At the turn of the millennium, conditions in the Putumayo region of Colombia challenged virtually every aspect of the standard narrative of the relations between state, society, territory, citizenship, and rights.¹ The normative ideal of modern state-society relations assumes territorial control via a state apparatus capable of guaranteeing citizens’ rights and the rule of law when threatened by illegal activities, armed actors undermining the state’s monopoly of force, or interference from other nation-states. In Putumayo, however, it was not the national state apparatus that attempted to safeguard the rights of citizens but rather a criminalized population of smallholding cocaleros (coca growers), who sought to establish the liberal freedoms and the rule of law, and who strive to develop the economy. In so doing, they sought support for their cause from a complex and evolving network of regional, national, and transnational NGOs, elements of regional, national, and foreign governments (including the United States), religious organizations, and, at times, illegal armed actors. At the same time, Putumayo was been the scene of multiple, conflicting claims about who is to govern, according to what legitimating principles, and toward what ends.

During the period from the late 1990s until the mid-2000s, there was a surfeit of groups in Putumayo seeking to be “the state.” During this period, coca cultivation in the region reached the zenith of what became known as the bonanza cocalero, when Putumayo became the world’s major production center of the raw material for cocaine. Beginning in the early 1980s, FARC established itself in Putumayo, and became the de facto governing force until the end of the 1990s, when the Colombian military and paramilitary groups began to struggle with the guerrillas for control of the region. Backed by extensive support from the United States, and in
conjunction with a broad network of paramilitary groups (who receive the tacit support of the armed forces), the Colombian military unleashed a campaign of brutality and terror upon much of the population. The armed forces did so with the avowed goal of eradicating coca production and the groups that support it, and of establishing what the military characterizes as a strong and stable state presence in the region. As a result, the very state apparatus that is understood in conventional state-society narratives as upholding the rule of law was systematically involved in its violation. But the Colombian military and its allies continued to dispute power with FARC; all these armed groups claimed the exclusive right to govern in Putumayo. The situation in Putumayo thus inverted much of the standard narrative concerning state-society relations. “Criminals” sought to establish the rule of law, while the state subverted it. Instead of viewing nonstate armed actors as a threat to sovereignty, state offices actively encouraged and supported Colombia’s paramilitary groups. The latter, however, did not work with the offices of government to protect and safeguard the rights of citizens, but instead to brutalize the population. Indeed, rather than establish broad conditions of social peace across the national territory, the military and its coercion-wielding allies waged war on the civilian population, who were seen as an internal enemy rather than a national citizenry. At the same time, a foreign government (the United States) operated as a governing power in the region via contracting agencies conducting state functions, including development and counternarcotics operations, with minimal oversight.

In the pages that follow I seek to draw out the implications of these seemingly aberrant conditions for theories of the state. What forms of boundaries and jurisdiction—the spatialization effect (Trouillot 2001)—emerge in contexts such as this one, in which contending projects of rule simultaneously seek to order space in different ways? How do local inhabitants, confronted with these competing projects, stake their political claims in terms of the state? These are especially interesting questions because in regions such as this one the term “state” has no agreed
upon institutional, bureaucratic, or territorial correlate. I am especially interested in the kinds of state effects (Mitchell 1999) that emerge in contexts in which much of the standard narrative of state-society relations is inverted.

Residents were forced to navigate extreme violence and competing claims for state authority. At the same time, they articulated visions of political alternatives through demands for what I call an aspirational state. This aspirational critique of the politics of the present focused on the qualities of the state, its affective ties to its citizens, and the state as an ideal form: caring, responsive, generous, and abundant, rather than distant, repressive, and extortive. These fantasies channeled oppositional imaginaries during the height of the violence. In these extreme circumstances, the magic of the state was revealed less through ongoing encounters, but more so conjured through these possible futures. The aspirational state described by these officials and activists drew on the conceptual categories of modern liberal democratic citizen-state relations, while at the same time resonating with historic ties of authoritarian paternalistic clientelism. This analysis explores the limitations and possibilities of local actions and how claims to jurisdiction and territorial control shift over time, particularly at the “fuzzy boundaries” (Gupta 1995) of state action, where state agents and local inhabitants become entangled in competing claims.

Stigmatized as violent criminals intent on personal enrichment through the drug trade, *Putumayenses* are considered throughout Colombia as a growing population excluded from citizenship and rights claims because of their assumed criminality (for comparative cases see Caldeira 2001 for Brazil, Coutin 2007 for El Salvador, and Goldstein 2004 for Bolivia). As in other cases of increasing fragmentation of citizenship and political belonging (Ong 2006), these residents attempted to fully inhabit citizenship rights, if only through their claims on the state. They articulated demands for citizenship organized around peasant identities, but at the same time did not negate their criminal practices except through their critique of the state, charging the
state with responsibility for failing to provide security, services, and market infrastructure. Anthropologists working in other marginal and criminalized regions in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia have documented similar dynamics, as local populations articulate their “longing for the state” (Bocarejo 2012), feel the presence of the “phantom state” (Goldstein 2012), and experience state violence as constituting law even while violating it (Kernaghan 2009). I explain these developments by locating them within a subterranean history of the region, one that focuses on the weak and incipient efforts of popular organizations to define new forms of citizen-state relations. In other words, I attend to the alternative visions of just rule that have been generated by everyday encounters between the general populace and the violent efforts of those who claim the right to govern them. This approach tracks the dispersed institutional and social networks through which claims to legitimacy are described and consolidated, and the roles that state and nonstate institutions alike play in mundane processes of governance (cf. Ferguson 1990; Gupta 1995; Krupa 2010; Nugent 1997; Scott 1998).

