On 15 October 2005, Orlando Valencia travelled with a group of nine other people on a dirt track road in Colombia’s north-western Chocó Department. Near the small town of Belén de Bajirá their car was stopped by police. Orlando and two fellow travellers were taken to the local police station for interrogation. This most likely did not come as a great surprise to him. His outspoken activism against the unlawful, forcible implementation of African Palm plantations in his native Curvaradó region had seriously annoyed the agro-industrial companies eager to exploit the lands in this tropical rainforest environment. As a recognised community leader, Orlando had indefatigably denounced the impunity with which right-wing paramilitary groups at the service of these companies threatened local populations and killed community leaders. He had been invited by the US-based human rights NGO Lutheran World Relief (LWR) to address their Partnering for Peace conference due to be held in Chicago on 21 October that year. However, the US Embassy in Bogotá had refused him a visa. So he returned to the Curvaradó region, accompanied by fellow community members and a representative of the Montreal-based activist group Projet Accompagnement Solidarité Colombie (PASC). The latter – together with volunteers from International Peace Brigades – provides an international presence in three ‘humanitarian zones’ set up in the region to protect Afro-Colombian civilians against murder, kidnapping and torture by military and paramilitary forces. This protection was not to be enough for Orlando that day in October 2005. Shortly after he left the police station, he was forced onto a motorbike by persons known to be paramilitaries. Ten days later his
lifeless body was found with a bullet in its head. His hands had been tied. He leaves behind his wife and their seven children.

As shocking as this cold-blooded killing was, it is unremarkable in the wider Colombian context. Cases of extreme violence – including massacres and torture – have become so common that their extraordinariness is hardly questioned anymore. As Daniel Pécaut, one of the best known experts on violence, or violentólogos – argues, violent events in Colombia are so varied and diverse that organised and random violence have entered into a reciprocal relationship that has led to a state of generalised violence. Violence is in fact so ingrained in the very constitution of society, from national governance to everyday lives, that it may appear trivial, or banal. In Pécaut’s view, this ‘banality of violence’ tends to obscure the existence of situations of real terror.

Orlando’s case is representative of the wider strategies of oppression with which dissent is dealt with. As Nazih Richani says, the ‘dominant economic groups look upon violence as an efficient mechanism with which to crush the opposition. This attitude has shaped the political behavior of the dominant social groups toward the working classes, the peasants, and Left-wing political parties’. Violence meted out to labour unionists, for example, has reached truly apocalyptic dimensions – every second trade union leader assassinated in the world each year is Colombian. This ‘death of trade unions’ is symptomatic of the relationship between neoliberal deregulation, state policy and paramilitarism. The persecution of labour unionists by paramilitary groups, the outlawing of labour unions in the public sector, and the deregulation of the labour market all pursue the same strategy. Its aim is the weakening or disappearance of organisations that resist policies friendly to transnational capital.

It is this link – the political economy of violence and the way it is played out on the ground in specific locations – that I want to focus on in this essay. The armed conflict in Colombia is usually portrayed as one of Marxist rebels versus right-wing militias and the Colombian army, with the civilian population caught up in the crossfire. Discussions of the political and eco-
nomic dimensions of the conflict often look at the role played by the illegal drug trade and natural resources such as oil and how they fuel the conflict by providing economic opportunities for the diverse armed actors. Yet these debates often fail to examine the wider global forces that significantly shape the violence and terror on the ground. I think it is important to examine the Colombian conflict within these wider strategies of globalisation, one of which is the expansion of a global economy of expropriation. For David Harvey, for example, the contemporary moment of ‘new imperialism’ is characterised by new cycles of ‘accumulation by dispossession’.

According to his analysis, one strategy for capital to overcome the crisis of overaccumulation (a condition whereby capital surplus lies idle with no profitable outlets in sight) is to seize common assets and turn them to profitable use. Today, then, we witness a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons’, pushed through by ‘policies of dispossession pursued in the name of neo-liberal orthodoxy’.

These processes are also responsible, in my view, for the escalation of the armed conflict in Colombia in regions that had hitherto been at its margins. The Pacific coast is one such region that was until recently considered a haven of peace, insulated from Colombia’s cartography of violence, but has now become fully integrated into it. Below I examine this region as a lens through which the wider context of violence can be viewed and understood. I want this to be an ‘embodied’ narrative, in which the voices of the victims are heard. I do not claim impartiality in this account. I emphatically side with those whose lives are being destroyed by the logic of a capitalist world order in which nothing is unconnected. As a researcher interviewing dozens of activists in Colombia, who have been subject to all kinds of violence, I became committed to making their struggle known, albeit through my own interpretations and with my limited ability to convey it.

