

SILENCE SPEAKS OUT LOUD: ARMED CONFLICT AND BOVINE LIVESTOCK IN COLOMBIA, A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Silence on the subject: amplifying a story (mostly) yet to be told

Contact zone:

“Social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power”

(Mary Louise Pratt, 1994)

- » We understand livestock in Colombia, and the narratives it evokes, as a -contact zone-, a complex multifaceted phenomenon traversed by the country's armed conflict.
- » A consistent lack of contemporary readings on the subject underscores the tensions and frictions that arise when discussing the relationship between bovine livestock and armed actors in Colombia.
- » The historization of livestock activities, land tenure and civil war in Colombia thus becomes an urgent trope: no rigid dualities between victims and perpetrators but a comprehension of strategic agency, alliances, and survival in the midst of war.

Underscoring two main narratives:

- » Bovine livestock as a driving force behind land accumulation, dispossession, displacement and violence.
- » Livestock activities as crucial development opportunities for rural communities, (including former combatants), impoverished families, and minorities.
- » In the former, a direct, causal relationship between warlords and large-scale livestock producers is established.
- » In the latter, debates over land tenure, forced displacement and dispossession, are muted.

“Competing” truths:

- » Either victims or perpetrators (large scale and small producers) [+].
- » Livestock producers as victims of armed conflict and guerrilla warfare stands as a recent “competing truth” (agreement between livestock associations and the National Center for Historical Memory).
- » Such historical readings are further problematized by the connections between some large scale producers and right wing, drug trafficking, or paramilitary groups. These relationships, according to primary sources, are extended to large-(some) scale livestock producers in several regions. Similar dynamics can be found in other Latin American latitudes [+];[+];[+].
- » Scholarly interpretations on the subject also suggest such problematic entanglement, as well as a manifest politization of some bovine livestock associations in Colombia ^{1,2,3,4,5}.



Figure 1. Report presented by the federated livestock producers about their version of the conflict. Source: eltiempo.com (screenshot).

Colombia's agrarian problem: a root cause

- » The country's pervading unequal land distribution, as well as uneven processes of nation-state formation, and the corruption of regional elites, favour narratives and societal dynamics linking livestock production and armed factions.
- » Land use and appropriation reinforces -clashing- dynamics and conflicts surrounding bovine livestock in the country, a social space where diverse agents collide, a **contact zone** in which even post-conflict opportunities are imagined (sustainability included) [+];[+];[+].



Smallholder farmer herding livestock in Colombia. Photo: © Edwin Huffman / World Bank

Conclusions

- » There is a historic, problematic connection between livestock and armed actors, mostly at a large scale, and embedded in regional dynamics of land accumulation, dispossession, and support of paramilitary organizations.
- » Narratives on the role of bovine livestock in Colombia's longstanding conflict remain scarce. While some draw sharp, causal connections between the state's failure regarding land distribution and the pervading presence of regional elites, others focus their attention in analyzing the productive role of bovine livestock, its importance for rural communities and the opportunities for sustainable improvement that lies within.
- » Amplifying clashing narratives and understanding academic silence as a byproduct of historical circumstances underscores the conflictive nature of livestock practices in Colombia, both in “theory” and practice: the history of such terrain becomes another battleground, even becoming a promising protagonist in post-conflict scenarios.

References

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Further reading

More exhaustive literature can be obtained on this link: <http://bit.ly/ConflictPoster> or scan this QR code:

