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Plan Colombia: A Political, Economic, and Cultural Analysis of Coca and Poppy Eradication Projects in Putumayo, Colombia

Carolina Pineda

Introduction

In 1999, the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) unveiled “Plan Colombia, Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State” (Chepesiuk 2001). Today, it is no wonder the above-mentioned plan is simply referred to as Plan Colombia. Upon examination, any competent analyst would recognize alternative aims and objectives to those stated in the official title of the plan. With this idea in mind, this essay will explore the existence of ulterior motives to the creation, implementation and continued support of Plan Colombia both within Colombia and at the international level. Most specifically implicated in this discussion will be the role of the government of Colombia and that of the United States and, furthermore, that of the elites of both countries respectively. Considering the scope of the issues surrounding Plan Colombia I have decided to focus primarily on one particular project initiated within its framework and funding -- that of the illicit crop eradication achieved through methods of aerial spraying.

As I will demonstrate in this paper, coca and opium poppy eradication projects have had adverse consequences on local communities. Among those affected are indigenous groups situated in the Southern regions of the country. Health complications among community members and their livestock, contamination of basic food crops, and ecological destruction, among other things, have been directly attributed to aerial spraying. I will discuss these consequences and moreover, suggest reasons for the continued practice and support of this method. In this instance, I will consider the position of the current Colombian government on Plan Colombia and, most specifically, its support of aerial spraying. Despite the outcry of indigenous peoples and their sympathizers in both Colombia and the international community, such methods of crop eradication are under no threat of suspension. On the contrary, as I will argue in this paper, aerial spraying and, more precisely, its accompanying consequences are directly linked to the hidden agenda of the Colombian government and the Colombian elite. The United States, as we shall see, is also implicated in these dynamics.

Using a theoretical framework based on my reading of William Roseberry, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Flaetto, I will explore the nature of enthusiasm expressed by some members of Colombian society towards Plan Colombia and additionally, towards continued relations between Colombia and the United States. As I will argue in this paper, U.S. interests in Colombia are served by and moreover, internalized by a powerful fraction of Colombian society. This group includes, but is not limited to, the Colombian elite and the rising middle classes. Theoretical speculations in this respect, though admittedly lacking in specificity, can serve the purpose of discussing ulterior aims and objectives to Plan Colombia nonetheless. In this sense, this discussion will serve as more of a starting point for reflection and contemplation of my research findings than as a definitive presentation of answers and conclusions.

A Brief History of Plan Colombia

As mentioned in the introduction, it was the government of Andrés Pastrana that unveiled Plan Colombia in 1999. Essentially, Plan Colombia is a multi-billion dollar project designed by the Colombian and U.S. governments to tackle the roots of the international narcotics industry and, by extension, the rising group of Colombian insurgents reportedly supported by drug-related income. As one expert explains “The aim [of Plan Colombia] was to reduce the inflow of drugs into the United States, the world’s largest market for narcotics, while strengthening Colombia’s armed forces in their fight against leftist rebels” (Vieira 2003: 4). Among the groups specifically targeted by Plan Colombia
are guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

At its onset, Plan Colombia was designed as a two-year mainly military aid package for Colombia and its Andean neighbours (U.S. Department of State 2001). Pastrana pledged $4 billion of this amount and called upon the international community to provide the remaining sum. Among those to respond to Pastrana’s requests was the United States. According to the U.S. Department of State, $1.3 billion in interagency assistance to Colombia would be provided in response to Plan Colombia. This sum was to be added to previously approved U.S. assistance totaling over $330 million.

Funds received through Plan Colombia are used mainly for counter-narcotics purposes. More specifically, these funds are used in the procurement and support of sophisticated helicopters, high-tech drug interdiction equipment, weaponry and the training of military personnel. As some have noted, approximately 80% of Plan Colombia’s funding is directed towards the various needs of military and police forces. The costly programs of aerial fumigation carried out by these state groups are among those funded by Plan Colombia. Twenty million dollars of U.S. approved assistance to Colombia, for example, is allocated especially to the purchase and support of Ayers S2R T-65 aerial spray aircrafts (U.S. Department of State 2001). To date, Colombia is the single largest recipient of military aid in all of Latin America (Vieira 2003). This aid, however, is received at high social costs.

