

Problematizing Views of Colombian Democracy  
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*Colombia's peculiar arrangement*

There is a practical problem to capturing a cogent understanding of Colombia in a single snapshot. There are two realities of Colombia scholars use to frame analysis of the birthplace of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magical realism: "armed conflict" and "political democracy." These phenomena are a defining feature of modern Colombia. They have coexisted since 1958 when the National Front political pact ended intra-elite conflict in *La Violencia* but failed to guarantee a stable social order. In a sense, Colombian society was never successfully "pacified" in the way its neighboring nations were. The question of whether and how these two realities will be linked in the future is what stimulates my interest in this Andean nation. To submit an intelligible diagnosis and prospective commentary about Colombian democracy, it is worthwhile to review how scholarship treats the trajectory of this unique arrangement.

*Divorced research approaches to studying Colombia*

For a number of reasons, under the current administration of President Alvaro Uribe the tradition of utilizing an integrative approach to understanding the tortuous epic of Colombian democracy and violence is diminishing in credibility. In general, divorcing the realities of the Western hemisphere's second oldest "democracy" (defined as the electoral party politics practiced in Bogotá and other urban centers) and the significant violent resistance and repression which characterize vast rural areas from one another by politicians is a means to establishing a binary of terrorism and democracy. The corollary is often to promulgate attractive panacea-like policy prescriptions.

In the academy, scholars too can fall victim to this oversimplification and compartmentalize issues so as to deny interrelatedness and privilege certain factors in formulating explanatory models about Colombia. These theories are perhaps always true

according to their own criteria but whether they advance understanding of an issue—let alone opened up new possibilities for interpreting it—is a separate question. Let me be more concrete about my critique. Security-specific and most democratization studies interventions on Colombia trouble me because they detach their respective complementary realities. As a result, they produce unsatisfactory substantive accounts.

Naturally, security wonks and democratization studies scholars proceed differently in presenting their views of Colombia. But in reviewing the scholarship of influential works on Colombia such as Jonathan Hartlyn's, The politics of coalition rule in Colombia (1988 and an update, 1999), John D. Martz's, The Politics of Clientelism (1995), Laurence Whitehead's, "Reforms" (2001), Fernando Cepeda Ulloa's, "Colombia: The Governability Crisis," (2003), Nazih Richani's, Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia (2002), and Ricardo Vargas's, "State, Espirit Mafioso, and Armed Conflict in Colombia," (2004), I find a blank middle space between security and democracy approaches that renders either narrative inadequate. This void needs filling in to make intelligible the contradictions mediating the juxtaposed realities of Colombia. Social movement scholars creatively address this deficit from the micro level.<sup>1</sup> I follow scholars such as Daniel Pecaut (1992, 2001, 2004), Gonzalo Sanchez (1992, 1999), Marco Palacios (1999, 2000), and a 2004 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Program on Colombia to carve out a macro level research agenda proposing a synthesis. Needless to say, I am indebted to these scholars'

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<sup>1</sup> For an important intervention accentuating the embodied "political culture" of Latin American social movements, and their contentious relationship with democracy as a practiced set of institutions and concept, see Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, Culture of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Revisioning Latin American Social Movements (1988).

works. Collectively, their scholarship introduces evidence of what democratization studies of Colombia seems unable to produce: an analysis which treats the institutional engineering of the liberal polity as a necessary but insufficient stand alone condition for deepening understanding of a nation where citizens' experiences with politics truly range from the bullet to the ballot.

*Beyond a Colombian "Democracy with Adjectives:" Recognizing and investigating a paradoxical alignment*

In seeking an integrative framework for understanding the coexistence of South America's oldest democracy and longest running internal conflict in new light, this paper argues that the prevailing logic of democratization studies, known as the "Democracy with Adjective" model (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) is problematic. It adds ambiguity not clarity and furthermore, risks becoming a self-legitimizing research approach through its use of circular logic. To put the second criticism another way, the nature of substantive accounts (outcome) in democracy with adjective approaches are determined by utilizing an unquestioned starting point of universal analysis (framework). What do I mean by this? How might Colombia help us unpack this logic?