This essay, then, does not provide yet another historical account – nor an all-encompassing explanation – of how violence developed over the last two centuries in Colombia. Instead I want to focus on current trends and particular manifestations of violence, and how they illustrate and may explain the wider underlying patterns of domination and repression that provide the structural context for all kinds of violence on the ground. The first section will briefly introduce the wider perspective in which violence has become shaped in Colombia over the last decades. I will then outline some of the contemporary patterns of violence, particularly those against organised labour. The remainder of the essay will then look at the Pacific coast region as an arena in which ethnocidal violence against Afro-Colombians is linked to capitalist expansion and development policies.
LA VIOLENCIA IN PERSPECTIVE

Most narratives of violence in Colombia refer at some point to the notorious period of bi-partisan-induced national slaughter between 1946 and 1966 that has become known – for lack of a more fitting expression – as La Violencia. It cost the lives of over 200,000 Colombians, predominantly in the rural areas. La Violencia began as a sectarian conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties, with campesinos constituting the majority of combatants and casualties. It saw the most brutal killings and massacres imaginable. People were cut in pieces with machetes, or burned alive. Pregnant women had their bellies slashed, their foetuses thrown into the air and pierced on bayonet points. ‘Don’t leave the seed’, was the order of the day. New modes of killing were practiced, such as the infamous corte corbata (the ‘necktie cut’), in which the victim’s tongue is pulled through the slit throat and left to hang like a tie.

Maria Victoria Uribe has studied at length the technologies of terror deployed during La Violencia, which she interprets as sacrificial displays aimed at dehumanising the victims. For those who can stomach it, she provides an inventory of techniques of manipulation perpetrated on the victims’ bodies. She has since traced the same techniques in the killing sprees committed by paramilitary groups today. The collective assassination of unarmed and defenceless people, she argues, has in fact become a recurrent cultural practice in Colombia, infused by the semantics of political terror:

The obsession with manipulating the Other’s body characteristic of La Violencia has now been replaced by a faunalization that mimics the industrial slaughter of cattle, entailing a diminution of the meanings ascribed to the Other’s body. Acts of barbarity, shamelessly publicized in television news broadcasts and newspapers, have transformed Colombians into beings filled with fear: fear of war, of violence, of blood, of losing one’s own family, even of watching the news on television.

These acts of barbarity have also transformed entire regions into landscapes of fear, where the armed groups’ impact is visibly inscribed. Violence leaves its traces, and its manifestations can be read off these landscapes. Houses are burnt down or riddled with bullets, their doors kicked in, windows smashed and roofs torn off. Dead and dismembered bodies lie in fields, float in rivers, or get stuck in mangrove swamps. Villages have been abandoned by their frightened inhabitants and transformed into empty, eerie spaces devoid of life, let alone laughter. The effects generated by acts of barbarity are not
coincidental but intended and planned. Extreme violence is aimed at producing terror and unmanageable fear in the targeted population. One may argue that terror is not so much aimed at the victim to be killed but at the family, friends and neighbours who witness the public spectacle of torture and dismemberment. Terror is a communicative strategy of armed groups to send a powerful message to the survivors of a massacre as a method of controlling these populations.13 As a prominent black activist in Colombia told me in November 2004:

Terror has always been a terrible exemplary strategy in this country, all that one heard during La Violencia: the corte de franela [literally ‘T-shirt cut’, by which arms and head of the victim are cut off], which was not just to kill someone but to send a message to the remainder of the population. Or playing football with severed heads. Or what you now hear in some areas that they force families to eat the meat of their relatives. These are powerful messages so that people don’t organize themselves … When they [the armed groups] enter a village and kill 10, then 50 others panic and flee. Those who stay, do so in a situation of absolute submission under the dominion of the armed group that plays out its own logic and rules. This is a concrete strategy, well thought out and impeccably administered throughout the country.

