

RESEARCH ARTICLE

War of movement: The political economy of conflict escalation in Colombia, 1990–8

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Abstract

Guided by interviews with key protagonists and extensive archival research, this article reinterprets the escalation of the Colombian armed conflict during the critical period of the 1990s. It rejects conventional characterisations of the war as an ‘internal conflict’ and challenges dominant approaches based on state weakness and economic opportunity. Instead, the article situates the FARC’s rapid expansion against the background of the international political economy, linking the conflict’s escalation to changing social relations of production. Grounded in historical materialism, and particularly drawing on the concepts of uneven and combined development, passive revolution, crisis of authority, and war of movement, the article explains how the Colombian state’s reintegration into global capitalism deepened social fragmentation, displaced subaltern populations, generated new terrains of resistance, and provoked a spreading crisis of authority that the FARC strategically exploited. It is argued that the FARC’s expansion was not a symptom of criminal degeneration but a strategic political response enabled by Colombia’s passive revolutionary transformation within the uneven and combined dynamics of global capitalism. The article contributes to broader debates in security, international political economy, global development, historical sociology, and regional studies, inviting scholars to identify the underlying but not immediately visible dynamics shaping conflict and peace.

Keywords: armed conflict; Colombia; historical materialism; political economy; state formation; uneven and combined development

Introduction

In light of Colombia’s 2016 peace agreement, it is easy to forget that in the late 1990s, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) perhaps came closer than any other insurgent group in South America to seizing state power.¹ While the Fidelistas in Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were each more successful in ultimately achieving their political objectives, the FARC developed into the largest and most militarily formidable guerrilla group in Latin America. At its peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it numbered 15,000–22,000 combatants, enjoyed extensive territorial control, and was financed by many millions of dollars annually.² In light of the FARC’s

¹ It could perhaps be debated whether Peru’s Shining Path came closer to taking state power but given its rapid fragmentation following the capture of their leader, Abimael Guzmán, in 1992, one might describe the Shining Path as a ‘paper tiger’. Daniel Masterson, ‘In the Shining Path of Mariátegui, Mao Tse-Tung, or Presidente Gonzalo? Peru’s Sendero Luminoso in historical perspective’, in Daniel Castro (ed.), *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (SR Books, 2006), pp. 184–7.

² Juan Esteban and Nathalie Pabón, *Militares y guerrillas: La memoria histórica del conflicto armado en Colombia desde los archivos militares, 1958–2016*, 2nd ed. (Universidad del Rosario, 2017), pp. 288–98, 350; Jenny Paola Lis-Gutiérrez and Doris

increasing power, the US Defense Intelligence Agency even predicted that Colombia's military 'could be defeated within five years unless the country's government regains political legitimacy and its armed forces are drastically restructured'.³

However, despite the FARC's rapid growth during the 1990s, few studies have seriously engaged with the historical dynamics underpinning the conflict's escalation. Dominant approaches tend to reduce the conflict to measurable indicators of state weakness and economic incentives. Too often, the conflict has been flattered into narratives of drug trafficking, institutional fragility, and the FARC's supposed criminal degeneration. These framings overlook the underlying and historical dynamics, providing decontextualised and superficial analyses that conveniently serve elite agendas and fail to capture the conflict's drivers.⁴ Accordingly, the article builds on critical scholarship – such as that of Paarlberg-Kvam,⁵ Meger and Sachseder,⁶ and others – that has highlighted strong ties between neoliberalism and violence, while reframing conflict and peace through a historical materialist (HM) perspective that foregrounds the structural contradictions of global capitalism, transformations in state authority, and subaltern agency.

More specifically, this article analyses the conflict's escalation against the background of the broader international political economy in which it was conditioned. Grounded in historical materialism, and particularly drawing on the concepts of uneven and combined development (U&CD) and passive revolution, it explains how the reintegration of the Colombian form of state into global capitalism deepened social fragmentation, displaced subaltern populations, generated new terrains of resistance, and provoked crises of authority that enabled the FARC to transition to the war of movement. In making this argument, the article contributes to theoretical debates across security studies, IPE, historical sociology, global development, and Latin American studies by demonstrating how armed conflict and resistance are shaped by evolving processes of state formation under global capitalism. The article therefore offers a novel framework that links global and national restructuring with agency-led conflicts. Together, the intervention rejects methodological nationalist approaches, insisting that Colombia's supposedly 'internal conflict' has always been thoroughly 'internationalised'.

Unlike positivist approaches, which reduce knowledge claims to directly observable 'problems', the HM framework adopted here treats social relations and global capitalist imperatives as real even when they are not immediately observable. This challenges strict empiricism's conflation of the 'real' with the 'observable',⁷ arguing that this obscures how structure and agency are historically situated. The article's approach not only pushes against state weakness theories but also departs from the greed-vs-grievance dichotomy, resource mobilisation, and political opportunity perspectives prevalent in conflict and revolution literature.⁸ While these approaches explain conflict and

Aguilera-Hernández, 'Evolución del esquema de financiamiento de las FARC-EP (1964–2012)', in Gerardo Barbosa et al. (eds), *Milicias guerrilleras: Estudios empíricos y financieros* (Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2017), pp. 320–45.

³Douglas Farah, 'Colombian rebels seen winning war: U.S. study finds Army inept, ill-equipped', *Washington Post* (9 April 1998); NACLA, 'Multilateral invasion force for Colombia?', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 31:6 (1998), pp. 46–7 (p. 46).

⁴Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín, *Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitaries and the State in Colombia (1982–2007)* (Peter Lang, 2019), pp. 47–9.

⁵Kate Paarlberg-Kvam, 'Open-pit peace: The power of extractive industries in post-conflict transitions', *Peacebuilding*, 9:3 (2021), pp. 289–310.

⁶Sara Meger and Julia Sachseder, ' Militarised peace: Understanding post-conflict violence in the wake of the peace deal in Colombia', *Globalizations*, 17:6 (2020), pp. 953–73.

⁷Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Thought*, 3rd ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), pp. 17–18, 120.

⁸Robert Rotberg, 'Failed states, collapsed states, weak states: Causes and indicators', in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 1–25; Stathis Kalyvas, 'Civil wars', in Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 417–34 (p. 419); Paul Collier, 'Doing well out of war: An economic perspective', in Mats Berdal and David Malone (eds), *Greed & Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 91–112; Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Sarah Daly, 'Organizational legacies of violence: Conditions favoring insurgency onset in Colombia, 1964–1984', *Journal of Peace Research*, 49:3 (2012), pp. 473–91.

mobilisation through insurgent motivations and structural openings, they pay insufficient attention to the historical and international political-economic conditions that shaped these dynamics in the first place. By contrast, this HM approach foregrounds the relational and conjunctural dynamics and conceptualises causality as mediated through the dialectical interaction of structure and agency. The article thus goes beyond immediate causes and appearances, insisting on the need to incorporate the underlying dynamics into analysis.⁹

The article draws on significant fieldwork and archival research, including semi-structured interviews with key protagonists. During a seven-month fieldwork period in 2022, research was conducted in Colombia's Archivo de la Presidencia, Archivo General de la Nación, and the Luis Ángel Arango Biblioteca. Documents from the US National Security Archives were investigated to analyse developments from US intelligence and policy-making perspectives. Interviewees were chosen based on their direct involvement in the war and strategic insight into the conflict's evolution, such as FARC leaders and members of the Colombian Armed Forces. Labour union and business leaders with knowledge of the conflict's political-economic dimensions were also sought. Given the lapse of time since the 1990s, only interviews with retired officers were conducted. Access was obtained using a network of existing contacts, snowballing, and formal interview requests. All interviewees gave informed consent, with the project approved by a rigorous ethical review based in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham in 2021. Interview participants have been anonymised to protect their identities and replaced with institutional affiliations and approximate roles.

The article begins with a theoretical section criticising state weakness and economic opportunity frameworks and the conventional approach of reducing conflict escalation to measurable indicators and 'problems' isolated from historical processes. It proposes a novel HM framework as an alternative, one bridging structure and agency and allowing the conflict to be understood in its historical and international political-economic context. The article follows with four empirical sections. The first section examines Colombia's passive revolutionary reintegration into global capitalism, highlighting how this produced widespread structural dislocation. The second analyses subaltern responses to the changing political-economic environment, arguing that this created new spaces of accumulation and resistance. The third explores the broader contradictions of neoliberal restructuring – particularly the tensions between global capitalist imperatives and domestic political governance within a context of spreading crisis. The fourth turns to the FARC's strategic response as it transitioned to the war of movement by the late 1990s.

Framing conflict escalation in Colombia

As suggested, state weakness theory is one of two leading approaches explaining Colombia's conflict escalation.¹⁰ State weakness theories can be divided into two main variants: those focusing on power imbalances, and those pinpointing institutional qualities. The two variants are not mutually exclusive, and combinations of both have been employed to explain Colombia's conflict. The first variant mirrors neorealist assumptions, explaining conflict as a structural outcome of uneven power distributions between states and armed groups. Collier¹¹ has captured this logic: 'Whether rebellion is easy or difficult basically comes down to whether rebels have access to guns and money, and whether the state is effective in opposing them'. Such approaches isolate various factors to pinpoint the cause of state weakness, such as the state's inability to impose itself over the territory, the difficulties in controlling resources, and topographical characteristics (i.e., mountains

⁹Robert Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55 (pp. 128–30).

