

Introduction

What are the circumstances that encouraged thousands of young men over the past three decades to join paramilitary groups in Colombia? How did they make sense of their experience? What does their lived experience suggest about the larger forces that shaped both the history and the practice of violence in Colombia, especially in a country that, since its first constitution in 1886, has enjoyed stable, longstanding democratic institutions? And, in turn, what does the longstanding experience of violence since Colombia's independence suggest about notions of modernity, state, and democracy? What meanings do perpetrators of gross human rights violations attach to these notions?

These were the leading questions that emerged from my fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2008 among victims and victimizers of paramilitary violence in Colombia. Paramilitary groups have been a permanent feature throughout the history of Colombia since its independence in the nineteenth century. Throughout the decades, such groups have appeared in different shapes and with different names, and they have operated by means of kidnapping, disappearance, torture, selective killings, and massacres, fueling the desires and fantasies of a variety of interests: the desire for power by individuals and groups, the greed of businessmen, the aspirations of politicians and their political parties, the ambitions of the army's military campaigns, and, for the past thirty years, the ever-spreading influence of drug cartels. Since the beginning of the 1980s, supported by a justificatory counterinsurgency discourse, paramilitary groups, employing a terror tactic of shock and awe, penetrated and eventually dominated entire regions, as well as neighborhoods, towns, and rural villages, beginning in areas where the influence of guerrillas has historically been most significant. In fact, the narrative of a weak and inefficient state, incapable of providing security and of

defending private property from the menace of guerrillas, has often justified the need for the establishment of paramilitary groups.

The staggering statistics of the long-standing armed conflict in Colombia gives a sense of the pervasiveness of the country's violence, to which paramilitaries contributed in a significant way. In its report *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Enough Already! Memories of War and Dignity), the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2013) calculated that between 1958 and 2012, the conflict produced a total of 220,000 deaths, 81.5 percent of which were civilians and only 18.5 percent of which were combatants. There were a total recorded number of 25,000 disappeared, 1,754 victims of sexual violence, 6,421 forcibly recruited minors, 4,744,046 internally displaced people, and 27,023 kidnappings. In other words, according to the report, between 1958 and 2012, twenty-six people were displaced in Colombia every hour. Since 1996, one person was kidnapped every eight hours, and one person was a victim of land mines every day. Colombia is second only to Afghanistan as the country with the highest number of land-mine victims.

The report also highlighted that paramilitary death squads were the main perpetrators of these crimes as compared to other armed actors, such as the guerrillas and law enforcement agencies. In fact, paramilitaries were responsible for 1,166 of the 1,982 massacres carried out in Colombia between 1980 and 2012—about 60 percent of the total number of massacres. Furthermore, paramilitaries selectively killed 8,903 people; that is, 38.4 percent of the total 23,161 victims. They were responsible for 42.1 percent of the disappearances. As the report highlighted, “For the armed groups, the civil population has been a source of political, economic, moral, and logistical support, which contributed to the end result of the conflict. For the victimizers, it matters little if this support is consensual or forced” (ibid., 37).

Though the numbers are astonishing, it is the stories of the people who suffered and witnessed the violence that mediate, in a more comprehensive way, the overwhelming experiences of violence and brutality, including their ambiguities and complexity. As Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) observed in her seminal book on the Mozambican war, it is by lending an ear to the stories of violence that violence ceases to be a mere tactic or a means to an end, putting forward a reality that rationality struggles to grasp and one that defies attempts for a coherent and causal explanation. Anthropology can insert itself into the gap between events and what is often labeled as absurd, irrational, illogical, and unfathomable because it escapes human comprehension. Anthropology can attempt to bridge this gap in favor of comprehension and

interpretation of meanings that may contribute to transcending violence and finding alternative strategies to prevent it.

In my own experience, the paramilitaries ceased to be a distant and sterile notion to which none of my life experiences helped me to relate to when I came across stories such as the one about Camilo and his family. It was while learning about his experience that I confronted both the emotional and intellectual challenge as an anthropologist to face the inhuman and unfathomable nature of our shared human condition.

In 2006, I met Camilo at a shelter for internally displaced people in downtown Medellín. At the time, Camilo, twelve years old, had just arrived in town, displaced by violence, together with his mother and three siblings, including his older sister and two younger brothers. From the balcony of the shelter overlooking an intersection, Camilo was observing the changing colors of a traffic light, attempting to figure out its function. In response to his inquiry, I told him that red was for stop and green was for go. I was astounded that this was the first time that Camilo had ever seen a traffic light. “This way, cars don’t crash into one another,” I said. Camilo repeated my explanation, memorizing and making sense of something that he had just learned. Countryside and urban areas in Colombia are often worlds far apart, and violence had just forced Camilo and his family to land on an unknown planet.

Only a few days prior to our meeting at the shelter, Camilo had witnessed the killing of his father at the hands of a paramilitary squad. His family lived and worked on a farm owned by Camilo’s father’s parents. They raised cattle and grew produce, such as yucca. They shared part of the land they owned with poor peasants and allowed them to grow their own crops. Camilo once described his father as generous with the poor, but also admitted that at home he was at times violent. “He did not always treat me or my mother well,” he shared. Though Camilo was, as noted, twelve years old at the time of our encounter, he had attended only two years of primary school. To go to class, he had to ride a horse for two hours across the fields, and his father had Camilo join him in his own work, something for which even today Camilo prizes his father.

One afternoon, when Camilo came home from school, he saw that paramilitaries had surrounded their farm. Some were arguing with his father, who had refused to comply with their order to sell and permanently abandon the land that his family had owned for a few generations. Camilo then heard a few shots and saw his father fall to the ground. He rushed forward to

embrace his father but was stopped and hit in the head with a rifle butt by one of the paramilitaries. Camilo's father met his resistance against the paramilitaries with his own death. Today, Camilo told me, the butchers who killed his father are growing coca on his family's land. For years to come, in nightmares, Camilo has relived the scene of the killing of his own father. The history of Camilo echoes the tragedy that Latin American people have endured throughout the centuries.

The night of the killing, Camilo and his family collected their loved one, put him on an improvised stretcher, and walked in the darkness for hours to reach the closest village for a quick burial. Then, with no money and a few belongings wrapped in plastic bags, they took a bus to Medellín, disoriented and powerless, hungry and thirsty. For a few days, they stationed themselves at the city bus terminal, sleeping on the floor as if frozen and unable to take the next step in their lives. Eventually, a police officer noticed them, asked about their condition, gave them some food, and directed them to the shelter where I met Camilo on the day that he had arrived, as he was wondering about the workings of the traffic light.

