

High on War

Marijuana and State Violence in Colombia

Lina Britto

Introduction¹

Colombia's endless war tends to be viewed through the filter of drug trafficking. The quantum leap that the coca and cocaine economies enabled in the finances of armed actors often appears to be the key factor in the intensification of violence. This perspective has been so influential that Point 4 of the Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict between the State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC-EP, "Solution to the problem of illicit drugs," begins by rejecting this thesis and claims that the conflict "predates and has causes unrelated" to the emergence of these crops.

It would be absurd to claim that the trade in one of the most widely consumed alkaloids in the world has not been a decisive factor in the internal armed conflict, but we simply cannot continue to argue for an in-

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trinsic connection between illicit drugs and violence. It is true that “all actors involved in the armed conflict, directly or indirectly, have had relationships with drug trafficking and these relationships have been decisive in the course of the war, its degradation and outcomes, and especially in its continuation” (CEV, 2022a, p. 312). It is also true that the use of brute force in the drug business is not the rule, but rather one more resource, especially in times of high prices (Reuter, 2009; Mejía & Restrepo, 2013). It is important to recognize that drug production and trade have been “vital lifelines for vulnerable and marginalized communities, providing the essential means for survival in the midst of adversity” (Marín et al., 2024, p. 2).

The impact of drug trafficking is multidimensional; it has been both a source of conflict and stability. But a kind of cocaine fixation in academic debate, media controversy, and public policy has numbed our ability to address the issue in all its complexity. Narcotizing the internal armed conflict “favored a stigmatizing narrative about certain populations that have been repressed, persecuted, criminalized, and politically nullified,” while helping to deny the existence of a historical struggle by dismissing the guerrillas as mere “criminal armies engaged in an illicit business” (Majbub, 2023). The narcotizing view is not only reductionist, but, in itself, a discursive weapon in the repertoire of violence that reduces the scope for negotiated solutions.

Looking beyond coca, cocaine, and violence is an essential step toward a comprehensive understanding of the conflict. For example, the histories of marijuana in the country have been downplayed as regional anecdotes with little to tell us about war and peace. Yet marijuana revenues, markets, and regulation have been reshaping key regions of the country’s political and human geography for more than half a century, with lasting consequences. The terms used to name the plant reflect these histories. “Marimba” was the euphemism used in La Guajira and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta during the country’s first illicit drug boom in the 1970s and 1980s. The term referred to a musical instrument with a similar spelling, but had its roots in *marimamba*, a word of African origins used since colonial times by the *palenqueros* (maroon communities) of the Caribbean coast to refer to hemp (Del Castillo

Mathieu, 1984). “Creepy” is the commercial name given to the type of tech-enhanced cannabis that flooded the fields of northern Cauca and the consumer markets of Colombia and Latin America in the second decade of this century. Imported along with the seeds, the English word usually describes things, people, or situations that generate fear or anxiety. “Cannabis” is the scientific name used in the legislation regulating medicinal use. Coined by European botanists in the 18th century, the concept was recently revived as a neutral term for the demonized marijuana now turned into a panacea by the pharmaceutical industry and a low-impact natural intoxicant in a world of synthetic drugs and lethal overdoses.

The terms “marimba,” “creepy,” and “cannabis” are also peepholes through which to observe the struggles of some of the “nods” that underpin the persistence of the conflict (Wills, 2015, p. 702). First of all, the internal colonialism of political domination, that is, a series of racial imaginaries celebrated in the expression “country of regions” and manifested in a tension between the political center and the peripheries of the nation, has shaped the physical and discursive space that defines who is and who is not a legal subject of the Colombian nation-state. Secondly, the state’s role in the processes of dispossession and acculturation that have facilitated agrarian modernization. Throughout the 20th century, these processes have been marked by relations of dependence and subordination to the United States. Hence, the third “nod” is the intended and unexpected effects of the U.S. superpower’s interference as a role model, ally, and financier of a type of development based on the concentration of land, wealth, and power, not only as a partner in counterinsurgency and anti-narcotics efforts. Lastly, the adoption and adaptation of the “war on drugs,” the latest chapter in the interstate drama between Colombia and the United States, has contributed to the degradation of the conflict and the state by reigniting its violence at critical moments of political dispute and creating the illusion that it is possible to solve historical challenges by force.

Although overshadowed by the spectacular nature of the cocaine hydra, cannabis has been a bridge to profound structural and identity transformations of the state and the nation, a dynamo of modern-

ization and an outlet for its contradictions. With a hasty transition to post-conflict in the national sphere and a process of decriminalization and legalization of the plant on the international stage, a spectrum of possibilities has opened up for a country that has historically been a producer, exporter, and consumer of cannabis. However, in order to make the most out of this situation, we need to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and potential of those who have created their productive enclaves and cultures of consumption, and thus overcome the narrowness of analysis, the moralism of discourse, and the provincialism of public policy. This chapter employs historical methods to analyze documentary sources and ethnographic methods, including interviews and fieldwork, to comprehend the past and present of the plant in the country.

The Forgotten Victims and the Construction of Peace

In 2014, during the peace negotiations in Havana, the parties agreed to create the Historical Commission on the Conflict and its Victims (CHCV, acronym in Spanish), which in 2015 published a report investigating the causes and origins of the war in order to break the deadlock in the talks, which had stalled in a disagreement over historical responsibilities between the government and the guerrillas (Bermúdez, 2018, p. 209). Ten years later, the commemorative volume in which this essay was originally published analyzed the reasons for the persistence of the conflict and offered a historical perspective to help overcome the presentism deeply rooted in public debate, in the hope of advancing the implementation of the peace agreements. But as Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín pointed out in his 2015 essay, “any statement made about our conflict is necessarily partial and is made from the perspective of an ongoing debate.” Historical thinking, as a “deeply political” exercise of imagination, helps to break with “presentist time [which] is always trauma time” because it allows us to question the belief that “something has always been in a certain way and therefore always will be” (Castro, 2021).

Narrating and analyzing the conflict to help “societies and groups come to terms with a past of war or mass violence and move toward nonviolence and non-repetition” (CNMH, 2013a, p. 13) has been Colombia’s commitment for more than half a century. Between 1958 and 2012, the country had twelve national commissions for the extrajudicial study and investigation of the conflict, an unprecedented case in the world. These reports constitute “radiographs” of the war, “taxonomies” that made it possible to establish responsibilities and explain origins and developments of conflicts (Jaramillo, 2014: 227–230). Beyond their differences, these reports shared a characteristic that made them exceptional compared to other Latin American cases: they were not products of the post-conflict period but of “institutional spaces of truce” amid the war (Jaramillo, 2014, p. 231). The monumental work of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition (CEV), published in eleven volumes in June 2022, brought this era of grand narratives produced from the heart of horror to an end.

