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Paramilitary politics and corruption talk in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The complex entanglements of organised crime, drug trafficking, paramilitary groups and clientelism continue to shape the political terrain of Colombia’s Atlantic Coast. This article examines how local elite assessments of how to ‘do corruption right’ were mobilised in the late 1990s by paramilitary commanders to legitimate their state building efforts, and were equally important to their project of territorial control. Here, I examine three registers of corruption talk. I first address anti-corruption claims public declarations made by paramilitary commanders decrying the corruption practices of the traditional political class. These same paramilitary leaders engaged in armed clientelism: using threat of violence, in addition to the delivery of state-funded projects, to gain both electoral loyalty and control of state agencies. The second register of corruption talk I consider are elite assessments of paramilitary. I argue that by approving of paramilitary governance as a means of reigning in excessive corruption, elites in the Monteria region of Colombia’s Atlantic Coast not only justified their own support for paramilitarism, but also exonerated themselves for their own ongoing corrupt practices. Finally, I consider how paramilitary links to drug trafficking have been erased in public discourse, in part through media portrayals of paramilitaries in telenovelas, nightly serialised television dramas.

When I started fieldwork on Colombia’s northern coast, I began asking about political participation. Instead, people told me about corruption. Corruption was built into the local landscape: unpaved streets and unfinished bridges indexed money siphoned off from government projects. Corruption also disrupted life prospects, as everything from school enrolment to doctors’ appointments was allocated by political allegiance. Hiring was also dictated by campaign contributions rather than skills or degrees. Yet a central theme of the stories I heard was not condemnation, but evaluation. The real question, people told me, was: Who was doing corruption right? Stories about what constitutes corruption, who does it and how to understand its impact were deployed in the public, ongoing assessment distinguishing deserved rewards from excessive accumulation. Thus, corruption talk is a central arena for establishing legitimacy in contemporary politics in Colombia.
Like many countries in Latin America, Colombia has seen corruption emerge as a central issue in political life. ‘Cronyism, corruption and political patronage have been the way to govern Colombia for years, but they weren’t on the mainstream because of the armed conflict’, investigative journalist-turned-Senator, Claudia López, said in an October 2017 interview. ‘The country’s predatory political class has often used this excuse: “We might be thugs, but the guerrillas are worse”’ (Senior 2017). I argue that regional concern about corruption has not recently moved to centre stage; it has played a central role throughout the past two decades of the Colombian conflict, in which paramilitary groups have emerged as a political force. In fact, the ability of paramilitary leaders to mobilise anti-corruption discourses has legitimated their state-building efforts, and has been equally important to their project of territorial control.

The impact of paramilitary groups on political life and democratic governance is one of the central issues in contemporary Colombia. Beginning in the early 1990s, these forces grew exponentially in strength, creating a national coordinating body and carrying out military offensives that resulted in expanding their territorial control throughout the country. My focus here is the late 1990s through the early 2000s, as the 1997 creation of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Auto-defensas unidas de Colombia, the AUC) marked a shift in their political and military strategies and their efforts to establish territorial control. The AUC was an umbrella organisation of regional paramilitary forces attempting to coordinate their operations, led by the Castaño brothers on the Atlantic Coast. From 1997–2003, paramilitary forces carried out extreme political violence, typified by massacres. To gain electoral loyalty and control of state agencies in the following years, they began practicing armed clientelism: they threatened violence but also delivered promised state-funded projects. Paramilitary leaders began participating in public discourse through websites and media interviews. They built local legitimacy by establishing non-governmental organisations and administering local development projects. Intimately connected to drug trafficking, paramilitary groups reached the peak of their power in the early 2000s as they infiltrated political institutions and enjoyed significant political support, even while employing extreme brutality. After entering into negotiations with government officials, more than 32,000 troops passed through demobilisation programmes verified by the Organization of American States. Much of the high-profile leadership was subsequently extradited to the US to face drug trafficking charges. To date, many local histories of the emergence of paramilitaries analyse their counterinsurgency role and highlight the importance of the paramilitaries’ assumed role of security for the state. I argue that corruption talk was also important to the legitimation of paramilitary leaderships’ territorial and political control.

This article examines three registers of corruption talk, beginning with the public declarations paramilitary commanders have made in staking their claim to be anti-corruption. Paramilitary leaders adopted the practices and rhetorical strategies of the leftist opposition as part of their efforts to be publicly recognised as legitimate political actors. In order to justify their ongoing project of consolidating political control, paramilitary spokesmen have positioned themselves as the solution to corruption, a central problem in Colombian political life. In public statements offered in interviews with journalists and researchers, and in meetings held with supporters and the region’s residents, these spokesmen helped create the conditions of possibility for the support of paramilitarism by naming
corruption as a shared grievance, and suggesting paramilitary governance as a legitimate response.

The second register of corruption talk I consider encompasses elite assessments of paramilitary corruption, offered in private conversations and fieldwork interviews. Reflecting on the years of rule by drug-trafficking paramilitary warlords, residents described both their brutality and their administrative efficiency. Even those who acknowledged paramilitary violence could not help but admire that the paramilitaries ended the corrupt rule of previous generations of political bosses and their role in improving the functioning of some state agencies. I heard these stories during fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, after paramilitary control was transformed by the paramilitary demobilisation and the extradition of the regional leadership. This corruption talk was a foundational strategy for constructing a historical narrative that normalised paramilitary governance and delineated forms of acceptable corruption. By approving of paramilitary governance as a means of reigning in excessive corruption, elites in Monteria both justified their own support for paramilitarism and exonerated themselves for continuing to participate in ongoing corrupt practices.

Finally, I consider how paramilitary links to drug trafficking have been erased in public discourse, in part through media portrayals of paramilitaries in *telenovelas*, nightly serialised television dramas. Colombia has a long tradition of producing politically-focused *novelas* that tackle topics including class, immigration and violence. Beginning in the mid-2000s, a series of shows focused on the recent history of drug trafficking and political conflict, purporting to portray ‘true stories’. Some of these were explicitly part of a larger ‘memory boom’ dedicated to helping the nation heal from its violent divisions. Despite their intended realism, these shows maintained the customary *telenovela* focus on romantic intrigue. I argue these shows are national melodramas that articulate a calculus of moral reckoning. This is evident in the *telenovela* *The Three Cains*, in which paramilitary leaders are positioned as heroic and patriotic saviours, in contrast to the violent drug traffickers of the Medellín Cartel. Like other *narconovelas*, *The Three Cains* is a form of counter-history that contests the narratives of accountability produced by human rights groups and some state-sponsored memory projects.

In all three of these registers of corruption talk, paramilitary practices of corruption are contextually understood to be legitimate political and social action, a calculus of what Janet Roitman terms the ‘ethics of illegality’ (2008: 265–66). These efforts to assess corruption do not condemn these practices, instead locating participants within local social hierarchies and value systems rather than legal binaries separating legal from illegal political practices. Many anthropological studies to date focus on the views of marginal and poor populations and their understandings of corruption (Gupta 2012). In her study of citizen action in El Alto, Bolivia, Sain Lazar analysed how corruption talk created political space for residents to generate citizen capacity to impose restraint and good conduct on their leaders (2005: 214). Here, I examine corruption talk by and among elites in their public, ongoing efforts to distinguish deserved rewards from unreasonable accumulation, and to assess what forms of corruption constitute appropriate political action in the process of regional state formation. I show that Colombian regional elites use corruption talk to reconfigure their relationship with the central state. I argue that this corruption talk allows elites to reject the characterisation of paramilitaries as backward, violent
authoritarians who need to be disciplined into modern political practices, and permits them to support paramilitarism as a necessary political sacrifice.