¹⁰Kalyvas, 'Civil wars', p. 419; Jenny Pearce, 'Perverse state formation and securitized democracy in Latin America', *Democratization*, 17:2 (2010), pp. 286–306 (p. 288).

¹¹Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (HarperCollins, 2009), p. 139.

and jungles). McDougall¹² summarises this variant's core reasoning accordingly: (1) state weakness provides opportunities for armed groups; (2) state weakness enables armed groups to exploit resources and opportunities; (3) the state's failure to control territory enables armed actors to create the problem of 'multiple sovereignty'. Rejecting alternative theories as 'not good predictors of conflict', McDougall concludes 'state infrastructural weakness is the primary cause of political violence in Colombia'.

Rather than focusing on uneven distributions of power, the second variant of state weakness emphasises institutional characteristics. Reflecting 'democracy promotion',¹³ such scholars often contrast 'good' with 'poor' governance. From this perspective, conflict stems from failures to consolidate particular governance types, notably inclusive and accountable institutions. In this light, Rotberg¹⁴ defines a weak state as unable to provide essential public goods, especially physical security. For Rotberg¹⁵ and Kline,¹⁶ this fosters insecurity and criminality. Asserting that its political institutions do not generate incentives for politicians to provide essential goods like public services and law and order, Acemoglu and Robinson¹⁷ contend that Colombia's conflict springs from illiberal governance. In her research on rebel social order in Colombia, Arjona¹⁸ centres institutional typologies. The nature of local governance – whether they are inclusive and civilian-led – is deemed to determine whether the FARC was able to effectively establish 'rebelocracy'. By building institutions in a pluralistic and accountable manner, such institutional approaches – mimicking the IR theory of 'democratic peace' – suggest that liberal-democratic governance is fundamental for resolving and preventing conflicts.

While the two variants of state weakness can pinpoint basic structural conditions enabling conflict, whether this be uneven power distributions or institutional typologies, both are inadequate. As Kline¹⁹ acknowledges, Colombia's state has always been 'weak', yet it was in the 1990s that the conflict dramatically escalated.²⁰ Moreover, as Kalyvas²¹ has pointed out, there are many 'weak' states, but they do not all experience widespread conflict. This emphasis on 'enablers' and 'predictors' conceals the fundamental problem with state weakness theories. They seek to abstract structural enablers from the historical dynamics in which they are formed as part of an appeal to universal validity.²² This type of argument has rightly been characterised as 'a violence of abstraction' in detaching states from their underlying social relations.²³ Failing to call into question the historical construction of states, such approaches treat states as either neutral mechanisms or static 'billiard balls',²⁴ devoid of historical character. Unable to connect state-making projects with historical processes and underlying relations, state weakness theories are unable to offer convincing explanations of conflict.

¹²Alex McDougall, 'State power and its implications for civil war Colombia', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32:4 (2009), pp. 322–45 (pp. 322–7).

¹³William Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 14–16.

¹⁴Rotberg, 'Failed states, collapsed states, weak states', pp. 1–3.

¹⁵Rotberg, 'Failed states, collapsed states, weak states', p. 15.

¹⁶Harvey Kline, 'Colombia: Lawlessness, drug trafficking, and carving up the state', in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 161–82 (pp. 175–7).

¹⁷Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (Profile Books, 2013), p. 383.

¹⁸Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 26–29.

¹⁹Kline, 'Colombia', p. 161.

²⁰U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Discussion Paper: Assessing the Situation in Colombia*, Confidential Discussion Paper NSA136-063003 (Washington DC, 1999), U.S. National Security Archive.

²¹Kalyvas, 'Civil wars', pp. 426–7.

²²Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', pp. 128–30.

²³Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism*, (Basil Blackwell, 1987).

²⁴Kayhan Valadbaygi, 'Hybrid neoliberalism: Capitalist development in contemporary Iran', *New Political Economy*, 26:3 (2021), pp. 313–27 (p. 315).

Reflecting how state weakness theories have not captured the historical dynamics or been effective predictors of Colombia's conflict's escalation, some have sought to combine theories of state weakness with a focus on economic opportunities. Such scholars spotlight economic opportunities and the economic agendas of armed actors. Like state weakness approaches, 'economic opportunity approaches' can be divided into two key variants – greed theory and what this article terms 'economic agenda analysis'. Greed theory has been linked to literature distinguishing 'old' from 'new wars', with the latter resembling a hybrid of criminality and insurgency.²⁵ Specifically, greed theory argues that rather than being motivated by grievances or political goals as professed by the insurgents themselves, what armed conflict really comes down to is profiteering. Greed theory holds that insurgents are better characterised as 'conflict entrepreneurs' fighting to perpetuate conflict for its material benefits.²⁶ In fact, Colombia is cited as a textbook case supporting greed theory. In this framing, Collier²⁷ and Sambanis²⁸ refer to the FARC as a clear-cut example of how once politically motivated groups can mutate into organised crime and drug barons. The logic of greed theory is influential not only in academic debates but also at policy levels: Colombian policymakers long petitioned US strategic planners to regard the FARC as indistinguishable from drug cartels.²⁹ Colombian President Alvaro Uribe,³⁰ under whose government (2002–10) it became official policy to categorise FARC as 'narco-terrorists', expressed greed theory's core assumptions: 'It was clear to me from the late 1980s onward, the primary motivating force among Colombia's criminals was not Marxism, social justice, or supposedly virtuous vigilantism. No, the only cause that really mattered anymore was cocaine. Everything else was just an excuse.'

Distinguishable from greed theory, economic agenda analysis recognises the importance of economic opportunities but stops short of dismissing armed groups as mere criminal profiteers. The work of Chernick³¹ and Palma³² is an example of this. They pinpoint economic opportunities for both explaining conflict escalation and internally reshaping armed groups from within. Economic agenda analysis essentially places economic opportunities at the centre. In this light, it is contended that the FARC's expansion was only possible because of its ability to extract wealth through the drug trade. Kline³³ expresses this reasoning: '[the] conflict persisted when Soviet funding dried up because of income derived from drug trafficking'.³⁴ Indeed, the former Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos,³⁵ who presided over the 2016 agreement and identified the FARC as still a

²⁵Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, 3rd ed. (Polity Press, 2012), pp. 3, 161.

²⁶David Keen, 'The economic functions of violence in civil wars', *The Adelphi Papers*, 38:320 (1998), pp. 1–13 (p. 11); David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, 'Introduction: Colombia's transition', in Dickie Davis et al. (eds), *A Great Perhaps? Colombia: Conflict and Convergence* (Hurst & Company, 2016), pp. 1–16 (pp. 6–7).

²⁷Collier, 'Doing well out of war', p. 100.

²⁸Nicholas Sambanis, 'Conclusion: Using case studies to refine and expand the theory of civil war', in Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (eds), *Understanding Civil War, Volume 1: Africa* (World Bank, 2005), pp. 303–34 (p. 324).

²⁹U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Ambassador's January 12 Meeting with the New MOD Designate*, Secret Report 1997BOGOTA00312 (Bogotá, 1997), U.S. National Security Archive.

³⁰Álvaro Uribe, *No Lost Causes* (Celebra, 2012), p. 75.

³¹Marc Chernick, 'Economic resources and internal armed conflicts: Lessons from the Colombian case', in Cynthia Arnsion and William Zartman (eds), *Rethinking the Economics of War: The Intersection of Need, Creed, and Greed* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005), pp. 178–205 (pp. 181–2).

³²Oscar Palma, *Commercial Insurgencies in the Networked Era: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* (Routledge, 2019), p. 183.

³³Harvey Kline, *Between the Sword and the Wall: The Santos Peace Negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* (University of Alabama Press, 2020), pp. 2–3.

³⁴It is an unproven and controversial claim that FARC ever received Soviet funding. Former FARC leaders told me that a key obstacle to growth was their failure to receive external support, whether from the Soviets, Cubans, or others. According to multiple interviewees, FARC's attempts to purchase surface-to-air missiles from various nation-states were consistently refused, and international black markets for purchasing such high-tech weaponry were always compromised by US intelligence and resulted in the FARC losing a lot of money. Interview, former FARC commander, Estado Mayor Central, 2022; Interview, former FARC secretariat member B, 2022; Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

³⁵Juan Manuel Santos, *The Battle for Peace: The Long Road to Ending a War with the World's Oldest Guerrilla Army* (University Press of Kansas, 2021), p. 299.

politically motivated group despite its economic activities, bluntly stated: ‘If it weren’t for the drug trade, it is quite possible that the FARC would have been defeated long ago’.