After the CEV, at least two recent developments suggest the need to replace grand narratives with more specific marginalized stories. Firstly, the reintegration processes and peace agreements of recent decades have created the conditions for the fragmentation of the national conflict, which “territorialized the armed confrontation and, as a result, produced multiple armed conflicts, each with autonomous actors and dynamics” (Trejos et al., 2021, p. 120). Secondly, although explaining the dynamics of the ongoing violence is in itself a battlefield, with powerful political sectors and public opinion makers denying the existence of a conflict and its victims, the CEV report gave us tools to transform this endeavor into a quest for peace by placing victims at the center of the discussion and elevating “human life above any other interest, however laudable: national security or revolution” (Ruiz, n.d.).

Faced with a new war paradigm of fragmented conflicts and confronted with the claims of the conflict’s victims, it is urgent to rethink grand narratives. After going through the “heroic memories” of the most powerful armed actors, which characterized the Democratic Security of the Uribe administration, and the “fundamental gaps” between conflicting versions that defined the peace process during the Santos

administration, we now find ourselves facing a new horizon built on the “counter-memories” of those who have been victimized and have raised their voices (Wills, 2024, pp. 379, 383, 389–392). Those who have suffered all forms of violence are “the new protagonists in the social and political arena, who arrive with their memorial of grievances and their voice of protest against all armies, legal and illegal” (Sánchez, 2021, p. 26). To hear them, we need “alternative grammars of listening,” principles that challenge what has been considered “unheard of” – in the double sense of inaudible and inadmissible – and broaden the spectrum of what is recognizable, memorable, and “historically indexable” (Acosta, 2024, p. 398).

Analyzing the war through the stories of yet forgotten victims is a task of reparation and reconciliation, as it leads us to examine repressed dimensions of the internal conflict. However, democratizing peacebuilding is not the sole responsibility of the state, but rather of society, as it involves questioning the state, challenging its authority, and transforming the national self-perception. One need only to look at the evolution of the school textbooks that have been used in classrooms for five decades to see how we have moved from a denial of the conflict to a recognition of its importance, thanks to “the amplification of the magnitude of the various attempts at a political solution” (Ibagón and Chisnes, 2019, pp. 207–208). In other words, each effort of the state to negotiate peace has meant a social opening in the way we understand war, in the methods used to narrate it, and in the collective interpretation of who we are as a nation. Each failure has led us to another cycle of violence, forging a new generation of warriors and victims. Still, it has also left a trail of peacemakers who are increasingly resourceful in their strategies, stubborn in their aspirations, and clear in their goals.

The victims of the “war on drugs” are part of this denied universe, although “since the 1980s they have been repeatedly calling for recognition” by the state and society (interview #6). Rural communities in producing regions and consumers in the countryside and in the city, especially racialized youth living in precarious conditions, have been hit hardest by prohibitionism. Their ignored stories are still alive, and the current context, defined by a national process of implementation of the peace agree-

ments and a reform of public policies on cannabis advancing around the world, offers a unique opportunity to listen to them. Just as Colombia has been a model of the failed punitive paradigm based on stigma, it is time to dare to be pioneers of a new type of regulation of psychoactive substances that focuses on science, technology, sustainable development, public health, social equity, harm reduction, and the promotion of human rights.

Internal Colonialism and the Formation of the State

Both marimba and creepy took root and spread in strategic corners for the circulation of resources and populations that have been integrated into the nation as “savage territories” (Serje, 2005). In these regions, governments have entered into alliances with elite, traditional, and emerging sectors, as well as multi- and transnational investors, including the federal government of the United States, to create the conditions for an agricultural modernization that has deepened inequalities. There, the “myth of the absence of the state” (Serje, 2012) has justified internal colonialism, a “kind of structuring matrix” of political hierarchies and social differences that revives the legacies of the colony in modern times, dividing society into segregated populations based on ethnicity and race (Rivera, 2010). In the case of Colombia, the ideology of the mestizo country and the imaginary of “the country of regions” has concealed this logic of internal colonialism (Appelbaum, 2003). Yet, it is this internal colonialism which continues to operate as the articulating principle of politics, economy, and society. Since the neoliberal turn of the 1990s, internal colonialism has deepened, manifesting itself as a “frontier effect,” that is, patterns of political intervention that erase their traces in areas considered peripheral in favor of extractive practices that promote violent struggles for control of land and the accumulation of wealth and power (Ballvé, 2020: 9).

Marijuana has been key in mediating the frictions generated by internal colonialism in the two core regions of the bonanzas. This role becomes apparent when looking beyond the specific epicenters where they

took place and observing the broader geographies and the dynamics of economic integration between the lowlands (plains and valleys) and the highlands (mountains) across them. During the marimba era, the radius of action was in La Guajira and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Still, the causes of the boom were an accumulation of contradictions in the history of the broader region known as Magdalena Grande, the northernmost area of the South American continent, which for centuries participated in the transatlantic trade and was an important stopover of the smuggling circuits of the Caribbean basin, a testing ground of modern capitalism. In the case of the bonanzas of creepy, the vortex has been in a corner of the Cordillera Central in northern Cauca, in the municipalities of Miranda, Corinto, Caloto, Toribío, and Jambaló. However, the enclave is the result of the connection between this area and the upper Cauca region, an extensive corridor that connects the Pacific coast with the Pan-American Highway, the inter-Andean valleys, and the Amazonian foothills (Indepaz, 2024, p. 12).

These multi-ethnic and multicultural regions, which have the highest concentration of indigenous peoples in the country, have been branded by the official discourse of mestizo Colombia anchored in Bogotá as “the nation’s primitive alterities, as its shadow and its other” (Britto, 2020, p. 6). The 1991 Constitution reformulated the rules of the game by recognizing the politics of difference as a bastion of the nation and of a democratic society, which needed to be expanded in a pluralistic manner. However, the change in the official discourse with the introduction of the constitutional principle of multiculturalism did not alter a particular “form of political rationality that silences, perpetuates, and conceals the complex contexts of political power in which it develops” (Bocarejo, 2011, p. 98). Nor did it make the state more effective, which left the process of decentralization and recognition of the autonomy of peoples that was necessary to implement multiculturalism unfinished, producing a “discrepancy between the discursive announcement of a policy and its pragmatic development” (Duarte, 2018, p. 397). Despite this ideological and legal change, both regions have continued to be scenarios of dispossession and acculturation, and therefore also of resistance.

Image 1: The foothills of the Sierra Nevada seen from the city of Santa Marta.



Photo by the author.

The internal colonialism of the Colombian state is laid bare in La Guajira in phenomena such as infant mortality, food insecurity, and multi-dimensional poverty (Londoño et al., 2023, p. 8–14). The humanitarian crisis of the Wayuu people is the result of the political weakening of the clans, who have been violently stripped of their historical ability to negotiate spaces of power with the *arijuna* (non-Wayuu) world and contain the effect of its violence (Guerra, 2001; Polo, 2012). In the neighboring mountain range, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, “the heart of the world,” the Kogis, Arhuacos, Wiwas, and Kankuamos have created an institutional network for the social and legal defense of their human and civil rights (Mora et al., 2010), confronting the “neocolonial engineering” aimed at eliminating the cultures and spiritualities that sustain the “Law of Origin” of their peoples (Padilla, 2024, p. 20). The government’s recognition of the Black Line in 2018, an imaginary border demarcating indigenous territory, is partly an achievement of the political

and legal mobilization of the communities, as it “imposes restrictions on economic appetite, protects ecosystems and sacred sites” (CEV, 2022c, p. 37), but it is also partly a result of the state’s internal colonialism, which, by demarcating indigenous territory, generated a process of differentiation that marginalized communities to the peripheral category of “traditional” (Coronel, 2012).