Social Costs of Plan Colombia

According to a statement produced by a group of NGOs at the International Conference for Peace and Human Rights in October of 2002, for example, “International agencies are fully convinced that Plan Colombia, as it is designed will not contribute to Peace but rather, we fear, will result in more deaths and despair for the Colombian people” (Fletcher 2003). These feelings echoed a similar position taken by Amnesty International in June of the same year. After careful review of Plan Colombia and its effects on local populations, they produced a statement completely opposing it. In their own words “the organization has serious concerns regarding the impact of Plan Colombia on human rights and the armed conflict” (Amnesty International 2000). Many local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) share a similar disdain for Plan Colombia and have refused to accept Plan Colombia funding. Nataly Fletcher reports in her article Advocates or Obstacles? NGOs and Plan Colombia, for example, “[i]n August of 2002, a coalition of 37 Colombian NGOs rejected the plan due to ethical and political difficulties and urged the European Union to search for alternatives to Plan Colombia” (2003: 22). Despite national and international outcry, however, Plan Colombia received approximately $1.4 million dollars of U.S aid per day between 1999 and 2002 (Vieira 2003: 1). Furthermore, Plan Colombia has maintained its position of top priority on the agenda of current government officials. Strong support of Plan Colombia, its goals and its objectives by Colombian president Alvaro Uribe (2000-2004) is a case in point.

To more fully understand the nature of national and international opposition to Plan Colombia it is first necessary to describe one of the major projects funded by this officially proclaimed “war on drugs.” In an attempt to gain control over coca and opium poppy producing regions of the country, the government has taken initiative in spraying large sections of the Colombian countryside with highly poisonous herbicides. As one source explains “[b]etween December 22, 2000 and February 2001, the Colombian government, with new military hardware from Plan Colombia, and the support of recently US trained anti-narcotics battalions, ordered the armed forces to begin aerial fumigation with a chemical known as glyphosate” (Rights and Democracy 2001: 29). In total, an estimated 60,000 hectares of coca and poppy fields were targeted throughout the country (ibid.). In what follows, I will briefly discuss crop eradication projects in Putumayo, examine the consequences of their use on local peoples, flora and fauna, and finally, discuss their efficacy in eliminating coca and poppy production in the region.

Coca and Poppy Eradication Projects

The department of Putumayo is located in the southern region of Colombia along the border with Ecuador. This area has been described as being rich in minerals and other natural resources (Kristensen 2003). Putumayo is the epicenter of Plan Colombia and has been the main target of government-initiated schemes of coca field fumigation since the implementation of Plan Colombia. In the year 2003, 200,000 hectares of coca fields were fumigated within the region (Chepesiuk 2001). This process involved the use of about 4.6
million liters of herbicides containing high doses of glyphosphate (Chepesiuk 2001). These herbicides are known by their commercial name as Roundup and are produced by the American company of Monsanto (Kristensen 2003, Walcott 2003). The warning Monsanto places on its product tell of its adverse effects on local populations and ecology. I will quote the Roundup label at length as it important to this discussion:

Roundup will kill almost any green plant that is actively growing.... Take care to spray Roundup only on the weeds you want to kill- don't allow the spray to contact plants you like or they may die too.... Roundup should not be applied to bodies of water such as ponds, lakes or streams as Roundup can be harmful to certain aquatic organisms.... After an area is sprayed with Roundup, people and pets (such as cats and dogs) should stay out of the area until it is thoroughly dry.... We recommend that grazing animals such as horses, cattle, sheep, goats, rabbits, tortoises and fowl remain out of the treated area for two weeks ...” (Walcott 2003:31).

