

**Daniel Pécaut,
Orden y violencia:
Colombia 1930-54.**

Bogotá: Siglo XXI-CEREC, 1987.

Catherine LeGrand
Queen's University

The product of twenty years research, this book is essential reading for historians, sociologists, political scientists, and indeed anyone who wants to know how Colombia became what she is today. French sociologist Daniel Pécaut advances a stimulating new interpretation of recent Colombian history, impressive for its meticulous research, theoretical sophistication, and comparative focus.

According to Pécaut, every nation faces the problem of establishing a durable political order; to do this, it is necessary to institutionalize relations between the political and social spheres. Owing to the history of conquest and their dependent position in the world economy, all Latin American countries were to various degrees heterogeneous and fragmented; as a result, Latin American thinkers looked to the State to create societal and national unity.

The questions Pécaut addresses are: How have the relations between State and society in Colombia evolved over time? How has the persistence of strong party identification affected the Colombian State's efforts to mediate the interaction of social groups? Why do we not find in Colombia organized social movements capable of influencing political outcomes? What does explain the coincidence of civil democracy and ongoing violence?

According to Pécaut, the 1930s and 1940s in Latin America marked the rise of the interventionist State in Brazil and Mexico. In Colombia, too, Alfonso López Pumarejo sought to reinforce the State by extending citizenship to those sectors of society previously excluded from the political process particularly urban labor. This innovative political vision, however, never became fully entrenched.

Beneath the symbolic recognition of popular rights, Pécaut stresses the fundamental weakness

of the Colombian State, which was always permeated by elite private interests which never assumed a major role in regulating the economy. The "precariousness" of the Colombian State stemmed from the persistent political division between Liberal and Conservative parties and from the fact that, in contrast to Brazil, the economic interest of the Colombian coffee bourgeoisie never required State intervention.

In the late 1930s, a bourgeois-oligarchic counteroffensive promoted the return to liberal (that is, unregulated) models of economy and society. During a period of rising social mobilization, the institutional channels that Alfonso López Pumarejo had created were dismantled—those very channels that would have allowed social conflict to find political expression. Once again labor was excluded from political access.

At the same time, the populist movement of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and the fundamentalist conservative movement of Laureano Gómez began to articulate new images of society that denied the promise of social unity at the heart of the 1930s "Revolución en Marcha". Gaitán and Gómez in different ways both portrayed Colombia as irrevocably divided—into two parties, into insiders and outsiders, into civilized people and barbarians. Seeking to build his own following, Gaitán opposed the unions; the effect of his political discourse and activity was to deny the urban poor institutional means for incorporation into the body politic. Together with the bourgeois-oligarchic counteroffensive, Gaitán's symbolic stance contributed indirectly to the outbreak of La Violencia.

According to Pécaut, the inception of La Violencia is linked to the final crisis of the State in 1947. In the late 1940s, a State with little influence in a privately run economy and with no powers of social arbitration could not legitimate itself. The political and the social had come completely apart: Colombia was torn by party antagonisms with no relation to social divisions and social antagonisms with no access to the political sphere. The public became privatized; individual differences were resolved by force. The images of deep, irreconcilable divisions in society and the representation of politics as brute force, expressed as early as 1940, came to be acted out in La Violencia. At the same time, La Violencia contributed to the persistence of a form of domination that had seemed near collapse in 1947—a model based on strong traditional parties; a weak State; private organization of the dominant classes; and disorganization of the popular masses.

This book deserves careful reading for the richness and nuance of its arguments. Pécaut's interpretations of the "Revolución en Marcha", the Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC); the Colombian Communist Party, the State, party identification, Gaitanismo, and La Violencia are bound to be controversial. But henceforth, they must be taken into account.

Pécaut's work is particularly valuable because it sets Colombia in comparative context. North American social scientists have tended to neglect Colombia because of its allegedly anomalous trajectory. Pécaut argues that in the 1930s and 1940s all Latin American countries faced certain basic questions, including how to respond to the economic depression, what role the lower classes should play in politics, and what powers to attribute to the State. Pécaut explains the logic of the Colombian response to these questions by judiciously contrasting conditions in Colombia and Brazil that led Brazil in a different direction. Furthermore, Pécaut maintains, the Colombian experience has much to teach Latin Americanists. As the coincidence of democracy and violence becomes more common in the 1980s, students of other Latin American countries will look to the Colombian case for understanding.

Beyond its many substantive insights, Pécaut's book also is interesting methodologically. The author focuses attention on how political actors "represent" —that is, how they conceptualize— their societies and the political order. Pécaut's analysis of political discourse and the myths embedded therein lies at the intersection of literary and historical analysis. This book makes a major contribution to the study of Colombian (and Latin American) political and social thought. But Pécaut also shows how the evolving socioeconomic context influenced the perceptions, interests, and options of those in power and in the urban

labor movement. And he argues that the political visions voiced in the 1930s and 1940s influenced what happened. Pécaut's method is a productive melding of political philosophy and sociology that is impressively sensitive to tensions and alternatives in the unfolding of history.

In reading any book, some questions inevitably arise. I should have liked Pécaut to have been more explicit concerning *how* representations shaped what happened. Given the relative weakness of the State and the regional fragmentation of Colombia, just how influential were the visions of social order put forth by national politicians? Pécaut's is primarily history from above, and it focuses mainly on the urban political space. We also need to know more about what was happening in the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s and more about popular perceptions of politics. Pécaut's work provides a provocative overview that certainly will stimulate research.

Furthermore, it promotes fruitful debate on some of the most important issues in recent Colombian history. To understand the contributions of scholars writing from abroad to the new history of Colombia, one would do well to compare Pécaut to Herbert Braun on interpretations of Gaitán and the role of political discourse and symbols; to Charles Bergquist on the effects of smallholder coffee production on politics and the reasons for the bility of independent labor organization in Colombia; and to Michael Taussig on the profound causes of violence¹.

In sum, Pécaut's is a seminal work that deserves to be widely read.

1. The works referred to are: Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Charles Bergquist, "Colombia", in *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 274-375; and Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: a Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).