Similarly, in the upper-northern Cauca, internal colonialism has many facets. In the fertile lands of the plains, the impact of proletarianization processes has been more drastic, especially for Afro-Colombian communities (Gutiérrez Márquez et al., 2022). There, the “exercise of coercion by private actors interested in taking over the land” has been more effective (CEV, 2022b, p. 38). In the rugged mountains, the Nasa and Misak people have had room to maneuver in resisting and negotiating the advance of landowners, missionaries, ranchers, businessmen, and armed actors. Since the beginning of the 20th century, with the mass mobilization of the Quintinada against land grabbing, then with the creation of the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council (CRIC) in 1971 and the unarmed community protection force known as the Indigenous Guard in 2000 (CEV, 2022b, pp. 50, 62, 150), the indigenous peoples in the region have built their own government and one of the most important social movements in the country through a mass struggle that fuses ancestral traditions with different leftist ideologies and state multiculturalism (Trojan, 2015, pp. 171–173).

This tension between centers and peripheries, and the racial imaginaries that reproduce it, has been a pillar of processes of state formation. The state apparatus and institutions in these regions have been built on dispossession and acculturation, and in the name of an economic model based on the production of agricultural goods and supported by a nineteenth-century ideology that conceives of the nation’s space in binary terms, between the humanized territory of the cultivated fields and the natural territory of the uncultivated areas, with the agrarian ideal as the only horizon (Leal, 2024, p. 110). In the counterpoint between war and peace that marked the period of *La Violencia* and the National Front, between 1945 and 1970, this type of spatiality took shape thanks to greater economic growth and structural transformations (Machado, 1991, p. 24).

This process, which came along with “intensive external technical assistance,” sought to imitate developed countries and create an institutional network for commercial agriculture, while the rest of the sectors “were left without valid interlocutors before the state, and without proper legitimization of their interests” (Machado, 1991, p 38, 41).

Image 2: The town of Corinto, the origin of cannabis cultivation in Cauca.



Photo by the author.

The state, which is not monolithic, has been both judge and party in the conflicts between agro-industries, which have promised progress under the leadership of a few large producers, and the ethnically diverse rural communities that have struggled for recognition as legitimate political and economic actors. Generally, the state has leaned in favor of the former and, at critical junctures, has supported the latter. In the back-and-forth between regressive and progressive logics, the state has also been subject to modernization, pressured by the urgencies of

the moment and responding to political mobilization from above or below. However, the important reforms that the state has announced have remained mere rhetoric, without being fully implemented, leaving intact the scaffolding of internal colonialism that sustains it.

Agrarian Modernization and Intimacy with the United States

The two marijuana core regions were first central stages of agrarian modernization as producers of cotton and sugar, the key commodities for export diversification during the decades of economic reforms between the late 1940s and early 1970s (Machado, 1991, p. 40). In the case of La Guajira and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the Magdalena Grande, the initial promise was bananas. Controlled by U.S. capital channeled through the United Fruit Company, the fruit transformed the western slope of the Sierra Nevada and revived the old port of Santa Marta as an export platform at the beginning of the 20th century. The massacre of banana workers committed on December 6, 1928, by the Colombian Armed Forces under pressure from the US company management triggered the decline of the enclave, which was exacerbated by the Great Depression, World War II, and the national catastrophe of the partisan war known as La Violencia in the decades that followed. When the end of the so-called *Yunai*, as the U.S. company was popularly known in the area, was imminent in the late 1950s, cotton arrived. This time, the sector was run by a group of national producers linked to political parties and with technical and financial assistance from the governments in Bogotá, Washington, and multilateral funds. They dreamed of transforming the Cesar River valley into “an oasis of racial democracy and capitalist productivity where [...] to build a future for the country beyond coffee and civil war” (Britto, 2020, p. 122–123).

In the case of upper-northern Cauca, the sugarcane industry has relentlessly advanced on the peasant farming and fishing economies. Its expansion has created investment and productivity scenarios for large-scale land exploitation and integrated communities into its orbit as cheap labor (Gutiérrez Márquez et al., 2022; Troyan, 2015, 12–13).

This “dual economic model” of large estates advancing over small farms received a major boost with the intensification of the Cold War, when the embargo imposed by Washington on Cuba in the early 1960s expanded the markets for Valle del Cauca sugar and allowed for rapid growth in the area under cultivation (CEV, 2022b, p. 73). Like the cotton growers of Cesar in the Magdalena Grande, the sugar growers of Valle del Cauca benefited from the growing intimacy between the national governments and the United States. But unlike the former, who ultimately succumbed to various cycles of crisis, the latter achieved a stability and prosperity that made them a role model in the hemisphere and a “springboard” for the Green Revolution in what was then called the Third World (Offner, 2019, p. 22; Lorek, 2023, p. 9).

Each agricultural commodity represented a set of hopes of historic proportions, piled up and mixed together. With the banana fruit, the country sought to heal its relationship with Washington after the tensions resulting from Panama’s separation in 1903, thereby enabling Colombian exporters to participate in the large U.S. markets, diversifying the country’s economy beyond coffee. With the cotton fiber, the aim was to shore up the national textile industry to sustain the import-substitution model that was considered indispensable for economic growth. With sugarcane, the hope was to reduce the state’s size and allow private enterprise to play a more prominent role in administering public affairs, ultimately consolidating a mixed economy in the hope of achieving membership among developed nations.

At a time when the continent was torn between the modernization model of the United States and the revolutionary model of Cuba, the Colombian state turned the two regions that would later become epicenters of marijuana booms into testing grounds. Much has been written about how the United States has been a “direct actor in the conflict” due to its involvement in counterinsurgency and anti-narcotics efforts (Vega, 2015, p. 7), but its role as an active participant in Colombia’s history of development is rarely discussed, a background story that the marijuana booms help to elucidate. For example, as an ally and financier, the US has played a key role in implementing the agricultural model, despite its many contradictions. Whether it is “strategic subordination”

or “dependent cooperation,” the intimacy between national governments with the United States forces us to overcome “that particular Colombian parochialism” and think internationally (Vega, 2015; Tickner and Morales, 2015; Borda, 2019).

