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Afterword: A Roadmap for the Study of Paramilitaries: Explaining Variations of Violence, Gendered Militias, and Demobilization

Stacey L. Hunt

For a long time, paramilitary forces have remained shrouded in silence and obscurity, effective in their unstated relation to state forces, what Ugur Üngör calls 'a nod and a wink' of complicity.[1] This collection of essays on paramilitaries both historic and contemporary in Europe and the Middle East is a welcome addition to our knowledge and understanding of this overlooked and evolving phenomenon. Covering the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war, the Greek civil war, Turkey's fight against the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s, and Bashar Al-Assad's brutal suppression of dissent in 2011, these four studies add rich texture and historically situated analysis of contexts as unique as genocide, civil war, low-intensity conflicts, and autocrats intent on maintaining power at all cost, thereby lending to our understanding of paramilitaries across space and time. The topic could not be more timely or pressing. Empowered by a president who believes suspected criminals should 'die in the streets like cockroaches,' off-duty Brazilian police officers kill dozens of civilians a day.[2] In the United States, current and former military and police were among the far-right extremist organizations and individuals who stormed the capital to overthrow the 2020 presidential elections, after a year of public collusion between police departments and right-wing militias that resulted in the deaths of several civilians involved in Black Lives Matter protests. Despite formally demobilizing in 2006, Colombian paramilitaries are gunning down a record number of civil society activists and social movement leaders. Armed militias affiliated with the ruling BJP party in India have stormed university campuses, attacked peaceful protestors, and brutalized religious minorities, members of lower castes, and political opponents, all with explicit police protection, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's

1 Ugur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 159.

2 Tom Phillips, 'Jair Bolsonaro Says Criminals Will "Die Like Cockroaches" under Proposed New Laws', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/06/jair-bolsonaro-says-criminals-will-die-like-cockroaches-under-proposed-new-laws> [accessed 15 March 2021].

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increasingly violent Hindu nationalist regime. Like concepts and practices such as democracy, populism, and fascism, paramilitaries have evolved over time in their organization, tactics, and expectations. Even as armed insurgency against the state is increasingly disappearing, defeated or irrelevant, the paramilitary organizations that were often employed to defeat them rarely definitively demobilize, instead persistently repackaging themselves. This collection of essays brings paramilitaries out of the shadows, illuminating the phenomenon we have to contend with if we are to reestablish the rule of law and the basis for democratic practice in a growing number of countries today.

These articles carefully explore the organizational arrangement of paramilitary forces, noting their involvement in illicit and licit economies, their relationship to state security forces, their training and level of professionalization, their internal hierarchy and cohesion, and their ties to local communities. These details are imperative to understanding how paramilitaries function, explaining why they evolve as they do, and having any chance at successfully demobilizing and reincorporating their members into civilian life. In addition to this organizational analysis, these studies provide rich evidence of the training, motivation, and political opportunity necessary for the emergence of both individual paramilitary commanders and collective forces. They identify whether paramilitary leaders were born into wealth or poverty, their gender, what they studied, who they worked for previously, the methods they use, and what motivates them as individuals. They also do an excellent job of identifying the local confluence of factors that allowed paramilitary forces to form, consolidate, and exert power. The studies included here largely hew to existing models that argue that hierarchical organizations with strong internal discipline and command behave more professionally than those without a strong command structure which frequently allows troops to procure 'selective incentives' ranging from petty theft to extortion, rape, and debauchery.[3] In some cases, the organizational dynamics among armed groups may complement studies of the organizational dynamics within individual organizations. Paramilitary scholars might consider variables such as the presence of and conflict among several competing armed actors, for example, to better explain local variations of violence than considerations of internal organizational structure alone. Additional research might explore when and under what conditions disparate paramilitary forces

3 Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Telling the Difference: Guerrillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War', *Politics and Society*, 36.1 (2008), 3–34.