At first, I met the paramilitaries only at second hand, through the tales of terror from their victims. Indeed, the original plan of my fieldwork was to collect the testimonies of internally displaced people and to observe how they had reinvented their lives in an urban area. My interest was in the resilience of victims living in the midst of violence and conflict. This is a theme that still interests me today, since the stories of survivors provide humbling insights into the possibilities of human nature. The tales of survivors are not only tales of horror, but also tales of hope. Only later, while I was learning about the paramilitaries through their victims, did I have my encounter with the paramilitary leader Doble Cero.

It was therefore the tales of terror shared by victims, such as Camilo's testimony, that provided me with my initial questions about the Colombian paramilitaries. Over the years, as my fieldwork deepened and my encounters and readings multiplied, I came to see the paramilitaries as a larger phenomenon far more complex and articulated than their overt violence, which is the most visible and repulsive manifestation of their reality.¹ In fact, multinational corporations, national companies, local businesses, influential politicians, and high-ranking military officials have been providing staunch support to paramilitary groups and have both invoked their existence and armed them through the

years. Moreover, support has also come from common people, who are often thankful for the kind of order that they provide or, at a minimum, have seen them as a minor and necessary evil to exterminate the brutes—the guerrillas, but also the *desechables*, literally the disposable people, the scum of the earth, such as drug addicts, petty thieves, and homosexuals. The paramilitaries have functioned like a sanitation department, disposing of the waste. “In my town, the paramilitaries prohibited men from wearing long hair. They distributed fliers with the list of people who had to abandon the town or else they’d be killed. They imposed a curfew under which by ten o’clock at night we had to be in our homes,” a young man from a town in northeastern Colombia once told me. Yet the killings, disappearances, and torture committed by the paramilitaries are only a clue, one hinting at a larger and deeper involvement of a society that has been sanctioning their existence and their violent deeds.

Three fieldwork encounters in particular provided me with the opportunity to gain a better grasp of the complexity and articulation of the paramilitaries as a social phenomenon. I spent most of my time in Colombia at the margins of cities and towns, recording observations in my notebook and collecting testimonies of paramilitary combatants and their victims—although these three encounters took place at the home of the political counselor of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá, at an apartment in a middle-class neighborhood of Medellín, and in a Colombian Army aircraft flying into a former stronghold of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; the FARC) guerrillas, respectively.² These three encounters provided a larger framework in which to interpret the stories that I was hearing at the margins. The individuals whom I met and the stories that they shared were spatially and socially far removed from the spaces where violence occurred and yet intimately connected to them.

My first encounter was with the owner of a mining company operating in Urabá, a subregion in northern Colombia marked by decades of violence and where paramilitaries have annihilated social and peasant movements for the past three decades. A senior official of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá, with whom I had become acquainted and who was aware of my research, offered me a meeting with the prominent business leader to listen to his arguments. We met in the large, posh living room of the diplomat’s apartment. The wall-to-wall window provided a startling view of Bogotá, observed from above as a shiny center of modernity where business, commerce, and sophisticated gastronomy coexisted. The peripheral and marginalized area of Ciudad Bolívar could barely be spotted on the horizon. We were sipping full-

bodied red wine, our ties loose, and the conversation flowed casually. The entrepreneur, who was originally from Medellín, had words of admiration for the Colombian president at the time, Álvaro Uribe Vélez³—the leader with an iron fist. “Finally there is someone occupying the presidential palace who is working for the country,” said the business owner, a short, obese man in his midfifties with small, chubby hands. “After the fall of the Soviet Union,” he continued, “the guerrillas are no longer guided by ideology but by the pragmatism of the cocaine market. They are experiencing the end of history.” He conceded that Colombia had suffered a deficit in democracy primarily because of the intertwining of drug cartels and political leaders. The businessman then made reference to the paramilitaries in Urabá.⁴ Of course, he clarified, he was in disagreement with the brutality of their methods—the torture, the disappearances, the massacres, and the selective killings the paramilitaries carried out so efficiently, especially in Urabá, where they operated in cahoots with the military—but in the absence of the state, he asserted, the presence of self-defense groups was necessary to do business and, by extension, they served the common good of the region. Without the intervention of the self-defense groups, my interlocutor insisted, there would be no more banana companies in Urabá today. He sipped more wine and then concluded, “What we need to do in Colombia is to forget. We don’t need memory, but forgetting. This is the necessary condition for reconciliation.”

With these words, it seemed to me that the businessman was advocating for the cleansing the memories of the complicities, the silence, and the indifference that, over decades, had allowed for the paramilitaries’ widespread social cleansing of peasants, social movements, union and human rights leaders, intrusive journalists, and inconvenient politicians. It sounded as if this cleansing of memory represented the summit of a larger project within which the disagreeable (yet deemed necessary) deeds of the paramilitaries were only the most visible steps. In fact, once a whole society has forgotten, there is nothing left to reconcile, since reconciliation presupposes the recognition of, and the identification with the enemy—that is, with the radical Other—as well as his or her inclusion and appreciation. Lacan (1977) argued that mediation is a conversation that links two subjects, thus allowing for the emergence of a truth. Forgetting is the negation of this mediation and the repression of truth. I put down my glass of wine.

The second encounter happened in an apartment in a middle-class neighborhood in Medellín, only a few blocks away from where the legendary drug kingpin Pablo Escobar was killed. It was the apartment where I was staying

during my fieldwork in Medellín, and some friends had organized an evening in which I would share some of my field experiences with interested acquaintances. My friends had been wondering for a while what it was like spending time in marginal areas of Medellín and the countryside, where they themselves did not dare set foot. When I sat down in the living room before an audience of about thirty people, I noticed a distinguished individual sitting in the front row whom I had never seen before. I did not worry, and I continued candidly sharing some of the salient moments from my fieldwork among members of the paramilitaries. In particular, I dwelled on the figure of Commandant Doble Cero.

At one point, the distinguished man sitting in front of me raised his right arm halfway, asking to speak. “Go ahead,” I said, offering a courteous smile.