Because that intimacy has been a two-way street, Colombia has been an essential player in the “American century” since its dawn. The story starts with the independence of Panama and the construction of the interoceanic canal at the beginning of the century, changes with the triumph of the Allies in World War II and the dual practice of counterinsurgency and modernization that defined the Cold War, and ends with Plan Colombia on the eve of the “war on terror” in the new millennium. At the climax of this drama, around the end of the world conflict and the escalation of La Violencia in the late 1940s, “no country inspired more ambitious dreams, scrupulous study, or relentless intervention than Colombia” (Offner, 2019, p. 6). The mass exodus from the countryside to the city and the competition for lands abandoned due to partisan warfare created a window of opportunity that made the country “a major theater” for modernization during the Cold War (Lorek, 2023, p. 11). In the following decades, along with India and the Philippines, Colombia was central to the consolidation of a U.S. empire, especially during Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, that “tamed revolution” with which the United States sought to support gradual transformations in the developing world, including agrarian reforms, so as to avoid violent change in the social and political order (Calvo, 2024; López, 2019).

At that time, marijuana became a mediator in the relationship between the two countries, acting as a catalyst for chain reactions at a juncture marked by a confrontation between a redistributive model and another model of concentration of land and wealth. Similar to how U.S. investors, technologies, and capital were instrumental in laying the foundations for the banana and cotton economies, U.S. citizens were instrumental in the development of a marijuana export sector. This time, it was not through their governments or elites, but through rebellious youth who, as consumers, came to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in search of sources of supply for an expanding market. Much has been said about the Peace Corps and its role in the business, but the truth is that “the

gringos” had no institutional affiliation whatsoever. But they did light the fuse. The fuel was the debris of the Agrarian Reform that the National Front legislated in 1961, with the support of Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, in order to solve the problem of modernizing the countryside in the face of fears of a revolution. By the end of the 1960s, it was clear that this reform had been torpedoed from within by the interests of landowners affiliated with the leadership of the political parties. In the Sierra Nevada and La Guajira, where the peasant movement represented by the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC) did not have a stable footing, the struggle was limited to survival (Zamosc, 1986, p. 75–76, 111; CNMH, 2010, p. 202–228). At this impasse, marijuana was the way out.

Similarly, creepy was the adaptive response to another fiasco in which the United States was also directly involved, namely the Caguán peace process that precipitated Plan Colombia. During the marimba boom of the 1970s, some farmers in Corinto and Caloto – as well as Palmira and Florida in Valle del Cauca – cultivated cannabis for a small group of up-and-coming traffickers who managed to establish reliable networks between the region and the export ports on the coast (CEV, 2022b, p. 73). For the rest of the aspirants, the promising business was the growing cocaine trade. Soon, the cannabis economy in Cauca was dwarfed by the trail of commercial coca coming from Putumayo and Caquetá (CEV, 2022b, p. 74). The new coca leaf, larger, thicker, and with a higher alkaloid content than the “pajarita” used for traditional consumption of the indigenous communities (interview #12), won the battle for land, labor, and resources when the FARC front operating in the area decided to make it the source of its finances (CEV, 2022b: 90). Although “a coca-growing peasantry comparable to that of Catatumbo or Orinoquía did not emerge there [Cauca], and coca crops did not reach the same scale within the agricultural economy,” many peasants and ethnic communities found in coca a means of subsistence (CEV, 2022b, p.111).

Two strategies of the escalating post-Caguán conflict and growing intimacy with the United States came together at the end of the first decade of the 21st century to awaken the dormant volcano of marijuana.

Firstly, the forced manual eradication and aerial spraying of coca crops, operations that constituted “the basis for analyzing the results of Plan Colombia” in Washington (Romero and Silva, 2009, p. 244). Secondly, the demobilization process of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a central policy of the Uribe administration’s Democratic Security initiative, which served as an incentive for some small paramilitary groups to try to strengthen themselves locally by controlling drug distribution points. These simultaneous processes led to a process of accommodation of those affected in northern Cauca, where investors and marijuana producers from Antioquia, Valle, Eje Cafetero, and the Amazonian foothills found protection from the FARC in exchange for a tax on their crops (interviews #12, #10, #5). The installation of greenhouses for the cultivation of tech-enhanced cannabis consolidated the synergies between guerrillas and illegal entrepreneurs, thus financing another cycle of war.

Rural Communities and the “War on Drugs”

In both Magdalena Grande and upper-northern Cauca, cannabis brought together disparate groups with varying intentions. However, the undisputed protagonists were and continue to be rural peasant and indigenous communities. It was them who adopted a foreign crop as their own, learned its secrets, experimented with techniques, created desirable commodities for captive consumer markets, and forged moral economies to define roles, hierarchies, and procedures within the business, based on their political cultures.

In Magdalena Grande, the pioneers were settlers located in the highlands of the former banana zone, along the Frío River basin and its surroundings, families displaced by La Violencia which had arrived in waves in previous decades (Molano et al., 1988, p. 23). Located at the corner where the western slope meets the northern slope, sponsored by buyers and their local partners, and favored by ideal solar radiation, humidity, temperatures, and winds, the settlers paved the way for other sectors frustrated or excluded from the miracle of modernization to join

in the production of marimba. Planting outdoors and using artisanal methods that in some ways imitated the well-known cultivation of coffee, peasant producers experimented with local strains that workers and sailors had brought from the Greater Caribbean during the golden years of the banana zone. They crossed these strains with genetics from the United States and Mexico imported by U.S. buyers themselves. They improved the productivity of their fields and the quality of their crops, and invented a menu of sativa hybrid varieties, with the famous Santa Marta Gold recognized as the most exquisite.

Image 3: Mother plants bank, licensed company, Bonda, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.



Photo by the author.

Around 150,000 producers and traders participated in this economy (Samper, 1980, p. 3), which had operated mainly through peaceful channels for years. During the boom, credit and debt facilitated ne-

gotiations between producers and traders. Among the members of the commercialization networks, the colorful marimberos, who were mostly men from the region, old cultural codes facilitated the articulation of one link in the chain with another. They imitated the cotton growers of yesteryear, who used parrandas and accordion music to forge “a cultural project that privileges the logic of honor, clientelism, localism, and machismo” (Figueroa, 2009, p. 144), thus, the marimberos turned to vallenato, renewed the principles of compadrazgo, and wove a “moral economy based on power hierarchies” under the authority of the exporter (Silva, 2024). These pacts of subordination and dependence provided the marimba trade with a high degree of social legitimacy, which did not need systemic violence to operate. By the mid-1970s, marijuana had already displaced coffee, subsistence crops, and forests located below 1,500 meters above sea level, where another climate acted as a natural barrier (Ardila et al., 2024, p. 45). For more than a decade, this pyramid provided “about two-thirds of all the marijuana smoked in the United States,” mainly on college campuses (Neff, 1979).

Although in the upper-northern Cauca the precursors were large entrepreneurs who arrived from other regions with seeds, capital, and technology, it was the indigenous growers who expanded it until it became “one of the main means of economic sustenance for families” (Indepaz, 2024, p. 20). Although the socio-political situation in the area presented advantages, as the FARC was willing to facilitate the business against the indigenous authorities who for years insisted on banning the plant (interviews #12, #3), the natural conditions were not ideal. The greenhouses and artificial lighting that look like a “manger” from a distance are technological adaptations to the local climate (El Espectador, 2022). Another successful adaptation is the hybrid strain that is sold under the generic name of Creepy, which is the product of imported varieties with a predominance of the Indica Kush and replaced the existing seeds, including the famous Punto Rojo (interviews #8, #10).