As this article will highlight, it is indisputable that economic relations – through the taxation of coca production in particular – played an important role in enabling the conflict’s escalation. Not only is this acknowledged by counter-insurgency planners, but senior former FARC leaders have acknowledged that income generation was crucial.³⁶ However, similar to state weakness theory, this article considers both greed and economic agenda analysis as superficial approaches that fail to capture the historical specificities of conflict escalation. As contended by Ballentine and Sherman,³⁷ greed theory and economic agenda analysis reduce complex historical developments to economic opportunity factors, identifying broad correlations that only illuminate a small part of the picture. In framing Colombia’s conflict through a lens of ‘cartelisation’, greed theories not only distort its character but also overlook how escalation was fundamentally shaped by political struggles, state restructuring, and global capitalism. It was no accident that conflict escalated in the 1990s. The reintegration of the Colombian state through transnational restructuring transformed the conflict’s terrain, drastically reshaped subaltern conditions, and opened up new strategic possibilities for the FARC.

To overcome the problem of ahistoricism and reductionism persistent in conflict literature while accounting for the underlying dynamics behind conflict, this article draws on the concepts of uneven and combined development, passive revolution, crisis of authority, and war of movement. These concepts are crucial for bridging the structure and agency gap and for understanding how the actions of strategic forces were conditioned – but not determined – by transformations in the broader international political economy and state formation processes. Rather than separating dynamics from the international political economy, this HM approach suggests that the conflict’s escalation was always internationally situated and shaped by changes in social relations of production through global capitalist restructuring. The concept of U&CD captures the ways in which Colombia’s development and state formation were historically articulated within global capitalism. Implicit in this conceptualisation is a rejection of the category – taken for granted in academic, legal, and institutional circles³⁸ – that the war is/was an ‘internal’ armed conflict. Instead, U&CD problematises Colombia’s development as shaped by and interconnected with the world-historical process of global capitalism. Appreciating how Colombia’s development was unevenly combined into global capitalism is therefore paramount to understanding the conflict’s trajectory.

U&CD diverges from stagist and modernisation theories that assume a linear progression, such as from feudalism to advanced industrial capitalism, or from ‘traditional’ to modern ‘democratic’ societies.³⁹ It contests methodological nationalist approaches that treat states as independent and detached from the global capitalist system in which they are integrated. While capitalism can be defined as based on the dynamic of competitive capital accumulation, the private ownership of the means of production, and the direct exploitation of wage labour, this definition represents capitalism’s pure and idealised representation. As Poulantzas⁴⁰ notes, social formations tend to consist of several overlapping modes of production, with one playing a dominant role. In the global south, capitalism frequently coexists and combines with historically non-capitalist social relations of production, including *campesino* and landowning structures traced to colonialism. Global capitalism is inherently uneven, absorbing and combining non-capitalist relations, re-articulating them for

³⁶ Interview, former FARC international spokesperson, 2023; Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

³⁷ Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman, ‘Introduction’, in Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman (eds), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), pp. 1–15 (p. 5).

³⁸ Mauricio Cárdenas et al., ‘Why internal conflict deteriorates state capacity? Evidence from Colombian municipalities’, *Defence and Peace Economics*, 27:3 (2016), pp. 353–77 (pp. 353–6); Sebastián Machado and Guillermo Otálora, ‘The objective qualification of non-international armed conflicts: A Colombian case study’, *Amsterdam Law Forum*, 4:1 (2012), pp. 58–77 (pp. 61–65).

³⁹ Chris Hesketh, ‘Passive revolution: A universal concept with geographical seats’, *Review of International Studies*, 43:3 (2017), pp. 389–408 (p. 395).

⁴⁰ Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (Verso, 1978), p. 71.

the purposes of capital accumulation.⁴¹ As such, U&CD calls attention to how global capitalism integrates and recombines diverse historical social formations in contradictory ways, producing historically specific and hybrid capitalist formations within the international political economy.⁴² Trotsky⁴³ famously captures this multilinear development dynamic within the world-historical process of global capitalism, describing U&CD as a ‘drawing together of different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms’.

U&CD is crucial as a concept because it illuminates how global capitalist restructuring reshaped the context of war-making. As the next section will clarify, Colombia’s process of neoliberal restructuring was itself conditioned by changes in the international political economy. Such changes unevenly interacted with pre-existing social structures, including social relations and political-economic institutions, in highly disruptive ways. The historical articulation of restructuring within Colombia’s social formation reshaped the conditions of the war and created new opportunities for the FARC’s expansion. Colombia’s development model was recombined into global capitalism in uneven and contradictory ways: subalterns, particularly *campesinos*, were subject to the structural violence of economic opening.⁴⁴ They were reabsorbed as unemployed and informal urban workers, pushed to the outer fringes of the countryside, and adopted self-defence strategies, including through coca production and mobilisation – each of which impacted the conflict’s trajectory and opened up new strategic possibilities for armed resistance.

The second core concept guiding the analysis is Gramsci’s⁴⁵ concept of passive revolution. HM theorists have rightly warned of deterministic and mechanistic applications of U&CD.⁴⁶ The concept of passive revolution recovers agency from overly structuralist interpretations that fail to account for the relative autonomy of social forces and state-making projects within global capitalism. Such interpretations treat agency as determined by insurmountable structural pressures with no room to manoeuvre or choose from a range of strategies.⁴⁷ Instead, passive revolution highlights the way in which social forces, particularly dominant groups embedded nationally, actively respond to the uneven conditions of global capitalism. More specifically, it captures how dominant forces reorganise states from above in an effort to preserve and restore their authority in the face of global capitalist pressures, political-economic crises, and radical-popular challenges. Rather than applying U&CD mechanistically and stretching it beyond its conceptual and empirical limits, passive revolution reasserts the role that nationally organised agents play in reshaping state forms in an attempt to safeguard their positions of dominance, including through modernisation policies and selective reforms. Passive revolutions can be thus understood as state-making projects involving the fusion of revolution with restoration, reconfiguring social relations through limited ‘rupture’ and ‘renewal’ as part of the same capitalist development process.⁴⁸

Along the lines above, the following sections will characterise Colombia’s political-economic project of neoliberal restructuring during the 1990s as a passive revolutionary process. In Colombia, global capitalist reintegration was not simply imposed externally, such as by international institutions or US imperialism, but the evolving dynamics of the international political economy were articulated through existing social structures and state-making processes. It was an elite-engineered reorganisation project implemented by Colombian elites, though extensively drawing from foreign capital and ideas. While restructuring was legitimised as a ‘modernisation’ and ‘democratisation’ project in an attempt to gain popular support, incorporate subaltern groups,

⁴¹ Andreas Bieler and Adam Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 96.

⁴² Tony Burns, ‘Marx and the concept of a social formation’, *Historical Materialism*, 32:3 (2024), pp. 158–87 (p. 172).

⁴³ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Penguin Books, 2017), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, peace, and peace research’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6:3 (1969), pp. 167–191.

⁴⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 106–13.

⁴⁶ Neil Davidson, ‘Putting the nation back into “the international”’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22:1 (2009), pp. 9–28 (pp. 16–20).

⁴⁷ Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 256–7.

⁴⁸ Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism*, p. 101.

and contain radical challenges,⁴⁹ the overarching aim was to restore dominant class authority under the changing conditions of global capitalism. However, given the transformative and restorative implications of the passive revolution, the project was inherently contradictory, disruptive, and violent, not literally ‘inert’ and ‘passive’ in form.⁵⁰ Far from stabilising the neoliberal model, the process of reorganisation deepened social exclusion, exacerbated conflict dynamics, and created opportunities for insurgent expansion.

As the Colombian case reveals, passive revolutions, though intending to restore dominant interests under modified conditions, are not necessarily successful. The passive revolutionary process involved widespread structural dislocation to the point that it created conditions for an intensification in the armed conflict. This is where Gramsci’s⁵¹ concept of war of movement becomes crucial to understanding the conflict’s escalation. Gramsci distinguished a war of movement from a war of position. He described a war of movement as constituted by a frontal assault on state power through aggressive tactics, whereas a war of position is defined more by a long-term strategy of building (counter)hegemony in political and civil society, placing more emphasis on consent-building than coercion. Gramsci understood a war of movement to be more appropriate in conditions where the dominant order faces a ‘crisis of authority’, a moment or period in which a state was internally fracturing and failing to maintain ideological, political, and economic leadership, leading to a rupture between rulers and ruled.⁵² Both ‘crisis of authority’ and ‘war of movement’ are critical for understanding the Colombian case, as they illuminate how the FARC was able to strategically capitalise on the contradictions of global capitalist restructuring and internal state fracturing to transition to the offensive.

In short, the concepts of U&CD, passive revolution, crisis of authority, and war of movement facilitate a more comprehensive and historically grounded analysis, situating the FARC’s development within the broader transformations of the international political economy. Across four empirical sections, what follows is a novel reinterpretation of the Colombian conflict, positioning its escalation against the background of an uneven and combined passive revolutionary project.

Passive revolution and the neoliberal offensive

The 1990s marked a turning point in the armed conflict, with the FARC expanding from a regional guerrilla group into a nationwide insurgent army.⁵³ However, rather than simply being driven by economic opportunities or state weakness, the conflict’s escalation was underpinned by a passive revolutionary project of neoliberal reintegration into global capitalism. This reconfigured the conditions in which the conflict was being fought and fashioned an environment conducive to the FARC’s aggressive expansion strategy. To understand conflict escalation, it is therefore necessary to analyse Colombia’s changing state form within the international political economy.