“I want to congratulate you and express my admiration for having met a true patriot,” the anonymous guest stated in reference to Doble Cero, with some excitement in his voice. He explained that he was a lawyer, and that his brother was a prominent member of the Congress of Colombia. He had had a chance to meet and appreciate Doble Cero as a paramilitary. The lawyer described him as someone who had dedicated his life to fight the curse of the guerrilla and was a true patriot, unlike the drug lords, he added, who had tainted the paramilitaries’ self-defense project. He then went on, providing his opinion on current events. At the time, in 2006, the scandal of so-called para-politics had broken out. Prosecutors had looked into the connections between regional politicians and the paramilitaries, and dozens of Colombian congressional members were under investigation. Several were already behind bars. “I know several of those politicians,” the anonymous guest continued with a tone that betrayed his outrage and disbelief.

The distinguished lawyer, as a member of the conservative elite of Medellín, had just delivered, before an audience of people mostly unknown to him, an open apology for the paramilitary project—for its necessity, for its noble and patriotic cause as well as that of politicians who had received the support of the paramilitaries and guaranteed and strengthened their legitimacy. There was no prudence, and even less embarrassment or shame, in his words and attitude. To the contrary, he prided himself on his friendship with Doble Cero. To me, this was a moment of shock due to the frankness and openness of such a public confession. It was a moment in which support for the paramilitaries by middle- and upper-class members of Medellín became tangible; it was a moment of illumination about the depth and breadth of the paramilitaries and their articulations.

The third encounter happened aboard a military aircraft flying into the region of La Macarena, a former stronghold of the FARC guerrillas. The top generals of the Colombian army, as well as military and civilian personnel of the U.S. government, were on the plane. The area, which lies behind the Western Cordillera surrounding the capital of Bogotá, was one of the main strategic counterinsurgency theaters of the Colombian government during the Álvaro Uribe Vélez administration. For decades, the Colombian deputy defense minister had explained, not only the institutions of the state, but also the very notion of the state, had been absent from this region. In a territory that FARC guerrillas had dominated for more than four decades, the population, the deputy minister told me, perceived the state as hostile and foreign. During the flight, I was sitting next to a civilian official, an economist, whose task was to coordinate the so-called consolidation process; that is, the blending of military intervention and socioeconomic development in a unified counterinsurgency effort. I asked the civilian official why governance functions were delegated to the military. The economist admitted that it was a problem that even the army's generals recognized, but he highlighted that La Macarena was an innovative experiment in which security and development went hand in hand. "We have to think and we have to act like a colonizing state," the economist observed. "We are penetrating an untouched and unexplored territory that we had to first conquer by battling against a hostile population, since every reality, even within civil society organizations, was previously penetrated and controlled by the FARC guerrillas."

It was an insightful conversation. What struck me was the mention of the FARC as the only threatening presence, since the civilian official's description of the local reality obliterated the role of paramilitary groups and influential drug cartels in the same area. The classification of the landscape and its people as being organically part of the FARC was a reification of reality turned into a place like that in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, one to be conquered and enlightened. La Macarena was imagined and described as a dark area, existing outside of the perimeter of civilization, and as a space inhabited by barbarism and wild men. Because of the longstanding domination of the FARC, La Macarena was spoken of as a space still existing in a state of nature, devoid of history and civilization. Such being the perceived reality of La Macarena, it had to be captured, interiorized, and transformed, with the help of what Walter Benjamin called "the predatory violence of the military," into a space of enlightenment, modernity, and civilization (Benjamin 1986, 283). Wasn't this a variation of the same justificatory dis-

course that I had heard from the business owner and lawyer when they explained the necessity of the existence of paramilitary groups?

Which commonalities, then, do these three different encounters share? And how are they linked to the violence perpetuated by paramilitaries across Colombia? What links the necessity of the paramilitaries' presence in Urabá with the glorification of the counterinsurgency as embodied by Doble Cero and the state's efforts to colonize areas historically dominated by the guerrillas? Is the perception and production of an exteriority conceived of as an untamed space—a thick and impenetrable forest like the one inhabited by savages in *Heart of Darkness*—a space that had to be ordered and enlightened? In other words, I suggest that it is the reification of individuals, landscapes, and history that glue together the three previously mentioned encounters. This objectification is immanent to paramilitaries' existence and to the production of violence, and it invites inquiry not only into the nature of paramilitaries in Colombia, but also into the conventional definitions of the state.

This book is about the violence committed by paramilitaries in Colombia. I draw on the narratives of paramilitary combatants in order to provide a cultural interpretation of Colombia's history of violence and the larger forces at play in that history. What has motivated large numbers of men to join paramilitary groups and disseminate terror and death? What meanings do these men attribute to their practice of violence?

The experience of the paramilitaries whom I met is the starting point of my inquiry; it is what hooked me. However, I am also interested in exploring the larger historical, social, and cultural repository underpinning their practice of violence and their justificatory discourse. In fact, as Begoña Aretxaga and Joseba Zulaika emphasized while analyzing political violence in Northern Ireland, subjectivity is grounded in history (Aretxaga and Zulaika 2005, 59). As part of this exploration, I am interested in analyzing the articulation that exists between paramilitary groups and the state, not only in order to inquire about the nature of paramilitaries' violence, but also to wonder about the immanence of this violence to the state.

Over the past three decades, several anthropologists have undertaken pioneering research on political violence. Though late into the debate, these anthropologists have pushed the boundaries of this analysis beyond conventional and established frameworks, which had previously emphasized the

instrumentality of violence, the cause-effect continuum, rational choice theory, or an understanding of violence as an anomaly or a reality pertaining to the premodern state. Instead, this new anthropological analysis has focused on understanding what lies beyond that which is taken for granted and has attributed relevance to history, structural violence, predispositions, and the technologies and mechanisms that produce violent realities. The understanding and analysis of cultural forms of violence is anthropology's unique contribution to coming to terms with violence through the field's discourses and practices. Having positioned themselves at the margins of societies where violence and its effects are recorded, anthropologists have made relevant contributions to an interpretation of its discursive formations.⁵

Whether focusing on victims or victimizers, anthropologists have attempted to show that violence, rather than an irrational force that needs to be tamed, represents a force inherent to the modern experience and to both authoritarian regimes and neoliberal democracies (Aretxaga 1999; Paley 2001). In other words, they underlined that violence does not just belong to the reality of a premodern state, but also has an intimate connection to reason (Taussig 1991). That is to say, violence is not external to modernity and does not represent an anomaly of social order, but is a part of the modern state, even in democratic regimes.