The framework which categorizes Colombian democracy in a universal taxonomy correlates to a circumscribed analysis of political life in the nation of inquiry. This logic depends upon centering an ideal notion of democracy, which in practice refers to advanced industrial democracies explicitly or implicitly (O'Donnell, 2004). Its narrative is told from a vapid institutionalist perspective. Elite political actors and institutions such

as congresses, ministries and constitutions do not interface with society, thus tending to remove the reader from actually existing democracy in Colombia. For example, the exercise of power seems formalized and bounded within institutions. This is highly problematic because power in Colombia functions through informal mechanisms of state-society ties (such as those between the armed forces and AUC paramilitary groups) and literally draws its resources from the interwoven interests of legitimate and illegitimate actors. By decentering actually existing democracy and actually functioning power, this narrow account ends up reinforcing the logic of universal categorizing because the case studies mainly address structural elements of the polity which ostensibly can be abstracted to a level conducive to broad evaluation and comparison. This can be true of scholarship that purports to take Colombia as its primary unit of analysis (Hartlyn, 1988) and does not (Whitehead, 2001).

I contend there are flaws internal to this democratization studies model; suggest scholars are using an invalid logic of comparison; and demonstrate how the reinforcing feedback loop between a preconceived conceptual framework and a limited substantive account poorly serves interpretation of peculiar political arrangements such as the Colombia one. Considering the intellectual debt democratization studies' interventions on Colombia have to the wider body of democratization scholarship (Linz and Stepan, 1996, and Diamond, Hartlyn, Linz, and Lipset, 1999), I question the epistemological worth of the "democracy with adjective" approach *writ large*.

In this regard, the Africanist Mahmood Mamdani makes an important intervention. Mamdani believes preconceived comparative frameworks lead to restrictive binary formulations where the logic of a “history by analogy” positions the “developing” nation in relation to a “modern” one. The goal is to make the former intelligible by measuring its contrasts with the latter (Mamdani, 1996). In other words, this logic can produce reductive outputs where the rigor of specificity (“the fragment” some have called it too. Chatterjee, 1994) is subsumed into the ether of the universal. I see the logic of “history by analogy” at work in “Democracy with Adjectives” prefiguring of an “advanced” versus “developing” democracy juxtaposition as the logical starting point for analysis.

One goal for this paper is to consider how an empirical case study might recover a meaningful understanding of Colombia’s complexity. In such a scenario, the “democratic” sphere in which actors (elites and citizens) and structures (institutions of the polity) function on a daily basis would *interact* with that other “violent” sphere inhabited by various armed private groups and disenfranchised citizens.<sup>2</sup> In order to make a breakthrough by interrelating these spheres, I propose we center the paradox of a national reality constituted by antagonistic conditions, democracy and violence.

Addressing the security and democracy studies literature, but also referring to the Uribe administration’s “Democratic Security” policy manifestation of this bifurcated logic, I unsettle the frameworks of those projects which compartmentalize. I primarily contain

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<sup>2</sup> Even under the Hobessian logic of the Uribe government’s declaration of the fundamental right to security, it is fair to say that if citizens are defenseless, they are denied basic access to franchise. See Alvaro Uribe Vélez, “La Colombia que quiero: Manifiesto Democrático, 100 Puntos,” Presidencia de la República de Colombia. <[www.presidencia.gov.co/documentos/](http://www.presidencia.gov.co/documentos/)>

my remarks to works on democratization, which engages in an interesting methodological debate about how comparativists should navigate questions of universality versus particularity.<sup>3</sup>

There are two caveats in order before getting started. To a certain extent thus far I have presupposed democratization studies to be a homogenously bound field. I also risk underestimating the diversity of Colombian studies on the same grounds. My unsatisfactory response to the accusation that I build two straw men to then tear them down is: this is the first effort to build an innovative model, and while my hunch is that there are significant tensions within democratization studies and their Colombian configurations, in a longer paper I would write a literature review more sensitive to the various contributions that are the foundation for building an alternative approach.

*General trends in the “bounded” approaches of security and democratization*

To security experts, Colombia approximates the definition of a failing state and more ominously, the U.S. government’s next potential quagmire. The analytic lens is directed on the countryside where over two million internally displaced people roam; the majority of human rights abuses are committed and approximately three to four thousand civilian casualties take place annually; over forty thousand illegal armed actors from leftist

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously the scope of this paper is a limiting factor too. I make a few comments later in the paper about innovative approaches to security studies which reach for holistic efforts to addressing the connections between development, democracy, and public security. Ann Mason, a professor at the Universidad de los Andes in Colombia, wrote an interesting working paper for the Social Science Research Council which addresses the inadequacy of current international relations paradigms for understanding Colombia. Her essay thus makes a number of points similar to my argument about (un)fitting Colombia to larger trends of comparative research, only her reference point is international relations theory. For more see, Ann Mason, “Colombia’s Conflict and Theories of World Politics,” unpublished, which on my last on-line visit was available at SSRC website under <<http://conconflicts.ssrc.org/andes/>>

guerilla groups (FARC and ELN), right wing paramilitary fronts (factions of AUC), and narco-trafficking cartelitos effectively govern fiefdoms; and a resource war over oil, drugs, and fertile land surges. They note that Colombia is a country openly at war, a claim President Alvaro Uribe substantiates by declaring a state of internal emergency to suspend civil liberty protections (only to have the constitutional court turn the request down), expanding the power of the armed forces, and arguing Colombia suffers more from “terrorism” than any other state in the world.