Interestingly, the specific formula of Roundup used in Colombia, that of Roundup SL, has not been approved for use within the United States. Furthermore, as a source reports, “it [Roundup SL] has been combined with surfactants, or soapy additives, in order to increase toxicity” (Kristensen 2003: 23).

In the Collins dictionary, glyphosphate (the principle ingredient in Roundup SL) is described as “a systemic nonselective herbicide used in certain commercial weed killers” (emphasis mine). Though government fumigation programs are hypothetically intended to target only illicit crops, the results are not always so hopeful. The use of sophisticated equipment like the agricultural spray aircrafts purchased and supported by Plan Colombia funds are insufficient to ensure that only coca and opium poppy fields are eradicated. Uncontrollable factors, such as natural wind drift, handicap any attempts to contain aerial spraying over specified fields. Drifts of these herbicides onto fields of basic food crops like yucca, plantain, and maize and onto livestock like pigs and cattle are therefore not uncommon. The fact that glyphosphates act indiscriminately upon spraying further contributes to the dangers of using it in regions of rich biological diversity.

As members in one Putumayo municipality attest, there are clear connections between the aerial crop fumigation and the contamination of local food crops and livestock. The delegates of a mission to Colombia between May 27 and June 3, 2001, were shown “elaborated lists of family losses, including the number of hectares or animals, as well as the exact date of the fumigation” by members of several Putumayo communities they visited (Rights and Democracy 2001:30). In another Putumayo community, one indigenous leader testified to the adverse effects of aerial crop fumigation. In his own words:

Even our own products aren’t doing well. For example, the coffee and cocoa crops were good 15 months ago, but not anymore. They don’t grow. The papayas that we plant grow and flower, but the leaves die. It is strange what happens. These have to be the effects of the spraying. It begins right after they spray” (Walcott 2003:32 emphasis mine).

A general loss of livelihood and, in some instances, situations of severe food crisis are among the related consequences of food crop and livestock contamination with glyphosphates (Kosec 2003).

The most disturbing consequences of Roundup use in Plan Colombia crop eradication initiatives are those that the toxic herbicide has on the health of local populations. In a recent study carried out in rural parts of Colombia “82.6% of the 403 people interviewed had experienced some type of health problem or illness within the four weeks after an aircraft sprayed near their homes or workplaces” (Kristensen 2003: 25). In this study, among the most reported health problems associated with Roundup were those of gastrointestinal or digestive tract complications (82.6%), skin irritations (58.3%), and eye problems (26.1%) (Kristensen 2003). Government officials, however, refused to take responsibility for this. One indigenous member of a Putumayo community says that Colombian authorities “told him that the idea that aerial herbicide spraying affects human health was ‘a lie’” (Kosec 2003: 46). At most, government officials will admit that contact with Roundup will cause minor eye irritation similar to the experience of having
baby shampoo in the eyes (Rights and Democracy 2001). Either way, Roundup continues to be the product of choice for Plan Colombia goals to eradicate illicit crops in the Putumayo region.

Is Plan Colombia Successful?

Considering the amount of money and effort that go into these projects it is reasonable to inquire about their status in achieving stated goals and objectives. Have projects of illicit crop eradication been successful in decreasing levels of coca and poppy production in Colombia? Although I consulted many sources for the purpose of this paper I was hard pressed to find any positive comments about the “success” of aerial spraying. As one of such sources reports “After four years, Plan Colombia has not led to a reduction in the land planted in coca or opium poppies, despite U.S. aid to the military and the police that has amounted to nearly $1.4 million a day over that period” (Vieira 2003:1). Some have even suggested that levels of coca and poppy production have actually increased in Colombia and its bordering neighbours since eradication programs began (Petras 2002).

In light of unstable markets and demand for legal food crops like coffee and yucca it is understandable that many Colombian farmers cling to coca and poppy production for their livelihoods. In the specific case of the Putumayo region, for example, “Since this state-abandoned and impoverished area of Colombia offers little in the way of viable economic alternatives, people, in desperation, move further into the Amazon jungle or to the Pacific Coast in order to continue growing the only crop that allows them to survive” (Rights and Democracy 200:30). In this sense, as one field is eradicated, new ones are quickly cultivated in more southern regions as a response. The particularly well-suited ecosystems of Southern Colombia and its neighbours for coca and poppy growth further contribute to the possibility of these dynamics. As I recall from my Cultures of Latin America course last year, for example, these areas tend to promise a bountiful harvest of coca approximately four times a year (Clark 2003). With the local government providing few alternatives to this stable income, local farmers have little incentive to alternate their livelihood strategies.

Furthermore, government promises to support local farmers in their transition to alternative crop production have proved unfruitful. On December, 7 2001, for example, a group of 62 international NGOs wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell addressing this concern stating “six months after the agreements [pacts of recompensation for losses and support in alternating livelihood], residents had received no funds” (Fletcher 2003:23). In this instance, local communities are hard pressed to find reasons to abandon coca and poppy production. In many cases, it is only in the production of illegal crops that these communities, like those of the Putumayo region, can continue to survive.

Given this, it becomes obvious that Plan Colombia is ineffective in targeting the international narcotics industry at its very roots. Not only does the plan exasperate miserable conditions throughout the country, as seen in Putumayo, but these conditions further encourage coca and poppy production among local farmers. Moreover, the government’s neglect of pressing social issues linked to Plan Colombia like forced internal displacement, economic crisis and food shortage have led many Colombians to seek refuge among some of the rebel groups targeted by military and police forces. According to a Human Rights Watch report on Colombian child soldiers, for example, many children and youth joined guerilla groups “simply...out of hunger” (Semana 2003).

Despite the information presented above both the United States and Colombian governments continue to pour funds into Plan Colombia. Today, Colombian president Alvaro Uribe is as dedicated to Plan Colombia as Pastrana was in years previous. In this instance, coca and poppy eradication programs (no matter how ineffective) are in little danger of being suspended. According to one source “Aerial spraying has the full support of Uribe, who has made containment of Colombia’s guerrilla forces his top priority” (Walcott 2003:29). In that illicit crops reportedly sustain insurgent groups, Uribe’s logic follows that eliminating the former will subsequently weaken the latter. This logic, as I have learned, is the basis for justifying continued instances of aerial spraying.

However, like many of the justifications for Plan Colombia and its projects, Uribe’s logic is flawed. The big bucks in the illegal drug market are not being made by so-called “narco-guerrillas.” According to James Petras, such groups are making relatively little profit from coca and poppy cultivation as they only produce and tax raw material (2002). As he notes in his article The Geopolitics of Plan Colombia, “the
big profits are in the processing and commercialization in the export market and the laundering of drug profits" (Petras 2002:47). In this sense, a genuine attack on the narcotics industry might be better fought elsewhere. For some, this attack might be more tactfully directed towards the largest consumer of illegal drugs like cocaine and opium in the world: the United States (Chomsky 2000, Walcott 2003, Podur 2003).

With this point in mind, if Plan Colombia funding could be redirected towards the “demand end of things”, perhaps the Colombian and U.S. governments would see results more fitting to their aims of countering the narcotics industry. As one study concluded: “$34 million spent on treatment of drug addicts reduces cocaine use by one percent. The same result costs $360 million when coca production interdiction methods are used” (Walcott 2003: 35). Given the potential of alternative measures to the “war on drugs” and the evident failure of Plan Colombia to achieve its stated goals and objectives, it seems curious that Plan Colombia would continue to receive so much support from both the Colombian and U.S. governments. In the midst of similar ponderings, Noam Chomsky suggests an insightful interpretation in his book Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs. In this respect Chomsky writes: “It is only reasonable to conclude that the ‘war on drugs,’ cast in the harshly punitive forms implemented in the past 20 years is achieving its goals, not failing” (2000:81, emphasis in original). In examining aerial spraying schemes, Chomsky’s observation becomes particularly pertinent.

