This story, as many others illustrated through this book with astonishing detail, shows the human degradation that surrounds the Colombian armed conflict, which, as the case of Pablo’s demobilization shows, has gone as low as weaponizing romantic love and family relationships.

Fattal’s book also contributes to the discussion on the ethics of ethnographic methods and armed conflict. In his introduction, he provides the background behind the complicated task of writing a critical account about the political actions and, in some way, the personal lives of the project’s close collaborators. He had privileged access to important persons involved in the PAHD program, including State functionaries, advertisers, high-rank militaries, and demobilized members of FARC. He acknowledged that this access was, in part, a product of luck, but also for being a white, American and Harvard affiliate in Colombia, a nation obsessed with the neocolonial delirium of constructing a “good image” at first world circles and that praises itself for being “the closest US ally” in the region.

In addition to its four chapters – an Archeology of Media Spectacle, Operation Christmas, Operation Genuine, The Good Life Deferred and Risk of Remobilization –, this book also provides five interview transcripts to the same number of former guerrilla fighters. These powerful accounts provide a touching description of the conditions of poverty, violence and exclusion that have pushed thousands of Colombians from rural areas to join armed organizations. In contrast, this book also depicts the different life experiences of higher-end State functionaries, advertisers, and military personnel from urban-middle-upper class backgrounds, providing a powerful sense of the social inequality – one of the highest in the world – at this Latin American nation.

Overall, *Guerilla Marketing* shows how, by combining advertising campaigns with military actions, the PAHD program achieved the biggest political and strategic damage to the FARC, but at a high human cost. As Fattal shows in detail, the human cost of this demobilization program includes, among others, condemning hundreds of former guerrilla combats to a civil life full of economic difficulties, unfulfilling promises for social reintegration, involving innocent civilians in traumatic counterinsurgent actions, and fostering a culture of betrayal through a system of economic rewards in exchange to information and war material. Perhaps one of the most problematic outcomes of this

demobilization program was the territorial and social uprooting of former combatants, resulting in a life of social fragmentation and isolation. As a result, Colombia lost a unique opportunity to restore some of its social fabric needed in many places of the countryside for the construction of a more democratic, inclusive, and equal nation. Rather than being the starting of a period of peace for this nation, this counterinsurgency effort represents the beginning of a new cycle of violence. As the shocking number of assassinated social leaders and former members of FARC since 2019 indicates, the demobilization and the subsequent peace agreement between the FARC and the State signed in 2016 resembles the fate of the failed peace negotiation between the FARC and the Betancur government in the mid-1980s. On that occasion, members of the FARC decided to continue the armed struggle after the assassination by paramilitary forces, with the complicity of the State, of more than 3000 members of the Patriotic Union, the political party composed between FARC members committed with the peace process and members of the civil society. As this book indirectly but firmly illustrates, powerful sectors of the Colombian ruling class are not much committed with a real solution for peace in Colombia. The only possible solution for peace, in this scenario, comes from the resolution and actions of a civil society. The question is whether or not advocates for a sustainable peace and inclusive social change can counteract the effective and, as *Guerrilla Marketing* shows, cynical pro-war propaganda and violence of those narco-criminal sectors who have captured the State in Colombia.