The dangers and risks involved in doing fieldwork on violence and the hazards of entering the field are a possible reason (and a plausible one, indeed) that research on perpetrators is still sparse. Yet there might be an additional explanation, which lies in the fact that the intensity and brutality of such violence make it difficult, disturbing, ethically questionable, and, at times, psychologically overwhelming to meet the gaze of, and cross paths with, the victimizers. The brutality and spectacular nature of their violence consign the perpetrator to the embodiment of the inhuman, radical Other, one whom it is almost unbearable to conceive of as another person, since this would require a certain degree of identification and recognition of a shared humanity and a shared capacity for the inhuman.

And yet, as Slavoj Žižek wrote, this inhuman Other is characterized “by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as humanity, is inherent to being human” (2008, 47). In a cultural interpretation of Colombia's sectarian violence during the 1950s, the so-called La Violencia, María Victoria Uribe (2004) titled her study *Antropología de la inhumanidad*, an anthropology of the inhuman, which referred not only to the spectacular nature of the terror during La Violencia, but primarily to the unbear-

able truth about our own humanity: the human capacity for the inhuman, monstrous, irrational, unfathomable, and traumatic. Therefore, can anthropology afford to avoid the direct encounter with the inhuman as expressed by victimizers, and approach the study of violence while mainly prioritizing the narrative of victims or by showing sympathy or tolerance for freedom fighters? In retreating from contact with perpetrators, doesn't anthropology turn its back on the possibility of grasping and reflecting in an even more comprehensive way the inhuman, which is part of the human experience? Doesn't anthropology deny itself another opportunity to direct our gaze into the abyss of our humanity? In avoiding the direct encounter with the perpetrator, doesn't anthropology risk mimicking the very one it abhors, the one who through violence dehumanizes and objectifies the victim as the enemy? Isn't the avoidance of the encounter with the perpetrator a form of the inhuman as well?

To be sure, the experience of intersubjectivity with members of paramilitary death squads was not an easy endeavor. It was often uncomfortable and puzzling to somehow connect with these killing men. There were moments when I had my fill of listening to their experience, and there were times when I wanted to leave the room in which I was meeting with them in disgust. This particular ethnographic work forced me to push my own psychological and intellectual boundaries and bring within my own horizon an undesirable Other as I stepped into an unknown and unexplored world. Granted, for me it was not as challenging as it would have been for a victim of paramilitary violence, since neither I nor any member of my family has ever been kidnapped, tortured, or killed by these or other armed groups. On the other hand, a certain empathy with the paramilitaries whom I met—while in no way a justification of their crimes or sympathy for their cause—is a necessary disposition for the understanding and interpretation of violence's cultural forms in Colombia. Without an authentic and deep experience of intersubjectivity, it is not possible to explore the worlds of individuals who embrace a violent life (Bourgois 1995, 13). It was, for example, the profound and equally uneasy experience of intersubjectivity and infatuation, of empathy, and of closeness that allowed Truman Capote ([1966] 1994) to access the life of killer Perry Smith and narrate the contours of his massacre of the Clutter family in Kansas, narrated in Capote's nonfiction "novel" *In Cold Blood*.

In addition to the testimonies of the victims, the narratives of violent perpetrators are an important contribution to the understanding not only of the complex biographies of individuals, but also of the contours within which

these biographies arise and violence is performed. The encounter not only with victims, but also with perpetrators, opens a valuable opportunity to create an alternative to violence, to write against terror, which, in my interpretation of Taussig, is about pointing the finger against the powerful and the violent as well as about the possibility, through recognition and reflexivity, to transcend and overcome the inhuman aspects of our own human condition. Writing against terror means holding up a mirror to the rawness of our own humanity. This calls for us to embrace the risk of an encounter with the violent Other, to sit down with the perpetrator of gross human rights violations, to accept the probability of humanizing the Other, to discover what is human in the violent Other, and ultimately to face the uneasiness of seeing oneself in the abyss of the inhuman. By accepting the possibility of recognizing an alterity with the one perceived as the radical Other, anthropology can offer its own particular contribution to an experience beyond enmity and violence and create an alternative that fends off and transcends violence.

This book is based on data that I collected over multiple travels to Colombia between June 2003 and August 2008. Sometimes my trips spanned one or two weeks, while at other times, I remained in the country for a few months. The bulk of the data used in this book were collected between April and August 2006 during the fieldwork that I did for my dissertation.

The first time that I traveled to Colombia also coincided with the first time that I had the opportunity to set foot in a village whose residents, a few months before my arrival, had been victims of a paramilitary massacre. In an area strategically located near the border between Colombia and Panama, the village that I visited had, for a long time, been a safe haven of the FARC guerrillas until the paramilitary forces irrupted, sowing terror and death. At the time, I was a graduate student at Columbia University and a researcher affiliated with the Center for International Conflict Resolution. A friend and a colleague who, at the time, was working at Antioquia University in Medellín invited me to collaborate on a project on sustainable development that he and his colleagues were promoting on the northern coast of Colombia in an area bordering Panama. I was asked to design and facilitate a conflict resolution workshop for about forty community leaders in the village that we visited.

For several years, Colombia had been present in my own imagination, and I had been keen to visit the country. In fact, during the 1980s, as I was grow-

ing up in Italy—my country of origin—news reports often labeled Italy’s southern regions, where the Mafia had established its stronghold, as Europe’s Colombia. Like many of my fellow Italians, I knew about drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, and I still remember the day I saw the news on TV of his assassination by the Colombian police. There was much talk about the Medellín and Cali cartels and their links to the Italian Mafia. Colombia was spoken of as a country ridden with organized crime, corruption, and violence—dynamics that, in our collective imagination, we associated with the actions of the Mafia in Southern Italy.

In my early twenties, I had joined a social movement against kidnapping, a phenomenon that at the time was a plague in Italy. The Mafia used to kidnap members of wealthy families from Northern Italy and hide them in Calabria, one of Italy’s southern regions. Because of my activism, I had the opportunity to meet kidnapping victims and their families, who shared the stories of their ordeals with me. Some of them were young men like me, and their testimonies of how they had survived living for more than two years in the thick and impervious mountains, sequestered in caves under inhuman conditions, made a deep impression on me.