Colombia is frequently described as a ‘country of regions’, and the political processes described here are produced through complex regionalised and racialised hierarchies of power. What is called simply la Costa in Colombian parlance refers to the Atlántico Coast states of Córdoba, Sucre, Bolivar, Magdalena, Atlantic, Cesar and the Guajira, including considerable inland portions of these departments; the people of this region are stereotyped as tropical, lazy and wild, and they are racialised as black (Ng’weno 2007; Wade 1995). This article draws on oral histories with paramilitary commanders, women community leaders, public officials, ranchers and business owners as well as and fieldwork in public political events in Córdoba, in the capital Monteria and surrounding small towns of Valencia, Ayapel and Planeta Rica in 2005, 2012–2013 and 2016. I also conducted research in the National Library archives and the Banco de la Republica Archive of Orlando Fals Borda in Monteria. My analysis focuses on Córdoba, and costeño regional identity in relation to Andean and paisa – Antioquia and its capital city of Medellín – regions. The dominant national identity in Colombia has historically been Andean, and centred in Bogotá. Throughout Colombia’s regions, the Bogotá political elite are viewed as distant holders of centralised power, concerned with enriching themselves and their family networks. When Colombians discuss the central state, and condemn its corrupt practices, they are referring to Bogotá’s political elite. Paisas are known for their slurred drawl and entrepreneurial hustle. The imaginaries of corruption that emanate from Medellín are deeply entangled with the illegal drug trade. The regionally-produced anti-corruption discourses I excavate from la Costa are articulated against an ongoing assumption that the elite political class in Bogotá is foundationally corrupt because it simply dismisses the political claims of the costeño regional elites. These regional elites are, in turn, viewed by Andean and paisa elites as hopelessly corrupt in their small-town dealings.

In the clearly racialised imaginaries of governance in Colombia, la Costa in general and the state of Córdoba in particular, are frequently associated with both excessive corruption and paramilitary violence. A set of family clans, the cattle-ranching descendants of settlers primarily from the neighbouring state of Antioquia, have long been known to divert public funds from state projects for personal enrichment. Beginning in the 1990s, paramilitary leaders who were simultaneously ranchers and drug traffickers, dominated the region; they justified their rule in part by claiming to be less corrupt. Complaints about corruption became a form of collective grievance against traditional rulers. At the same time, corruption became one in a series of indicators of a regional propensity for undisciplined excess, articulated through longstanding hierarchies of racialised regional difference in which Antioquia signified civilised (white) restraint and business discipline (Roldán 2002). As one woman put it to me: ‘In Córdoba, we don’t do corruption right. Here, they steal 80 per cent and build with 20 per cent’. The women finished her appraisal of corruption in Córdoba with this comparison: ‘In Antioquia, they steal 20 per cent and build with 80 per cent’. Corruption talk established the appropriate relationships between citizen, officials and paramilitary commanders who claimed the right to rule, but also established the legitimacy of a regional elite marginalised from national political life in a time of dramatic economic shifts generated from neoliberal trade agreements that undercut the rural agrarian sector and evolution of the illegal drug trade.
Corruption and governance on the Atlantic Coast

Beginning in the early twentieth century, settlement of the north-western Atlantic Coast occurred along several parallel processes, involving the arrival of merchants and investors from the neighbouring state of Antioquia and from abroad. Entrepreneurs arrived in droves from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine (often referred to generically as los turcos); others came from France and Italy. These entrepreneurs established commercial trading networks and banking and financial services, investing much of their profits in massive haciendas. In the process, they were fundamental to transforming wild territory into agriculturally productive landholdings (Igirio Gamero 2009; Ocampo 2007; Van Ausdal 2009a, 2009b; Vargas 2007). This process was structured and enabled by the central governments’ land policies, which encouraged the settlement of frontier regions, particularly from the 1920s onward. The government promised land titles to those who settled in so-called ‘empty lands’, tierras baldias. These settlers pushed peasants and indigenous peoples off public lands and indigenous resguardos (similar to Native American reservations in the US) to create the massive private holdings that came to characterise first the cattle, then the cotton and finally the drug trafficking economies of the region. These settlers also established an imaginary of governance that located authority and legitimacy in the bodies and mandates of patriarchal entrepreneurial ranchers.

The settlers from Antioquia came to dominate in many neighbouring regions, through the process known as la colonización antioqueña (Appelbaum 1999, 2003; Ballesteros 2009; Steiner 2000). Their rise was accompanied by the spread of what is known as the mito antioqueño (Antioquian myth), which celebrates the contributions Antioqueños made to the nation as they created order out of the wilderness through their industry, thrift and civilising influence (Berrocal Hoyos 1980; Parsons 1949). These settlers brought with them the benefits of Antioqueña society: respect for patriarchal authority, glorification of hard work, loyalty and capitalism, Catholic religion and the cult of Mary, and whiteness. In her work, historian Mary Roldán refers to the ‘hierarchy of cultural difference’ that dominates and its guardians are Antioqueños of the upper classes. Their values centre on piety, Hispanicity (whiteness), legitimate birth, Catholic marriage and capitalism.

Córdoba became the principal Antioqueño outpost in the north, and was made an independent department in 1952, with Monteria as its capital city. Antioqueños were easily able to consolidate landholdings along the coast, given that Costeños (traditional residents of the coast, who were assumed to be black or mixed-race and lower-class) lacked the capital (or culture, according to the narrative of the Antioqueño settlers) to invest in creating profitable ranching operations. The Antioqueños, known colloquially as paisas, moved in to modernise and civilise the region. In interviews, elderly ranchers told me how paisa patriarchs donated land for churches, hospitals and schools. They recruited paisa doctors and priests, and their wives held fundraisers for the buildings, organising social dances, bazaars and sporting events. These women attempted to recreate, as best they could, paisa domestic culture and gender roles in La Costa. According to the daughter of a hacienda owner from neighbouring Sucre who married an Antioqueño settler and adopted a conspicuous paisa drawl, the wives would bring in chefs from Medellín to

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1 For a review of this historiography see Christie 1978 and Londoño 2002.
cook for all the fancy parties, and Medellín *orquestas* to play for the dances. Medellín remained their metropole; they sent their children to boarding school there, usually by the age of 7 or 8, and the wives aspired to *paisa* high society fashion. Even the prostitutes, one elderly musician told me, were sent to Medellín to learn the *paisa* accent to improve client satisfaction.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, political life in Córdoba was dominated by a series of family clans (Ocampo 2014). The region’s political backwardness and its corrupt, *macondo* politics were personified in figures such as the López family, including brothers Libardo, Eduardo and Jesus Maria. The López clan began as *hacendados* who lined their pockets with the profits from cattle ranching on their massive landholdings. They grew into major political bosses by managing the government contracts they acquired though successive appointed and elected positions. Until a series of political reforms were enacted in the late 1980s, most major offices in Colombia were appointed, not elected. Mayors were appointed by governors, who were appointed by the president, facilitating back-room deal making and exacerbating political violence. The López brothers benefited from this system. They, along with several other interconnected families, came to dominate regional political life over the course of several generations. And their political power brought massive wealth. The López family ‘took all the money in Córdoba’, as one businessman told me.3

But prior to the electoral reforms of the 1980s, beginning in the 1970s, a new wave of entrepreneurial *antioqueños* – drug traffickers – began to make their mark on the country’s economy, transforming social norms in Medellín and beyond (Roldán 1999, 2003). The drug trade also transformed practices of corruption, as is typified by the now-common saying ‘*plata o plomo*’ – silver or lead – meaning, ‘take the bribe or take a bullet’. The forms of corruption that emerged with the drug trade were not orchestrated to gain resources – the drug trade bonanzas provided more than enough money for all – but to ensure the preservation of newly established illegal trade networks. By 1988, *Fortune* magazine reported ‘the illicit drug trade is probably the fastest-growing industry in the world and unquestionably the most profitable’, estimating that Colombia’s illegal exports were worth US$4 billion a year, more than coffee and oil exports combined (quoted in Dudley 2004: 71). These complex, competing transnational businesses were headquartered in Medellín (known popularly as the Medellín Cartel) and Cali (known popularly as the Cali Cartel), although cartel was a misnomer, suggesting central control and price monopolies that never existed (Kenney 2008). Elected as a Congressional alternate in 1982, Medellín ‘Cartel’ head Pablo Escobar became a flamboyant public figure who built subsidised housing and soccer fields in the slums while cultivating a reputation for extravagant violence. The Cali ‘Cartel’, led by the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers and José Santacruz Londoño, emerged as the Medellín ‘cartels’ main rivals, while building an image of sophisticated, staid businessmen. Their violent rivalry culminated in the creation of the PEPES (People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar). This shadowy group was dedicated to

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2Macondo was the name of the invented *costeño* village immortalised in Colombian Nobel-prize winning author Gabriel García Márquez’ most famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and has become shorthand for the fantastical elements of Colombian political life.

3The class power structure in the region was more dynamic than this summary suggests, with the descendants of *los turcos* creating new powerful networks. At the time, immigrants were prohibited from participating in political parties or holding public office in Colombia, so it was their children who marshalled their business networks and landholdings into campaigns based on promises of clientalistic rewards rather than the traditional family connections (Romero 2000).
attacking the Medellín Cartel’s businesses and associates; it was also alleged to be secretly supplying the DEA with information about its adversaries while providing a unifying structure for mid-level Medellín traffickers who rose to become the paramilitary leadership, including Fidel Castaño (Bowden 2002).

Much of the mythology, and the scholarship, examining the drug trade has focused on the social mobility of young lower-class men involved in the industry (Britto 2015). Less documented, however, are the substantial investments the Medellin and Cali trafficking organisations, and their successors, have made in legal businesses. There is also a dearth of documentation about the massive participation of legitimate businesses in the illegal economy. While many peasant and urban poor youth rose on the tide of drug money, many elite families also diversified their holdings to include the illegal trade. In the case of the Caribbean coast, smuggling had been a foundation of the economy since colonial times, from the grey market where merchants moved goods to avoid paying tariffs and taxes to the black-market trade in forbidden objects (Grahn 1997). From the 1970s into the early 80s, the marijuana bonanza, centred in the Sierra Nevada and Santa Marta, proved to be a source of economic mobility and social transformation for lower-class mixed-race men (Britto 2015). Some of the established landowners resisted this new illegal trade, or even retreated back to Medellin (Romero 2000). By the 1980s, however, several sons of Monteria’s agricultural elite saw opportunity, not stigmatised criminality, in offers to work in illegal drug transit off the Caribbean coast. In the secluded cool of her upstairs bedroom in Monteria, a woman now in her 70s told me how her high school friends had become the pilots of the marijuana and incipient cocaine trade. Her father had arrived in Monteria from Antioquia in the 1950s, to establish his medical practice and a pharmacy business. She told me the story of the early years, when men from Medellin arrived looking for landing strips and pilots to launch trafficking to the US, and found them on the haciendas, where young men trained to fly fumigation planes.

You know this business started with pilots who could fly under the radar and the pilots were all rich guys from Monteria … There wasn’t the stigma that there is now about these things. They said, give me 500,000 pesos and I’ll bring you back a million … [the pilots] were the sons of the rich families in Monteria.

By the early 1980s, many costeño families, including some from the political elite, were involved in the growing cocaine trade as members of what became known as the Cartel de la Costa, which dominated in the city of Barranquilla but spread throughout the coast. In one of the most spectacular examples, Carlos Nader, who had gone from land-owning to politics and was elected to Colombia’s House of Representatives, was arrested in New York for drug trafficking in 1983. In another interview reflecting on this history, a local businessman described the drug trade as a booming source of investment and growth in the region. As he described it, men gained entrepreneurial opportunities as pilots, while women’s bodies were remade to meet the desires of male traffickers: ‘because of the drug trade, the aviation schools [in town] were as good as the plastic surgery clinics’.

During this period, drug profits were used to buy up massive tracts of land throughout rural Colombia, a process described as a ‘reverse agrarian reform’ (Reyes 2009). By the 1980s, drug traffickers purchased land in 22 of 26 municipalities in Córdoba, which ranked second in the country for such land transfers (Reyes 2009). As the new owners of vast haciendas, drug traffickers used land to launder money and to buy their way
into the regional elite. Many hacienda owners profited from illegal drugs trafficked through strategic corridors to the Coast. They went on to create regional paramilitary armies, led by the remnants of the Medellín and Cali cartels, after their capos (bosses) were killed or jailed in the early 1990s. Regional traffickers who became paramilitaries rose through the ranks to control the new cartelitos – little cartels, the new smaller, more vertically-integrated trafficking structures following the demise of the Medellín and Cali structures – including alias ‘Don Berna’, the Castaño brothers, and Ramón Isaza. They were joined by newer figures such as Salvatore Mancuso and ‘Jorge 40’.

Paramilitary groups articulated the intersecting interests of drug traffickers, cattle ranchers and counterinsurgency politics beginning in the 1990s. Publicly, paramilitary leaders claimed to be targeting the small guerrilla forces that emerged throughout rural Colombia beginning in the 1970s. The guerrillas extorted and kidnapped landowners in regions including Córdoba (Pizarro Leongomez 2011; Villarraga and Plazas 1994). Yet in practice, regional elites and their allies unleashed drug-funded paramilitary death squads to suppress democratizing reforms and to protect their business interests (Romero 2005). Electoral reforms including the popular election of mayors (beginning in 1986) and governors (beginning in 1991) initially generated significant opportunities for reformist efforts, at the same time that administrative decentralisation was channelling greater control of state funding to local governments. Simultaneously, paramilitary death squads began expanding into private armies, funded by the extravagant resources of the drug trade and working in close coordination with local military and police. Ranchers were not just supporters of these efforts; they became leaders of paramilitary groups as well. ‘Cattle ranchers were ubiquitous in the leadership of the most visible, powerful and representative paramilitary structures. They not only created them; they also constituted the bulk of their leadership’, even directing military operations (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas 2017: 743).

