

*BOOK REVIEW*

Jasmin Hristov. 2009. *Blood & Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia*. Toronto: Between the Lines. ISBN 9781897071502. Paperback: 29.95 CAD. Pages: 320.

Reviewed by Henry Veltmeyer  
St. Mary's University

From a socialist or activist social change perspective this is a very good book indeed on a very important topic. As noted on the jacket we Canadians are all too familiar with '*la violencia*' in Colombia – a long history of violence and a protracted class war misrepresented by many scholars (not this author fortunately) as a civil war or as political disputation among different factions of the elite or 'political class' – shedding the blood of generations of Colombians in different sectors of society. In the political imaginary and image constructed in the media the perpetrators of this violence generally are those caught in the crossfire of drug traffickers and FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), an army of national liberation (and social justice and transformation), the only one that survived the repression of the state in pre-neoliberal times. However, as the author documents at length on the basis of careful research, this image has been manufactured for ideological and political ends. The reality is quite otherwise. Most of the violence, in fact, has been perpetrated by the paramilitary and regular armed forces of what the author describes as the Colombian state's 'coercive apparatus,' and the victims of this violence for the most part have been activists and supporters of all sorts--lawyers, human rights activists, workers, peasants, students and others in the popular sector, deemed to be sympathetic to FARC.

A deconstruction of the recent history of political violence as a matter of 'blood and capital' is very welcome. What is particularly relevant in the author's approach and analysis is the digging up and finding the roots of the violence in the repressive or coercive apparatus of the state, penetrated by paramilitary forces and other agents of the propertied and capitalist class, truly a ruling class in the Colombian context. Coercive state power, as the author reconstructs it, is operated largely in the interests of capital, and wielded by those who have taken it upon themselves, or are armed mercenaries working for, and paid by, different elements of the

dominant class. This includes the paramilitary forces of the political reaction, who are, moreover, well connected to the political establishment, reaching well into the government itself – virtually a clandestine arm of the state’s repressive apparatus. The connections between the paramilitary and members of the government, the judiciary and armed forces in fact have been well documented, but the author adds to this documentation a very sharp class analysis of the political dynamics involved. The author’s analysis of these links is timely and important, but what is of even greater importance is the connection that the author makes between the paramilitary and the economic interests behind them: the connection of blood to capital.

The book is organised in the form of seven chapters, each focused on a critical dimension of the capitalist (and narco/proto-fascist) state in the workings of its repressive apparatus. I would judge the book to have originated in a doctoral dissertation – it bears the marks of a carefully crafted theoretical frame and careful research. But fortunately it has been carefully reconstructed to provide an exceedingly well-written and very readable non-academic treatment that is accessible to any interested or informed reader. Needless to say, the author’s ideological slant is anti-capital, making the book of particular interest to those with socialist leanings or persuasion. Notwithstanding this slant, the analysis is scrupulously ‘objective’ in its concern to present all of the relevant and normally ignored ‘facts,’ and for all that deeply ‘political’ in its implications – and the clear understanding that the book provides of the state under conditions of a violent class struggle, capitalist development and neoliberal globalization.

The book deserves to be widely distributed and needs to be carefully read. Would that this readership reaches beyond the Canadian and international Left to affect a change in government policy towards Colombia.