To summarize, for those who study Colombia’s security crisis, the research agenda is the search for extending effective sovereignty throughout the nation from Bogotá to the *llano* of Amazonas, from Medellín to the cattle grazing *fincas* of Cordoba, from Cali to the bio-diverse Pacific coast Littoral region. In essence a Weberian modern state with a capacity for monopoly control of violence and authority is the idealized reference point.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, democratization scholars narrow their analytic lens to the political institutions and elites in the capital and regional seats of state power. While Colombia’s paradoxical alignment of comparatively modern political institutions and internal war is a source of intrigue, the conceptual framework argues that treating “violence” as Colombia’s central reality is a gross misrepresentation. It would be ahistorical and reductionist to treat Colombia as either a mythical democracy or more cynically, a haven

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<sup>4</sup> (The Uribe and U.S. governments explicitly adopt this view but perhaps from a narrow perspective. A Rand Institute study, The Colombian Labyrinth (Chalk and Rabassa 2001), had an important intellectual influence on these governments’ embrace of an effective sovereignty strategy. Other security narratives, which do not offer such valorized judgments, but emphasize this chaotic violence as a metaphor for Colombian politics and also end up addressing the question of Weberian stateness are Bergquist, Penaranda, Sanchez, 1992 and 2001; Nazih Richani, 2002; Vargas, 2004; and McCarthy and Sweig, 2005).

for Mafioso politics, economic greed, and a private resource war, those scholars who study the Colombian system normally maintain. It should be underscored, they argue, that Colombia enshrined modernity into its revamped 1991 constitution, is home to an incipient pluralist trend that includes former guerillas turned leftist politicians, and is widely recognized for its famous commitment to electoral politics—most notably a history largely free of interrupted civilian rule in the comparatively unstable Andean region of South America.<sup>5</sup>

### *Toward a synthesis*

So is Colombia a case of mass armed instability amidst procedural democracy? Or does this placid urban democracy exist amidst massive instability? Is it paradoxical and remarkable that the formal trappings of a political democracy function according to a constitution in spite of a ragging armed conflict and its adjunct, the billion dollar drug trade? If this twofold setup is the more interesting query, and the answer to both parts is yes, we need to transcend submitting Colombia's resilient "liberal" political culture as a proxy for explaining the character of democracy. The deeper task, it seems, is to investigate the nature of this persisting arrangement by asking: what issues mediate the dynamic of coexisting political democracy and armed conflict?

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<sup>5</sup> For four years during the tumultuous decade-long *La Violencia* (1948-1958) General Rojas Pinilla was Colombia's second military dictator. Before Rojas Pinilla, the only other military official to hold office lasted for a few months in the nineteenth century. This is an aberration within Latin America to say the least and leads some analysts to compare Colombia as a close second to the United States in its historical commitment to democratic rule. That democratic tradition began in 1810 at the founding of the republic, according to one author's reading (Javier Sanin, S.J., 1987). (Influential scholars maintaining this cautiously sanguine view are Javier Sanin, (1987); Jonathan Hartlyn, (1988 and 1999); Jorge P. Osterling (1989); Ana Maria Bejarano, (2001); and Fernando Cepeda Ulloa (2003)).