unite under umbrella organizations and how such institutional fragmentation or unity affects their daily workings, longevity, relations to local economies and residents, and potential demobilization dynamics. Along those lines, we know quite a bit about paramilitary leaders and organizational figureheads, yet we continue to know significantly less about their troops, such as what motivates average fighters, where they are housed, how they relate to local populations and economies, and the like. For example, it is often unclear how low-level commandos are recruited and whether they are paid mercenaries invested in a salary, children who were forcefully conscripted, local residents drawn to power and the desire to settle petty debts or establish social hierarchies, zealots driven by ideological or identity-based animosity, or some combination thereof. Similarly, paramilitaries are generally studied as a primarily domestic phenomenon, approached through the lens of the nation-state, and the studies here are no exception. Yet each of the cases alludes to transnational actors, economies, and institutions that are constitutive of the phenomenon. International power brokers at times train, fund, and back paramilitaries in another country. Paramilitary forces are often involved in transnational illicit economies, particularly the trafficking of drugs, humans, and arms. And foreign citizenship often determines a victim's fate. Identifying and explaining international and local patterns of support for and participation in paramilitary violence is essential to explaining the internal organizational dynamics and strategies of paramilitary forces, interrupting their recruitment efforts, understanding variations of violence within the conflict, and successfully demobilizing troops.

These four articles reflect both the deep and apparently constitutive ties paramilitary forces have to local, national, and international economies, providing a number of provocative hypotheses regarding the potential for demobilization in contexts of particular economic arrangements such as illicit economies or the widespread use of patronage systems to distribute limited welfare state goods. Political scientists have long struggled to identify, quantify, or explain socio-economic and structural violence and to understand its relationship to physical violence. Each of the cases presented here includes explicit reference to economic crimes: forceful acquisition of property, particularly land and homes following forced displacement, extortion, racketeering, organized crime rings trafficking in illicit goods and activities, and corruption and clientelism, particularly in the distribution of limited state assets such as student housing and rationed foodstuffs. The authors detail

paramilitaries driving around in flashy cars, engaging in conspicuous consumption, occupying desirable and scarce housing blocks, and joining paramilitary organizations in order to access economic resources and establish themselves as local and regional elites. All of the cases documented here involve a redistribution of resources from local and increasingly impoverished residents to paramilitary forces. Yet discussions of the economic crimes or impact of paramilitarism are often told as separate, parallel, or secondary to their physical violence, as if economic violence were a rational and self-evident endeavor reflecting human nature in juxtaposition to physical violence that is laden with emotion and requiring of explanation. These cases demonstrate that economic crimes must be studied as part of a continuum of violence that blurs seamlessly into the experience of victimization. No paramilitary force exists outside economic structures and motivations which are as socially constructed and emotionally imbued as other patterns of violence. Even communal, ethnic, and genocidal violence are structured by and enacted through micro and macro level economic violence.[4]

The seizure of private assets and self-enrichment of paramilitaries and their elite backers is a fundamental and constitutive part of paramilitary violence. In Colombia, paramilitary forces raided state budgets, displaced millions of residents in order to seize their land, systematically assassinated labor organizers and those who challenged the existing social hierarchy, and enriched themselves through the illegal drug trade.[5] Paramilitary forces were integral to the start of the Holocaust of European Jews, which started by 'non-violent' legal limits on Jewish education and business, such as prohibiting Jews from entering certain professions or procuring particular contracts and employment in particular fields. Efforts to impoverish, ghettoize, and starve victims illustrate the intractability of economic violence from other deadly violence and contextualize the enormous symbolic import of on-going efforts at recovering valuable objects stolen from Jews during that time. While highlighting the violence of economic crimes, it is difficult but essential to avoid reducing paramilitary forces to merely economic actors or conflating them with mafias or cartels. Instead, we must highlight the interconnectivity of violence and the economy by

4 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Lee-Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

5 Stacey Hunt, 'Languages of Stateness: A Study of Space and El Pueblo in the Colombian State', *Latin American Research Review*, 41.3 (2006), 88–121.

uncovering the economic logics that shape recruitment patterns and paramilitary practices, and the violence in the economic systems they uphold. In particular, scholars should pay more attention to the extent to which paramilitary economic logics and motivations involve forced prostitution and sexual slavery, on one hand, and the extent to which they are embedded in lucrative illicit economies, on the other. Preliminary evidence suggests these two violent economies might carry significant weight when explaining patterns of violence, the level of institutionalization and enduring nature of some paramilitaries, the level of trauma experienced by local populations, and the potential for successful paramiliary demobilization and reintegration.