In 1997, regional paramilitary leaders (who were also drug traffickers) created a loose federation, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). As a paramilitary offensive military campaign operating in coordination with local military commanders throughout the country, the AUC killed thousands of civilians and pushed back guerrilla territorial control in many regions. At the same time, paramilitary leaders carried out a public relations campaign, employing a range of strategies to engender acceptance of their growing role in public life. They set up websites, conducted media interviews, established non-governmental organisations and sponsored politicians for political office. In 2002, Colombian president Alvaro Uribe began talks with paramilitary leaders to facilitate a demobilisation programme; by the end of 2006, more than 32,000 people had participated in collective demobilisation ceremonies. While I do not analyse this process here, it is important to note that the demobilisation did little to address the structures of power that supported paramilitary groups. Currently, paramilitarism has re-emerged as neo-paramilitary forces, sometimes called ‘emerging criminal bands’ (known as BACRIM for their Spanish acronym), operate as death squads in many regions.

Montería and the surrounding towns that are my focus here were first under the control of the Castaño brothers and then ruled by paramilitary commander Salvatore Mancuso. Mancuso personifies these complex historical processes discussed above. Mancuso, known as el Mono, was a native son of Montería; his father a prosperous Italian immigrant. Mancuso became a major landowner in 1981, when he married into one of the region’s wealthiest families. His (first) wife was the granddaughter of the French settlers who
founded the region’s first bank in 1906, and became one of the region’s largest landowning families. Mancuso first assumed the public role of political ideologue and major promoter of paramilitary participation in political life when AUC spokesperson Carlos Cantaño disappeared in April 2004, presumed dead as a result of an internal power struggle. He ruled Montería as commander of the Bloque Córdoba from the late 1990s until 2008, when he was extradited to the US; he is currently serving a 15-year sentence in Virginia for trafficking more than 100,000 kilograms of cocaine.

**Armed clientalism and the consolidation of paramilitary power**

Within this complex political terrain involving entangled criminal organisations, paramilitary forces and an entrenched political establishment, paramilitary commanders and the Montería elite used corruption talk to legitimate paramilitary rule during their consolidation of power in the late 1990s. Scholars of Colombian paramilitary forces have explored the political impact of these groups in a number of arenas: some have mapped and analysed their evolution (Romero 2005, 2007, 2011), while others have studied their relationship to democratisation efforts and electoral reforms (López 2010), or their impact on land tenure (Reyes 2009), or their participation in the demilitarisation process (Theidon 2007, 2009). My analysis has been inspired by an emerging body of work using fine-grained ethnographic research to examine the ways in which paramilitary forces have transformed political imaginaries and practices, including how they established neighbourhood associations (*juntas de acción communal*) and successfully launched candidates in local elections (Ballvé 2011; Bocarejo 2012, 2018; Ojeda 2012). The paramilitaries also assumed control over major state institutions, including health services, educational institutions and other agencies, using these to bolster their political control, and to extract resources (Romero 2011). Paramilitaries orchestrated electoral outcomes by employing armed clientelism, to ensure territorial control as well as access to state resources. Even when guerrilla forces were pushed out, paramilitary commanders had no intention of ceding power and disbanding. These commanders justified their ongoing rule by arguing that their governance was more efficient and reduced corruption more than the traditional elites.

In many ways, paramilitary commanders filled the role of traditional politicians with ease. In this region, like many others in Colombia, clientelism remains the foundation of the relationship between citizens and the state. Voters view personal relationships with politicians and their advisors as the primary channel for access to state resources, including health care, educational opportunities and government contracts, as well as material rewards in the form of money, food and other supplies. Community leaders describe ‘their’ Senator or Representative, claiming a personal connection to him (or her). They also identify particular projects – paved roads, bridges or school buildings, for example – as belonging to particular politicians. Anthropologist Gloria Ocampo analyses this personal dynamic of ‘giving and receiving’ as foundational to political imaginaries in the region (Ocampo 2003: 255). During interviews about local politics, a number of the women I spoke to, particularly those involved with the *juntas de acción communal* and the mayor’s office, described their central political activities in terms of clientelism. They marshalled votes in exchange for particular material rewards for their neighbourhood, group or faction. Among Colombians, this was referred to as the *voto amarrado*, the ‘tied’ or committed vote. Such practices were contrasted with the *voto de...*
opinion, opinion voting in which candidates were selected for their political ideologies and platforms rather than the promise of material gain. The *voto de opinión* was widely viewed as a superior, modern political practice that was coded by both class and geography. Lower class voters were seen as vulnerable to the *voto amarrado*, both because of their greater need and their lack of political sophistication. The *voto amarrado* was viewed as predominant in rural regions while the *voto de opinión* was more prevalent in urban areas such as Bogotá (Vidart Delgado 2013).

In their efforts to control local and regional state institutions, these paramilitary groups employed armed clientelism to ensure particular electoral outcomes. Researchers examining the intersection of political life and violence by armed groups in Colombia have defined armed clientelism as a continuation of traditional clientelistic practices with new actors: illegal armed groups (Pecaut 1999, 151). Political scientist Kent Eaton argues that the Colombian conflict led to an expansion of armed clientelism practiced by ‘illegal groups on both the left and right’ (2006: 533) with the goal of destabilising the state and creating parallel structures of power. Such practices are similar to the forms of clientelism practiced by mid-level drug traffickers in Brazilian favelas. These groups often provide minimal services, ranging from the management of violence in marginal urban areas to social programmes such as funding for health care and community kitchens. Their goal is to insure the territorial and social control that has allowed their illegal businesses to operate unimpeded (Goldstein 2003; Larkins 2015; Leeds 1996; Penglase 2009, 2010).

In the case of Colombia, however, I argue that the goal of paramilitary armed clientelism has not only been using the control of the state to finance the war and to ensure that illegal groups could operate freely. Rather, paramilitaries have used armed clientelism, and the war itself, to gain financial control of the state and to consolidate elite power structures. As geographer Teo Ballvé argues, ‘the narco-paramilitaries became the midwives of state formation by showing how paramilitary and decentralised state relations were symbiotically and spatially configured in practice’ (2011: 608). My work demonstrates that unlike the guerrillas who arguably practised a form of armed clientelism through their radical programme of redistributing (some) state resources to their rural, poor supporters, the forms of armed clientelism practised by paramilitary forces were not against the state. Instead, paramilitary armed clientelism was directed towards consolidating existing elite authoritarian power structures and controlling state resources. The paramilitary relationship with voters, in addition to benefiting from local perceptions of their ability to deliver infrastructure projects and other resources, was also based on widespread knowledge of their extravagant violence, and the implicit threats facing anyone who opposed them. Local residents were well aware of the extensive history of massacres, targeted assassinations and public torture carried out by paramilitary forces throughout the region (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2014).