While the cruelties and atrocities of Colombia’s internal conflict seem to surpass all imagination, one must remember that civil war, armed uprisings and bloody repression have a long tradition in Colombian history. In fact, Colombia in the 19th century has been described as a ‘country of permanent war’.14 Following the Wars of Independence from Spain there were fourteen civil wars, countless small uprisings, two international wars with Ecuador and three coups d’état. Responsibility for these wars lay with the Liberal and the Conservative parties that were formed in the mid-19th century and polarised Colombian society. Mobilised by powerful bonds of personal allegiance, the rural poor fought and died for the rival causes of a bipartisan land-holding oligarchy. The wars never ended in decisive victories but merely provided short breathing spaces before renewed fighting took place. As Gonzalo Sánchez has argued, these were ‘unfinished wars’ without clear victors or vanquished: ‘What was at stake … was not the takeover of the state, a change in the system, the replacement of one class with another, … but simply the participation of occasionally excluded forces in the bureaucracy, their incorporation or reincorporation into the institutional apparatus’.15
The bipartisan oligarchy shared political power and monopolised wealth in this way while the vast majority of Colombians lived in poverty. These tensions became explosive in the mid-1940s, when the populist Liberal candidate for presidency, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, mounted a challenge that went beyond party politics to confront the class conflict and the elitism of Colombia’s ‘oligarchic republic’. Gaitán’s mass politics found wide-spread popular support. When he was assassinated during a rally in Bogotá on 9 April 1948, people spontaneously rose up in a collective fury in what is known as El Bogotazo. Violence spread into the countryside and people took up arms, virtually running amok. After ten years of unremitting national bloodletting, a political solution was sought through a party pact that created the National Front in 1958. Under this pact political power would alternate every four years during a period of ‘peaceful coexistence’ until 1974. This hegemonic power-sharing arrangement, however, did not open up any space for political participation beyond the two dominant parties. The criminalisation of social protest forced resistance increasingly underground, building the basis for what were to become, in the mid-1960s, armed guerrilla groups. The most important ones still dominating the national scenario today are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Whereas the ELN was heavily influenced by the ideas of the Cuban revolution, basing their strategy on the foco theory of guerrilla warfare, the FARC arose in 1964 as a direct response to government and army repression of peasants. FARC’s longer-term regional structure of social welfare for peasants explains the deep loyalty that the guerrilla group enjoys, and their strong support base in many regions otherwise abandoned or neglected by a weak state to this day. Despite a number of peace initiatives involving the FARC and the ELN, they both still form part of the violent political landscape in Colombia.

PATTERNS OF CONTEMPORARY VIOLENCE

Reflecting on the possibilities of an emerging civil society articulating itself within this context of armed struggle, Eduardo Pizarro, another renowned violentólogo, argued in 1993: ‘The guerrilla movement has not been a suitable instrument for social and political change, nor has it contributed to the expansion of democratic spaces. On the contrary, in Colombia the “chronic rebellion”, perceived by the elites as a potential threat, real or imaginary, has served as a justification for the maintenance and even the increase of democratic restrictions throughout decades. Internal war and authoritarian restrictions have mutually reinforced one another’.17
This analysis still seems valid. The economic, political and social inequalities that came to be addressed in the 1960s by a number of guerrilla organisations still remain intact. As long as the oligarchy feels that it can sit out the conflict without having to concede to rebel demands, it will do so. This is all so much easier, of course, with significant support from the United States, which feels it cannot afford to ‘lose’ Colombia in the way that Venezuela has been lost in this century. This wider geopolitical context explains the continued US commitment in Colombia, where the ‘war on drugs’ functions as a convenient pretext for intervention.

The economic elite have never had it so good, one may argue, now that an authoritarian president is in power who enjoys significant popular support. Forrest Hylton has done a good job of grasping the extraordinary character of the oligarchy in Colombia, listing the kinship ties of its modern presidents and mapping the topography of oligarchic clientelism. To him, this is Colombia’s ‘evil hour’ – an allusion to one of Gabriel García Márquez’s first novels, \textit{La Mala Hora} – when with Álvaro Uribe’s inauguration as President in 2002, ‘the outlaws have become the establishment’.\footnote{Hylton, \textit{Colombia’s War: The Military Occupation of the People} (2003), p. 18} Uribe’s authoritarian restrictions – nicely clad in the postmodern political discourse of his ‘Democratic Security’ campaign – are the worst seen for decades in Colombia. As Gisela Cramer argues in a recent, exhaustive review of Uribe’s security policies, these ‘rely, to a far greater extent than in previous years, on the use of force’.\footnote{Cramer, \textit{Safeguarding Democratic Rights in Colombia} (2005), p. 19} At the heart of these policies lies a significant increase of the state’s coercive capacity. This includes the modernisation of the military and the police in an effort to regain full territorial control within the country’s borders. To achieve this, Uribe’s administration has resorted to a heavy-handed approach that has widely been criticised by human rights groups in and beyond Colombia. Particularly worrying have been the mass detentions of suspected guerrilla sympathisers or collaborators, often without proper arrest procedures and based on flimsy evidence by paid informants. Basically, anyone who might be remotely considered critical of the regime has to fear some kind of retribution. Internal war and authoritarian restrictions still mutually reinforce one another.