Daniel Pecaú essentially posed this very question in a 1992 essay titled “Guerillas and Violence” and his analysis suggested a disquieting prognosis for the “limited democracy” model that still prevails among political elites in Colombia (Pecaú, 1992). Looking backward at the coinciding historical moment when the National Front—an oligarch pact formed by the Liberal and Conservative political parties—ended intra-elite conflict and peasant resistance groups coalesced with the then outlawed Communist Party, Pecaú postulated the continuity of a fragmented social order: “the original violence of the 1950s continues as the horizon of all social actors” (Pecaú, 1992, 221). He then theorized that the violent expressions of the increasingly powerful guerilla groups (at the time he wrote rebels were not directly associated with narco-trafficking) were in fact the “flipside” of a “Colombian democracy” that could not unite the country. The “limited democratic” state, as he put it, did not address the fundamental social disorder which was “inscribed in ‘the nature of things’” (Pecaú, 1992, 221). While this discouraging view of the quasi-structural impediments to bridging the “dissociation between the social and political orders” is not irrelevant, I think it is important to note that the dynamic is not static and continues to transform. For their part, Colombians do not feel eternally imprisoned by their past or current condition (Pecaú, 1992, 221). Along with other scholars’ contributions, I draw on Pecaú’s interdependent approach to the problem and seek to reframe the current stage violence and political crisis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A fecund scholar, Pecaú publishes new works on Colombia almost annually where he seems to revise his arguments without departing from his original positioning of democracy and armed conflict as linked. Because Pecaú makes clear that there is no civil war as we conventionally think of them, his most cited work of late, *Guerra contra la sociedad* (2001) is appropriated by those scholars seeking to divorce the armed conflict from any political context and burnish the credentials of Colombia’s political democracy. I think Pecaú’s larger point, that while the conflict transformed from a romantic one (to some people) to a cynical war against society, does not mean we should displace analysis juxtaposing these realities and replace it with a framework which removes the actors from history and treats the situation as an internal

One fruitful approach is to collapse the geographical divide between the urban and rural reference points that democracy studies and security approaches respectively assume. To the extent this separation of worlds was ever real or tenable—which Colombian historian Marco Palacios would argue is belied by cases of regional rebellions which reached Bogotá only to be crushed by an elite dedicated to maintaining a bifurcated Colombia—the boundary demarcating urban from rural society is rapidly transforming into a frontier of sub-national imbrication (Palacios, 1999 and 2001). In other words, the deep rooted societal fragmentations of the countryside, the alleged stimulus for the guerilla groups once disregarded by elites as peripheral to their world, are now expressed through social problems of mass urbanization. The symptoms of armed conflict are increasingly present in the cities—internally displaced refugees are flooding social service offices in Cali, recruitment battles for new rebel soldiers continue in Medellín, and FARC attacked an elite social club in downtown Bogotá in 2003.

Uribe himself astutely recognizes the traditional exclusion of populations in the countryside and now regularly travels outside the capital to promote local “caudillo” democracy by presiding over Communal Councils of Government. His extension of public security forces to peripheral confines for the first time ever is an important recognition of the debt Colombia accumulated by never achieving a Hobessian level of national unity based on a Leviathan-like social contract.<sup>7</sup> This rupture of once bounded

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“terrorist” war against the state. Other recent publications which review Uribe administration policies are less theoretical and hold a different value as policy analysis (Pecaut, 2003, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> This a problem which should also be correlated with the logistical issues of trade and communication in a geographic zone as complex as Colombia’s. For more on this question see Marco Palacios and Frank

realities—if less a qualitative shift than a gradual response to a mutating conflict—is an important backdrop for developing the fused conceptual framework I propose.<sup>8</sup>

My main hypothesis then is that a minimum methodological prerequisite for understanding Colombia’s peculiar situation under President Alvaro Uribe is transcending a binary perspective, which treats either the civil pluralist reality of Bogotá politicians or the underbelly reality of privatized political violence and humanitarian catastrophe as independent conditions. Both are “true” realities. But as Pecaut explained in 1992, and I think is still very true, neither is fully intelligible without understanding the nature of interaction between the two (Pecaut, 1992). That is to say understanding the nature of Colombian democracy can be illuminated by examining its adjunct: the history and dynamics of the violence. The concomitant point is that the armed conflict, despite its uncivil expressions of terrorist acts, is most effectively interpreted if we situate it in a political context.

While not relaxing the conceptual interdependence of what Pecaut termed the “complementary” conditions of Colombia, I want to now concentrate my analysis on the democratization studies school rather than the security and resource war scholarship.<sup>9</sup>

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Safford, Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society, (2001) or David Bushnell, The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself, (1993).

<sup>8</sup> For a more overview and analysis of the Uribe policy decisions in his first two years of office see McCarthy and Sweig, 2005, and Pecaut, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> For an essay which adopts the security lens as its primary focal point and addresses the myth of robust Colombian democracy as a secondary issue, see McCarthy and Sweig, 2005. Some innovative frameworks for broadening the concept of security are under formulation using the rubric “new security” or “human security.” This new approach is oriented toward a holistic effort. i.e., bridging security and development and similarly, security and democracy. For further information on such research see Fafo, a Norwegian think tank in Oslo, which is starting a research program, “Linking Development and Security,” at <<http://www.newsecurity.info>>.