Despite these limitations, thousands of indigenous families saw their future in marijuana, displacing the initial entrepreneurs and confronting their own authorities and the armed organizations that sought to control the crop. The signing of the peace agreements in 2016 was the

turning point. The FARC dissidents, grouped in the Dagoberto Ramos and Jaime Martínez fronts, sought to make marijuana the driving force behind their plans for expansion and consolidation (Indepaz, 2024: 31), which led to clashes with communities and a resurgence of the political culture of resistance and belligerence that has characterized the indigenous movement in the region. In the midst of the 2020 pandemic crisis, producers established the Guild, a cannabis cooperative based in Toribío, with a board of directors and supervisors for each village (interview #8). In a collective assembly, or *minga*, the Guild decided to expel outsiders, create a quota system for community members based on the number of plants, define rules for water and electricity management, and prevent prices from falling (Indepaz, 2024: 22). FARC dissidents continue to “regulate based on transaction control,” authorizing the entry of buyers and charging them a tax per pound extracted from the region, but producers have gained autonomy over the functioning of an economy that is estimated to involve between 16,000 and 19,000 families (Indepaz, 2024: 46) and supplies the markets of Colombia and much of Central and South America (Shuldiner & Rosado, 2023; Méndez, 2024).

In both cases, marijuana initially came to the rescue of precarious and isolated economies pushed to the agricultural frontiers. A worker at one of the licensed cannabis companies in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a member of a family of marimba growers during the boom times of the 1970s, recounts that with the money from the first harvest, his mother bought a heifer, from which he and his siblings still have descendants. “It wasn’t a temporary thing,” he says proudly (interview #11). With marijuana, rural communities opened up a space to maneuver amid adversity, where they could make their way of life viable and overcome the narrow, rigid, and short-sighted vision of development that has historically prevailed at both the state and agro-industrial levels and has created major obstacles to cumulative, participatory, and diversified rural development (CNMH, 2013b, p. 33).

Their histories are a warning that the state is part of the problem. It is commonplace to attribute the emergence of illicit crops to the weakness or absence of the state. The histories of the marimba and the creepy question this premise, as they show that the process of state formation,

its “differentiated presence” (González, 2003, p. 136), the inconsistency of its actions, and the discrepancy between what it plans and what it executes, are the causal factors. Analyzing “the forms of presence and articulation of the state” (Bolívar, 2003, p. 34), how power is constructed, preserved, and reproduced, and delving into a critique that recognizes internal colonialism, the relationship of dependence and subordination to the U.S. superpower, and the “particular version” of hierarchical and patriarchal “democracy” (López, 2019, p. 14) that constitute the repertoires of domination in Colombia, are the first steps towards understanding that the “war on drugs” was not imposed by Washington. On the contrary, a state that had failed in an agrarian reform used U.S. support for the “war on drugs” to renew, strengthen, and legitimize violence against the rural communities to which it had failed to deliver on its promises.

Three significant moments illustrate the process of adopting and adapting the “war on drugs” as a tool for renewing state violence. The initial cycle against the marimba in the late 1970s provided valuable lessons that were later adopted, expanded upon, and improved in other regions of the country in the 1980s. The cycle of expansion against coca and cocaine producers and “cartels,” and to a lesser extent, poppy producers, in the 1990s, made Colombia the bloodiest arena of this war in the world. The cycle of synthesis with Plan Colombia merged anti-narcotics and counterinsurgency efforts under a new paradigm of territorial control, aimed at integrating a geostrategic corner of the hemisphere into neoliberal globalization.

Just as drug trafficking emerged as an export sector in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the “war on drugs” first unfolded there, after the administration of Julio César Turbay (1978–1982), in association with the Jimmy Carter government, launched the Two Peninsulas campaign in November 1978 (simultaneously applied in La Guajira and Florida, hence its name). The target of this low-intensity war was “the source,” the production sites, on which resources and workforce focused through bilateral operations of crop eradication and trafficking interdiction. Unleashed as a state of siege that closed airspace and roads, replaced civilian authorities with military personnel, destroyed crops and harvests, put hundreds in jail, and sprayed the fields with poisonous

herbicides, the first trial of this novel paradigm of state control deactivated the existing codes that governed the pacts of subordination and dependence which allowed the business to function without the need for systemic and indiscriminate violence. The violent presence of the state led to robberies, denunciations, intimidation, murders, and sexual assaults that henceforth defined a new *modus operandi* in the business.

But the chaos and bloodshed were not enough incentive for the governments in Bogotá and Washington to consider other options, including the legalization of cannabis, which was widely debated (Tokatlian, 2000; Britto, 2019). More than a pragmatic decision by the elites to reinforce monopolistic control and political domination (Camacho, 1981), the continuation of the “war on drugs” responded to a punitive state logic. During “a critical juncture” marked by a profound crisis of governance (Wills, 2015, p. 704), the “war on drugs” offered the Colombian state a valuable toolbox to legitimize stigmatizing discourses, sponsor communities of experts, create a new internal enemy, expand the functions of the military apparatus, concentrate power in the executive branch, and strengthen relations with the United States. On a continent of military dictatorships, a democratically elected government in Colombia turned violence into the lifeline of a political system threatened by popular discontent.

One of the functions of democracy in societies built on colonialism is to prevent the awareness that violence is constitutive in order to preserve the myths that reproduce the status quo (Mbembe, 2019, p. 27). Since its inception, the “war on drugs” has been a weapon of Colombian democracy to wage battles for “political legitimacy, the role of the state power, and the freedoms to which their citizens are entitled” (Farber, 2022, p. 6), powerful, flexible, and malleable, wielded “against domestic rivals and internal threats with and without the threat of drugs present” (Teague, 2022, p. 218).

The Degradation of the State and the Escalation of the Conflict

By serving as a pilot program for channeling U.S. resources into new violent repertoires, the campaign against marimba contributed to the “modern cycle of violence” in Colombia, characterized by “a multiple, increasingly de-ideologized war” (Sánchez, 2021, p. 21). However, its official termination in March 1980 went unnoticed amid the turmoil caused by two insurgent operations: the takeover of the Dominican Republic embassy in Bogotá by the M-19 and that of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by a group of university students. In both places, U.S. diplomats fell hostage, prompting Washington to rethink its priorities and the Colombian state to focus exclusively on subversion. But in the original site of the “war on drugs,” the violence did not cease. The end of the state campaign meant the reactivation and deepening of existing pacts of dependency and subordination, but this time in a context of terror from multiple sources. “The atmosphere was gloomy,” recalls a resident of the Sierra Nevada, now a biologist and agronomist specializing in Santa Marta Gold, of his childhood in the 1980s (interview #1; Mazuera, 2017).