What is Plan Colombia Actually Achieving?

As I have demonstrated above, these schemes are doing little to decrease the overall production of coca and poppy production. They have, however, been quite successful in exasperating miserable (and in many instances unlivable) conditions for the indigenous communities throughout targeted regions like Putumayo. Increased instances of health complications among local populations and ecological damage observed in these regions are cases in point. In many of these instances, displacement into other regions of the country is the only viable alternative for local peoples. To date, Colombia has the fourth largest population of internally displaced individuals in the world (U.S. Department of State 2001). Though there are many causes contributing to forced internal displacement like the armed conflict between guerrilla and the paramilitary groups, Plan Colombia conceivably contributes greatly to this phenomenon.

In the article entitled The Ones Who Preserve Our Identity: Women, Children and Plan Colombia author Katrina Kosec speaks to this connection between Plan Colombia and forced displacement. As Kosec states “Migration necessitated by food and work shortages, personal danger, or orders from the government or other actors has emptied entire indigenous territories” (Kosec 2003: 47). In the case of Putumayo, local indigenous leaders reported that displacement out of the region following overhead aerial spraying was, in many instances, the only alternative for their communities (Rights and Democracy 2001). In this sense, it is clear that aerial spraying in Putumayo, while contributing little to decreasing coca and poppy production in the region is, in fact, quite successful in accomplishing one thing: clearing out vast regions of land for alternative purposes. The fact that Putumayo is a region characterized by its richness in minerals and natural resources adds further clarity to our understanding of Plan Colombia’s goals.

Unlimited access to oil reserves in the region, for example, would be a direct consequence of securing control over Putumayo. Oil, it must be remembered, is the primary source of energy in the United States (Petras 2002). With this in mind, support of Plan Colombia by wealthy oil companies like BP-Amoco and Occidental Petroleum is quite understandable (Kristensen 2000). According to Kristensen, Putumayo has been handed over to approximately 28 different multinational companies in the past several years (2003)! As I have learned, indigenous communities are a major obstacle to oil-seeking mongers like those mentioned above. Although indigenous peoples make up only 2% of the Colombian population, the 1991 Constitution grants them territorial autonomy over large portions of land throughout the country (Podur 2003). To this extent human rights activist Hector Mondragón writes: “their [indigenous communities’] territory extends over 21 percent of Colombia, and contains a high percentage of the natural renewable and nonrenewable exploitable resources. For example, over 50 percent of the petroleum is located on indigenous territory” (Mondragón 2004). Territorial autonomy in these regions would therefore hinder direct control of Putumayo natural
resources by non-indigenous peoples and companies. Again, it becomes clearer that emptying Putumayo would consequently rid the area of potential obstacles to accessing unlimited oil and other such natural resources.

Using the “war on drugs” as a guise, Plan Colombia has ulterior motives in mind. As Chomsky observes “it [the war on drugs] regularly serves the interests of private wealth: interests revealed by the pattern of winners and losers, targets and non-targets, well-funded and under-funded in accord with the main interests of US foreign and domestic policy generally and the private sector that has overriding influence in policy” (2000:81). These motives, as the case of Putumayo has shown, take little consideration of Colombian indigenous communities. And, despite the outcry of many Colombian NGOs and international organizations, Plan Colombia is in little danger of being put to a halt.