With the aforementioned caveat that democratization research on Colombia is certainly not a homogenous body of literature in mind, I venture some general comments about how this approach goes about interpreting Colombia and other “developing democracies.” This epistemological critique is central to developing a model flexible enough to synthesize the dual realities of Colombia. At another level, it also is a statement about the perils of universal categorization.

### (Un)Fitting Democratization to Colombia

The complexity of Colombia’s politics would seem to problematize placing it on a scale of polyarchy or defining it as a specific type of democracy comparable to other nations’ polities. Nonetheless, the *problematique* does not seem to dismay democracy scholars. Ironically, these scholars almost invariably preface the sections where they categorize Colombia by acknowledging the near impossibility of the exercise.<sup>10</sup> Forging ahead nonetheless, scholars describe Colombian democracy as “near polyarchy” (Dahl, 1971), “oligarchic” (Wilde, 1978), “consociational” (Hartlyn, 1988 and Dugas and Hartlyn, 1999), “clientilistic” (Osterling, 1989 and Maartz, 1997), “reforming” (Whitehead, 2001), “ambiguous” (Sanin and Rueda, 2004), and “besieged,” (Pizarro, 2004). These are the embodiments of the so-called “Democracy with Adjectives” approach (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

Collier and Levitsky envisage “democracy with adjectives” as a necessary analytic process but one that can be “overdone” when scholars unscrupulously try for “analytic

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<sup>10</sup> For a good example of a scholar recognizing this conundrum but not truly confronting it, see Hartlyn, 1988.

differentiation” and “conceptual stretching” (Collier and Levitsky, 1997, 430, 431). The programmatic of their article is an appeal to judicious comparative research with “greater consistency and clarity of meaning.... for assessing causal relationships” (Collier and Levitsky, 1997, 431). Their article does not problematize the starting reference point of the Schumpeterian and Dahlian procedural model deployed to define four categories of non-democratic democracies (my phrase and hint that the approach verges on tautology). Neither do they question the overall epistemic purpose (or trend toward utilizing universal categories) of the comparative democratization project (Collier and Levitsky, 1997, 431).

The individual Colombia “democracy with adjective” narratives exhibit that prioritizing the description of representative and other state institutions can yield a lopsided narrative. In a sense, the analysis is distorted by reifying democratic institutions as universal structures. Whether these pillars of polyarchy actually apply in a meaningful way to their intended agents is an after thought. How politics in a given nation actually function (or dysfunctions) is reduced to an adjective.<sup>11</sup>

#### *An alternative framework for Colombian and beyond*

In the substantive analyses of Colombian democracy there is an assumed presupposition that Colombia—and this applies generally to other new developing democracies—is democratizing toward a particular end. As Bruce Bagley notes in his criticism of early scholarship, authors such as Dahl (1971), Bailey (1977), and Hartlyn (1988) poorly hid

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Katie Jennings for helping me clarify this point about democratization studies’ blind spot.

their linear teleological analysis in postulating the gradual “maturation” of a democracy to a point where the system would just work out the kinks on its own (Bagley, 1984). Bagley is directly referring to scholarship that emerged after the formal abrogation of the National Front government in 1974. Recent works, on the other hand, are taking a more skeptical view of Colombian politics but not necessarily relinquishing the reference point of a fixed modern democratic end (Sanin and Rueda, 2004). I admit avoiding this pitfall is not at all easily done.

The way I would frame a non-teleological approach is to consider Colombia’s trajectory according to its own standards and cyclical history. In this narrative, Colombia, while not a member of the “Third Wave” democratic transition group, is still transforming codified norms in its new constitution into real functions of the state. This is obviously a test we could apply to the United States against its constitution too, which is precisely the point. At a deeper level, it is important to unsettle linear analyses in order to prevent any notion of assumed progress associated with the fulfillment of “democratic” criteria present in advanced industrial states. The point is not to discard democracy, however. Rather I wish to challenge scholars to engage the manifest realities of unshed colonial legacies and their relation to the actual way in which democracy selectively applies in a place like Colombia. This is clearly an argument for the dialectics of historical change, whereby disruptions and continuities are interwoven and “development” is not assumed.