In the aftermath of the “war on drugs,” armed groups created by some marimba-growing settlers to defend themselves from “predators” (González Zubiría, 2024) transformed into small private security armies. Led by Hernán Giraldo and Adán Rojas, these early paramilitary cells consolidated their power by exercising iron-fisted control over the Santa Marta market and carrying out social cleansing campaigns against common criminals and drug users, while receiving protection from the security forces and specialized training from the Castaño brothers in the Magdalena Medio region (CEV, 2022c, pp. 91, 105). The guerrillas arrived to dispute their power. First, it was the 19th Front of the FARC, which settled in the Sierra Nevada between 1982 and 1983. Then came the 41st and 59th Fronts in Cesar and La Guajira, also covering the Perijá mountain range, and finally the ELN (CEV, 2022c, p. 85). Equipped with “a discourse of social, economic, and political redemption, which would later transform into violent control of the territory,” the guerrillas created “a parallel regulatory regime” that recruited minors, militarized daily life, and, together with the paramilitary structures they fought

against, caused the highest number of victims of the conflict on the country's Caribbean coast (CEV, 2022c, p. 86).

The war against marimba and its problematic ending paved the way for the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to become “a scenario of armed confrontation linked to the internal conflict” (Trejos, 2020, p. 6). The absence of a process of truth, justice, and reparation after the Two Peninsulas campaign allowed local armed powers to decide the course of the transition. In their hands, a vicious circle of chaos and control trapped the regional society in a whirlwind from which they reaped the profits of the new cocaine economy. “The marimbera bonanza was a constitutive moment,” the senior advisor for Peace and Post-Conflict in the district of Santa Marta claims, “there is no discontinuity” in the disregard for norms, “the subordinate position of women, the hypocrisy, the attitude of vassalage” (interview #4).

The case of Hernán Giraldo is emblematic, but not exceptional. The complex system of intermediation he created, by connecting local elites, security forces, state institutions, multinational companies, and international connections for cocaine and arms trafficking, made him indispensable to the functioning of the regional economy and politics for decades (Gutiérrez, 2024, p. 331). His actions relied on territorial control, community involvement, and the use of violence. One of the worst sex offenders of the war in Colombia, Giraldo and his men resorted to the abuse and humiliation of the most vulnerable sector of the population, girls and adolescents, in order to reinforce their reign of terror over rural communities and reaffirm “the patriarchal imaginary in which they proclaimed themselves ‘owners’ of lives and bodies” (CNMH, 2017, p. 74). The type of power that “through sexual violence is amplified and expanded into territorial domination” (Osorio, 2021, p. 40) thrived under the protection of a state that had delegated part of its functions to private agents, instead of repairing the damage, building consensus, and agreeing on a transition. As a “coercive intermediary,” Giraldo complemented the way in which “the Colombian state was present in different territories in the context of the armed conflict” (Gutiérrez, 2024, p. 332).

Although in general terms the “war on drugs” has failed in its stated objectives, it has been a resounding success in creating powers such as Giraldo’s that have assisted in the capitalist expansion necessary to make neoliberalism functional (Paley, 2014). The fight against drug trafficking emerged as the “dominant ideology” of U.S. foreign policy, which had remained devoid of a guiding principle at the end of the Cold War (Mitchell, 1998, p. 8). Between the 1990s and the end of the century, Colombia went from being the testing ground for this policy to a laboratory for a new hybrid form of anti-narcotics and counterinsurgency, which was suitable for the incorporation of strategic regions into neoliberal globalization.

Plan Colombia, a program initially conceived by the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) as an investment in the social development of areas affected by war, was approved by the U.S. Congress in the summer of 2000 as a territorial control project, localized and regionalized during a key moment in the “political constitution of the global market” (Estrada, 2001, p. 15–16). Considered “the measure of success” for other similar initiatives around the world (Hylton, 2010), the Plan Colombia introduced a kind of double violence that presented the state and its military apparatus as gatekeepers of rights while concealing the private actors, both Colombian paramilitaries and U.S. mercenaries, who helped achieve the announced objectives through any means necessary (Tate, 2015, p. 10–12). The center of operations was the geostrategic Amazonian foothills in the south of the country. Known as the “push into Southern Colombia” (U.S. Dept. State, 2000), this strategy was intended to dislodge guerrilla groups from the border departments and weaken cocaine production in Putumayo, where it had flourished in the last decade.

The push southward under the military and paramilitary presence of the Colombian state, supported by the United States, revived the old strategy of attacking rural communities at “the source,” as if they were existential threats to what appeared to be a “failed state” (González, 2003) that was unable to establish a presence in the valuable Amazon basin while left-wing governments took power on the continent. The strategy first stifled the coca growers’ movement, which in the 1990s had managed to “negotiate as valid interlocutors with state representatives and

to propose their own alternatives for the region” (Ramírez, 2011, p. 11). It also forced the Western Bloc of the FARC, commanded by Alfonso Cano, to retreat to the upper-northern Cauca corridor, where they joined other existing fronts and confronted the Calima Bloc of the AUC and its subsequent strongholds, the Águilas Negras (Black Eagles) (Duarte et al., 2022, p. 111). “Forced displacement, irregular detentions, torture, sexual violence, murders, confinement, planting of anti-personnel mines, forced recruitment, forced disappearance, attacks on the civilian population, threats, and attacks on the environment” are all war crimes committed against the populations of the municipalities of Santander de Quilichao, Suárez, Buenos Aires, Morales, Caloto, Corinto, Toribío, and Caldon as a direct consequence of the Plan Colombia (JEP, 2018).

The emergence of creepy occurs between the ebb and flow of war and peace. Foreign entrepreneurs established the first greenhouses during the final stages of the Plan Colombia, during the time of Uribe’s Democratic Security. Indigenous families multiplied micro-crops on a plot of land or a corner of their parcel during the Santos peace negotiations (González Posso, 2019). The double explosion of creepy and victims happened in the years following the signing of the agreements due to the uncertainty of implementation under the Duque government (2018–2022). Former senator, Nasa authority, and peace negotiator Feliciano Valencia asserts that the root of the new cycle of violence in upper-northern Cauca is “the great failure of Havana,” understood as the failure to comply with the agreements not only between the government and the FARC, but also between the government and the traditional authorities grouped in the CRIC (interview #12).

The roadmap for ending the war exists, but it has been lost on the ground. The disaster begins, but does not end, with the National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS), which, although it only covers coca, promised to be the spearhead of renewed state action. In Miranda, the municipality selected for the pilot program, of the 1,300 families that agreed to participate, three years later only 500 had received resources, while the rest were plunged into poverty with their fields eroded and without any infrastructure to alleviate the degradation (Vélez & Lugo, 2021, p. 58). Instead, a small-scale corporate agri-

culture program was imposed on them, one which replicated the agro-industrial model that has historically generated a highly regressive system of wealth distribution in the region (Vélez & Lugo, 2021, p. 59). The swift violence of the war was coupled with the “slow violence” of daily dispossession, which causes a subtle and prolonged breakdown of social and biological life (Vélez & Lugo, 2021, p. 58) and fuels “a dynamic of diverse conflicts” of an interethnic and intercultural nature over the use of land and soil (Duarte et al., 2022, p. 171).

Image 4: Batons of authority of the Cauca's Indigenous Guard, López Adentro resguardo (reservation), Caloto, Cauca.