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC

For many years Colombia’s largest and oldest guerrilla group, FARC, dominated in the region. The presence of FARC in the southern jungles dates to The Violence, when Liberal peasants organized to defend themselves from Conservative police brutality. These “self-defense forces” adopted a revolutionary Marxist platform with aspirations to national power in 1964. The FARC 32nd Front settled in Putumayo in the early 1980s, when FARC remained a marginal group with minimal national presence. The remote region was logistically important because of the shared border with Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. FARC encountered minimal state resistance, and found a ready base of social support in the growing population of colonos, many of whom had experienced guerrilla leadership in other rural areas. FARC leaders came to control much of the social and economic life of the region, maintaining a strong militia presence in hamlets and town
centers and regularly patrolling rural areas.

FARC efforts to regulate local life were clearly evident during my first trip to the region in 1999. The local activists who helped me organize my trip requested permission from the regional commander for our travel by boat down the Putumayo River from Puerto Asís to Puerto Leguízamo; we only proceeded after given clearance. We did not stop in particular hamlets where local commanders were known to be mercurial. On my travels by road from Puerto Asís to Mocoa, we passed a large, slightly tattered poster attached to the walls of a concrete community building, painted in patriotic red, blue, and yellow, titled “Sanctions and Fines: Norms for living in a dignified and honest community.” Signed by the 32nd Front of the Southern Bloc, the poster listed 19 regulations, and the corresponding fines and punishments, ranging from 200,000 to 2 million pesos (approximately US$100-1,000). The crimes included being a gossip ($100 fine), to the more serious, $1,000 fines for bringing in unknown people, selling a farm without consulting with the FARC or traveling in a vehicle after 6 p.m., which also could result in confiscation of the car. During interview in the region, I frequently heard the FARC were identified as “the law”; commanders regulated social life, organized forced communal work brigades, and required local officials to report their operations.

FARC was one of many groups to benefit from the staggering profits of the drug trade. The leadership made a strategic decision during their 1982 Seventh Conference to use profits from the drug trade to expand their military operations. While during the late 1980s, FARC had “negotiated on behalf of the harvest workers as an organization analogous to a labor union” (Jansson 2008: 54), by the 1990s the group was involved in taxing coca crops, protecting drug processing labs and intermediate trafficking, and even placing militia members as intermediate traffickers, funding significant military expansion (Chernick 2005). The Southern Bloc became one of the most powerful in the country, operating with 7 fronts and ability to mobilize 2400
combatants. The southern command played a central role in a series of dramatic military operations against Colombian armed forces battalions, beginning with the attack on Las Delicias military base in Putumayo, in which army casualties totaled 54 dead, 17 wounded and 60 captured (Rabasa and Chalk 2001). In a series of subsequent operations, the FARC conducted itself more like a standing army than a guerrilla force, taking and holding garrisons and capturing more than 500 soldiers and police that they claimed as hostages.

**<A>The Local State in Putumayo**

Beginning in the 1990s, coca paste became the region’s major export, the latest in a historic cycle of transnational boom-bust economies, which included Franciscan missionary efforts and quinine, fur, rubber, and oil exploitation for the international market (Stanfield 1998; Taussig 1987). Even while engaged in illegal activity, local residents pushed for greater recognition from the state and the creation of administrative structures that would allow them to participate in political life. Paradoxically, the coca boom, which brought new people and resources to the region, facilitated this process. During the 1980s, Putumayo had one of the country’s highest rates of internal colonization. From 1973 to 2005, the coca-growing region of Lower Putumayo experienced a 725 percent growth in population, while the Middle grew 89 percent, and the Upper region grew 137 percent (M. C. Ramírez 2010: 13). The resulting new communities were largely self-built and financed. Collective work brigades built roads and schools; relatively flush coca farmers paid construction costs and even supplemented teacher salaries in some remote regions. Unions and civic committees in Puerto Asis (still the area’s largest town) organized strikes and protests to demand state services. In the early 1980s, the teachers’ union, Asociación de Educadores del Putumayo (ASEP), together with other sectors, led strikes for water, electricity, and sewer systems.

Residents in newly constituted communities also took advantage of the administrative
restructuring efforts during the late 1980s and early 1990s that were intended to increase local political participation. These committees were legally recognized and frequently required the participation of both civil society and local officials, providing a critical political space for state-resident encounters. One of the most important examples was Law 11 of 1986, which provided for the direct election of mayors and created mechanisms for community participation in local decisions (among them local administrative boards) (Hoyos and Ceballos 2004: 4). Throughout the country, President Vergilio Barco’s (1986-1990) national development strategy, known as the National Rehabilitation Plan, mandated that rehabilitation councils be established in all municipalities to facilitate communication between government officials and community representatives. Through their participation on these local councils, leaders learned to negotiate with officials, and gained access to government services and training courses. In 1991, a new constitution allowed the election of governors, as well as enshrining a number of new rights. Putumayo was declared a department, rather than an independencia, or nationally administered colony, with the capacity to elect regional assemblies, a governor, and congressional representatives.

New administrative avenues to national recognition included the opportunity for communities to claim status as municipalities, allowing them to gain access to resources from the central state, as well as establish local political offices, such as mayors and assemblies. Many of the new communities in Putumayo organized pro-municipal committees to lobby for recognition, negotiating with government representatives, as well as local FARC commanders (Torres 2011). This complex and ambiguous process involved moving through stages of increasing state recognition, beginning with the designation of inspección de policia, until reaching the goal of being designated a municipality.

The local state provided a significant source of employment and resources. “Here, we all
live from the state and from coca,” a doctor native to the department told me over tinto, the ubiquitous small cups of sweetened black coffee, laughing at the contradictions inherent in her assessment of the primary survival strategies in Putumayo. Her words capture the ways the local state coexisted with the local illicit economy; more important, she highlighted the multiple ways the state was a central presence, an important economic motor in the region, at a time when the department was routinely described as “abandoned” by the state, or without state presence. For many local inhabitants, work with the state was the primary means of achieving minimal financial security, as an official, teacher, secretary, or contractor.

Yet state officials themselves frequently described the state as absent, drawing a distinct boundary between the central state and the local state as separate, often competing entities. In part this reflected the larger stigmatization by Colombian officials (as well as their U.S. counterparts) of the population as criminals and guerrilla supporters, existing outside the law, to whom the rights and protections of citizenship did not apply. Anthropologist María Clemencia Ramírez summarized the general view of Putumayenses and their elected officials as “migrants in search of easy money, without identity, without roots in Amazonia, and concerned with their own interests above all” (M. C. Ramírez 2011: 58). Military officials characterized them as a “scourge,” “the Mafia’s masses, sponsored by the FARC cartel,” “like herds of animals” (General Bedoya, quoted in M. C. Ramírez 2011: 58).

Local officials were caught between guerrilla claims to jurisdiction and the security forces’ efforts to maintain their territorial control. FARC commanders frequently required local state officials to meet with them, to consult over infrastructure projects, and explain budgeting decisions. Local officials would also meet with local commanders to negotiate the guerrilla’s justice system, when specific communities’ members were punished or threatened with death because of presumed misdeeds. I heard the story of one local official’s experience with FARC
governance from his wife, who explained that as deputy mayor, he had to “go into the
mountains” to meet with local commanders, to investigate guerrilla punishments after infractions
(including death sentences). Such diplomatic missions frequently included local priests as well,
and were not “to fight with them, he went in peace.”

While most accounts of Putumayo stress political violence, illegal armed actors, and the
illicit economy, the region was home to several generations of efforts to organize political
participation. During my interviews with priests and other community leaders, they recalled the
importance of the Putumayo Grassroots Civic Movement, created in the late 1980s in order to
participate in the newly organized local elections. Working with priests influenced by Liberation
Theology and attempting to chart a political middle ground, the movement was deeply impacted
by paramilitary violence. In part as a result, the first municipal human rights committee was
formed, with a paid staff advisor funded by the Bogotá-based Jesuit progressive think tank
Center for Grassroots Education and Research (CINEP). In 1991, large-scale community protests
expelled the most brutal paramilitary commanders in what local residents remembered as heroic
and empowering actions (M. C. Ramírez 2011). After the committee was forced to disband
because of paramilitary persecution in the mid-1990s, the advisor remained working with the
state health service and became a critical link between Bogotá and international NGOs and local
communities.

Local accounts of political participation highlight 1996 peasant protest marches that
paralyzed the region for months, demanding an end to U.S.-sponsored aerial fumigation, as well
as an increase in services. Many U.S. and Colombia policymakers claimed the marches were
simply motivated by pressure from FARC. María Clemencia Ramírez has argued, however, that
the peasant leadership was attempting to claim citizenship rights while negotiating space for
relatively autonomous community organizing when faced with extreme pressures from the
guerrillas and the state security forces (M. C. Ramírez 2011). She emphasizes that the cocalero marchers were not attempting to withdraw from the Colombian national polity, but were demanding full citizenship rights: they wanted more state presence in their region, along with the full range of state services, benefits, and opportunities for participation in the political process. The marches ended with the government and peasant leaders signing an agreement known as the Orito Pacts, in which representatives from the central government pledged to provide resources for infrastructure projects (such as paving major roads), education funding for teachers salaries and increasing school coverage in rural areas, and technical assistance for peasant farmers. These pacts were left entirely unfulfilled. Escalating paramilitary violence forced the marches’ leaders to leave the region; several were killed, including one assassinated in Bogotá; some joined the ranks of FARC. The Catholic Church has played a central role in regional organizing efforts, in particular a charismatic Catholic priest, Father Alcides Jimenez, who worked for more than eighteen years in the Puerto Caicedo parish. He introduced training in Liberation Theology with an emphasis on gender equality and sustainable development. Father Jimenez promoted a number of sustainable development projects, women’s groups, peasant organizations, and peace networks, creating the Peace Promoters Network (Red de Formadores de Paz), bringing in community leaders from around the country to help local leaders strategize and present their proposals for development and other community initiatives. While they were unsuccessful in gaining central government support for these programs, pressure from the community forums resulted in the creation of the office of the regional personero, a human rights ombudsman linked to the National Ombudsman’s Office.²

<AE> The Paramilitary Project Comes to Putumayo

The paramilitary forces that moved into the region in 1999 were intimately linked to local
military commanders’ counterinsurgency efforts in the region, but also targeted FARC’s control of coca cultivation areas and their taxation of coca paste production. Their groups were connected to AUC, a national umbrella organization, and operated in close coordination with local military commanders. Rather than having a hierarchical structure, AUC was a loose confederation of regional commanders, most of who worked with Medellín and Cali cartels and were heirs to the trafficking business following the cartels’ demise. Their efforts to buy their way into the regional ranching and business elite served as a method to launder money and as a concerted strategy to gain political legitimacy (Reyes 2009). Scholars of this period have characterized the paramilitary ideological project as pro-state and pro-capitalist, with significant support among political elites, and “more successful in taking over the state” than the guerrillas. Efforts to gain political legitimacy, including a sophisticated public relations campaign, were dedicated toward generating negotiations with the central government that would allow the leadership to legalize their assets and gain entry into the political system (Tate 2009). No longer simply concerned with using military force and brutality to consolidate military control, paramilitary forces claimed jurisdiction over multiple dimensions of daily life in the village centers.

FARC reacted to increased paramilitary presence in the region with growing violence, including selective assassinations and massacres. They also organized against what they called Yankee imperialism in the region. Beginning in September 2000, FARC leadership declared the first of several “armed strikes,” rejecting U.S. intervention and the growing presence of the AUC, paralyzing the economy and all transportation. During the armed strike, deputy mayor “David” (a pseudonym for his security) found himself once again confronting guerrilla claims to governance. While inspecting some of the mayor’s construction projects in local schools, he encountered guerrillas already mobilizing people to protest during the strike. After learning that
he advised people to remember the hardships suffered during previous strikes, guerrillas
confiscated his motorcycle; the next day, he found that the guerrillas had taken a municipal dump
truck full of food and supplies; they burned the truck. After speaking with him, the commander
allowed him to complete the inspection. He reported his concerns about the guerrilla actions to
his superiors during the Monday morning public order report; news of his report traveled swiftly
through the region and he was soon under threat from guerrilla commanders.

Paramilitary commanders managed inhabitants’ movements to solidify their territorial
control. Rural people presumed sympathetic to the guerrillas, and residents of the urban centers
assumed to report to paramilitary forces, with the respective groups killing people who moved
from rural to urban areas. Paramilitary forces also developed what came to be labeled
“confinement” by human rights groups: preventing people from leaving their homes, or traveling
from hamlets to towns or the reverse. As a result, rural people were no longer able to travel to
urban markets for their livelihood and for supplies, while residents of urban areas were no longer
able to travel to their land in rural areas. In another example, women from urban centers who
worked as part of church and other community outreach programs told me they could no longer
travel to meet with their rural counterparts. Any travel required consultation with paramilitary
commanders. “There was a time here when you even had to get permission,” one lay Catholic
agriculture extension agent told me. “I mean, if the neighborhood committees (juntas de acción
comunal) were going to go out, they had to get permission to go because the [paramilitaries]
became like the state.”

Categorizing people as allies or enemies was achieved through an analysis of clothing
styles, footwear, hairstyles, and ascribed racial identity. Individual bodies became a central site
for distinguishing allegiance to particular groups, for civilians attempting to negotiate these
competing claims, and for the groups to determine who deserved punishment or reward. “Here,
men can’t walk with their shirt untucked because that was the paramilitary uniform, they kept their shirts out so you couldn’t see their weapons,” one school teacher told me. Paramilitary gunmen were marked by a closely shaved head with a longer ring of hair along the edge. Racial profiling also impacted local Afro-Colombians. Many paramilitaries came from the Atlantic Coast, known for its high Afro-Colombian population. “I have a brother, they said he was one of them because he looks like them, because the ones that arrived were tall, fat, Costeños” one Afro-Colombian woman told me.

Paramilitary commanders also regulated public space. They ordered communities to clean their streets and display certain Christmas decorations, calling residents and business owners to public meetings to inform them of the new rules. One resident of a hamlet explained, “The commander in the beginning, he organized a minga [a collective work brigade] every month to clean up the whole town… They were doing work for the town.” One neighbor continued the story, “They arrived in September 1999, they took all the people out of the town to the park, and had a big meeting. They told everyone that they were the ones who were going to be in charge now.” Commanders also intervened in local disputes, regulating domestic violence, as well as punishing thieves. “The people who solve the problems are the people who have the guns. When the police go, people say, it becomes a scandal, but when a group goes, things are calmed at once (calla de una vez) and the problem is silenced,” one local school teacher told me. I heard stories from many local residents how the commanders charged all local businesses “taxes,” as well as percentages of all government contracts.

In his work as deputy mayor, David was one of many local officials who became ensnared in the growing paramilitary presence. He witnessed their arrival with a civic-military brigade organized by a senior military commander. During a meeting, one of the same senior military officers asked David to report in his official capacity “what strange movements had been
occurring in the pueblo.” In response, David reported that “people were worried, they were afraid because there were some strange guys that were going around armed, in cars and were driving all over, and were already living in one of the hotels.” David was responding to local demands for responsive governance; by assuming the state would act against paramilitary forces he endangered himself and his family. As paramilitary commanders began to claim jurisdiction over the exercise of local governance, David was further exposed to retaliatory violence as they demanded he submit municipal budgets to their oversight. After they called him and delivered a deadline—November 20, 2000—to confess “anything pending” he fled the region.

Putumayo and Plan Colombia

During this period, the region also factored heavily in Washington debates over the appropriate role of U.S. assistance for Colombia. The same month that David was called to accountability by paramilitary commanders working with the local military, Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Brian Sheridan told the St. Petersburg Times, “Putumayo is a poster child for why you need Plan Colombia. The FARC and the paramilitaries are running roughshod all over the Putumayo right now, killing each other, blockading roads, holding villages hostage … and the military and the police are nowhere to be found.” His formulation of Putumayo, erasing military and police presence and complicity with paramilitary forces by portraying the region as in chaos, became the standard narrative for understanding Colombia (Tate 2010). Colombia began to be discussed as a possible failing state, in danger, in the words of one senior defense department official, of “sliding off the table.” In 2000, U.S. president Bill Clinton announced what became known as Plan Colombia, a $1.7 billion dollar aid package. The majority of the assistance was military aid; the package made Colombia the third largest recipient of U.S. military aid after Israel and Egypt. The largest single program——$600 million—was military training and supplies destined for the “Push into Southern Colombia,” for new
counternarcotics army battalions that would be based in Putumayo. While U.S. support was limited to counternarcotics operations, staffing and training military battalions operating in historic FARC strongholds made the operations largely indistinguishable from counterinsurgency.

U.S. jurisdiction in the region was justified by U.S. official “zero tolerance” for all drug production, trafficking, and consumption, organized around the premise that America’s youth must remain innocent of any exposure drugs. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan formally issued National Security Directive 221, declaring drugs a national security threat, setting the stage for the legislative changes that were to follow. The 1989 omnibus anticrime bill dramatically expanded domestic drug enforcement bureaucracy, and made the Department of Defense the lead federal agency for interdiction efforts in support of law enforcement agencies. In August 1989, President George H. W. Bush issued National Security Directive 18, which “specifically directed the military to assist law enforcement agencies to halt the flow of drugs as part of the national counterdrug effort” (Bertram et al 1996: 114). Fighting drugs became the primary post-cold war mission of the U.S. Southern Command, the U.S. military command with jurisdiction over Latin America; widely described as “narco-guerrillas,” the U.S. focus on FARC fused lingering anticommunism with the new counternarcotics concerns. U.S.-sponsored operations in the region frequently bypassed the Colombian government completely. They were developed, executed, and evaluated by U.S. contractors reporting to U.S. governmental agencies. For example, military contractor DynCorp ran all aerial fumigation efforts (the spraying of chemical herbicides), reporting to the State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), while development contractors Chemonics, Inc., and Associates in Rural Development Inc. ran crop substitution programs for the Agency for International Development (AID).
U.S. officials and their contractors were also deeply invested in population management. U.S. military commanders were required by law to ensure that soldiers with a history of credible allegations of abuse were not allowed to participate in military training; when no existing units free of such accusations could be found, the United States insisted on the creation of new units staffed by recent volunteers (Tate 2010). In Washington, INL and AID officials debated on whether or not any inhabitants of Putumayo could be considered a legitimate resident. One AID official explained the conflict as between those who wanted to force everyone out of the region—“they needed to go back where they came from” —and those who supported development projects that would allow farmers to make a legal living in the region.

Excluding the military programs, from 2000-2004 Plan Colombia funding in Putumayo was more than five times the state’s budget. USAID argued that existing Colombian governmental agencies were weak, highly corrupt, and frequently delayed in their execution of program funds, resulting in U.S. funds being channeled through NGOs rather than any Colombian government institutions. The view of these contractors toward the local population was summarized in a Chemonics report evaluating a $200 million alternative development grant, the majority of which was spent in Putumayo, and which described the region until 2000 as a characterized by “perverse social capital.” In their view, all social practices and networks in the region were condemned as contributing to violence and instability.

As a result of the U.S. programs and escalating violence in the region, a number of international agencies, as well as Colombian human rights groups, established programs in Putumayo. The International Red Cross, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and other transnational humanitarian organizations established offices in Putumayo during this period, providing important political and material resources for community activists. Colombian national organizations Minga (named for indigenous concept of collective work) CINEP, the Women’s
Path to Peace (Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres), and the Quaker Andean Service Committee (Comité Andino de Servicios) all began working with local community initiatives. They organized several community forums addressing local concerns about the impact of counternarcotics policies, as well as about political violence. In 2003, the Ruta Pacifica organized a march of approximately 3,000 women in support of peace and against violence and fumigation operations.

Local Officials Stake Their Claim

While David was simply attempting to fulfill his mandate as a state official to communicate public concerns to his superiors, other local officials used the political space opened up by the presence of international NGOs to critique alliances between paramilitary forces and state agents, in the process participating in the articulation of what I am calling the aspirational state.

Elected officials in Putumayo and other regions of the country where Plan Colombia programs were carried out protested the lack of opportunity for participating in the policymaking process. According to then Putumayo governor Jorge Devia Murcia, he was never consulted about the project, and learned of the proposal from the media. Beginning in late 2000, the governors of Putumayo, Nariño, Huila, Cauca, Caquetá, and Tolima formed the “Southern Alliance” to press for more opportunities to participate in centralized planning and offer alternative programs. In February 2001, they presented the “Southern Project,” proposing an end to fumigation and increased social investment, and offering a model of alternative development based on sustained investment in participatory planning as the basis of peacebuilding in the region. The governors explicitly rejected Plan Colombia because of its development without the participation of local authorities and communities (M. C. Ramírez 2011). Invited by U.S. NGOs, they traveled to Washington and met with civil society and government officials to express their concerns.

“Carlos” (a pseudonym for his security) was another local official who expressed his
objections, as a personero, to the central tenants of Plan Colombia. A flamboyant lawyer in cowboy boots and with a flair for dramatic tales, most of which featured him confronting some powerful person in defense of local peasants and small time traders—such as negotiating with guerrilla and paramilitary commanders for the release of captured young men or standing up to what he called “high officials” from the federal government who would arrive in campaign season and depart with empty promises. He argued that the central government’s vision of the region as criminal was “very erroneous,” contributing to political divisions that “strangled all forms of regional autonomy and cultural expression,” and that in fact local residents were deeply committed to social transformation. He channeled his opposition to military-paramilitary collusion through national and international NGOs, including testifying to Human Rights Watch for their reporting, and participating in a closed forum with the U.S. ambassador, two U.S. congressional representatives, and other U.S. officials organized by national human rights NGO MINGA and Washington advocacy group the Washington Office on Latin America.7

Carlos described the central state as being reluctant, unwilling (reacia) to recognize local political priorities and participation. In his case, it was his connections with well-established NGOs that allowed him, as a local civilian state official, greater political space. These NGOs working in the region served as intermediaries; the ability for local officials to intercede with the central state was made possible by the support of these NGOs. He went on to emphasize that local people “want to see a distinct form of political leadership, they want to truly believe in a transparent administration that works for the public good, that will truly provide public services.”

Officials like Carlos have been able to mobilize the symbolic resources of the state in order to develop state activism on particular human rights cases, and to serve as a critical link between civil society groups and other state institutions. Many local state officials viewed Bogotá-based NGO representatives as more powerful, not less—NGO activists often enjoyed
higher class standing, more education, and better international connections and opportunities—than many local state officials. In some instances, local officials relied on NGO activists to support their efforts to promote human rights, provide education training opportunities, pursue investigations of specific cases, and connect them with international groups (and support political asylum claims and other protective strategies); their colleagues within state institutions were often unsupportive of their efforts or even undermined them. State agencies applied to international funding sources—including the U.S. and European governments as well as the UN and private foundations—to support their projects, further blurring the lines between state agencies and NGOs. Many of the same staff circulated between these institutions.

These state officials demonstrate the importance of distinguishing the different alliances and linkages among state agencies, which can be marshaled to support or challenge official state positioning and interests. Gupta makes important observations about the difference between national bureaucracies and local structures, challenging “Western notions of the boundary between state and society” in the more fluid relationships between public servant and private citizen in small rural communities (Gupta 1995: 384). The roles of Colombian local civilian state officials, including personeros, their relationships to national bureaucratic structures, other government agencies, and NGOs, illuminate the possibilities and the limitations of such efforts. In Carlos’s case, the limitations became apparent the year following his encounter with U.S. Congressional representatives, when threats from the local paramilitary commanders escalated and his NGO connections—primarily Human Rights Watch—would facilitate his political asylum claim abroad.