The Colombian historian Marco Palacios is extremely relevant here. For Palacios, the inchoate democratic nation-state in Bogotá today can be understood through a “Parable of

Liberalism” in which Colombians’ simultaneous “encounter with and loss of Liberalism” is the central theme mediating the highly uneven modernization experience (Palacios, 1999). Palacios provocatively suggests that Colombian elites adopted a strategy of “liberalism by omission” (Palacios, 1999). To put it another way, liberalism was, and still is, an empty analytical category and political doctrine. This unfulfilled liberal project, which was intentionally designed as such on Palacios’s reading, stains any notion of democracy in Colombia. Undoubtedly, Palacios has a normative reference point for what democracy should be like. But he is to be credited for measuring his evaluation against the claims made by Colombian political elites and not cloaking his benchmark in the tacit Northwestern democratic reference point deployed by the democracy with adjectives school (O’Donnell, 2004). Furthermore, in demonstrating how the formal trappings of polyarchy are of scant significance to actually existing political realities in a nation with a fragmented citizenry, he makes an invaluable contribution to the problem of democracy in Colombia.

In my conception then, deeming Colombia an “illiberal” or “consociational” democracy or like Dahl finding a proxy term such as “near polyarchy,” is to misconstrue. The point is that Colombia can be seen as democratizing or modernizing according to its own historical terms and codified principles. Rather than imposing a framework based on an idealized end point of democracy, which in democratization literature is coded as advanced industrial countries such as the United States (Anthony and Schamis, 2005 unpublished and O’Donnell, 2004), we begin to examine Colombia from the ground up—

effectively centering it as the paradigm (Mamdani, 1996). Why might this be a more fruitful approach than situating Colombia as another “democracy with adjectives?”

I explore two principal reasons why unsettling the prevailing model of democratization typologies would enhance analysis, which my review of Palacios foreshadowed. The first is that conceptually, the intellectual enterprise of adjective-laden categories of democracy studies seems subjective and flawed in its logic of comparison. The (normative) reference point for this scholarship ranges from the implicit to explicit. And with that particular advanced industrial country as a reference point, there is an assumption of “ideal” versus “suboptimal” hybrid regimes (Anthony and Schamis, 2005, unpublished).

The first error, it seems, is that a corollary of this distinction is to erect a boundary which prohibits comparing advanced and developing democracies. This is problematic since in reality there are numerous *common* problems and imperfections in democratic polities across the globe.<sup>12</sup> From the denial of franchise in Florida 2000 (which is ongoing for felons there) and Ohio 2004, to imbalances in access to democratic rights, to disproportionate concentration of power, weakened checks and balances, and undue delegation of authority, a range of problems beset both new and old democracies.

“Delegation, illiberalism, and other suboptimal outcomes,” note Ariel Anthony and

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<sup>12</sup> In an interesting essay where he is somewhat self-critical of the optimism implicit in much of the transitions to democracy approach, Guillermo O’Donnell discusses the variety of informal features in all democracies which he calls “particularisms.” O’Donnell claims these “particularisms” are “antagonistic” to fulfilling the “main aspects of the full institutional package of polyarchy: the behavioral, legal, and normative distinction between a public and private sphere.” My main point here is not to fully explore O’Donnell’s argument; it is just to demonstrate how one major democratization scholar identifies similar problems indigenous to advanced and developing democracies. O’Donnell, “Illusions About Consolidation,” in *Journal of Democracy*, 7.2, 1996, pp. 39-40.

Hector Schamis, are not the exclusive provenance of developing democracies (Anthony and Schamis, 2005, unpublished).

And while the effectiveness of democracies might be somehow measurable and comparable through survey and other data, I am skeptical whether such a framework of universal comparison enhances rather than distorts a deep understanding of a particular country and its polity. If for the sake of cosmopolitanism and the practical value of just being realistic, the goal is not to make others in our own self image but to speak in terms of efficacy, then it becomes crucial for scholarship to carry through this rule of thumb when conceiving comparative research. It is important to note I am not questioning the imposition of frameworks and naively suggesting models developed from field research are free of conceptual bias. Recognizing that scholars cannot check their beliefs at the door and impose a true, empirically derived model is the necessary first step to problematizing a particular framework and advancing the quality of the narrative output.

This point leads directly to what I see as the second problem with the “democracy with adjectives” approach: its reductive focus on formal structures of the polity known as “institutional engineering.” As noted, when we unpack this conceptual logic centered on advanced industrial countries, it becomes evident that this enterprise is vulnerable to “history by analogy” (Mamdani, 1996) and prone to producing reductionist substantive accounts. Anthony and Schamis, who ridicule this veritable cottage industry as a “terminological Babel in democratization studies,” submit that generalized descriptions and empty analytical categories such as “illiberal, immature, and delegative” are

frequently the outcomes of recent democratization taxonomies (Anthony and Schamis, 2005). A confusion of what distinguishes real autocracy from genuine democracy is where they fear this approach is headed. To save democratization studies, they call for clarity of terms, research relating advanced and developing cases, and pursuing non-ethnocentric comparative empirical research.