Between 1945 and the early 1970s, capitalist expansion provided the basis for national class compromises between labour and capital in the global north. By the early 1970s, however, a crisis of overaccumulation disrupted this balance, leading to sharpening class conflict between capital and labour. In response, dominant forces embarked on a political project of global capitalist restructuring, shifting away from Keynesian-based redistributive capitalism, and expanded outwards through the transnationalisation of production. These dynamics increased the pressures

⁴⁹William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil–Military Relations in Colombia* (State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 52–62.

⁵⁰Adam Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 104.

⁵¹Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 238.

⁵²Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 210; Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci*, pp. 75–85.

⁵³U.S. Department of Defense, *Colombia’s Insurgency: Military Implications from Las Delicias to Mitú*, Secret Intelligence Assessment, Defense Intelligence Assessment (Washington DC, 1999), pp. vii–3, U.S. National Security Archives.

on states globally to remove obstacles to the movement of capital and goods through economic opening and neoliberal reform.⁵⁴

Colombia's neoliberal restructuring process was not a mechanical consequence of global pressures. Rather than being imposed externally as a pre-determined and uniform neoliberal alignment with global capitalism, transnational restructuring was internalised through the existing state form and conditions of uneven and combined development. The historical character of Colombia's political economy – organised around social relations of domination and subordination, especially in agriculture – influenced the uneven effects of reintegration. Existing conditions of unevenness shaped the historical form in which restructuring took and how different social groups were affected. It represented a structural transition away from traditional agricultural production and import-substitution policies, exposing subalterns to ruin and recombining them around transnationally oriented sites of production.

State reorganisation took the form of an elite-engineered passive revolutionary 'modernisation' project that aimed to co-opt political opposition and restore capitalist development under new conditions. During the 1980s, pressures to restructure were mitigated by Colombia's booming semi-legalised cocaine industry.⁵⁵ However, by the late 1980s, slowing economic growth, diminishing export revenues, and rising external debt amid heightening global competition increased the pressures,⁵⁶ as did a deteriorating security situation.⁵⁷ In 1988, Colombia's historically dominant commodity of coffee was replaced for the first time in a century by transnationally oriented extractives invested in mining and petroleum. This was combined with the declining influence of traditional agricultural interests in favour of mining and petroleum at state-society levels.⁵⁸ Strengthening the shift was also the ascendance of a technocratic elite of organic intellectuals⁵⁹ – close to Liberal Party leaders – who promoted neoliberal restructuring as a growth model.⁶⁰ But it was the systematic repression of Unión Patriótica, combined with the co-option of left-leaning groups like M-19 and Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame through peace talks and a Constituent Assembly with a limited mandate, that truly opened the way for César Gaviria's government (1990–4) to enforce a sweeping policy of economic opening from above.⁶¹ In other words, Colombia's neoliberal transformation was shaped by a complex historical interaction between global capitalist pressures, capital, and ideas and domestic developments. The Liberal Party government absorbed and redirected these pressures into a seemingly progressive modernisation project that sought to restore dominant class authority under new conditions.

César Gaviria's government implemented a whole series of neoliberal measures from the early 1990s onwards, known as 'la apertura'. Subsidies and tariffs, historically enforced to protect domestic industries and agriculture, were dismantled. State industries were subject to widespread privatisation, encompassing telecommunications, energy, mining and petroleum, banking, and transport. Meanwhile, there was a push to promote FDI through deregulation of finance and equalisation of treatment for foreign investors, especially favouring mining, banking, and petroleum. These

⁵⁴David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005); William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁵⁵Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia* (Verso, 2006), p. 82; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *The Economic Impact of Colombia's Underground Economy – Part II of II: The Illegal Sector*, Classified Cable 24544353 (1985), U.S. National Security Archives.

⁵⁶Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil–Military Relations in Colombia*, p. 46.

⁵⁷Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Colombia: Sustaining Economic Reform*, Secret Intelligence Research Paper 1232276 (USA, 1993), pp. 1–11, U.S. National Security Archives.

⁵⁸Interview, Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia (FNC) senior representative, 2022; Interview, Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible civil servant, 2022; Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, 2nd ed. (State University of New York Press, 2013), p. 141.

⁵⁹This is Gramsci's term for individuals 'directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong.' Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 4.

⁶⁰Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil–Military Relations in Colombia*, pp. 52–6.

⁶¹Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, pp. 80–3.

transnationally oriented measures were accompanied by a sustained attack on labour rights.⁶² Economic opening was combined with political and institutional reform to improve the investment climate, represented by the signing of a new constitution in 1991 – the first since 1886 – as well as various peace-building initiatives. ‘Democratisation’ and ‘modernisation’ were components of a passive revolutionary class strategy to co-opt opposition leaders, weaken labour powers, and restore stability under economic opening.⁶³

Colombia’s reintegration into global capitalism was a highly uneven and combined process, restructuring its development trajectory more closely in alignment with transnational cycles of accumulation. By opening up to transnational capital, Colombia’s development model was increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of global capitalism, exposing less competitive groups – particularly poor *campesinos* like *colonos*, *arrendatarios*, and *minifundistas* – to increased pressures.⁶⁴ Economic opening devastated national industry and smaller producers, increasing unemployment and labour informality.⁶⁵ US intelligence documents reveal that Colombia’s government was fully aware that restructuring would involve widespread economic disruption.⁶⁶ Food self-sufficiency declined from 95 per cent in 1990 to 84 per cent in 1996.⁶⁷ Small-scale producers were overwhelmed by cheaper imports, with agriculture’s employment share and GNP falling significantly.⁶⁸ Deregulation facilitated a rapid increase in food imports, with agricultural import values expanding at an annual rate of 23 per cent between 1990 and 1997,⁶⁹ laying waste to struggling *campesinos*.⁷⁰ The 1993 Census declared that restructuring rendered it more difficult for 17 million poor Colombians to sustain themselves.⁷¹ Passive revolutionary reintegration therefore contained elements of modernisation while exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, reshaping social relations in ways that reinforced dominant interests.

Neoliberal restructuring deepened land inequality, dispossession, and forced displacement, with large landowners (measured as more than 200 hectares) increasing their land share from 47 per cent in 1984 to 68.3 per cent by 2000, much of this by narco-traffickers, cattle ranchers, and speculators that left vast tracts idle.⁷² Meanwhile, smallholders (measured as 20 hectares or less) saw

⁶² Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Colombia: Sustaining Economic Reform*, pp. 19–20; Sebastian Edwards, *The Economics and Politics of Transition to an Open Market Economy: Colombia* (OECD Publishing, 2001), p. 47; James Petras, ‘The FARC faces the empire’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 27:5 (2000), pp. 134–42 (p. 137).

⁶³ Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil–Military Relations in Colombia*, pp. 60–2; Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, pp. 80–1.

⁶⁴ Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Colombia: Sustaining Economic Reform*, p. 14; FARC-EP, ‘El café, cada día más amargo’, *Resistencia*, 114 (August 1998), p. 16, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango. *Colonos* are small settler-farmers producing for subsistence and markets; *arrendatarios* are small tenant farmers; *minifundistas* are smallholders producing for subsistence and markets. Robert Dix, *Colombia: The Political Dimensions of Change* (Yale University Press, 1967), p. 64.

⁶⁵ Interview, Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) trade unionist, 2022; Interview Unión de Trabajadores Colombianos (UTC) senior representative, 2022; Nubia Ruiz et al., *Geopolítica del despojo: Minería y violencia en Colombia* (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2018), p. 60.

⁶⁶ U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Gaviria Press Conference: No Negotiations with Narcos*, Confidential Report 18432 (1990), U.S. National Security Archives.

⁶⁷ Bob Prather, ‘Colombia – Agriculture Briefing’ (Alberta, 1999), available at: <https://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/vdir/marketnews/alberta/colombia9906.html>, accessed 3 August 2025.

⁶⁸ Carlos Felipe, ‘Liberalization, crisis, and change: Colombian agriculture in the 1990s’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 49:4 (2001), pp. 821–46 (pp. 825, 828); U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Agrarian Reform and Peace in Colombia*, Confidential Report 09224 (1998), pp. 1–2, U.S. National Security Archives.

⁶⁹ Felipe, ‘Liberalization, crisis, and change’, pp. 228–30.

⁷⁰ Ruiz et al., *Geopolítica del despojo*, p. 68.

⁷¹ Darío Villamizar, *Las guerrillas en Colombia: Una historia desde los orígenes hasta los confines*, 2nd ed. (Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2020), p. 619.

⁷² Richani, *Systems of Violence*, pp. 33–34; Jairo Estrada, ‘Acumulación capitalista, dominación de clase y rebelión armada’, in Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas (ed.), *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia* (Ediciones Desde Abajo, 2015), pp. 295–358 (p. 312).

their land share reduced from 14.9 per cent to 9.2 per cent.⁷³ Development logics were reconfigured, with FDI – especially linked to extractives and agroindustry – driving land concentration and forced displacement.⁷⁴ The accelerating rural-to-urban migration mirrored broader trends in the global south, where global capitalist restructuring compels rural producers to move to cities and slums while subjecting them to highly exploitative and informal labour conditions⁷⁵ – creating new opportunities for organised crime and armed groups.