At the beginning of the 1990s, I decided to move from the quiet town in Northern Italy where I grew up to Palermo in Sicily, where a large social urban movement against the Mafia was increasingly vocalizing, and publicly manifesting, their resistance against the Mafia, breaking the longstanding law of silence known in Mafia jargon as *omertà*. I wanted to be part of that movement and have a front seat in making history within the anti-Mafia movement.

The years that I spent in Palermo coincided with a very difficult time for the city. This was the time when car bombs planted by the Cosa Nostra exploded, killing the prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino,⁶ whose investigations had brought down the top leadership of the Sicilian Mafia and revealed for the first time the inner workings of the Cosa Nostra. The killings of the two prosecutors and the outrage of Palermo’s citizens, who took their anger to the street, made a profound impact on me and certainly shaped the personal and professional choices that I have made since. With my decision to move to Palermo and work for the anti-Mafia leader Leoluca Orlando, I had unconsciously wanted to follow in the footsteps of my Austrian grandfather—my mother’s father. He was an engine driver, a union leader, a Social Democrat, and a Catholic who, when he became aware during World War II of what Nazism represented to freedom and democracy, armed

a partisan group of a few young men and eventually liberated a large valley in Austria from Hitler's occupation. In any case, the exciting as well as difficult years that I spent in Palermo were important for me to initially grasp the Mafia phenomenon, including how it operates in the underworld of crime and how it expands and consolidates its domination by extending its tentacles into politics, finance, and business while also shaping people's predispositions and practices. Those years certainly prepared me for my encounter with Colombia and shaped my understanding of paramilitaries and their violence.

In April 2001, together with my colleagues from the Antioquia University, I boarded a small aircraft in Medellín. After about one hour, we landed on a narrow strip of asphalt ending in a soccer field within a fishing village. The air was hot, and the view of the sun sinking into the ocean was stunning. The beauty of nature was in stark contrast to the stories I had heard about the violence that this village had endured. The same night that we arrived, we were informed that we should not present our workshop as one focused on conflict resolution. Nor should we talk about peace, because such words were charged with meanings that could endanger us as well as the participants and might be interpreted as us siding with the leftist ideology of guerrillas. I was surprised and, being naive and ignorant of the dynamics of Colombia's armed conflict, I considered it somehow perverse that speaking of peace was banned in a space saturated with violence. As I talked with community leaders, I sensed that the presence and violence of paramilitaries had frozen time in that village, suspending it in a violent present that seemed to be permanent and pervasive and negated the possibility of any alternative future. Among residents, trust waned and cooperation had become sparse. Violence had suddenly turned one's neighbor into an unknown and a possible threat. Suspicion and terror, rather than solidarity, had become the norm for this community, turning it into a place of fear. This was the first time that I was faced with the aftermath of terror, and that three-day stay in that fishing village convinced me to pursue fieldwork in Colombia for my dissertation.

I chose Medellín as the site for my ethnography because I had a seminal network of friends there and because the city—the capital of the Antioquia region—had been an epicenter of Colombia's political violence. Historically, Medellín had been Colombia's capital of business and commerce, but it was also the city where Pablo Escobar established his powerful drug cartel at the

end of the 1970s, opening drug routes to the United States. When I first traveled to Medellín, in April 2001, the city was experiencing one of highest murder rates in its history. Guerrilla militias were still present in some marginal areas of the city, while paramilitaries had aggressively begun the takeover of the city. On my first day in Medellín, I was mugged in the morning and witnessed a shooting in the afternoon. There was a sense of constant peril, chaos, and disorder. People were frustrated; they had lost confidence in President Andrés Pastrana's attempts to negotiate a peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas, and several whom I spoke to—mostly professionals living in Medellín's middle-class neighborhoods—called for a U.S. military intervention while paramilitaries spread their presence and influence across the country.

When I started my fieldwork, in June 2003, my original idea was to look at how internally displaced people were reinventing their lives in the aftermath of violence and adjusting to an urban setting; Medellín was one of the primary repositories of displaced people. I began my research in Moravia, one of the most densely populated marginal areas of the city, listening to the testimonies of paramilitaries' victims. These were mostly peasants, who, under the threat of paramilitaries or after witnessing the assassination of their loved ones—as was the case of Camilo and his family—had decided to collect a few belongings and come to Medellín in search of safety. I spent a few days sitting down with them, listening to their tales of horror, taking notes on the dynamics of violence, learning about the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, and starting to get a feeling of how different and distant the experience of violence and war is from the theoretical notions that we often encounter in books. I began tracing back the stories that I was listening to, and I ended up in Colombian rural towns where my interlocutors had lived under the domination of guerrillas and paramilitaries and from where they had eventually been uprooted and evicted.

It was by traveling to these towns and visiting them for a few days that I first felt in my own flesh the intimidating and menacing presence of the paramilitaries. At first, it was a ghostly presence, felt through a sense of constant surveillance and measured by the care of the words people uttered and the comfort they took in remaining silent. As I talked to more individuals, gaining their trust and traveling to more of these towns, I eventually learned how to recognize members of the paramilitaries, walking in civilian clothes among the regular people, sitting at cafés, or standing at street corners. Eventually, it was a local journalist who offered me the opportunity to

arrange a clandestine meeting with Doble Cero, the founder and leader of the influential paramilitary group Bloque Metro, as I detailed in the prologue. That encounter with Doble Cero opened the door into the world of perpetrators, together with the announcement, at the time that I started my fieldwork, of the disarmament and demobilization of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense of Colombia; AUC)—the paramilitary umbrella organization led by Carlos Castaño—which redirected the focus of my research to the men who had joined the paramilitaries and committed gross human rights violations. I became interested and engaged in a kind of fieldwork that I had not anticipated.