I am sympathetic to this rectification of terms critique but am not sure it will solve “history by analogy” problems or address the short-sighted emphasis on the “institutional engineering.” My preference is to remove comparative research from the level of the universal and ground it in the specificity and rigor of a longer historical view disinterested in causation but focused on “understanding.” This perspective militates against a logical model of causality and prediction and is strongly biased toward an emerging sociopolitical matrix perspective which seems to seek a Weberian *Verstehen*, or deep totalized “understanding” of heterodox meaning.<sup>13</sup> How we realize this *Verstehen* is through politically informed historical method or what Meredith Woo-Cummings calls “a full understanding of where we have been” as interpreted from Hegel’s Owl of Minerva metaphor (Woo-Cummings, 1999).

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<sup>13</sup>In a recent formulation, [Latin America in the 21st Century: Toward a New Sociopolitical Matrix](#), five authors, lead by Manuel Antonio Garretón, outline a comprehensive analytical framework for a deep understanding for the region. This SPM synthesizes the economic, social, cultural and political pieces of the puzzle (Garretón, et al, 2003). The matrix is based on four constitutive pillars “none of which can be reduced to or explained by any of the others: construction of political democracy; social democratization, including national integration; the reinsertion of Latin American economies in the world system; and the building of a model of modernity that assumes both globalization and cultural identities” (Garretón, et al, 2003, 93). I am intrigued by the possible robust capacity an SPM would have for integrating analysis of political democracy with the other realities affecting the polity. I introduce it here in the notes as an alternative pedagogical mode of research to be tested at another date.

*Withdrawal from the universal and engaging specificity: Grounding research in Colombia*

To reiterate, institutional engineering and democracy as “only the rules of the game” approaches to Colombia need the complementary conditions of armed conflict and exclusionary politics to be intelligible. The formalist institutional view—a Schumpeterian one—that elections and institutions commend to Colombia the stature of democracy ignores that nasty other reality raging outside the halls of government that is not in the least disconnected from the state. For example, the significance of private expressions of armed resistance and repression is not explored despite its overtly political nature and direct relation to state strategies. There are important links between the trends of private violence and the Uribe government’s Democratic Security agenda. The most obvious example is the well documented relationship between the paramilitary AUC groups and the armed forces, which continue despite the outlawing of private security groups by the Colombian parliament in 1989.<sup>14</sup> Let us also remember that on the other hand, the Mafioso politics perspective—roughly a resource war between state and non-state actors—disregards the real effect state institutions and representative bodies do have in Colombia. Neither perspective can see how the two are deeply interrelated. But this has been recognized by scholars before me.

Bruce Bagley sought to bypass it almost altogether in 1984 when he described the polity as “inclusionary authoritarian” (Bagley, 1984, 125). By engaging and discarding the utility of a universal typology, Bagley is a relatively early example of critiquing the

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<sup>14</sup>For a good article addressing the historical tradition of private violence in Colombian society, see Fernando Cubides, C, “From Private to Public Violence: The Paramilitaries,” in Bergquist, Penaranda, and Sanchez, *Violence in Colombia 1990-2000*, Wilmington: University of Delaware, 2001, pp. 127-150.

democratization with adjectives school (using the same words in certain formulations even). As discussed, he was troubled by those scholars' teleological perspective that qualified Colombian democracy under the assumption that the state would eventually "come of age" as an ideal polyarchy (Bagley, 1984, 126). Like Palacios, he applies a thick normative conception of what democratic politics ought to be in roundly criticizing "the excessive focus on the formal aspects of democracy and failure to understand the dynamics of power and policymaking within the Colombian system" (Bagley, 1984, 126). The virtue in the Bagley selection is that while comparing Colombian to a set of criteria he personally believes are important to democracy, the evaluative method is to test the applicability of the system against claims made by the Conservative and Liberal party elites (Cavarozzi, 2005, JHU Lecture). In this regard, Bagley began an important project of situating Colombia as the paradigm and challenging the worth of a formal comparative logic which did not take into account the questionable relevance of political democracy to a significant portion of the citizenry.