Another key outcome of the uneven and combined passive revolution was the consolidation of the narco-bourgeoisie. Perhaps suggesting the scale of influence that drug traffickers and other dominant class fractions enjoyed in the political establishment, money laundering was not even illegal until 1995.⁷⁶ Rather than being marginalised, the narco-bourgeoisie thrived, capitalising on deregulation to launder their money through land, real estate, and contraband.⁷⁷ Contraband values doubled in the 1990s, reaching \$2.2 billion in 1999, equivalent to 25 per cent of overall imports. Indeed, the reintegration process produced a fortuitous alignment for the narco-bourgeoisie. On one front, dismantling protections freed up vast expanses of land for accumulation; on another front, it paved the way for money laundering, allowing the narco-bourgeoisie to further embed themselves in the political economy. By 1994, this capitalist fraction was responsible for accumulating around 4.4 million hectares – more than the Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria (INCORA) had distributed since its 1961 founding.⁷⁸ Four years later, this share had increased to an estimated 6 million hectares, or 11 per cent of agricultural land.⁷⁹

The discussion above is essential for understanding the conflict's escalation and the FARC's eventual transition to a war of movement. While neoliberal restructuring was implemented as a passive revolution to restore dominant authority within the uneven and combined conditions of global capitalism, the process involved widespread structural dislocation. As the next section shows, rather than suffer idly as passive victims of insurmountable structural pressures, subalterns – particularly displaced *campesinos* and informal urban workers – responded to the changing conditions through their own agency, notably in the form of migration, coca production, and radical-popular mobilisation. Instead of simply being a product of state weakness or economic opportunities, the conflict's escalation was internally related to the state's changing character – the way in which neoliberal restructuring produced 'weakness', intensified conflict dynamics, and opened up new strategic possibilities for insurgent expansion.

Coca and conflict in the wake of neoliberalism

Reflecting an uneven and combined reintegration process, neoliberal restructuring encouraged the rapid spread of coca cultivation, pushing large numbers of *campesinos* into guerrilla-held areas. By undermining traditional agriculture, economic opening sparked a mass exodus of *campesinos* to peripheral areas where coca proved more commercially viable. This migratory trend was also cemented by many urban workers whose conditions of reproduction had been eroded.⁸⁰ The uneven impact of global capitalist reintegration incentivised subalterns – both urban workers and

⁷³Salomón Kalmanovitz, *Nueva Historia Económica de Colombia* (Fundación Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2010), pp. 223–9.

⁷⁴Ruiz et al., *Geopolítica del despojo*, pp. 60–8.

⁷⁵Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism*, pp. 150–1.

⁷⁶Money laundering was only made a crime in June 1995, although a US Intelligence Memorandum described the legislation as 'weak and possibly flawed' CIA, *Colombia: Tainted President Scores Antidrug Successes*, Secret Intelligence Memorandum 765486 (DCI Crime and Narcotics Center, 1996), pp. 1, 5, U.S. National Security Archives.

⁷⁷Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Colombia: Sustaining Economic Reform*, p. 7.

⁷⁸Richani, *Systems of Violence*, pp. 33, 97.

⁷⁹Nazih Richani, *Colombian Peasants in the Neoliberal Age: Between War Renterism and Subsistence* (State University of New York Press, 2023), pp. 65, 68.

⁸⁰Juan García, *La Lucha Contrahegemónica de Las FARC-EP (1998–2002)* (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017), p. 58; Gary Leech, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (Zed Books, 2011), pp. 79–80; Interview, Colombia's Comisión de La Verdad Representative, 2022.

campesinos – to turn to the production of coca as a class-based survival strategy, reshaping the dynamics of conflict and creating new opportunities for the FARC's expansion.

Within the context of economic opening, coca could be described as a *campesino* crop par excellence, offering subalterns a strategic response to the structural violence of uneven capitalist development. Coca is typically characterised by low input costs and requires less maintenance than traditional alternatives, such as coffee and cacao. In contrast to crops like coffee and palm oil, which take years to produce their first batch, coca can be harvested between three and eight times annually. Coca is also an incredibly resilient crop: it can thrive on poor-quality soils and rugged land.⁸¹ Moreover, the 'War on Drugs' paradoxically tended to counteract global capitalism's crisis tendencies of overproduction, lending coca a relative price stability and demand that legal alternatives, such as maize and coffee, do not enjoy. This frequently allowed *campesinos* to earn more from coca than licit options.⁸² In this conjuncture, global capitalist restructuring combined with agrarian unevenness to open up new spaces of accumulation, resulting in the decision of subaltern groups to produce coca as a survival strategy.

Against the background of neoliberal restructuring, coca cultivation exploded from the early 1990s onwards and doubled between 1995 and 2000.⁸³ It increased from 34 metric tonnes in 1987 to 570 metric tonnes by 1999.⁸⁴ During these years, coca became the lifeline for more than one million *campesinos*, with an estimated 500,000 direct producers.⁸⁵ Simultaneously, the migration of urban workers and *campesinos* led to new communities on the rural fringes serving as strategic rearguards for the guerrillas. Crucially, like the *colono* areas that supported the FARC's incipient growth during the 1960s and 1970s, these *cocalero* communities emerged in a crisis of authority.⁸⁶ For an armed group like FARC, such crises create fertile ground for expansion by enabling the construction of alternative social orders and counter-hegemonic projects. The FARC's accumulation of popular power at local levels was made possible by these crises, which were, in turn, shaped by Colombia's uneven integration into global capitalism.⁸⁷ In this changing uneven development environment, the cultivation of coca combined with the conflict's dynamics and became part of a political and class strategy of resistance.

As a guerrilla organisation that had increased its strength significantly in the 1980s in a context where the legal left was being systematically repressed, the FARC was one of few groups able to mobilise a radical-popular response to neoliberalism.⁸⁸ In 1982, at its 7th Conference, the FARC outlined a Plan Estratégico, a political-military strategy for achieving revolutionary change based on a military confrontation culminating in a popular insurrection or a negotiated political solution. Central to Plan Estratégico was the build-up of a nationwide insurgency capable of defeating the

⁸¹International Crisis Group (ICG), *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, Latin America Report 87 (International Crisis Group, 2021); Daniel Mejía and Carlos Esteban, 'Cocaine production and trafficking: What do we know?', in Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza (eds), *Innocent Bystanders: Developing Countries and the War on Drugs* (Palgrave and The World Bank, 2010), pp. 253–300 (pp. 254–5).

⁸²Richani, *Systems of Violence*, pp. 93, 108; Richani, *Colombian Peasants in the Neoliberal Age*, pp. 165–6.

⁸³Leech, *The FARC*, p. 60.

⁸⁴Richani, *Colombian Peasants in the Neoliberal Age*, pp. 63–5.

⁸⁵Richani, *Systems of Violence*, pp. 72, 93.

⁸⁶Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Guerrilla y población civil: Trayectoria de las FARC 1949–2013*, 2nd ed. (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013), pp. 96–104.

⁸⁷Alexandra Phelan, 'FARC's pursuit of "taking power": Insurgent social contracts, the drug trade and appeals to eudaemonic legitimation', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44:12 (2021), pp. 971–93 (pp. 977–82); Interview, former FARC international spokesperson, 2023; Julián Urquijo, 'The FARC-EP: Beyond the Rifles, "Reaching the Heart" of the Colombian Peasants' (2017), pp. 64–77, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328964132_The_FARC-EP_beyond_the_rifles_reaching_the_heart_of_the_Colombian_peasants}, accessed 3 August 2025.

⁸⁸Petras, 'The FARC faces the empire', p. 136.

enemy on the battlefield,⁸⁹ requiring the accumulation of political, military, and economic power.⁹⁰ Guided by this strategy, the FARC responded to neoliberal restructuring in a way that would allow it to expand. It identified the *campesino* turn to producing coca as a symptom of capitalist development, rooted in extreme land inequality, and the historic exploitation of *campesinos*. To realise its political objective of revolution, the FARC determined that it was not going to be the nurse, the healer, the cleaner of capitalism, but was going to tax the drug trade just like it taxed other sectors. The FARC declared that capitalism was responsible for the war and so concluded that dominant class interests should pay to finance the revolutionary struggle.⁹¹ Former FARC leaders, senior Colombian military commanders, and US Planners⁹² have all acknowledged FARC's economic strategy as politically motivated and guided by the strategic goal of revolution.⁹³

Driven by the rapid build-up of migrant and *cocalero* communities on the rural periphery, the FARC was presented with more opportunities to expand. The 'War on Drugs' had the paradoxical effect of criminalising *campesinos*, uprooting and driving them into guerrilla areas, where the FARC offered social protection and helped to stabilise coca production through rebel social order.⁹⁴ Structural violence and the 'war on drugs' not only attacked the means of production (land) enabling the survival of *campesinos* as social-class forces, but it also reshaped *campesino* collective identities in ways that encouraged closer ties with the FARC, who offered solidarity, the chance to resist, and a political-economic alternative. This convergence of structural violence, criminalisation, and collective identity reformation explains why so many *campesinos* – and especially *cocaleros* – were drawn into joining the FARC during the 1990s, as not merely economic actors but also politicised subjects responding to the war declared against them.⁹⁵ Glyphosate – the chemical of choice for coca eradication in the 1990s – indiscriminately targeted agriculture, including the water supplies and soils,⁹⁶ effectively amounting to chemical warfare against *campesinos*. As *cocaleros* tended to be displaced *campesinos* and migrant workers who had experienced neoliberalism's worst effects, *cocalero* areas were typically found in remote regions. These areas, characterised by crises of authority, including an absence of basic infrastructure and social services, represented

⁸⁹Carlos Medina, *FARC-EP: Notas para una historia política 1958–2006* (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2010), pp. 111–13; Interview, former FARC commander, Estado Mayor Central, 2022; Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

⁹⁰The strategy was conceived as being able to feed tens of thousands of militants, purchase armaments, medicine, and any other resources essential for developing a nationwide insurgency. Under conditions whereby the vast majority of people are compelled to sell their labour power to property holders to survive, the FARC could not rely on 'monthly subs' to finance such an ambitious strategy. They, therefore, developed a 'war economy' that facilitated the FARC's growth into a nationwide insurgent army. Central Intelligence Agency et al., *Colombia's Insurgents: Assessment of Their Role in the Drug Trade: A Joint Intelligence Report*, Secret Joint Intelligence Report 989132 (1996), pp. I–17, U.S. National Security Archives; Medina, *FARC-EP*, p. 114; Phelan, 'FARC's pursuit of "taking power"', pp. 977–8.