The brunt of authoritarian repression is borne by social movement leaders, teachers, university professors and organised labour. Colombia has for decades been the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. The figures are simply staggering. Since 1986 the National Labour School (Escuela Nacional Sindical), a prominent labour rights group in Colombia, has recorded more than 2,500 killings of trade unionists – with no convictions of these murderers in 98 per cent of the cases. This trend continues despite claims made by the Uribe administration that levels of violence have
dropped. Not only are homicide rates in Colombia still amongst the highest in the world, but since Uribe came to power in 2002 nearly 400 trade unionists have been killed, with only 10 cases resulting in a conviction.\textsuperscript{20} According to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 78 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia in 2006 alone – more than half of the 144 trade unionists killed worldwide in that year.

In a significant deviation from the normal pattern of impunity for such murders, August 2007 saw four soldiers from Colombia’s 18\textsuperscript{th} Army Brigade sentenced each to 40 years in prison for the killing of three trade union leaders in 2004. This notorious army brigade received counterinsurgency training from the US Special Forces to protect an oil pipeline that is partially owned by US–based Occidental Petroleum in the state of Arauca. The soldiers’ conviction became the most high-profile case of all Colombian trade union murders, as it so clearly demonstrated the active involvement of the Colombian military – protecting US interests – in the killing of trade unionists.

The president of Colombia’s mineworkers union Sintraminercol (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Empresa Nacional Minera), Francisco Ramírez Cuellar, has powerfully outlined ‘the relations between the mining industry, the Colombian government, the Colombian military, the paramilitaries, the US government, US multinationals, the US military, US agencies, and the web that all of these have spun to protect foreign investments’ in the following terms:

> During the last few decades and in the context of the imposition of the neoliberal economic model, they have manipulated bilateral and multilateral agreements in their own interest, they have acted as consultants in the drafting of new legislation, and, most seriously, they have participated openly in the Colombian state’s military response against the strong popular resistance that has arisen among Colombians who oppose the process of globalization. The popular organizations challenging the imposition of this model suffer from methods of state terrorism that include extermination, genocide, forced displacement, and every conceivable kind of violation of human rights, in the defense of the interests of the powerful and to protect foreign investment in Colombia.\textsuperscript{21}

It goes without saying that such outspoken denunciations resulted in death threats and attacks against Sintraminercol union leaders.
VIOLENCE AND CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC COAST REGION

Most of my fieldwork over the last 15 years has been carried out in the Pacific coast region in Colombia. I was initially interested in this tropical rainforest area because of the international attention it had received as one of the planet’s biodiversity hotspots. Travelling extensively the Pacific lowlands in 1994, I quickly realised that Afro-Colombians, who make up some 90 per cent of the population in this region, were mobilising over territorial, cultural and socio-economic rights. In fact, in the early 1990s, the Pacific coast basin was at the centre of a legislative initiative that redefined relations between black populations and the Colombian state. Building on inclusionary declarations in the 1991 constitution which defined the nation as multicultural and pluriethnic, Law 70 was passed in 1993, granting collective land rights to rural black communities in the Pacific region. Many black leaders regard this legislation as a ‘small constitution’ for Afro-Colombians, ‘because it recognizes a group of persons whose country ignored them throughout its history’. While black activists had long lobbied for such recognition, it was also in the state’s interest to empower these communities territorially and enlist them in the task of preserving the rich ecosystems that they had traditionally inhabited and which were threatened by the overexploitation of natural resources such as timber and alluvial gold deposits. Moreover, encouraged by a global awareness over environmental destruction – signalled by the UN’s Brundtland Report in 1987, and the Rio Summit in 1992 – the Colombian government was keen to present the Pacific coast region as a laboratory where such global concerns could be channelled into a regional development strategy based on biodiversity conservation. The early 1990s, then, attested to a convergence of interests between governmental institutions and black organisations to work towards more sustainable ways of developing the Pacific coast region.