The benefits of armed clientelism to paramilitaries during this period were both political and material. The decentralisation of state resources during this period dramatically increased the stakes for any group interested in controlling local governmental agencies, as revenues and control were divested from the central state into regional institutions. As a result, anyone controlling local state agencies could make significantly more money than previously. As one local analyst described:
If you help during the election, then you will get government contracts for your company, to build roads, schools, anything, and if it is for 100 million pesos, then once everything is signed, you have to give back some of the money. Now it is 20 to 30 per cent, before it was 10 per cent, but it is going up. Some people get smart, they inflate the cost of the project to include the corruption, so instead of asking for 100 million, they ask for 115 million. If you want the project finished fast, you have to pay. The quality will go down, because the work costs 100 million and now you only have 85 million, so you will buy materials that cost less. Or you won’t finish the project. Or if you are hired to do something, if I hire you to give talks on illness for example, I hire you for 5 or 10 talks, and you only give 2, then you can keep all the money. You don’t spend anything on transportation or anything. All that money is yours.

New regional social security and health agencies such as the Empresas Promotoras de Salud and Instituciones Prestadores de Salud, created as part of state modernisation efforts in the 1990s and early 2000s, were vulnerable to paramilitary domination in areas under AUC control, including the Atlantic Coast. Paramilitary forces siphoned off millions of dollars in funding from state health agencies in this region alone (Romero 2011: 15–7).

As one local researcher told me:

Mancuso was involved with the mayors’ administrations, they would call the mayors, say, we need these two positions, health department, and budgeting, and so then he would get one of them named to those positions. They wanted to control the positions that managed the money within the government. Mancuso wanted health, housing, where the money was moving, because they had a lot of money for contracting and things.

The extent that paramilitaries successfully employed armed clientelism to gain political control was not made clear until the late 2000s. In 2007, Colombian journalist Claudia López’s analysis of electoral records revealed ‘atypical voting patterns’ suggesting collusion between paramilitaries and politicians. For example, in AUC-dominated regions, she found that electoral results almost unanimously put paramilitary-favoured candidates into office, suggesting that these voting patterns were the direct result of armed clientelism. López’s research launched widespread investigations, known collectively as the parapolítica scandal (López 2010: 27). Central to the investigations was a secret pact, discovered in 2007: the Pacto de Ralito. This pact, rumoured to have been written by Mancuso and signed by 36 paramilitary leaders and politicians in 2001, set out to ‘re-found’ the country and to create a new social contract based on territorial security, ‘just order’, and the right to property. Approximately one third of Colombia’s mayors, governors and congressmen have been implicated the parapolítica investigations, which are ongoing as of this writing. Testimony by demobilised paramilitaries has implicated hundreds of members of the armed forces and thousands of private citizens. Representatives of the Fondo Ganadero de Córdoba (the Córdoba Cattle Fund) and the former president of the national cattle ranching guild, FEDEGAN, were among those convicted of collusion with paramilitary groups, as were several members of the López clan (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas 2017).

Register 1: corruption talk and the legitimisation of paramilitary rule

To legitimise their ongoing efforts to consolidate power, paramilitaries claimed they had the ability to ‘do corruption right’ by ensuring that state agencies complied with at least some of their mandate. These anti-corruption narratives became part of the discursive
scaffolding that legitimated the consolidation of paramilitary rule from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. These narratives were advanced in multiple venues, and often appropriated leftist political symbols and genres of self-presentation. The AUC’s first communiqués, for example, copied the style of the guerrillas. They were issued with the dateline ‘from the mountains of Colombia’ (previously, the guerrillas were the only armed actors inhabiting ‘el monte’), and the letterhead featured a logo that depicted a peasant man silhouetted against a map of Colombia. In marked contrast to other forms of communication from paramilitary groups, such as the death threats intended to strike fear in the recipients (often sent in creative forms such as funeral invitations), these communiqués showcased the political claims of the organisation. In 1999, the AUC expanded its communications online, launching ‘Colombialibre.org’, a website that, by 2001, rivalled official Colombian government sites in its sophistication, graphics and content. One of the first documents posted on the site included ‘proposals for structural reforms for the construction of a new Colombia’, alongside diagrams outlining the AUC’s structure of command, communiqués, open letters issued by paramilitary leaders and documents outlining the history and evolution of paramilitary forces. By 2005, the active website was home to daily press links to articles featuring paramilitary commanders and activities, as well as links to the home pages of the regional blocs making up the AUC, which featured their own communiqués and diagrams of their command structure.4 Paramilitary commanders also gave extensive interviews in the Colombian and foreign press (Tate 2009).

Paramilitaries did not limit their propaganda to news and websites; they also produced and promoted testimonies highlighting the heroics of paramilitary leaders. In 2001, Carlos Castaño approved the release of My Confession, oral histories collected by a Colombian journalist; he also gave regular media interviews in which he appeared in civilian clothes. The book became a Colombian best-seller. Mancuso released a similar account in 2004, Salvatore Mancuso: Life Enough for One Hundred Years. In both cases, the accounts addressed not simply the atrocities committed by the paramilitary warlords, but the suffering they endured and their sacrifices in the name of defending their community. These accounts can be analysed as part of the Latin American testimonio genre. These oral and written testimonies of activists purport to tell the collective story of oppressed groups, articulate collective grievances and engender political action on the part of the reader/listener. Historically, testimonios have focused on the experience of victims of state violence (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990; Gugelberger 1996). In contemporary Colombia, the narrative form has begun to circulate unmoored from its original political foundation, and has come to be used by narrators from the right who hope to position themselves as marginalised and oppressed.

Like leftist testimonio, paramilitary life histories were produced with the guidance of journalists and academics. They were intended to reach – and move – a broad audience, and featured a similar narrative arc: the protagonist grew up innocent of political machinations, was called into service by an oppressed community, became frustrated by the impossibility of change through existing channels, and left with no option but to organise to defend collective interests, which resulted in personal and communal transformations.

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4As of June 2007, a much-reduced version of the ‘Colombialibre.org’ website was dedicated to the ‘National Movement of Demobilized Self-Defense Forces’, with empty pages and no links to regional groups. By the following month, the site was completely dismantled.
Such narratives were once the exclusive domain of Latin American leftist resistance efforts against state repression, but over the past two decades the genre has been mobilised in support of right-wing projects as well. In this case, Colombian paramilitary leaders claim to represent beleaguered regional elites, abandoned by the central state and are unable to defend themselves against guerrilla violence and state corruption. In their *testimonios*, paramilitary leaders have articulated a narrative of political awakening and oppression that frames security and corruption as universal concerns and unites the readers in sharing a collective outrage at official malfeasance. What differentiates these accounts from traditional *testimonios* is that in addition to being victims, paramilitary leaders claim to be heroic victors, who have been triumphantly successful in their counter-insurgency and governance projects. In these accounts, paramilitary leaders repeatedly, and publicly, deny involvement in drug trafficking, admitting only that *perhaps* some profits from the drug trade were used to finance their military operations.

I interviewed Mancuso in January 2005, the day before he officially demobilised. The members of the Bloc Norte were going through the documentation phase before the formal ceremony. At the time, Mancuso was 42 years old, plump and sunburned. He was wearing the uniform of a wealthy Colombian on his day off: khaki pants with a polo shirt. Appearing tired and often sighing, he told me the story of how the paramilitaries came to govern local life. He bore the studied calm of someone who had related the story many times before. His account highlighted the primary legitimating discourse of the origins of Colombian paramilitaries: they took over the state’s security function in response to guerrilla abuses, and to provide counterinsurgency security for the country’s middle class and elites (Tate 2013). However, his story also contained an additional legitimating discourse that I heard repeatedly in oral history accounts from the region: that the paramilitaries took control in order to reign in excessive corruption.