⁹¹FARC-EP, 'Deterioro de la economía: La generalización de la crisis', *Resistencia*, 16:16 (1996), pp. 22–5, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango; Interview, former FARC international spokesperson, 2023.

⁹²Central Intelligence Agency et al., *Colombia's Insurgents*, pp. iii–iv; Alberto Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', master's thesis, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 1996, pp. 16–19; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Guerrilla Involvement in Colombian Drug Trafficking*, Secret Telegram 221953Z (1983), U.S. National Security Archives.

⁹³Retired Colombian Army General Ospina and Thomas Marks contend for example that 'In spite of the contradictions that drug trafficking generated within FARC, the political concept of seizing power guided the organization'; Carlos Ospina and Thomas Marks, 'Colombia: Changing strategy amidst the struggle', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25:2 (2014), pp. 354–71 (p. 359).

⁹⁴Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', pp. 18–19; Interview, former Colombian Navy Strategic Analyst, 2022.

⁹⁵Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022; Interview, former FARC commander, Estado Mayor Central, 2022; Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022; Mark Peceny and Michael Durnan, 'The FARC's best friend: U.S. anti-drug policies and the deepening of Colombia's civil war in the 1990s', *Latin American Politics & Society*, 48:2 (2006), pp. 95–116 (p. 109).

⁹⁶International Crisis Group (ICG), *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, Latin America Report 87 (International Crisis Group, 2021), p. 25.

favourable conditions for the FARC's expansion.⁹⁷ According to a retired Colombian army colonel, the FARC expanded significantly in the 1990s both because of the resources acquired through taxation of the drug trade and 'because they opened up the possibility of gaining a social base, protecting the coca farmers from the drug traffickers who came to buy the coca'.⁹⁸ This view is also expressed by former FARC leaders who explain that one of the key factors behind the group's expansion was its increasing ties with *cocalero* communities, which provided both a rebellious social base and the money that fuelled growth. 'It would be absurd to deny', stated a former FARC Senior Advisor, 'the importance of the increasing amounts of resources that began to enter the FARC in the 1990s'.⁹⁹

By 1996, the FARC had expanded to 569 of Colombia's 1,043 municipalities – up from 173 in 1985.¹⁰⁰ Two strategic outcomes resulted from the FARC's policy of revolutionary adaptation in the face of global capitalism. Firstly, it secured a growing social base among *campesino* – particularly *cocalero* – communities. Secondly, it channelled new economic resources into its aggressive Plan Estratégico. Colombia's neoliberal reintegration gave rise to new spaces of accumulation and class struggle, reshaping subaltern identities and drawing many into joining the FARC's ranks. 'Greed' theories have mischaracterised the meaning of the FARC's organisational links to coca, aligning with dominant policy-making agendas in portraying this as irrefutable evidence that it had become corrupted and was no longer politically motivated. In rejecting such a narrative, this article contends that the FARC's decision to tax the drug trade was thoroughly political and strategic in character – part of a subaltern class strategy of resistance shaped by the uneven and combined conditions of global capitalism.

Fracturing of the state: Neoliberalism in crisis

As argued, global capitalist reintegration deepened conditions of unevenness by undermining the social reproduction of subaltern groups, reshaping spatial dynamics and leading to the build-up of new spaces of accumulation and resistance on the rural periphery. However, neoliberal restructuring also enabled the FARC's expansion by aggravating a spreading crisis of authority and internal state fracturing, reflected in rapidly declining popular consent, political destabilisation, and mounting tensions between dominant capitalist fractions. Unfolding as a passive revolution within the uneven and combined conditions of global capitalism, the restructuring process was inherently contradictory: it reoriented Colombia's state form along transnational lines, exacerbated conflicts, impacted existing development trajectories, and intensified exploitation. These contradictions were expressed through increased land-grabbing, repression of labour movements, spiralling unemployment and informality, and efforts to depopulate entire subaltern communities.¹⁰¹

The spread of right-wing paramilitarism became a key mechanism of the process of transnational reconfiguration. As Colombia's state was unevenly reintegrated into global capitalism, processes of neoliberal restructuring combined with existing structures of repression and domination. Strategic actors navigated the changing climate to advance their interests, fostering a development trajectory that combined capitalist modernisation with violent accumulation. Dominant forces interested in accessing land and resources in guerrilla and *campesino* zones deployed paramilitary violence to discipline subaltern resistance and reshape social relations of production. As paramilitary groups were perceived as helpful in combating radical-popular forces, they were widely

⁹⁷ Phelan, 'FARC's pursuit of "taking power"', pp. 977–82.

⁹⁸ Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022.

⁹⁹ Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ CIA, *Colombia's Guerrillas: A Persistent Thorn in the Government's Side*, Secret Intelligence Report 951600 (Office of African and Latin American Analysis, 1996), p. 5, U.S. National Security Archives.

¹⁰¹ Jasmin Hristov, *Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism: Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond* (Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 83–5, 126, 151–2; Petras, 'The FARC faces the empire', p. 136.

supported across political society.¹⁰² US Intelligence documents and retired Colombian army officers highlight that military support for paramilitarism grew significantly throughout the 1990s.¹⁰³ In other words, transnational restructuring aggravated and combined with pre-existing patterns of coercion, renewing paramilitarism and pushing repression to new heights.

The triple offensive of economic opening, paramilitarism, and the fumigation of coca cultivation was experienced by *campesinos* as a combined policy of scorched earth. If economic opening failed to uproot *campesinos*, the broader counter-insurgency offensive devastated communities.¹⁰⁴ As *campesinos* saw their crops systematically attacked through chemical warfare, their communities violently ravaged by paramilitarism, and their ability to compete economically undermined by transnational restructuring, such uneven and combined restructuring processes can be conceptualised as a real project of scorched earth. This systematic targeting provoked unprecedented protests and union mobilisation by *cocaleros*, which, according to Colombian Army General Mejía,¹⁰⁵ signalled the FARC's popular control. Rural mobilisation was accompanied by the revival of urban-based mobilisation in 1996 protesting neoliberalism.¹⁰⁶ During a 1997 military briefing involving senior leaders and US Planners, then Colombian Minister of Defence Gilberto Echeverri directly linked the deteriorating situation facing subalterns with the conflict's escalation, declaring, '8 million Colombians were out of work, which greatly hindered a peaceful resolution to the guerrilla conflict'.¹⁰⁷

While it has been suggested that paramilitarism weakened the FARC,¹⁰⁸ it had paradoxical effects. Paramilitarism instilled fear and disrupted subaltern organising, yet its indiscriminate violence drove many into joining the FARC's ranks, emboldening its resistance and further delegitimising the dominant order. As a former FARC leader explained, many *campesinos* joined the guerrillas during the 1990s in response to the escalating paramilitary onslaught and the collapse of state legitimacy. Paramilitary killings created paramilitary enemies:

The paramilitary onslaught of the 1990s throughout the national territory resulted in an enormous growth of the FARC. So a lot of people from the countryside went to the FARC. [Interviewee gives hypothetical examples in first person] They killed my father, they killed my mother, they came to the village and massacred 10 people. I'm not going to wait for them to massacre me. I'm going there [to join the FARC]. In other words, the human material willing to take up arms grew in an impressive way due to the violence of the state.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰²Gobierno de Colombia (unsigned), *Situación de orden público en el Urabá* (unknown author, likely regional security force, 1996), Archivo de la Presidencia; Hristov (2017), p. 57; Oficina de Apoyo Defensa Judicial, *Algunas reflexiones en torno de las CONVIVIR*, constitucionalidad, su relación con el derecho internacional humanitario y su reglamentación, Legal Memorandum (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 1997), Archivo de la Presidencia. One memorandum bluntly states: 'Colombian security forces continue to employ death squad tactics in their counterinsurgency campaign'; Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Colombian Counterinsurgency: Steps in the Right Direction*, Secret Intelligence Memorandum 951603 (Washington DC, 1994), p. 4, U.S. National Security Archives.