The efforts made in this special edition to explain variations in paramilitary violence are particularly welcome. As I have argued elsewhere,[6] disappointingly few studies analyze variations in non-lethal violence, particularly outside of outright civil war, resulting in a notable silence pertaining to both economic violence, as mentioned above, and violence against women (VAW), given that women are significantly less likely than men to die in armed conflict but more likely to experience a variety of other violences. Only in the last decade has the systematic rape of women in armed conflict been noticed by scholars or prosecuted as a human rights violation.[7] Instead, non-lethal violence and VAW generally are widely dismissed as interpersonal or cultural, and as such, beyond the explanatory capacities of political science. Uma Narayan refers to this phenomenon as 'death by culture,' a way in which certain violences are dismissed as self-evident manifestations of violent cultures that do not require further explanation.[8] To that end, the exploration of variations of violence is deeply welcome and can be furthered to include studies into why certain communities of people are targeted with particular types of violence. Scholars should continue to explore the relationship between so-called 'strategic' violence and 'spectacular' public violence in order to uncover the simultaneously spectacular and strategic nature of all violence. More research needs to be done to identify and explain variations in and of violence in order to honor the victims of paramilitary violence, hold perpetrators accountable, and

6 Stacey Hunt, 'Public Emotions and Variations of Violence: Evidence from Colombia', *Perspectives on Politics*, 18.3 (2020), 788–804.

7 Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

8 Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

form effective institutional interventions and protections. In her book, Dianna Ortiz describes in haunting detail her torture at the hands of U.S.-trained forces in Guatemala and the enduring trauma it engendered. She painfully describes the 111 cigarette burns she sustained on her back during her 'interrogation,' being forced to drink urine and semen, gang rapes that left her pregnant and in need of an abortion, being suspended by her arms over a pit of mutilated children and adults, and being made to stab a woman to death. And yet there is one type of violence she endured that she cannot talk about: 'Dogs were used in my torture in a way that was too horrible to share with anyone. Even now I don't talk about that part of the torture'.[9] Another type of paramilitary violence that appears to go largely unspoken is sexual assault against men. A well-known joke in Croatia describes a group of young children begging their grandfather to retell war stories: '"Yes," Grandpa sighed, "the war was terrible. Everyone was either raped or killed." "And you, Grandad, which one happened to you?" the kids demand, on the edge of their seats. "Killed," the grandfather replies.' Of course it is highly unlikely that dogs were trained to be used in the torture of just one person or that popular jokes that were widely understood were based off unique or highly unusual experiences. Naming and talking through very specific types of violent trauma are essential to both collective and individual recovery as well as holding perpetrators accountable, and scholars of paramilitary violence must do better to isolate and specify not just temporal or spatial varieties in the quantity of violence, but varieties of different types of violence, enacted on different populations, for different purposes.

Relatedly, each of the articles deals with gender and sexuality in their own way, though perhaps indicative of political science writ large, fail to wrestle with either sexism and misogyny or masculinity and femininity as either structuring or primary motivating factors for collective behavior. We hear tidbits here and there – that the gang rape of women was a primary component of paramilitary violence, that paramilitary fighters themselves were exclusively men, that female survivors of paramilitary violence begged to be killed, that local commanders organized effective harems and ran prostitution rings, that women affiliated with or benefitting from paramilitary violence were exceptionally rare and noteworthy – but any form of systematic analysis of structural sexism and misogyny, or the gendered nature of