According to Mancuso, the paramilitaries did more than replace the state. They were *better* than the state in their ability to develop infrastructure and to provide healthcare and education, because they were unencumbered by the forms of state bureaucracy that generate corruption. ’We are more efficient because the state has more bureaucracy, more limitations’, he told me.

We have the advantage because we don’t have to deal with the bureaucracy. We can just solve problems. When we get involved, things get done. We have the resources. We put in electricity, schools. We helped communities prepare projects that were then submitted to the governmental agencies and approved. We directly contracted the engineers for the projects.

According to Mancuso, the paramilitaries have credibility because we are not traditional politicians’. By ’traditional politicians’, he meant the López clan, the landowners who dominated much of regional life for much of the twentieth century. Mancuso had a complex relationship with the patriarch of the López family, who he once described as his ’political father’. Their relationship deteriorated as Mancuso became the undisputed ruler of Monteria. The business elites I interviewed described Mancuso as confronting the López and insisting they do corruption right. As one business leader told me in 2012:

The López sons didn’t get along with Mancuso. But it isn’t that the López weren’t in favour of what Mancuso was doing, it is that he was afraid that [Mancuso] would hurt his business. Mancuso was the one who said to López, don’t be so hard on people. Don’t steal so much from people, you need to actually carry out some of the work. For the López, Córdoba
was all their property. Mancuso came in, an intruder who was going to damage their 50-year-
long banquet …

The case of the paramilitary conquest of the region’s public university offers a prime
example of how corruption talk was used to justify the paramilitary take-over of state
institutions. The University of Córdoba, founded in 1964, serves approximately 7000
students, mostly from around the region. The University is a state institution which
has had its public funding diverted to private enrichment. Almost all employment in
public institutions including in the university, from directors to janitors, were political
rewards distributed to friends of those in power. The University’s resources and rewards
had historically been controlled by the López family. By the late 1980s, however, the
university was also widely viewed as infiltrated by guerrillas. I heard from several
sources that the guerrilla leadership would hold meetings in the University’s cafeteria;
they even summoned people there to deliver ransom payments for their kidnapped
family members. While professors were often accused of having guerrilla sympathies
or ties during this period, guerrilla groups did not control the bureaucratic systems
of the university.

The paramilitary take-over of the University involved increased surveillance of pro-
fessors and students who they had suspected links to the guerrillas, as well as violent
attacks. Paramilitary gunmen murdered at least 5 professors and 12 students. They threa-
tened many others, and forced them to flee. The paramilitary takeover of the University
also involved consolidating paramilitary control over administrative functions, including
contracting and budgeting. Mancuso ensured that his supporters in the new adminis-
tration put in place contracting rules that would reduce workers’ rights and create a
pro-paramilitary bureaucracy.

Paramilitaries had been carrying out violent attacks against the University’s employee
unions and student movement leaders since the late 1980s, but the push for administrative
control was consolidated in the 2000 elections for rector. In April 2000, local newspaper El
Universal reported complaints that the university had become ‘a bureaucratic centre dedi-
cated to electoral clientelism’ (quoted in Ocampo 2014: 283). Prior to the election, the
sitting rector was kidnapped by armed men and taken to speak with AUC commanders,
who forced him to withdraw from the elections and accused him of corruption. Of the two
remaining candidates, one was backed by López (Hugo Iguarán Cotes) and the other by
Mancuso (Victor Hugo Hernandez). Iguarán was assassinated before the election, and
Hernandez took office. Hernandez is now under house arrest charged with collusion
with paramilitary groups and complicity in the murder of his rival. In an extended inter-
view with a Colombian website, Hernandez described being taken to a paramilitary farm,
and forced to listen to Mancuso’s justifications of the paramilitary takeover of the school
and the region. According to Hernandez, Mancuso told those present that the guerrillas
had infiltrated the school, and that there was a lot of corruption in the University: ‘The
door was opened to the AUC by the guerrilla presence and the administrative corruption
in the institutions’. Hernandez quotes Mancuso as outraged, saying ‘we are going to be
very attentive to the administration, because we are not going to permit that the University
of Córdoba continues to rob us’, and mentioning specifically that the school paid $80
million pesos a month (about US$40,000) for photocopying even while there was a photo-
copy centre at the University (Verdad Abierta 2013).
In Mancuso’s public testimony after his demobilisation, he described the paramilitaries’ intention as cleansing (sanear) the University of Córdoba. He claimed they were cleaning up both the guerrilla problem and what he called the ‘pension problem’, referring to corruption in contracting and retirement benefits. The double discourse of ‘cleaning up the university’ from its political and administrative ‘dirtiness’ was foundational to paramilitary political claims. Other paramilitary commanders also offered such narratives in public testimony following the paramilitary demobilisation. The Justice and Peace Law (2005) required those who hoped to take advantage of the reduced jail time to confess their crimes (versione libres), sometimes in public and in dialogue with victims. As Leigh Payne argues, however, these ‘unsettling accounts’ allowed commanders to perform stories that contributed to ‘enhancing, rather than diminishing, perpetrators’ power over how the past is remembered and its meaning for contemporary political life’ (Payne 2009: 1).

Register 2: elite assessment of appropriate corruption

In the interviews I conducted in 2012 and 2013 in Monteria, elites assessed the paramilitaries approvingly as doing corruption right. In part, this focus on their administrative efficiency was possible because the paramilitaries’ notorious brutality – including public torture and dismemberment, massacres and widespread rape – targeted poor residents of rural communities, not the white, urban business leaders I interviewed (Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica 2014). Elite perceptions of paramilitary administrative efficiency, however, also reflected their very real frustration with the excesses of the traditional political class, which were visible in the surrounding environment. Corruption talk erupted around the landscape, as elite and poor residents alike described infrastructure projects that were incomplete because they were ‘eaten by the politicians’. Open trenches of wastewater snaked alongside the unpaved streets, sending up a fetid stench in the suffocating heat of the day in many poor neighbourhoods. Webs of pirated electrical cables stretched overhead, illuminating houses that public electricity failed to reach. On the road from Monteria to the largest neighbouring town of Valencia, a giant single piling loomed over the battered raft that ferried people, cars and livestock from one side of the Sinú River to the other. It represented an abandoned bridge project; no one could tell me what happened, but surely politicians had ‘eaten’ the money. The driver of a colectivo described to me the hazards of driving up a bridge that had been completed, but only as a single lane instead of the necessary two. Drivers could not see over the rise of the bridge, resulting in several fatal accidents as two-way traffic attempted to share the single lane. Now, a woman and her young son take it upon themselves to stand at the peak and drop a red rag signal, the ‘all clear’, in exchange for a few thousand pesos donated by passing motorists, an example of make-shift ingenuity solving the immediate problem of fatal accidents, while leaving the larger issues unaddressed.