¹⁰³CIA, *Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength*, Secret Intelligence Report 1426333 (Office of African and Latin American Analysis, 1997), pp. 1–17, U.S. National Security Archives; Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022.

¹⁰⁴Interview, Colombia's Comisión de La Verdad Representative, 2022; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Paramilitary Groups in Colombia*, Secret Intelligence Report 120409Z (Washington DC, 1997), U.S. National Security Archives; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Eradication Program on Track*, Classified Report 01337 (1995), U.S. National Security Archives; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Aerial Eradication in Guaviare, Caquetá and Putumayo: Things Heat Up as DANTI and COLAR Increase the Pressure on Miraflores and Environs; COLAR Launches 'Operation Conquest II' into Caquetá and Putumayo*, Confidential Report 1996BOGOTA06803 (1996), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹⁰⁵Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', p. 19.

¹⁰⁶Petras, 'The FARC faces the empire', p. 140.

¹⁰⁷U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Military Briefing on Counternarcotics Efforts, Human Rights*, Secret Report 1997BOGOTA05129 (1997), p. 27, U.S. National Security Archives.

¹⁰⁸Arjona, *Rebelocracy*, pp. 252–5.

¹⁰⁹Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

A former army colonel who fought both the paramilitaries and the guerrillas during the 1990s also observed that even while paramilitarism became generalised from 1995 onwards, it did not fundamentally weaken the FARC but intensified its resistance:

Paramilitarism did not weaken the FARC. It was an apparent weakening. What it did was to make them more angry and make them more self-justified and radicalised against the state, because they saw that the state supported paramilitarism... paramilitarism weakened certain social bases of the FARC through fear, but not all of them, and above all not the guerrillas themselves... What this produced in the guerrillas was more desire for revenge and more radicalisation.¹¹⁰

However, the spread of paramilitarism was not merely a counter-insurgency response but also a reflection of the contradictions underpinning the passive revolutionary project, notably the way in which it unevenly reshaped political-economic development and exacerbated conflict. As Gramsci¹¹¹ warned, when state-making projects fail to secure consent by integrating competing social groups based on shared interests and beliefs, dominant forces will tend to increasingly use coercion as a prevailing mechanism for securing order, which can escalate conflict and make a counter-hegemonic war of movement strategy feasible. Rather than neutralising insurgency, state-sponsored paramilitary terror discredited the dominant order, motivating subalterns to join the guerrillas.¹¹² Confronted with the persecution of the legal left within a conjuncture of structural violence, many came to view armed struggle as not only legitimate but also necessary to survive.

It was not only the spread of paramilitary death squads that undermined the passive revolutionary project. As previously argued, the process of economic opening led to the explosion of the drug trade throughout the 1990s. The growing influence of drug trafficking politically conflicted with Colombia's developing neoliberal model – heavily reliant on FDI, cash-crop exports, and US aid. Profits from drug trafficking renewed the power of traditional dominant forces, notably landed interests, and nurtured a more unstable and costly environment for FDI.¹¹³ The narco-bourgeoisie had a corrupting influence across society.¹¹⁴ While some dominant class forces recognised the narco-bourgeoisie as harmful to the modernisation project, others were deeply entangled with the informal economy, repressive structures, and feared the guerrilla's rise. In other words, within the passive revolutionary project itself, a hybrid ruling power bloc emerged,¹¹⁵ which tended to internally fracture the state. The government was compelled to mediate between the pressures of global capitalism and world order as domestic stability unravelled and political elites conflicted over drug policy and counter-insurgency methods.¹¹⁶ While it was already accepted that drug traffickers had penetrated political society, it was the clear links between Samper's presidency (1994–8) and the

¹¹⁰ Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022.

¹¹¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 161, 268.

¹¹² Interview, former FARC commander, Estado Mayor Central, 2022; Interview, former FARC secretariat member B, 2022; Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Colombian Violence – It's 'Everyone Vs. Everyone' in a Dog-Eat-Dog-World*, Confidential Diplomatic Cable 02837 (1993), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹¹³ Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, pp. 132–3.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Asst. Sec. Gelbard's Meeting with Colombia Trade Minister on Feb 23*, Confidential Telegram 042619 (Washington, DC, 1996), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹¹⁵ A power bloc has been systematically outlined by Poulantzas as the 'participation of several classes and class fractions in political domination'. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 234.

¹¹⁶ Carlos Trujillo, *Evaluación del estado actual del proceso de paz, report submitted to President Samper* (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 1995), Archivo de la Presidencia; U.S. Department of State, *Asst. Sec. Gelbard's*. An example was in Urabá, where according to an internal public order document there was a 'proliferation of private justice groups [paramilitaries] controlled by farm owners and ranchers'. Despite this and identifying the links between Convivir and right-wing death squads, the document called for the 'promotion of the formation of Cooperatives de Vigilancia (Convivir's) in the areas most affected by subversion'; Gobierno de Colombia, *Situación de orden público en el Urabá*.

narco-bourgeoisie, alongside Colombia's decertification by the US as no longer cooperating in the war on drugs, that exposed the state as penetrated even at the highest levels.¹¹⁷

Decertification was not just a diplomatic crisis but also a crisis of the passive revolutionary project. It represented the inability of dominant class forces to resolve the contradictions between the implications and imperatives of economic opening and domestic political governance. By the mid-1990s, these contradictions had fashioned a political-economic environment conducive to the conflict's escalation. Not only had the FARC been able to acquire the resources and social bases for expansion, but the state was severely fractured, widely perceived as illegitimate, and faced mounting popular resistance. As a retired Colombian Army Colonel active during the 1990s contended, the crisis of legitimacy accelerated by the decertification scandal emboldened the FARC, motivating them to advance to the war of movement.¹¹⁸ It was in the aftermath of Colombia's decertification in 1996 by the United States that the FARC transitioned to conventional military operations.¹¹⁹ Decertification discredited Colombia internationally, cut off vital international support, reduced the government's space, and undermined the state-making project.¹²⁰ The failure of the neoliberal passive revolutionary project to secure order by incorporating competing forces and establishing a hegemonic project culminated in an authority crisis, creating conditions for the FARC's transition to a war of movement.

The FARC's transition to the war of movement

The aggressive military thrust of the FARC's Plan Estratégico, initially envisioned in 1982, was not comprehensively enforced until the 1990s. Ironically, just as FARC was planning to expand militarily in 1982 – two years later – in 1984, peace accords initiated a period of sustained negotiations and the founding of Unión Patriótica (UP). However, the annihilation of UP, the collapse of peace talks and the attack on FARC's headquarters known as Casa Verda in 1990 encouraged the group to switch to the more aggressive posture outlined in Plan Estratégico at its 1993 Conference. This strategy's implementation, when set against the background of Colombia's process of neoliberal reintegration into global capitalism, is fundamental for understanding FARC's expansion during the 1990s. It called for strategic escalation from mobile guerrilla warfare to large-scale conventional military operations supported by increased financing, territorial expansion, and mass recruitment,¹²¹ to the point where the group was capable of openly defeating the military.¹²² This more aggressive posture aligns with Gramsci's¹²³ concept of war of movement, characterised by a direct confrontation on state power.

The crisis of authority, signified by the state's internal fracturing and the increasing reliance on coercion as a mechanism of control, alongside the opening of new sites of resistance, represented fertile conditions for the FARC's offensive and made a war of movement strategically viable. To support its transition, the FARC reorganised its guerrilla fronts into regional blocs, each headed by a member of the FARC's Secretariat and an intermediate leadership known as the Estado Mayor Central. The FARC also created new offensive units for joint and special operations. A clear plan

¹¹⁷ Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', pp. 3–7; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Decertification Criteria: How Did Colombia Measure Up in 1996?*, Classified Cable 628 (Bogotá, 1997), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹¹⁸ Interview, retired Colombian Army Colonel, 2022.

¹¹⁹ CIA, *Colombia: Military on the Defensive*, Top Secret Intelligence Report 496359 (Directorate of Intelligence – CIA, 1996), U.S. National Security Archives; Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', pp. 87–9.

¹²⁰ Kline, 'Colombia', p. 173; Mejía, 'The Impact of U.S. De-Certification on Colombian Democracy', pp. 87–9; U.S. Department of State, *Asst. Sec. Gelbard's Meeting*; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, *Ambassador Discusses Decertification with Foreign Minister*, Confidential Report 052002Z (Bogotá, 1996), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹²¹ Interview, former FARC senior political advisor, 2022.

¹²² David Kilcullen, 'Guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare in Colombia', in Dickie Davis et al. (eds), *A Great Perhaps? Colombia: Conflict and Convergence* (Hurst & Company, 2016), pp. 61–88 (p. 61); Interview, former FARC international spokesperson, 2023; Interview, former FARC secretariat member B, 2022.