Understanding the role of these local civilian state officials requires an alternative history of Putumayo, locating the rejection of armed actors’—including the Colombian military—claims of jurisdiction over the population, and the articulation of a vision of a responsive, democratic
state in generations of local organizing. Armed actors, as well as the Colombian state officials, almost always categorically rejected these demands, as the result of manipulation or criminality. These efforts were fragile, often met with brutal repression, but this history is fundamental for understanding the multiple ways in which local residents and officials understand and make claims on the state. In many cases, porous boundaries between civilian officials and local residents make classifying such efforts as part of “civil society” or “the state” extremely difficult. In many instances, these claims were facilitated by national and international NGOs, who created the forums for the articulation of these claims; NGO representatives and training provided the language of rights claims that were employed before national state officials.

Civil society groups also organized to protest Plan Colombia programs implemented in the region, as well as the escalating political violence during this period. One of the first examples was a large gathering called “The South Evaluates Plan Colombia,” organized by Colombian national NGOs Minga and CINEP on December 10-11, 2001, in an educational center on the outskirts of Puerto Asís. The primary goal was to present Putumayo residents as legitimate citizens with credible proposals that were worthy of respect from national and international state actors. Local officials and community leaders were given space to speak; in small group sessions distinct local concerns including political violence, fumigation, and alternative development programs were discussed. The mayor of Puerto Asís, the governor of Putumayo, and the national coordinator of Plan Colombia for the Colombian government, Gonzalo de Francisco, were present, as well as representatives from the Canadian, Swedish, and British Embassies and the UN human rights and development programs.

In the opening welcome, organizers referenced the history of local demands on the state, locating the state, not citizens, as the source of betrayal and being unresponsive, reminding listeners that “this is not the first time that Putumayan peasants tried to provide a means to end
coca cultivation with social support” by invoking the failed Orito Pacts from the 1996 cocalero marches as “when the national government wasted the opportunity to make the pacts a real proposal for social economic development for the entire department.” They went on to issue a call to “state agencies, to the human rights NGOs of the world, to the human rights NGOs of the country, to the departmental and municipal institutions, to the countries that intervene” to replace funding for war with money for development and humanitarian programs. During the two days, the majority of the public discussion centered on the issues of fumigation and concerns about money for development projects: who were designated as recipients, the requirements for it, and the issues in implantation of these projects. Ongoing fumigation was widely criticized as undermining local participation by destroying alternative and food crops, as well as serving as one of many examples of the betrayal of peasant trust and expectations raised by state promises. During the forum, statistics from government and Colombian NGO human rights groups were quoted to demonstrate the severity of the situation, but there was little discussion of specific cases in the region, probably due to fear. There were subsequent similar forums held in Putumayo, and activists traveled to Washington with the support of DC-based NGOs to meet with U.S. officials about the impact of U.S.-sponsored military and development programs (Tate 2010).

Putumayo community leaders, working with NGOs, created additional channels for expressing their demands to an aspirational state. The Putumayo Women’s Alliance (La Alianza de Mujeres del Putumayo, herein Alliance) emerged in the early 2000s as a loose network of women community leaders, many of them teachers or involved in rural community organizations, such as the regional chapter of the Ruta Pacifica. Being recognized as a politically powerful force, and being able to participate in local political debates, is widely recognized by Alliance members as an important objective. An explicit part of their feminist political agenda is
to play a more active role in designing local policies, particularly those that impact women such as ensuring the enforcement of Colombian legislation safeguarding women’s rights. They also hope to gain material benefits from the state, including a building, with a lot, to serve as their permanent office. In their view, broad participation of women in formulating local public policies, efforts to safeguard collective memory and symbolic recognition of loss, and demands for legal redress in individual cases all constitute the embodiment of citizenship.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed recent struggles over the right to rule in Putumayo. In so doing, I have had several goals in mind. First, I have attempted to complicate official claims that the problems of the region stem from a deficit of state activity. U.S. and Colombian officials have repeatedly declared Putumayo to be a chaotic region characterized by an absent state and a criminal population. I have argued, however, that Putumayo is a region characterized by the hyper-presence of the state-like actors. Indeed, it is this surfeit rather than the deficit of state-like actors and organizations that is responsible for many of the problems faced by Putumayenses.

Despite official claims to the contrary, Putumayo is oversaturated with state-making activity. Indeed, the region is the scene of competing and contradictory projects of rule—a fact that introduces the second question I have explored in this chapter. How, I have asked, do states come to be imagined when people are confronted with conflicting political projects, none of which is able to prevail over its competitors? As we have seen, these are precisely the conditions that have developed in Putumayo. The presence of multiple actors and organizations with pretensions to govern the region has meant that the population of Putumayo has been confronted with opposing visions about how political life is to be organized, conflicting expectations and demands about appropriate behavior. It has meant that the region’s inhabitants have been compelled to consider competing normative claims about how space is to be organized (cf.
Trouillot 2001), and have had to make sense of conflicting experiences of verticality and encompassment (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). The presence of multiple projects of rule that vie openly with one another has also meant that Putumayenses finds themselves confronted with an array of institutional orders, each of which presents itself as the locus of authority. Much the same applies to the cultural principles associated with the various projects of rule, each of which claims to be the exclusive basis of legitimacy.