Photo by the author.

Cultivating awareness of this complexity is one of the tasks of the Indigenous government under the leadership of the CRIC and the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN). The failure in the implementation of the Peace Agreement confirmed to the authorities and community members “that we must rely on our own logic and not depend on Bogotá” (interview #5). The 16th CRIC Congress in August 2021 was crucial for the redefinition of the Cxha Wala Life Plan, as at that “juntanza” (gathering) the communities reaffirmed the urgency of advancing in the construction of a regional interethnic universe of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities strengthened in their organizational processes, based on their own rights and education, with the goal of protecting Mother Earth (interview #9).

Given this worldview, illicit crops and drug trafficking are among the most significant challenges. Cannabis, which has recently experienced rapid growth, has been a topic of debate, discord, and conflict. The influx of investors and consumers from outside the region, the involvement of families, including children, the growing school dropout rate associated with cultivation work, the rising cost of labor, the participation of young people from the communities in transportation through the mountains, and the increase in consumption among them, all these factors led traditional authorities to initially impose their version of prohibition. The stable livelihood it provides for families, the economic independence it gives to women “haircutters” who are responsible for the delicate task of cutting the flower, the opportunities to apply the technical education that many have received in the cities, and the diversification of the economy with derivative ventures are some of the advantages to promote. Supported by the Indigenous Guard, authorities and community members have tried everything, from forced eradication campaigns to concerted efforts to reduce production and industrialization projects (González Posso, 2019). This recursive search for community solutions laid the foundations for the great cannabis cooperative created by the Guild, with which growers continue to fight for autonomy over their future.

The Patriarchal State and the Legalization of Cannabis

Creepy took over upper-northern Cauca as a result of Plan Colombia, and its cultivation has been democratized as a political commitment on the part of the communities. The approval of Law 1787 in the Congress in July 2016, which created a regulatory framework for the medical and scientific uses of cannabis and its derivatives, was the signal that raised hopes. Article 3 includes several paragraphs stipulating that the state must “protect and strengthen” initiatives, “developed by rural communities and indigenous peoples and communities,” and promote and formalize “partnerships” between them and producers with greater investment and technological capacity. When, months after the enactment of this legislation, the government and the FARC signed the agreements, all the pieces seemed to fall into place. “That was the dream,” that peace and legalization would happen simultaneously, says one of the founders of *Caucannabis*, a cooperative in Toribío dedicated to industrializing the plant based on indigenous knowledge (interview #8). In an ideal scenario, cannabis is a source of employment and technical education for the reintegration of demobilized combatants and a tool for reconciliation in the region. In reality, the plant was the excuse for a new invasion of investors in search of the green gold of the cannabis pharmaceutical industry.

Until now, cannabis has been caught in a limbo, between state-sanctioned pharmaceutical uses and adult uses that are legally restricted and socially stigmatized. The great missed opportunity was the period following the signing of the agreements. The lack of political will on the part of President Iván Duque to implement what was agreed upon in Havana strengthened “the paternalistic state that infantilizes society” (interview #13) and, according to which, a peaceful future is built from above, with investor confidence, and not from below, based on the needs of the communities directly affected by the war. The severe short-sightedness in the face of the unique opportunity that this moment offered Colombians, namely “to be pioneers and leaders in the global market for medical and recreational cannabis” (Quintero, 2020, p. 42), has set the tone for a debate and public policy mired in stigma and outdated moral-

istic discourses, entrenched in shame and punishment, which mistakenly insist on seeing the plant as a gateway to vice and degeneration.

Image 5: Home cultivation for personal consumption, Bogotá.



Photo by the author.

Barely mentioned in Point 4 on illicit crops in the Havana peace agreements, and after seven failed attempts at regulating adult use in Congress (at the moment of writing this essay), cannabis continues to flourish in the fields of upper-northern Cauca and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, as well as on terraces, balconies, plots of land, rooftops, and in the rooms of home growers. However, the peace agreements, which outline a long-term vision for the country along with the necessary reforms to overcome the war, do not address these issues and focus solely on those related to coca. This narrow view responded to a political agenda that aimed to achieve “some kind of recognition by the FARC of its participation in the business” (interview #14). In other words, in

seeking to hold the guerrillas directly responsible for drug trafficking, the government focused on the coca economies and ignored everything else (Bermúdez, 2018, p. 185). The shift in international opinion was also a factor. With a series of reforms underway on the continent, the government insisted that the issue of cannabis was “a discussion that must take place in the country with broad participation from different sectors of society,” not behind closed doors at a negotiating table (interview #14).

By the time Point 4 was discussed, the need to align with the U.S. superpower led a sector of the political elite to take on the task of addressing a contradiction in the lost “war on drugs.” Since 2012, and against the will of the federal government in Washington, citizen organizations in the United States have been calling for and winning referendums state by state in favor of the decriminalization or legalization of cannabis. In this context, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in Bogotá began to support the movement of doctors and patients experimenting with the plant in the treatment of chronic pain and terminal illnesses, including HIV (Kapkin, 2015). Finally, it issued Decree 2467 of 2015, which served as the basis for the law of the following year, Law 1787 of 2016, mentioned before. As in the rest of Latin America, “the transnational spread of ideas” was key, but “reform adoption depends on pro-reform elite political coalitions” (Durán & Penell, 2024, p. 4). In Colombia, these reformist elites resorted to the medicalization of the plant to make morally acceptable a first step toward another paradigm.

However, the weight of prohibitionism has produced a law that excludes the vast majority of existing producers and consumers without offering paths of transition from illegal to legal markets. Even those who benefit find in the actions of the state the greatest barriers to their growth. “It’s challenging to build an industry when you’re working with such a stigmatized product,” says the manager of one of the licensed companies in the Sierra Nevada, who has decades of experience as a flower grower (interview #2). Improvising accommodation strategies, producers and consumers have created a gray area between legal and illegal, where the big battle is over the flower. Legislation passed in 2016

created a system of four types of licenses in which the flower was considered a simple input for pharmaceutical products, which require high injections of capital and technology. By not decriminalizing the flower, the regulation established “a form of legal shielding to prevent illicit business” (interview #13) while serving as a hook to promote “investor confidence at the expense of the victims of prohibition” (interview #3).

It is not surprising that the first effect of the Law 1787 was a speculative bubble of paper companies formed by national and international investors. Up until the conjuncture of the pandemic and the creation of the Guild in Cauca in 2020, the business was “mostly monopolized by large local and foreign capital” (Martínez, 2019, p. 2). The trite dilemma of agro-industries and peasant economies, which the state once again resolved in favor of the former, deprived the country of “income, taxes, and social benefits in the short, medium, and long term” (López, 2022, p. 32). Solving this economic problem, not necessarily promoting social equity, was what led the Duque administration to enact Decree 811 of 2021, which created the conditions for the flower to become an end product.