Any critical website, article, or book on Plan Colombia has the winners and losers sketched out quite clearly. For the most part, the United States is recognized as having the most to gain from Plan Colombia. As one such argument goes “The strategic goal [of the United States in Plan Colombia] is to reconsolidate power in Northern South America, secure unrestricted access to oil, and enforce the ‘no alternatives to globalization’ ideology” (Petras 2002:34). Increased U.S presence in Colombia via Plan Colombia facilitates the attainment of the abovementioned goals. Following the United States, there is a section of Colombian elite who benefit directly from Plan Colombia. These are mainly the national companies involved in natural resource exploitation. Again, their access to resources such as oil is hindered by indigenous presence in regions like Putumayo and their constitutional rights to territorial autonomy. This group of elite and, furthermore, members of the upper middle class, fully support Plan Colombia and the accompanying implications of increased U.S intervention in domestic affairs (Petras 2002).

The United States, the Colombian Elite, and the Middle Classes
The United States and this stratum of Colombian elite are inextricably linked. Drawing from the work of Cardoso and Faletto it is clear that in the relations described above “foreign interests have internal expression through the action of groups and persons who represent them or have advantages in their presence” (1979:27). The pressure national elites and the upper middle classes exert on national policy, for example, often accommodate U.S interests in Colombia. Conversely, U.S intervention in Colombia through Plan Colombia projects and initiatives secures the interests (mainly financial) of the elite stratum of the country.

What remains unclear, however, is the support Plan Colombia receives throughout the Colombian middle classes. As I have discovered in my research, this support is considerably widespread. The popularity of current president Alvaro Uribe and his political agenda among voters is a case in point. Maintaining Plan Colombia’s “war on drugs” as a platform priority, Uribe managed to secure 53.4% of the Colombian vote in 1998. This percentage is substantial when compared to the support received by Uribe’s competitors: Horacio Serpa 31.72%, Luis Garzón 6.18%, Noemi Sanin 5.82% and other candidates 3.24% (IFES Election Guide 2004).

As revealed in an opinion poll featured in London, Ontario’s local Latin American newspaper, 76% of Colombian voters are in favour of Uribe’s re-election in the upcoming presidential campaign (Prensa Latina 2004). As the article states, Uribe’s popularity may very well be “the highest that any Colombian president has had in more than a decade” (2004). Support for Uribe is strongly felt when taking into consideration the Colombian Constitution. Article 197 of the 1991 Constitution specifically states that “[n]o citizen who has served a term of presidency can be re-elected president of the Republic” (1991:51). Many Colombians, however, are willing to make the necessary amendments to the constitution in order to have Uribe as head of the nation.

The question remains as to why such widespread approval of Uribe, Plan Colombia, and most especially continued U.S. presence within the country exist among the Colombian middle class. When considering the history of U.S relations in other parts of Latin America this enthusiasm becomes more puzzling. The well-documented instances of U.S intervention in Nicaragua and Guatemala are cases in point. Nonetheless, I refuse to view the middle class as a group of thoughtless individuals. This abstract mass needs to be analyzed by considering the very real, thinking and feeling actors that compose it. This standpoint is essential in an attempt to understand political and economic
process as social processes (Cardoso and Faletto 1979).

The dynamics between Colombia and the United States need to be understood, to borrow Eric Wolf’s analogy, off the billiard table (Roseberry 1989). Initially, I understood Plan Colombia to be a direct imposition of U.S. hegemony in Colombia via political and economic means. I never considered, however, the infiltration of U.S. hegemony socially. More specifically, I never suspected U.S. interest to find expression amidst the Colombian middle classes. Such allegiances to the United States were more fathomable throughout the elite and upper-middle class stratum of Colombian society. As I mentioned above, U.S. intervention in Colombia would directly benefit such groups in their own economic and political ventures.

In their book, Dependency and Development in Latin America, Cardoso and Faletto explain that it is “traditional groups” (i.e. large landlords) and the “new middle class” in Latin America that are “often the main sustaining force for foreign interests” (1979:27). Listed members of this middle class include “technicians, private and public employers, people devoted to the social sector, professionals, and so forth” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979: 27). It is these members of society that, according to Cardoso and Faletto, have progressively gained more strength in Latin America (1979). In Colombia, for example, it is this mass of people that has the potential to democratically direct domestic policy and politics. Uribe’s election by the majority of Colombian voters reflects this point. U.S. interests in Colombia are thus “democratically” expressed through the support of Uribe’s voters.