¹²³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 238.

for opening up strategic corridors and encircling Bogotá was enforced, as the FARC undertook a massive recruitment drive to increase its combatants to 30,000.¹²⁴

Meanwhile, the FARC's income generation activities provided the group with enormous revenues to enforce its strategy, consolidating territorial control and putting the military on the defensive. The FARC harnessed popular grievances and the structural dislocation to its strategic advantage and significantly increased recruitment.¹²⁵ By 1998, the strategic initiative had clearly shifted to the FARC as the neoliberal order faced a severe political-economic crisis. Between 1998 and 1999, Colombia experienced its worst-ever recession on record: GDP fell by approximately 5 per cent, the first year-on-year decrease since 1931, with official unemployment rising from 12 per cent in 1997 to 20 per cent in 1999.¹²⁶ The state was internally fractured; widespread paramilitary terror undermined state legitimacy, and criminality and human rights abuses devastated communities.¹²⁷ The armed forces were demoralised and even risked disintegration,¹²⁸ reflected by a string of defeats on the battlefield.¹²⁹ The shifting balance of power was so drastic that by 1997 the US Defense Intelligence Agency predicted that the military 'could be defeated within five years unless the country's government regains political legitimacy and its armed forces are drastically restructured'.¹³⁰ Colombia's newly inaugurated president in 1998, Andrés Pastrana, described the crisis of authority:

Taking advantage of the weakening of the state, the guerrillas had achieved the greatest military advances in their history and had dealt the hardest blows to the army.. The FARC used combat strategies that positioned them militarily as never before.¹³¹

Similar concerns were bluntly expressed by the then head of the US Southern Command in 1998, General Charles Wilhelm:

At this time, the Colombian armed forces are not up to the task of confronting and defeating the insurgents. Colombia is the most threatened in the area under the Southern Command's responsibility, and it is in urgent need of our support.¹³²

Accordingly, the FARC's strategic adaptation to the changing conditions under neoliberal reintegration culminated in its transition to the war of movement by the late 1990s.¹³³ This transition

¹²⁴Interview, former FARC secretariat member A, 2022; Interview, former FARC international spokesperson, 2023; David Spencer, 'A long war', in Dickie Davis et al. (eds), *A Great Perhaps? Colombia: Conflict and Convergence* (Hurst & Company, 2016), pp. 17–44, (pp. 27, 32).

¹²⁵Felipe Castaño, 'Crisis política y economía', *Resistencia* 110 (July 1996), pp. 30–1, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango; Douglas Farah and Laura Brooks, 'Colombian army's third in command allegedly led two lives', *Washington Post* (11 August 1998), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/08/11/colombian-armys-third-in-command-allegedly-led-two-lives/0191ce67-11c8-4184-a476-74ee37062b30/>}, accessed 3 August 2025; Interview, former FARC commander, Estado Mayor Central, 2022; Interview with former FARC head of security for a Secretariat member, 2022; Phelan, 'FARC's pursuit of "taking power"', pp. 971–93.

¹²⁶Albert Berry, 'Agriculture, rural development, and attempts at land reform in Colombia into the 21st century', in Bruce M. Bagley and Jonathan D. Rosen (eds), *Colombia's Political Economy at the Outset of the Twenty-First Century: From Uribe to Santos and Beyond* (Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 33–48, (p. 35); CIA, *Colombia: Modest Economic Growth Through 2002*, Confidential Intelligence Report 1232266 (Office of African and Latin American Analysis, 2000), U.S. National Security Archives.

¹²⁷CIA, *Colombia: Paramilitaries Assuming a Higher Profile*, Secret Intelligence Report 1413656 (Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis, 1998), pp. 1–6, U.S. National Security Archives; U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Discussion Paper*.

¹²⁸NACLA, 'Multilateral invasion force for Colombia?', p. 46.

¹²⁹Esteban and Pabón, *Militares y guerrillas*, p. 328.

¹³⁰NACLA, 'Multilateral invasion force for Colombia?', p. 46.

¹³¹Andrés Pastrana, *Las Palabras Bajo Fuego* (Planeta, 2006), p. 40.

¹³²NACLA, 'Multilateral invasion force for Colombia?', p. 46.

¹³³Kilcullen and Mills, 'Introduction', pp. 7–8; Ospina and Marks, 'Colombia', pp. 360–1; U.S. Department of Defense, *Colombia's Insurgency*.

was not simply a result of state weakness or economic opportunities; it was a dialectical outcome of the passive revolutionary transformation of the Colombian state formation and shifting subaltern agency under global capitalism. In response, Pastrana's incoming government in 1998 pursued peace talks and a new phase in the conflict was unleashed.

Conclusion

Guided by interviews with key protagonists and extensive archival research, this article has reinterpreted Colombia's conflict escalation during the 1990s through the concepts of U&CD, passive revolution, crisis of authority, and war of movement. In bridging the gap between structure and agency and situating a supposedly 'internal' conflict within the broader dynamics of the international political economy, the article challenges dominant explanations of war, violence, and conflict more generally. It rejects the notion that state weakness and economic motivations can be comprehended in isolation but must be seen as historically integrated processes internal to global capitalism. In doing so, the article speaks to broader debates in security studies, international political economy, global development, historical sociology, and regional studies, inviting scholars to identify the underlying but not immediately visible dynamics shaping conflict, development, and peace. Rather than treating conflict as reducible to particular variables such as individual motivations or institutional types, the article conceptualises agency and armed conflict as dialectically bound up with changing historical processes. More specifically, it theorises how conflicts can be internally related to the uneven and combined nature of global capitalism and passive revolutionary restructuring.

As a result of the tendency to focus on particular factors as disconnected from underlying relations, the Colombian conflict's trajectory has been mischaracterised. The shaky narrative of 'cartelisation' – advanced by greed theorists – arose as the dominant framing through which both the FARC and the Colombian conflict's escalation has been conceptualised. This superficial narrative of 'greed' seamlessly aligned with US and Colombian policy-making objectives seeking to delegitimise armed resistance through depoliticising categories like 'narco-terrorism'. From this perspective, responsibility for conflict escalation is disproportionately placed on the FARC's agency, as if its expansion strategy and decision to extract economic resources was non-political and emerged in an ahistorical vacuum, disconnected from exploitation, political conflict, and global capitalist restructuring.

In contrast, this article has argued that the escalation of the Colombian armed conflict during the critical period of the 1990s was intimately connected to global capitalist restructuring and an elite-led passive revolutionary project that failed to incorporate competing social-class forces into the changing neoliberal model. The uneven process of reintegration into global capitalism during the 1990s transformed Colombia's historical development model, uprooting *campesinos*, driving down labour conditions, and further marginalising already marginalised populations. In fact, when combined with the so-called War on Drugs and the paramilitary onslaught, this article has conceptualised the process of neoliberal restructuring as essentially a declaration of war on *campesinos*, a real project of scorched earth. This not only undermined the conditions of social reproduction but also reshaped the collective identities of *campesinos*. Treated as criminals, drug traffickers, and enemies of the state, many *campesinos* came to identify more closely with the FARC's rebellion, who were similarly targeted, and offered protection, stability, and a political-economic alternative. Indeed, while restructuring was highly contradictory, exacerbating inequality and exploitation, as well as tensions between dominant fractions – resulting in a spreading crisis of authority – neither the FARC nor subaltern groups stood still as passive objects of political-economic pressures. In the face of the unofficial declaration of war, *campesinos* and unemployed workers turned to producing coca in much greater numbers than before. They formed *cocalero* unions and other social movements, often in collaboration with the FARC. Restructuring was contested, new sites of conflict emerged, and *campesino* struggles converged with the FARC's rebellion, expressed through a

growing influx of recruits and expanded territorial control. The spreading crisis of authority led to an escalation in the conflict, involving increasingly coercive methods. Within this shifting context the FARC switched to a war of movement, expanding its support base, amassing critical resources, and implementing its aggressive Plan Estratégico. It was this adaptation to actually existing capitalism and the deepening crisis of authority that enabled the FARC to advance to the war of movement and pose an existential threat to state authority by 1998.

Other armed conflicts have likely taken a similar trajectory to Colombia. Peru's neoliberal restructuring process in the 1980s and early 1990s appears to have operated along passive revolutionary lines shaped by global capitalism's uneven and combined conditions. Though the Shining Path fragmented following the 1992 capture of their leader, their social base was overwhelmingly composed of marginalised Indigenous and *campesino* populations – many of whom also turned to producing coca. Resistance need not be overtly politically expressed. In Ecuador, as in Mexico, neoliberal passive revolutionary restructuring has arguably instigated diverse forms of conflict, ranging from intense labour mobilisation to organised crime. Pressured by neoliberal restructuring between 2017 and 2025, many subalterns have responded through survival strategies of workplace struggles, while others have gravitated towards criminal activity and gang warfare in Ecuador. Equally, since Colombia's 2016 peace agreement – which consolidated a neoliberal development model and can be conceptualised as a passive revolutionary process – the country has witnessed a resurgence and re-escalation in armed conflict. These cases suggest that the concepts used in this article have broader application across time and space. Future research should therefore explore how various forms of conflict – whether revolutionary, criminal, or labour oriented – emerge from passive revolutionary restructuring under the uneven and combined dynamics of global capitalism.

Ultimately, understanding conflict and peace requires more than data on economic opportunities and indicators of state weakness; it requires an interdisciplinary analysis that captures the underlying and historical dynamics at work – one attuned to the dialectic of structure and agency – and the international character of so-called internal conflicts.

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