Despite this vital change, the specter of drug trafficking has continued to cloud the official perspective, which has failed to recognize that cannabis is much more than fuel for war. With the end of the marijuana boom, the plant-commodity became a “localized” and domestic phenomenon of microtrafficking (Botero, 2024, p. 10). The consolidation of paramilitary groups in the 1990s placed marijuana at the center of disputes for being the most widely consumed drug. Dominating the sales markets was a form of territorial control, while repressing marijuana consumers was a vehicle for social control. In Cali, for example, “death squads [...] ended up seeing ‘bareteros’ (marijuana users), LGBTIQ+ people, and prostitutes as the thousand heads of the ‘communist and subversive monster,’ when the only revolution they wanted was that of the body” (CEV, 2022b, p. 42). But since the conflict has morphed into a collection of focalized battles, and since criminal structures have changed from pyramids to networks, “like a shade cloth that covers the marriage between legality and illegality” that makes them possible (interview #6), “cannabis is no longer relevant, the portfolio has grown,” and extortion, real estate

speculation, prostitution, and human trafficking are more critical issues in cities (interview #7).

Even in upper-northern Cauca, where the trafficking of creepy continues toward South America, where it has displaced the traditional “Paraguayan” (Botero, 2024, p. 15), other activities have begun to carry more weight as a means of sustaining the war. The fragmentation of armed groups without a chain of command, the violence of FARC dissidents against those who seek to prevent the recruitment of minors and other human rights violations, and the creation of the Guild, as well as the process of democratization of crops have been undermining the control of armed actors over creepy. After the assassination of Mayor Carmelina Yule in March 2024, “the Guild became emboldened,” sought the support of traditional authorities, and together they closed ranks, forcing FARC dissidents to resort to other methods of financing, such as extortion, kidnapping, and gold mining (interview #12).

In upper-northern Cauca, as in the rest of the hemisphere, social mobilization from below has pushed for a paradigm shift (Durán & Penell, 2024). The awakening of a courageous youth of indigenous university students and technicians who have taken the lead in the industrialization of cannabis has helped to organize the Guild, create a portfolio of food, cosmetic, and medicinal products that fuse ancestral techniques with new technologies, and experiment with seeds from different parts of the world to reverse the monoculture of the creepy (interviews #5, #8, #9, #13). In cities, it is no different. A new generation has contributed to an existing culture of consumption that began in the 1970s and was further amplified in the 1990s by the 1994 Ruling C-221 of the Constitutional Court, which decriminalized personal use. Building on the lessons learned by pioneering activists such as Olmes Ortiz, founder of the Marijuana March (Arteaga, 2023, p. 205), a network of enterprises, non-profit organizations, cannabis clubs and roundtables, and consulting and lobbying groups has formed, bringing together consumers and entrepreneurs to educate themselves about the laws, perfect cultivation and extraction techniques, organize cups and fairs, and hold marches and “smoke-outs.”

Image 6: Cannabis essential oil, Natural Medicine Plant, Santander de Quilichao.



Photo by the author.

Young people are at the forefront of social reform around the plant because they have been direct victims of prohibition. Violence against consumers was not exclusive to guerrillas or paramilitaries. Public law enforcement has consistently resorted to prosecuting drug possession as an easy and effective way to show results, avoiding the prosecution of other behaviors, such as money laundering or conspiracy to commit a crime, which “are much more complex to detect” and whose prosecution “can help strike at organized crime and illicit economy in a more effective way, as well as protect public safety and health” (Uprimny et al., 2017, p. 34). One in three arrests made by the police in 2014 was drug-related, with 52% involving people under the age of 25 (Uprimny et al., 2017, p. 36). Between February 2017 and February 2019, just under half of the nearly 1.7 million corrective measures imposed by the national police

were for drug possession and targeted people under the age of 30 (Quintero, 2020, p. 144). Prohibitionism on an urban and local scale is a war against the youth, especially those living in poverty and who have been racialized (Botero, 2024, p. 22).

Image 7: Cannabis businesses, Copa Farallones, Cali.



Photo by the author

With stigma as its compass, the state entrenches itself in paternalism. The executive branch only recently (October 2025) dared to enact a regulatory framework for adult uses and the legislative branch continues to stumble through moralistic debates. A dynamic society makes up for the ineptitude of the state. The beginnings of a disarmed and peaceful cannabis economy, multi-scalar, with large, medium, small, and micro-entrepreneurs, startups, and non-profit organizations, pluralistic in its

class and regional composition, multi-ethnic and multicultural, are to be found on the gray market that has emerged in recent years at the confluence of restrictive state laws and broad social organization. Enabling what people are building to flourish requires a new institutional framework based on the recognition of the debt accumulated with the victims of the “war on drugs.” It requires focusing on the human aspect and the effective exercise of constitutional rights, including environmental rights, as well as the strengthening of citizen participation in public life (Jaramillo, 2014). It is the “territorial peace” conceived in the peace agreements; the challenge is to implement it.

For a state accustomed to taking refuge in the familiar war to make a leap into the unknown peace, it requires an aware, politicized, and organized citizenry to take the lead. Some of the protagonists of the marijuana histories have stopped keeping quiet so as not to cause discomfort. They shout about war, the formation of new armed powers, and the intensification of state violence in ethnically diverse regions and among counter-hegemonic sectors. They also whisper about peace, about how groups with varied interests have managed to come together to create strategies of resistance against violence and to produce socio-economic, political, cultural, and technological innovations that point to possible futures. But “learning to love plurality is really difficult,” wrote philosopher Estanislao Zuleta in the early 1990s, in the midst of another failed attempt to put an end to the conflict, “we are accustomed to believing in our idea as the only true one, unquestionable and unchangeable” (Zuleta, 2015, p. 18). Stop ignoring the victims of the “war on drugs” is a pending task for the society.

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3. David Curtidor, founder of Coca Nasa and former director of the National Narcotics Fund; Bogotá, 29 July 2024.
4. Jennifer del Toro, High Advisor for Peace and Post-Conflict, Santa Marta Tourist District; Santa Marta, Magdalena, 6 September 2024.
5. Carlos Espitia and Salomón Majbub, researchers at the Institute for Development and Peace Studies, Indepaz; Bogotá, 31 July 2024.
6. Max Yuri Gil, coordinator of the Truth Commission, Antioquia-Coffee Region territory, and director of the Institute for Political Studies, University of Antioquia; Medellín, 27 August 2024.
7. Diego Herrera, researcher at Viva la Ciudadanía; Medellín, 29 August 2024.
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9. Leonidas Perdomo, Jesús Édgar Ramos, Marino Oviedo, and Marina Calisto, members of the Indigenous government; Corinto, Cauca, 12 August 2021.
10. Sergio Puerta, genetics expert (breeder); Bonda, Magdalena, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, 7 September 2024.
11. Wilmer Serrano, cannabis grower; Bonda, Magdalena, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, 7 September 2024.
12. Feliciano Valencia, former senator of the Republic and Nasa authority; Viyachí, Santander de Quilichao, Cauca, 2 September 2024.

13. Diana Valenzuela, lawyer and consultant for the cannabis sector; Rionegro, Antioquia, 28 August 2024.
14. Carolina Varela, advisor to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace in the negotiations in Havana; Bogotá, 6 August 2024.