9 Dianna Ortiz, *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 104.

paramilitary power and violence, is missing, as if to suggest that it is so natural and obvious for men to join armed groups on the margin of the law and rape women that it doesn't merit analysis. It seems essential to this task of explaining variations *of* violence in paramilitary forces to embrace gender as both a variable and category of analysis. Together, these articles identify the nearly exclusive composition of paramilitary forces with men, in stark contrast with insurgent forces and state militias, and their explicit use of gendered violence and power. Findings from studies of other militias, both legal and illegal, suggest that the gender composition of troops and leadership, ideological orientation, and the presence of hierarchical and effective chains of command are among the variables that influence the behavior of troops and variations of violence. Yet robust studies of gender and violence performed by 'gender' scholars have been systematically overlooked and marginalized in mainstream studies of paramilitary violence. Scholars must do better to engage with the findings of existing studies of gender and armed forces and to incorporate women and gendered analyses into their own research. Systematic analysis is needed to ascertain if, in fact, paramilitaries are more male dominated spaces than other armed groups, and how the gender composition of troops affects their ideologies, command structures, and strategies. We must begin to gather data on and present explanations as to how violences such as internal displacement, assassination, human trafficking, and torture are gendered, while broadening our scope of sexualized and gender-based violence to include sexual violence against men and sexual minorities, sexual slavery, and reproductive violence.

With a growing theoretical and empirical understanding of what paramilitary forces are and how and why they function, we must turn our attention to the study of their demobilization and reintegration and designing institutions that both hold perpetrators accountable and prevent new paramilitary forces from forming. While focusing more on the dynamics of paramilitary operations during specific time periods, the studies here coincide with an extensive body of research suggesting that the successful demobilization and reintegration of paramilitary troops is extraordinarily unusual. As Vukusic notes elsewhere, Serbian paramilitaries were formally disbanded at the end of the war only to regroup, embedding themselves into both organized crime and the Serbian security forces, even assassinating the prime

minister of Serbia in 2003.[10] Similar processes occurred or are occurring in both Syria and Turkey, and the cases presented here highlight the transformation, permanence, and resilience of paramilitary forces over decades. Only in the case of Greece does the author suggest that the paramilitary organizations in question disappeared in the face of radical economic transformation accompanied by rapid urbanization, an argument famously put forth by Elizabeth Wood to explain the evolution of elite interests that led to the negotiated resolution of the civil war in El Salvador.[11]

Scholars of paramilitarism must mine existing literature of demobilization and reintegration from other contexts such as civil wars, guerrilla insurgencies, military dictatorships, and international warfare in order to ascertain if paramilitary forces are indeed more difficult to demobilize, or differently demobilized, than other armed forces and identify possible hypotheses, variables, and causal mechanisms that explain why with the explicit goal of creating the policies and institutions necessary to facilitate demobilization and reintegration and discourage future paramilitary formation. From the four cases presented here, five variables jump out for further testing: organizational structure, local political economy, international intervention, and individual motivation for paramilitary fighters. As a point of departure, I would hypothesize that the more professional the paramilitary force, with hierarchical chains of command and effective internal discipline, the easier they would be to demobilize and reintegrate than disperse paramilitary forces; that paramilitary forces deeply imbedded in illicit economies and organized crime will be harder to demobilize than those unconnected to illicit economies; that international intervention and support to demobilize or continue fighting would weigh heavily and proportionally to the pressure exerted; and finally, that those motivated by personal status, power, and financial gain will be more difficult to successfully demobilize and reintegrate that those motivated primarily out of identitarian claims or disputes. But this list is by no means is exhaustive. The level of militarization of civil society – i.e., whether civilians are merely cooperating or actively recruited and armed – is likely a key variable as is the state's capacity to hold perpetrators accountable and exert civilian control over its official

10 Iva Vukušić, 'Serb Paramilitaries and the Yugoslav Wars' (unpublished PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2020).

11 Elisabeth Wood, *Forging Democracy from Below: Insurgent Transitions in South Africa and El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

forces. The study of paramilitary demobilization and reintegration is incipient and urgently needed as observations of the porous and fluid nature of armed groups increase, such that troops cycle through any variety of legal or illegal armed group, even ones of opposing ideologies and politics, rather than demobilize.