Despite these issues with ongoing corruption, local assessments of the legacies of paramilitary forces emphasised their work against corruption as a positive dimension of their authoritarian, patriarchal project. ‘Mancuso made the University of Córdoba work’, one

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5These declarations ended after the extradition of the paramilitary leadership to the United States for drug trafficking charges. This was widely viewed as a political move to prevent further testimony from emerging about the links between paramilitaries, politicians and businesses (Otis 2009).
local business leader told me in 2012. ‘He took them away from the López and made them work. All the progress at the university is due to him [Mancuso].’ Mancuso was widely credited by elites with improving the performance of state agencies. One person I interviewed noted how the environmental agencies offices had always been empty; she assumed that the bureaucrats were drawing a salary but not showing up to work. During Mancuso’s rule, she saw dedicated public servants hard at work whenever she walked past the office. Another woman, the director of a local ecotourism project, who considered herself a pacifist and opponent of paramilitarism, told me, ‘It is sad to say but the University of Córdoba functioned better when the paras ran it. Things happened, they had a lot of events for students, did a lot of projects’. She, like the others quoted here, did not argue that the paramilitaries were not violent, involved in illegal crime, or corruption. Rather, through her form of corruption talk, the paramilitaries were recognised as doing corruption right, and this process was a fundamental legitimating strategy in their efforts to consolidate political control in the region. ‘Mancuso was a like a god here, like a small god, un dios chiquito’, a bank executive told me. ‘People would go to him with any kind of problem’. Administrative corruption was one of the many problems Mancuso and other paramilitaries fixed; their administrative efficiency justified their illegal rule.

Local elites told these stories in part to justify their years of support of these violent actors once it was no longer possible to overlook their widespread brutality. When the paramilitary demobilisation process began in 2008, perpetrators were required to give public testimony of the atrocities they had committed. Colombia began to experience a ‘memory boom’ that promised accountability for the violence of the recent past (but not, however, legal sanctions). The Justice and Peace Law (Law 975 of 2005) required the creation of a National Commission on Reparations and Reconciliation, which in turn created the Historical Memory Group (HMG; their mandate has now lapsed and they remain as a government Historical Memory Centre). Their work documented emblematic cases and resulted in more than 20 book-length studies that are available in Spanish on their website, as well as web resources including an interactive site focused on massacres (http://rutasdelconflicto.com/). Spurred in part by this process, academics, journalists and human rights organisations, as well as local governments, produced numerous reports intended to clarify the violence events of Colombia’s recent history. These narratives were produced alongside widespread acknowledgement in the region that ‘everyone’, as I repeatedly heard, had supported the paramilitaries. ‘Everyone had to pay their respects to Mancuso’, one woman told me. ‘Everyone went to hunt with Mancuso’, another person told me. ‘Our friends the doctors, they would take money to buy super technology from the abroad and set up their clinics. [Mancuso] would put up all the money and they would be partners’, another told me, then adding ‘but it was for [money] laundering’. By asserting that support for paramilitaries was universal, as well as through corruption talk praising paramilitaries for their anti-corruption efforts, local elites exonerated themselves for their support of the paramilitary project at a time when their brutal abuses were being exposed.

Register 3: erasure of narcoparamilitarism and the rewriting of paramilitary history in narconovelas

Paramilitaries’ claims to political legitimacy functioned in part because the paramilitaries’ origins in and ongoing ties to the drug trade were largely erased in the public discourse
about them. The vast majority of paramilitary commanders began their careers in the illegal drug trade, and the AUC leadership has been almost universally indicted to face trafficking charges in both Colombia and the US. Yet Colombian paramilitary forces were never discursively imagined as inherently linked to the drug trade, as the guerrillas were. Colombian and US officials widely used the label ‘narcoguerrillas’, but never the parallel narcoparamilitary form (Tate 2015). In part, this reflects the work of paramilitary leadership, who were able to successfully use the public relations strategies mentioned above to portray themselves as beleaguered businessmen attempting to protect their families (Tate 2009, 2015). This dynamic was also the result of the political interests of supporters of the Colombian military, who sought to increase military funding despite their ties to paramilitary forces (Tate 2015). In Washington, military analysts such as David Spencer played an important role in articulating a narrative of paramilitary history that portrayed the paramilitaries as sympathetic opponents of the guerrillas; in his account the paramilitaries were not involved the drug trade. In 2001, Spencer’s study *Colombian Paramilitaries: Criminals or Political Force?* was published by the Center for Strategic Studies of the US Army War College. In it he wrote:

> The atrocities of the paramilitaries are not acts of abnormal men, but rather the acts of normal men subjected to and victimised by unremitting violence, who see the disappearance of the guerrillas as the only sure solution to their plight (2).

He went on to uncritically reproduce Colombian military statistics and reports. For example, he cited Colombian officers’ inability to recall any counternarcotics operations against paramilitaries as evidence that ‘the guerrillas seem to be more heavily involved in drug trafficking’ (Spencer 2001: 11).

This version of Colombian history presented in popular television shows portrays the exploits and adventures of lightly fictionalised trafficking organisations. One of the most popular television genres produced in Latin America, the *telenovela*, offers emotional release while grappling with complex issues of modernity, marginality and identity (Martín Barbero 1993, 2002; Martín Barbero and Janer 2000). While melodrama as a form has often been dismissed as lowbrow and shallow, Martín Barbero and others argue that mediation of political and class conflict through melodrama allows viewers to reconfigure local identities and understandings of gender, class and political belonging (Benavides 2008). Through shows that explicitly address inequality, racial and ethnic identities and discrimination, and other forms of social harm, melodramas articulate political narratives and make powerful claims about the origins of, and responsibilities for, ongoing social traumas (Williams 2014). A subset of this genre, the *narconovela*, focuses on the lives and misadventures of drug traffickers. This subgenre’s current popularity was unleashed by the 2006 hit *Sin Tetas No Hay Paraiso* (Without Tits There is No Paradise, Caracol), which examines in prurient detail the desperate efforts of a young Medellín slum dweller to finance her plastic surgery in an effort to gain the attentions of local drug traffickers. While the producers involved in this and similar shows frequently announce their intentions to critique the erosion of values and violence associated with the drug trade, in many cases the resulting shows titillate by glamorising the illegal trade producers which they claim to critique (Cabañas 2012, 2014; Morgan 2013).

One example is the historical *narconovela El Cartel de los Sapos* (The Cartel of the Snitches, 2008–2009), which dramatised the pseudonymised exploits of the Northern Valle Cartel. Like other historical *narconovelas*, the show focuses on the intimate, daily
lives of paramilitary and traffickers, including their domestic relationships. It also displays their vast resources and showcases their critiques of the exclusionary, corrupt traditional political elite. All of this appeals to many Colombians. While the show’s intersecting narratives highlight the paramilitaries’ extravagant acts of violence, the ongoing impact and transformative effects of the violence remained unexamined, outside the frame. Los Tres Caines (the Three Cains) is another such show. Named for the violent biblical brothers, the series focused on the real brothers Fidel, Carlos and Vicente Castaño. It was broadcast nightly in Colombia from 4 March to 18 June 2013. While presented as a family melodrama about the romantic competition between brothers, at its heart the show is dedicated to the national dilemma of how to deal with violence. Through its narrative arc, costuming, music and aesthetic choices, the show positions Carlos Castaño and his allies, including Mancuso, as heroic patriots who sacrificed individual comfort and family stability in service to a suffering nation. Here, the combative hero, abandoned by the state that should protect him, reluctantly accepts the resources of the drug trade.