In making this point I must acknowledge the incidences of terror, violence and intimidation that reportedly surrounded Uribe’s campaign. In fact, these incidences are wide-spread throughout most Colombian elections. On October 25, 2003, for example, municipal and departmental elections witnessed the death of 13 voters and 30 candidates (Podur 2003). An additional 180 candidates withdrew from the running out of fear for their lives (Podur 2003). I am therefore not naively painting a picture of Colombian society as “democratic.” However, I do think I can say with confidence that Uribe is well-supported among a large and powerful stratum of Colombian society. Mainly, as I stated above, the Colombian middle class.

What then am I to make of this apparent widespread support for Uribe and, in extension, continued relations with the United States? This is, as I have discovered, a very complicated matter. William Roseberry’s work entitled Americanization in the Americas, however, helped me move towards a better understanding of the issues outlined above. More specifically, Roseberry alerted me to the political, economic and, most importantly, cultural forces that are at play in the dynamic relations between Colombia and the United States. Unbeknownst to myself, I had initially conceptualized these relations in terms of autonomous “external” and “internal” factors (Roseberry 1989). According to this understanding, foreign interests expressed by internal actors were best comprehended in terms of the political and the economic pressures exerted by the former (external) onto the latter (internal).

I never took into account, however, the consideration of cultural forces aiding in the establishment of U.S. hegemony in Colombia. To be more precise though, I never expected these cultural forces to come from within Colombian society itself. Roseberry’s explanation of the “internalization of the external” phenomena clarified my understanding of the nature of widespread support of Uribe in Colombia (1989). It is through this support, as I have demonstrated above, that those U.S. interests find a viable means of expression in domestic policy and current political agendas. It is through the internalization of external foreign interests by the Colombian middle class that have welcomed the United States into Colombia through the front door.

Understanding the nature of this internalization is another complicated matter. I cannot, for example, understand the allegiance middle class individuals might have towards the United States. In the case of Putumayo, why would middle class individuals choose to align themselves with exploitive multi-national companies? This position, as I showed earlier, directly encourages among other things continued environmental degradation of the region. This degradation affects all of Colombia and not just the particular indigenous groups and ecology of the area in question.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps this summer, when I am in Colombia I will be able to better understand these issues. I will be able to discuss what I have learned in this paper with many Colombians and perhaps, gain a different perspective than the one presented here. From afar, Plan Colombia seems
like just another scheme permitting increased U.S. intervention in Latin America. It also seems like a plan benefiting mainly American interests. The helicopters and herbicides used in coca and poppy crop eradication programs, for example, are all made in American. Profits from these products are at stake if Plan Colombia falls under question.

The elites and upper classes of Colombia are also implicated in profiting from Plan Colombia at the expense of other Colombians. As I mentioned above, this group often has direct connections and investments in the oil companies situated in Putumayo. And though these elites are often challenged by guerilla groups like the FARC, I think that a long history of class stratification in the country has provided them with a space in which to exercise power, privilege and dominance over others. And the middle class, as it progressively gains more strength in the country, is competing for access to this formerly restricted space of upward movement and opportunity. It is perhaps within this competition that Plan Colombia is internalized and interpreted as being in some way beneficial to this group. The middle class is, after all, one of the main supporting groups of Plan Colombia.

It is in considering the divergent interests of these two groups and the interests of uprising indigenous movements in the country that have made me suspect that social change in Colombia is looming. None of these groups are homogeneous. There are contradictions and tensions within the groups as much as there is between them. If, according to Cardoso and Faletto, “social change depends on historical alternatives” (1979:14) then it is perhaps in the expression of difference between and within groups that social change resides. Let us hope, however, that this change takes into consideration the heterogeneity that characterizes the Colombia nation.

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