I met some of the paramilitaries whom I interviewed through the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program of the city of Medellín. The director, Gustavo Villegas, and his staff were instrumental in giving me access to demobilized members of the paramilitaries, to the workshops that they attended as part of their reintegration process in marginal areas of the city, and to some of the paramilitary commanders. The members of the paramilitaries whom I met through the DDR program were part of the collective demobilization process, of which Medellín was the first site. To better control the over eight hundred former combatants who had been disarmed and demobilized, the DDR program had preserved the previous paramilitary groups' chain of command. I soon found that this made it more challenging for me to collect long narratives and life histories, as the former paramilitaries I approached felt observed, which made them more reticent. I was able to circumvent this difficulty by approaching and meeting members of the paramilitaries who had not been part of the collective demobilization but had instead demobilized individually. The demobilization of individual combatants was an additional national DDR program that the government of Colombia had conceived of, providing a series of benefits, such as housing, vocational training, and schooling, to guerrillas and paramilitary members alike who had made the decision to desert their ranks in exchange for providing valuable intelligence. For their own safety, several of these former combatants had come to Medellín, since they had had to leave the areas of Colombia where they had been active paramilitary members. It was possible for me to meet these former combatants thanks to friends and acquaintances who worked as social workers or psychologists and had some of these individuals among their clients. They told them about me as well as my research, and several expressed an interest in meeting with me. Because they were disjoined from their organization and not under a chain of command, I found

them eager to spend time with me, share their stories, walk around Medellín, and take me to other areas of the country. It is primarily through them that I also had the opportunity to meet with paramilitary members and groups that had not demobilized and were still active, subjugating several areas of Medellín, as well as towns across Colombia, to their rules. While both the national and local governments were publicly pronouncing the success of their DDR program, I was spending some of my afternoons in Medellín with paramilitaries who had never put down their weapons and who continued to control neighborhoods and rural towns, attending to drug trafficking and other illicit market business. Some of them moved on to become the pillars of new criminal groups in recent years, such as the Paisas or the Urabeños, which continue the practice of violence and terror previously carried out by the paramilitary groups affiliated with the AUC.

The paramilitaries whom I initially interviewed introduced me to their companions, thus becoming collaborators in my research. I spent days and weeks with some of them, in a few cases having the opportunity to visit their homes, meet their families, wives, and children, and follow them on trips across the country. I saw them crying, laughing, happy, and depressed. Seeing them as human beings, and not as the embodiment of perverse evil, made the endeavor all the more challenging and difficult. Seeing them as bloodthirsty and irreducible assassins probably would have eased my endeavor. But it is precisely the fact that the totality of their existence and humanity is not exhausted by the qualifiers of “killer” or “torturer”—and that their stories are much more complex than reducing the totality of their identity to their violent actions—that makes it even more relevant to attempt an anthropology of experience that can shed some light on the contours of their existence and violent practices.

During my fieldwork, I became familiar with their stories, feelings, and dreams, while they familiarized themselves with this strange gringo who had come from New York and displayed interest in their stories and was ready to listen. In fact, it was their stories, the turns that their lives had taken, and my desire to try to understand why someone is willing to join an armed group and commit atrocious acts of violence, rather than their violent deeds and their paramilitary membership itself, that interested and motivated me. At the same time, to meet someone genuinely curious about their lives and narratives has been for several of them a unique experience, as it was for me to know stories that were so far away from the comparatively safe, comfortable, and peaceful place in Italy where I grew up under the care of loving parents.

Being a foreigner and an outsider, with no stake in their lives, helped me gain access to them and facilitated my task of recording their narratives.

Rather than the ethnography of a defined and circumscribed space, my fieldwork had a nomadic character. I followed victims and perpetrators who had welcomed my interest in their stories around in their often itinerant and uncertain lives. I followed them through the streets of downtown Medellín and hiked up hills through the city's marginal areas with them. I traveled with them to remote towns and villages, becoming familiar with the landscape of violence that constitutes Colombia. I sat down with paramilitaries in the small and humble apartments that they shared with their family or in the bodegas that are often the only legal commercial activity existing within the peripheries of poor cities and towns. I collected detailed and lengthy life histories and conducted long semistructured interviews, recording and later transcribing them. Several times, I gained the most interesting insights while engaging in informal conversations or observing the interaction of paramilitaries among themselves as well as with the residents of a neighborhood or town. In regions that were the cradle of the paramilitary movement in Colombia, I visited farms and met some of the ranchers who had established and supported paramilitary groups and drug cartels. I visited paramilitary leaders in high-security prisons in both Colombia and the United States, and I met young criminals in juvenile prisons. I spent days in shelters where displaced people, often victims of paramilitaries, waited for some aid from government programs, and I then traced their lives as they moved from neighborhood to neighborhood in search of affordable housing or a way to make some money. Often I met the children of displaced people at street intersections where they sold candies to drivers and passersby to make a living. The spaces of death where I dwelled were also often spaces of marginalization and misery, and I realized how narrow the possibilities and choices in life become when these spaces circumscribe one's existence.

From listening to the stories of the paramilitaries whom I met, I learned a lot about their upbringings, their country, and their internal armed conflict, but also about myself—a white male who grew up in Europe and now lives in New York. Though listening to the graphic descriptions of the crimes that my interlocutors had committed was often uncomfortable, difficult, and even repugnant, at one point I had to recognize that the potential for evil and the ability to harm others equally resided within me. It was in this moment of honesty and realization, which happened while I was recording the life history of a paramilitary member in a humid and humble room in downtown

Medellín, that I learned to mirror myself in the narrating Other, to suspend moral judgment, and to stop looking down from a higher moral pedestal on the life of perpetrators. This was the moment when my interlocutors turned from objectified paramilitary combatants into fully human individuals, endowed with complex personal histories in which the often reified and made-up distinction between victim and victimizer is often blurred. Such times were moments of empathy, though not of sympathy, for their lives and their violent deeds. These encounters and conversations did not represent for me a cultural shock, but rather, as Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben have emphasized, an existential shock (1995, 13; cf. Mahmood 1996, 14–25).

The potential for resorting to violence when confronting danger and being hijacked by fear became vivid to me, even in just those instants when I felt that my safety was in peril. These were moments in which I had to confront not the violence suffered or committed by others, but the possibility for violence that lingers within myself. Later in my fieldwork, a rumor went around that one of the demobilized paramilitaries whom I had interviewed, believing that I, coming from the United States, must be a wealthy man, had plotted with others to kidnap me for ransom. When I learned about that rumor, I felt both angry and very fearful, and for a split second I wished someone could kill this particular paramilitary in order to get rid of the threat. It was the angry thought of an instant, but I was later shocked and puzzled that such a strong emotion and horrendous idea could rise from deep within me and present itself so clearly in my mind. In that moment, I experienced what fear can do to you, and how the environment in which I had been immersed for some time had allowed for that instinctive thought to be produced. I thought of Kurtz and how he lost himself among the savages, fascinated by abomination. It doesn't take much, I thought, to mirror and be ready to mimic the violent Other. How much I could now see myself in that Other; how bonded, rather than separate, I was. The thought of eliminating the Other, reified now as a dangerous threat, was not so much engendered by the experience of fear in itself, but rather by the environment circumscribed by violence, in which (at that point) I had been dwelling for some time and in which, little by little, inadvertently and subtly, I was taking the risk of losing myself, blending in with the surrounding reality. I was now mirroring myself in the desire to have someone killed because I had perceived him as a serious threat. It did not occur to me to question if the rumor was at all true, nor did it occur to me to go to the police, having learned all too well that it would

have been inefficient in stopping the threat. In a moment, my instinct was to take the rumor as a certain fact, and I felt rushed to do what I considered to be the most effective for my own safety within the environment that I had somehow become a part of.