The show’s claims to represent Colombia’s history are clear from the outset. The subtitle of the show is ‘The History of a True Vengeance’ and each episode begins with the announcement that it is ‘based on true events’ and inspired by paramilitary testimony. The first episodes feature a young Carlos selling cheese in a market; he is a hard-working, idealistic youth. His actual work history as teenage hitman for Medellín drug traffickers is not portrayed (Ronderos 2015). Throughout the show, the Castaño brothers are positioned as the good guys – not only against the guerrillas, but also against the truly evil drug traffickers embodied by Pablo Escobar. Carlos is portrayed as a reluctant trafficker, participating in the illegal trade in order to fund his private army; he is uninterested in personal enrichment and unwilling to compromise his ideals for profit. This storyline dominates the second quarter of the show, which dramatises the violent internal conflict among trafficking organisations that culminated in the Castaño brothers saving the country from Escobar’s violent excesses. While the Castaño brothers debate how to maintain the legitimacy of their cause, Pablo is shown maniacally insisting on placing car bombs in crowded locations to ensure maximum civilian casualties. The show devoted to their respective Christmas celebrations dramatically juxtaposes the Castaños’ family-oriented patriotism with Escobar’s pathological and murderous violence (15 April broadcast). The zenith of this subplot ends with the Castaño brothers killing Pablo. Escobar’s killing on the roof of a building after US satellite technology was used to locate him, has been re-enacted in many media sources, including documentaries and other telenovelas, but in all of them Colombian police take the shot. Although conspiracy theories abound, this is the widely accepted version of his death (Bowden 2002). Here, however, here it is Carlos and Fidel who pull the trigger, while the police move in to take the credit. Killing Escobar positions them as the ultimate saviours of the country from violent traffickers. While as far as I know the belief that Castaño killed Escobar has not transcended the Tres Caines to be widely believed, this version of Colombian history illustrated the degree to which paramilitaries have been separated from the category of ‘drug traffickers’ in popular media and in the general political discourse.

The paramilitary leadership successfully claimed political legitimacy emanating from their political identity as cattle ranchers, obscuring their simultaneous role as drug traffickers. They were only doing what their country required, making the ultimate sacrifice, and if they needed to draw on the illegal profits of the drug trade, well, desperate times required
desperate measures. During my interview before his demobilisation in 2005, Mancuso claims, ‘In the beginning, it was simple. We were cattle ranchers, good people, gente de bien. But at a certain moment in life, things change’. He was forced into this role, a claim echoed frequently in other paramilitary testimony. For most elites in Monteria, these claims were accepted without (public) question. During interviews, one owner of a construction contracting company, however, acknowledged that the paramilitaries were involved in drug trafficking, but inverted their history positioning them as victims. ‘They had to get involved in the trade to fund their armies’, I was told by the construction company owner, but the meaning was that they then could not resist the siren song of easy money: the drug trade corrupted the paramilitaries.

Conclusion

This article examines some of the forms of politics enabled by corruption talk on the coast of Colombia. Beginning in the 1990s, Colombian paramilitary commanders employed multiple forms of political action to consolidate political and territorial control: counterinsurgency violence funded by drug trafficking, armed clientelism to guarantee electoral success – and anticorruption discourses and administrative efficiency. For the ranchers and business elite that supported them, these processes were not seen as contradictory. For their supporters, paramilitary anti-corruption politics minimised and even erased their role in violent abuse and ongoing corrupt practices. Being against corruption – being less corrupt in the daily administration of the state than their predecessors – became a legitimising scaffold for their authoritarian politics. Despite their origins in the illegal drug trade, their brutality and their use of armed clientelism to secure political offices, paramilitary commanders on the Atlantic Coast claimed the right to rule because of their ‘cleansing’ of local bureaucracies. Drug trafficking paramilitary warlords – actors many would describe as the pinnacle of corruption – were able to use corruption talk to legitimate their growing political and economic power until these same paramilitary leaders were extradited to the U.S. to face drug trafficking charges in 2008. Part of their ongoing legacy is the emphasis on anti-corruption politics in elite evaluations of paramilitary governance, as well as in popular media representation such as telenovelas.

This corruption talk functions as an ongoing assessment of ‘how to do corruption right’, revealing the ways in which understandings of corruption emerge from local systems of meaning, social relationships and hierarchies of value. Like all social actors, those of negotiating accusations of corruption occupy multiple social roles, and the evaluation of these acts is judged in part according to which of these roles is given prominence. The figures discussed here are paramilitary leaders – and also drug traffickers and cattle ranchers, as well as fathers, sons and brothers. Their corruption is weighed against the presumed corruption of what both they and other regional elites call the ‘traditional political class’. Paramilitary corruption is also understood through a racialized, gendered regional system of political authority privileging those tracing their origins to the antioqueño and foreign settlers who emerged as massive landowners on la Costa.

Corruption talk is a foundational form of anti-corruption politics, but their political effect is not predetermined, nor necessarily reformist or liberatory. Anti-corruption politics have come to occupy centre stage in Colombian political life, even as a consensus about how to do ‘anti-corruption politics’ remains elusive. During the May 2018 presidential elections, corruption was a central issue, reported in opinion polls as ‘more important’ than the
insurgency war, which is finally winding down following a fractious peace deal signed in December 2016. Following her unsuccessful presidential campaign, former senator and investigative journalist Claudia López led a citizens’ referendum on corruption, asking voters on 26 August 2018 to endorse a platform that included limiting congressional salaries and term limits, requiring candidates to disclose their assets, and requiring public budget hearings for government spending. The referendum garnered a 99 per cent approval rate, but missed the minimum level of participation for ratification.

In this, Colombia is not alone. Throughout Latin America, a range of anti-corruption movements have galvanised conservative, liberal and radical activists to demand political change. Presidents have fallen in Guatemala and Brazil, but their replacements have, by many accounts, continued in the same vein – or worse (Ansell 2017; Doyle and Ogelsby 2018). In August 2018, Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales announced he was disbanding the international Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which had been investigating campaign finance irregularities in Morales’ presidential campaign. He had come to power in 2016 as an anti-corruption candidate following massive demonstrations against the corruption of his predecessor, Otto Pérez Medina. As these cases demonstrate, the leaders who come to power through corruption talk often reinforce authoritarian and exclusionary systems of governance even while continuing the corrupt practices they promised to eradicate.

In their essay introducing a series on the anthropology of corruption in *Current Anthropology*, Sara Muir and Akhil Gupta ask, ‘What are the conditions of possibility for anti-corruption politics and what are the limits of that mode of politics?’ (Muir and Gupta 2018: 5) My analysis demonstrates that anti-corruption politics does not occur as a single mode. Rather, in contemporary Latin America anti-corruption talk is mobilised for multiple, and even contradictory, forms of politics. The registers of elite corruption talk examined here did not generate space for reformist projects or challenge traditional practices of corruption. Rather, they reinforce practices of governance in which the goal is not the universal application of the law but fortifying existing social and economic hierarchies. As in Guatemala and Brazil, allegations of corruption in Colombia are a central register for political legitimation, but in practice reproduce elite structures of power.

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