This fundamental disconnect is where Pecaut picked up in 1992 with "Guerillas and Violence," though he surprisingly does not cite Bagley. Pecaut's contribution also centered Colombia without feeling the need to contextualize it with a comparative framework. His normative agenda perhaps crept into the analysis too. However, he clearly maintains throughout the article that empirical research indicates violence and democracy are fundamental complements of one another. In speculative remarks in the conclusion, Pecaut suggests that peace brokering in 1980s between new political elites and suddenly conciliatory guerilla groups could lead to an attenuation of the social and

political gap (Pecaut, 1992, 237). He was ultimately a realist, however, declaring that “limited democracy” and “armed struggle” had clearly learned how to coexist despite transformations in the dynamics mediating the relationship. Thus, they were likely to persist at least as general categories but would not be static phenomena, which brings us up to the situation in Colombia today (Pecaut, 1992, 237).

*Concluding Remarks Uribe: Breaking the Cycle?*

As I hope it is clear by now, I will not be qualifying Colombian democracy with an adjective and categorizing it on some continuum. The question I want to ask is how Uribe’s administration fits in the ongoing “Parable of Liberalism” outlined by Palacios. For Palacios the “parable of liberalism” in Colombia has not ended. That is to say “liberalism by omission” still prevails in Colombia, as evidenced by a “weak state” which, in the Hobessian tradition, cannot provide the most fundamental liberal right to agency: security (Palacios, 1999, 236). While security is essential to realizing the good life in liberalism, Palacios would blanch at the suggestion Colombia needs only to increase the capacity of its armed forces to crush the armed groups. The absence of security is merely the most glaring example of Colombia’s incompleteness; it does not necessarily mean more war is the best solution.

Nevertheless, in the instance of Alvaro Uribe’s “Democratic Security” policy, we have a strategy of betting the house on a single-minded goal: ratcheting up the conflict against the leftist guerillas with the hope of increasing state monopolization of violence and creating a sense of public security for the citizenry. This policy does not pretend to be

imaginary. It is a blanket security doctrine, which is understandably popular in a country with the highest kidnapping and murder rates in the world (excluding Afghanistan and Iraq) and where sympathy for the leftist armed groups dissipated long ago.

Colombia always seems to be living in dangerous times but the stakes are particularly high since Uribe stoked expectations and continues to generate such high hopes. Eduardo Pizarro, a former guerilla activist turned political analyst and academic, believes Colombia finds itself “at a point of inflection” (Pizarro, 2004, 5). Indeed, with paramilitary demobilization proceeding as state provision of blanket impunity for drug traffickers and AUC thugs; FARC, the largest guerilla group, firmly entrenched ideologically and militarily; and Uribe seeking a constitutional amendment to run in a second election he would almost undoubtedly win, politics seems to be reaching a climax from which contending forces could emerge seriously weakened or significantly empowered. Uribe’s “heroism,” to borrow from Pecaut, is a double edged sword (Pecaut, 2004, 5). He clearly instills confidence in the state but seems opposed to laying the necessary foundation for redressing the “liberal deficit” he inherited. Granted this would require the development of a robust democracy in a context of war and IMF-imposed fiscal austerity. In the end, an Uribe let down—either losing reelection because of scandal or failing to maintain the legitimacy of the state because the paramilitary demobilization becomes unglued or the FARC score a crushing blow—would be a devastating blow to the nation’s psyche, which already suffers from the syndrome of unfulfilled expectations so common in Latin America.

While there is some consensus over the need for security as a precondition to extending the reach of democracy to the citizenry, sharp discord emerges when debating the contents of what the “democratic security” process substantively entails.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in my view, critics justifiably claim that if the state focuses on strengthening state authority at the expense of upholding human rights; without addressing the social tensions that are at this conflict’s roots; without truly severing ties with the paramilitaries; and by neglecting to build a sustainable foundation for security, justice, and prosperity for its disenfranchised majority, it could easily win a war against a particular armed group but lose the peace. If the wrong path is chosen, the risk is that like Central American nations which waged dirty war campaigns to end their conflicts, Colombian democracy and its social fabric could be ravaged once again as it was during *La Violencia*. If a short sighted formula does go terribly wrong in Colombia, violence could easily reproduce itself in a different form just as occurred in the now crime-ridden nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Or as Palacios would point out, violence will reappear just as it has in Colombia’s own past from the 100 days war in 1899 to *La Violencia* to today.

The habitual cycle of violence and politics is the burden of Colombia’s past. Hopefully it will not continue as the routinized reality of its future.

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<sup>15</sup> See the press coverage of Uribe’s remarks about NGOs alleged sympathy for the “narco-terrorist guerillas” at the swearing on off the new Commander in Chief of the Colombian Armed Forces archived at the Center for International Policy website: <<http://www.ciponline/colombia>>

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