For some time, I wondered about the appropriateness of sharing this particular experience. Would readers who have not had the opportunity to wander in a space marked by terror and death—to come into close contact with its shadows, to look into its abyss and gaze at its fantasies, to feel the fascination of abomination—be able and open to understanding such an experience, or would they reject and dismiss it? I resolved that it was important to share it, because it is foolish to think that the endeavor of an ethnographer is an aseptic one, within which one remains untouched by the people, the stories, and places one encounters. Instead, fieldwork is a deep, existential encounter, and ethnographic seduction, as Antonius Robben (2005) highlighted, is part of the fieldwork experience and one of its risks. Not only might we be seduced by our interlocutors, but we might seduce them as well. Within this experience rests the risk of losing oneself in the field under the illusion of blending oneself with the surroundings. In becoming aware of this dynamic, one has an opportunity for insight and interpretation. As the episode that I related above shows, the ethnographic encounter does not let one be indifferent, and the experience might be even more intense when one carries out fieldwork in a context of conflict and violence. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, for example, in presenting her fieldwork among Sikh militants, highlighted that to write about them “as if I had not become personally, existentially entangled with them and their quest would be an inexcusable hypocrisy” (1996, 1). Fieldwork can be an existential shock that leads you into the depths of human nature, but gazing into them is an opportunity to think about alternatives to violence.

The more I listened to the stories of young men whose personal stories were entangled in the maze of the paramilitaries, the less I came to see them as merely biographies of separate individuals. Rather, their narratives brought into evidence the background from which these life stories emerged, much like sculptures in low relief. Increasingly, I saw their subjectivity as rooted in history, which in turn caused me to wonder about the larger forces that allowed for those life histories to come about.

The ethnographic evidence that I was collecting in the field pointed to an interlacement among the paramilitary death squads and other agents that

represented the state, such as law enforcement officers and military personnel, but also local and national politicians and business owners. What did the reality of this interlacement imply about the nature of the paramilitaries? In fact, as I suggest in this book, the ability of these illegal and violent groups to connect with agents and institutions of the state is a fundamental characteristics of the paramilitaries in Colombia. At the same time, these interconnections presupposed a reciprocity on behalf of the state without which that linkage was not possible. A more intriguing inquiry, then, became to interpret which light the reality of the paramilitaries shed on the nature of the state. If the relation of the paramilitaries to the state was an immanent quality of their nature, was the state's relation to the paramilitaries also an immanent quality of its nature, and in particular that of the liberal state?

This question was also suggested to me by my previous experience as an observer of the Italian Mafia. As I will detail more specifically in chapter 5, scholars, prosecutors, and journalists coined the expression *intreccio* in order to capture the intertwinement of the multiple forms and levels of alliance among the Mafia and the state and to define the convergence of interests that the *intreccio* expresses. This intertwinement is the immanent quality of the Italian Mafia without which the Mafia would not exist. It is this intertwinement that allows for the Mafia's existence and perpetuation and converts it into a system of impunity. And while the emphasis is mostly on the *intreccio* as a key feature of the Mafia as a criminal phenomenon, I suggest that attention needs to be paid equally to what the *intreccio*, as an immanent quality of the state, reveals about the nature of the state itself.

Anthropologists have questioned the state's fixity as category of analysis for some time now and, based on the observation of everyday encounters with the state, have preferred to interpret the state as a phenomenological reality produced through discourses and practices of power (Aretxaga 2003; Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1999; Nagengast 1994). Accordingly, the state was presented as a mask (Abrams 1988), as magical (Coronil 1997; Taussig 1997), and as a fantasy (Navaro-Yashin 2002), all echoing Radcliff-Brown's assertion that the state "is a fiction of the philosophers" (1940 [1970], xxiii).

And yet encounters with the state, as a hierarchical mode of organizing power, are real and concrete to citizens who are its subjects, especially when they are confronted with repression and arbitrary violence. Such are, for example, the encounters with the state at its margins, where, as Das and Poole have highlighted, "the state is imagined as an always incomplete project" (2004, 7) and where threats to security are constantly engendered

(Goldstein 2010, 2012). This notion of margins, which, more than geographical spaces, are epistemological ones, refers to a liminal threshold in which order and disorder, lawful and unlawful, norm and exception, outside and inside conflate. It is in these spaces that arbitrary violence is practiced as legitimate and necessary, and where the reality of intertwinement takes shape. It is within these spaces, as Aretxaga highlighted, that “anything can happen” (2003, 405), since the “inside” comes into contact with an outside that is conceived as wild and unruly, and where the state, in order to extend its sovereignty, does not hesitate to intertwine with agents, such as the paramilitary death squads in Colombia or the Mafia in Italy. If, therefore, it is at the margins that the effects of power can be observed, it is also at the margins that the *intreccio* as an immanent quality of the state’s nature and of its strategy can be recorded. This notion of the state at the margins refers to the definition of state suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, who defined the state as an apparatus of capture that presupposes an exteriority on which the state asserts a right to capture: “The State itself has always been in relation to an outside and is inconceivable independent of that relationship. . . . The State is sovereignty. But sovereignty only reigns over what it is capable of internalizing, of appropriating locally” (1987, 360).