Finally, scholars must work to advance our understanding of the relationship between paramilitary forces and state capacity, both theoretically and empirically. Are paramilitaries the sign of a weak state unable to reign in illegally armed groups, or are they the sign of a strong state, savvy enough to exploit the rule of law in order to achieve its goals? There is a strong scholarly tradition of interpreting such institutionalized violence as 'perverse' statebuilding, a body of literature to which the article on Greece seeks to contribute, arguing that paramilitaries contribute to nation-building. Pearce argued that paramilitaries in Latin America were compatible with more or less democratic elections, while in the case of Greece, the author argues that paramilitaries contributed to nation-state construction because they oversaw the distribution of food and illicit entertainment and taxed local inhabitants, momentarily incorporating them into national patronage networks before collapsing outright because their victims fled their abuse.[12] My own work has documented how states that embrace paramilitary actors are by no means failed or on the brink of collapse. Yet it is very different to argue that the state is not failed, that it functions through such violence, and to argue that such violence and irregular armed forces contribute to statebuilding or the construction of a stronger state. Paramilitary forces exist for one reason, and that is to engage in violence unbeholden to the rule of law. It is impossible that such actions do not degrade the quality of democracy, regardless of increasingly farcical elections, and undermine state capacity by destroying the state's ability to enforce the rule of law.

Paramilitary violence has at times engendered national identities in which civilians seek to make sense of endemic violence by blaming themselves for it. Like elections, however, the presence of a strong national identity does not ensure strong state capacity or a democratic regime. At the turn of the 21st century, for example, Colombians widely blamed the wave of paramilitary violence consuming their country on

12 Jenny Pearce, 'Perverse State Formation and Securitized Democracy in Latin America', *Democratization*, 17.2 (2010), 286–306.

their own 'collective barbarity' and 'characteristic aggression'.[13] Paramilitary violence certainly provided a platform for nation-building, but as I have argued elsewhere, it did not serve to strengthen the state but further undermined state capacity as citizens turned away from an unresponsive and indifferent state and rationalized the privatization of public goods, seeking basic provisions like security and justice where they could: in themselves, however inadequate that proved to be.[14] Moreover, paramilitary violence destroys the social trust and fabric necessary for basic collective action, democracy, and statebuilding. I witnessed this process of inter-connected state and social devastation firsthand while living in a small, agricultural town in rural Colombia during a paramilitary take-over. Unable to rely on the state for security, local residents took radical steps to curtail their daily interactions and activities in order to avoid encountering paramilitaries. Those who were victimized, particularly those killed in the frequent purges, their bodies dumped in ditches and along the side of the road, were labelled as prostitutes, drug users, or insurgents who in one way or another deserved what befell them. This victim blaming was a desperate effort to convince themselves that they would be safe if they did not engage in such behaviours, as a way to compensate for the state's absolute abdication of its responsibility to provide justice or security. The traumatic violence, anonymity, and impunity of paramilitary activity combined to destroy the social trust necessary to rely on neighbours for a cup of sugar, much less mobilizing a public protest, holding public officials accountable, or turning up to vote, all necessary for both democracy and re-establishing floundering state capacity.

Recent research has pulled paramilitaries out of the shadows, illuminating their ties to the state, origins, internal hierarchies and organization, methods and strategies, ties to organized crime and illicit economies, variations of paramilitary violence, and more. The articles presented here have contributed rich empirical evidence regarding how paramilitaries originated and functioned in Greece, Turkey, Syria, and the former Yugoslavia at moments of critical junctures. Moreover, they have furthered our theoretical understanding of what types of violence paramilitaries deploy and why, their links to organized crime and il/licit economies, their relationship to genocidal violence, guerrilla

13 Eduardo Posada Carbó, *La nación soñada: Violencia, liberalismo y democracia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006).

14 Stacey Hunt, 'Writing Cartographies of Violence: Nation Building through State Failure', *New Political Science*, 35.2 (2013), 227–249.

insurgents, and autocratic regimes, and more. It is urgent that we now turn our attention to the study of variations of violence, including economic violence, incorporate systematic considerations of gender and sexuality as both variables and categories of analysis, and focus on how to effectively demobilize and reintegrate paramilitary fighters in order to end the cycle of violence once and for all.

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Stacey L. Hunt is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Auburn University. Her research specializes in comparative politics with an emphasis on urban planning and state capacity in Latin America.
Email: StaceyLeighHunt@gmail.com