I have placed equal emphasis on the peculiar nature of state effects (Abrams 1988) in Putumayo—on the ways that conditions in this region tend to create confusion about what the state is, where it is located, and who acts in its name. Military officers, for example, have come to exert considerable control in the region, but much of this is through (paramilitary) proxies (López 2010). This practice has the important effect of blurring the boundary between state and nonstate (Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1999; Nugent 2010). But it does more. It also raises questions about what the true locus of state power is, where it is to be found, and which principles and practices are involved in the legitimation of rule. Similarly, foreign governments (especially the United States) have intervened extensively in the organization of everyday life, especially through projects that focus on the management of public infrastructure and local governance. Like their counterparts in the Colombian military, however, the U.S. government has generally acted through proxy forces like civilian contractors—creating further confusion about which institutional orders represent the state, about who might be the power behind these institutional orders, and what the locus and source of that power might be (cf. Krupa 2010). The vision of Putumayo that circulates in official policy circles as an outlaw zone, a region of state absence dominated by a criminal population, which is being reformed through U.S. intervention, has served to justify the self-congratulatory assessments of U.S. intervention and formulate these efforts as a model for other regions (de Shazo et al. 2007; Pickering 2009).
The general populace has thus been confronted with conflicting claims about the right to rule, as well as confusing and inconsistent messages about where the state is located and which institutions and individuals act in its name. These conditions have produced a destabilizing and fragmentary experience of the relations between state, society, territory, citizenship, and rights. In these circumstances, local state officials have organized to express alternative visions of citizen-state relations. They have done so by means of what I have called an aspirational state. Civilian government officials have at times played a crucial role in helping civilian groups that seek to craft their own political futures. But state officials have been only one element in a complex network of actors and organizations that have sought to promote an aspirational state—a network that defies any neat division between state and society, and that undermines claims that the territorial state and its bureaucracy is the locus of governance.

Putumayo is only one of many regions throughout Colombia and other countries in Latin America that have hidden histories that involve illicit drug production, the presence of illegal armed actors and struggles for control between an array of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. As noted above, cases such as these invert conventional understandings of state-society relations, and in the process show the highly interested nature of normative claims about the national state. The Colombian case dealt with here also sheds light on the multiplicity of forms in which states may be imagined—such as that in Putumayo, in a deterritorialized form, in which the national state is not regarded as the sole source of authority or legitimacy.

Chapter 11. The Aspirational State: State Effects in Putumayo

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1 It is important to note that there are thirteen officially recognized indigenous groups in the region with distinct forms of indigenous sovereignty exercised within their territories and among community members; this will not be addressed here.
Father Jimenez’s organizing efforts also resulted in growing resistance to abusive practices by the guerrillas. When the local guerrilla commanders attempted to pressure communities to come out for another large-scale protest march in 1997, the peasants refused, arguing that the previous marches had led to increased violence and poverty without any gain for the communities involved. Father Jimenez was killed while saying mass on September 11, 1998; responsibility for the attack has never been definitely established but it is widely believed he was killed by FARC in retaliation for encouraging autonomous community organizing. After his death, the local peace network dissolved; other local priests who had been involved in his community development projects were transferred to other parts of the country because of threats.

A prior generation of death squads known as Los Masetos, linked to powerful drug lord Jose Rodriguez Gacha (and regional landowner), operated in Putumayo. Masetos derives from “MAS”—muerte a los secuestadores, death to kidnappers, the name given to a death squad established by members of the Medellín Cartel after the daughter of a high-profile drug trafficker was kidnapped by members of the guerrilla group M-19. The name spread to be used by any of the regionally based, drug-trafficker-linked death squads that targeted both business enemies and perceived leftists during this time. Between 1989 and 1991 they targeted leftist politicians and anyone accused of sympathizing with the guerrillas, but were weakened after Gacha’s killing in a shootout with Colombian police in 1989, public outcry against their brutality, and a FARC attack of their camp.

Conversely, wearing knee-high rubber boots, a staple of muddy rural life, was widely warned against, as such apparel signaled rural origin, and a presumed sympathy for the guerrillas, making anyone wearing such boots in town a paramilitary target.

The United States has also played a central role in the history of the counter-narcotics efforts in
the region, as well as being the primary market for the Colombian cocaine originating there.

Beginning in 1989 with the “Andean Strategy,” U.S. money, equipment, logistical support, and personnel from the DEA, CIA, and other agencies have played a leading role in counternarcotics operations in Colombia.


7 In February 2000 Representatives James P. McGovern and Jan Schakowsky traveled to Colombia, together with six congressional staff. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) sponsored the delegation, which meant covering the costs through special fundraising, organizing the itinerary, and leading the actual trip; as the WOLA Colombia analyst, I organized much of the trip and acted as the group’s leader while in Colombia. In Puerto Asís, the U.S. ambassador joined the delegation for a day with a large entourage.