When analyzing the effects of neoliberal processes, some anthropologists have pointed to the eroding effect that flows of money, commodities, weapons, and ideologies have on states’ power, contributing to the deterritorialization of an increasingly diasporic and transnational world (Appadurai 1996; Ferguson 2006). In a post 9/11 world, Jean Comaroff, for example, stressed that when the state outsources certain functions, it weakens itself (2011, 70). And yet, as Carolyn Nordstrom highlighted, the “shadow networks” that today mark a transnational reality, though they are not composed by states themselves, “neither are they entirely distinct from, or opposite to, states—they work both through and around formal state representatives and institutions” (2000, 36). In other words, being at the same time inside and outside the state, they are an extension of the state’s power. To this respect, in more recent times, anthropologists have been writing about the hybrid state as an analytical category to capture the intertwining of multiple actors exercising forms of political authority, including crime cartels. Analyzing the role of criminal “dons” in inner-city neighborhoods in Kingston, Jamaica, and their relation to the state, Rivke Jaffe defined the hybrid state as that system of governance that emerges from the entanglement between organized crime and the state, both intertwined in a relationship of collusion while sharing

control over urban areas and populations as part of a displacement of functions (Jaffe 2013, 735; see also Civico 2012; Goldstein 2012; Kosmatopoulos 2011; and Trouillot 2001).

Rather than an erosion, absence, or even failure of the state, the intertwinement between illegal actors and the state is an extension of the state's sovereignty into spaces that are produced as an exteriority that still lives in a natural condition and is in need of colonization—as the Colombian senior official expressed to me as we were flying into an area once dominated by the guerrillas. In other words, it represents an extension of the state's power, not its diminution, “generating patterns of ‘variegated’ or ‘graduated’ sovereignty” (Jaffe 2013, 735).

In his cultural interpretation of young combatants in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Danny Hoffman (2011) used Deleuze and Guattari's notion of “War Machines” to analyze the relation, processes, and practices of neoliberal rationalities and economies of scales. Intrinsically, War Machines stand in opposition to the state apparatus, and the two terms are in and of themselves mutually exclusive. While the state is an apparatus of capture, the war machine is a line of flight, like the movement of nomads generating constant deterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari wrote that the war machine “is of nomadic origin and is directed against the state apparatus” (1987, 230). But war machines are destined not to be eternal and are eventually captured by the state. In this process, the war machine changes in nature and in function, since it is now “directed against the nomad and all state destroyers” (*ibid.*, 418).

Paramilitary death squads in Colombia, then, can be interpreted as the war machine acquired by the state to produce violence and extend its sovereignty over spaces seen as external, wild, and unruly. Rather than seeing paramilitaries as weakening the power of the state, their intertwinement with the state should be interpreted as the *modus operandi* of the state at the margins. The notion of state and war machine suggested by Deleuze and Guattari should serve not for descriptive purposes, but rather as an epistemological strategy to highlight the *intreccio* as an immanent quality of the state and one that is expressed in the fluidity of processes, practices, and mechanisms by which the state reinforces and perpetuates its power—including collusion with criminal organizations, such as paramilitaries and death squads.

Chapter 1 provides an account of a meeting that I had at a ranch in the Middle Magdalena region with a man everyone called El Doctor (“the

doctor”), a former drug lord and supporter of the paramilitaries. The events in the Doctor’s life intermingle with the history of paramilitaries’ rise in the 1980s in Colombia. The Middle Magdalena region, in fact, was the cradle of the paramilitaries, a project that rapidly extended to other regions across the country. The ranch, where important meetings in the history of paramilitaries in Colombia took place, therefore also became a metaphor for the country and the entanglements that have shaped much of its recent history.

Chapter 2 presents the abridged life history of several members of the paramilitaries whom I have met and interviewed during my fieldwork over the years. Beyond an account of events that led several young to men enroll in the paramilitaries, these stories highlight the context in which such biographies have developed. The lived experiences of paramilitaries allows us to look at the linkages that exist between the personal stories of individuals and the larger forces and social worlds that are at play in the production of those webs of significance that, as Clifford Geertz suggested, we ourselves spin. The lived experience of these young men are the stories of individuals who have been living at the margins, recruited to be the mediators of terror on that threshold that Taussig (1987) has defined as the “space of death.”

Chapter 3 provides an analysis of paramilitaries’ spectacular violence, focusing on the notion of *limpieza* (“cleansing”) used by paramilitaries to justify their massacres, selective killings, and disappearances. Analyzing the history of the paramilitaries’ penetration of a subregion of the Antioquia department and the ethnographic data that I collected in a town where paramilitaries committed a major massacre, the chapter not only presents the modes of conquest and domination applied by the paramilitaries, but also interprets the spectacularity of their deeds as the expenditure of their force, which in turn consolidated their power as well as their legitimacy.

Chapter 4 is an ethnography of cocaine in a rural area of Colombia. It presents an account of my visit to rural areas of the country run by a drug lord and his private army of paramilitaries. In this chapter, I present a description of the life of the town, the work of peasants in a coca field, and the policing done by paramilitaries. The observations and interviews recorded during my stay highlight how cocaine has become a commodity that regulates the economic, political, and social dynamics of societies living in rural areas. Cocaine is a commodity that allows for both desire and terror to flourish, engendering the contradictory and complex reality that marks what I call despo-capitalist spaces, in which paramilitaries and drug lords dominate with the direct or indirect assent of the state.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the nature of the Italian Mafia and the intertwinement between states and organized crime. To this end, I suggest a comparison between the origins of the Mafia in Sicily and that of the paramilitaries in Colombia, underlining how the relationship with the state is what characterizes the Mafia. Beyond the complicity that often exists between paramilitary groups and the military, this chapter also takes into consideration the ties that the paramilitaries have developed in the fields of politics and business. Thus, the paramilitaries appear as a war machine that the state has acquired. The chapter questions traditional definitions of the state as being the entity that holds the monopoly on the use of force and analyzes how its articulation with illegal groups, such as paramilitaries, does not suggest that the state is either absent or weak in the spaces where paramilitaries are dominant, but rather suggests that the state's intertwinement with the paramilitaries is one of the modes of capture in which the state engages to express its function in areas that it produces as an externality.

The final chapter is an account and interpretation of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process of paramilitaries in Medellín, which began in 2003. It is a process that emerged from a negotiation between the paramilitaries and the Colombian government and that saw leaders of the paramilitaries lobbying before Congress, which resulted in lenient punishment for the authors of massacres and the massive displacement of people. Based on my historical overview of the process, coupled with my own observations, I suggest that it was a transformation of the relation that allowed the state to reaffirm its own legitimacy rather than sever its ties with the paramilitaries.