This optimistic outlook was to change dramatically, however, in the mid-1990s. In late December 1996, just 4 days before Christmas, a combined army and paramilitary offensive dubbed Operation Genesis attacked the local population in the municipality of Riosucio in the north-western Department of Chocó. Supported by army helicopter gunships, paramilitary search troops killed and ‘disappeared’ hundreds of peasants. One of the survivors, Marino Córdoba, remembers the ‘tragic dawn’ of 20 December 1996:

Five o’clock in the morning of a day that seemed quiet as usual. Nobody expected at that time the terror that suddenly woke us
up. We were stunned by the screams of those who tried to flee. There were bursts of gunfire. With their butt rifles they knocked down the doors that we didn’t open out of fear. It was madness. Confused we screamed and ran because we saw men armed to the teeth. …‘The paras have arrived’, one of the armed men shouted. That was when we realized who it was. …The victims were paraded through the village in underwear; they were brutally beaten, hands tied behind their backs, and then they were taken away and disappeared. Those of us who could see what was happening managed to jump into the river and hide among the reeds. We stayed for two days submerged with the water up to our necks, without food, desperate. …At 8 am helicopters of the Army’s Boltígero Batallion arrived. They circled over the village and then dropped off troops. We were still submerged in the water among the reeds and thought that things had changed at last. But to our great surprise the helicopters began to bomb the area. The paramilitaries gave orders by radio to those in the helicopters and these sprayed us with machinegun fire, bombs and grenades. We couldn’t believe what was happening. This was not a game, this was death that was very close. Many of my friends were killed by the gunfire; it was horrible to see them die without being able to do anything.  

Estimates put the number of deaths at 500 during the (para)military operation. Over 20,000 people fled in its aftermath. Marino Córdoba eventually managed to escape to the capital of Bogotá. Shortly afterwards he founded the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), which aims to provide support to the thousands of black peasants and fishermen who have been forced to flee their homes. Yet as an outspoken community leader, Marino’s life was also threatened in Bogotá. After a number of failed attempts on his life he fled in January 2002 to the United States, where he was granted asylum. He has received many peace prizes and as AFRODES’s spokesperson in the US he continues to denounce what he and others call an ‘ethnocide’, or ‘the second genocide’, against the Afro-Colombian population. As a displaced female black activist told me in an interview in December 2004:

After slavery this is the second time we are being uprooted. First we were expelled from Africa; our ancestors had to come to America to serve as slaves. They gained their freedom eventually, but now, in full twenty-first century, we are banished from the lands that we
have obtained and made ours since the abolition of slavery. And we are pushed into the cities to fill up the slums, where they turn us into beggars.

Reflecting in hindsight on the events of 1996 in Riosucio, Marino is sceptical of the official claim that the military incursion was aimed at routing out FARC guerrillas from the region (and the army never admitted to the massacres committed by paramilitary groups): ‘If the combined action of paramilitaries and army in Riosucio aimed at forcing the guerrilla from the region, why were we all bombed, massacred and displaced, if our only weapons were the tools with which we work the land to feed our families? …Or was their aim really to drive away all the people living in this area?’

As another prominent black leader explained to me in an interview in Bogotá in November 2004: ‘The displacement in the Pacific coast region is not a consequence of the armed conflict, the way in which the government wants to portray it to international public opinion. No. The displacement is a strategy of the conflict. The armed conflict uses the strategy of displacement to empty those lands that are needed to develop their megaprojects’.

At the heart of this unprecedented paramilitary incursion into the Pacific coast region lies a changing rationale for developing the region. The conservation strategy of the early 1990s has been abandoned and replaced by a return to the logic of exploitation and extraction, to capitalist accumulation and land dispossession. One recent overview of capitalism’s long historical process of enclosure and attack on the commons actually captures the current deterritorialisation trends in the Colombian Pacific coast with chilling accuracy:

The great work of the past half-millennium was the cutting off of the world’s natural and human resources from common use. Land, water, the fruits of the forest, the spaces of custom and communal negotiation, the mineral substrate, the life of rivers and oceans, the very airwaves – capitalism has depended, and still depends, on more and more of these shared properties being shared no longer, whatever the violence of absurdity involved in converting the stuff of humanity into this or that item for sale.

This development can best be illustrated with the rapid expansion of African Palm plantations that are established with national and transnational capital on lands collectively owned by rural black communities.
African Palm was first introduced to Colombia in 1932, but it was not until the late-1950s that it became of commercial value, mainly for the use of palm oil in the production of soaps, vegetable oils and animal feeds. The area under African Palm cultivation grew tenfold, from 18,000 hectares in the mid-1960s to 188,000 hectares in 2003. Estimates put the current area under production at around 300,000 hectares, making Colombia the fourth largest palm oil producer in the world, after Malaysia, Indonesia and Nigeria. And much more is to come. On repeated occasions President Uribe has identified palm oil production as one of the principal export strategies for the future, for which six million hectares are to be put under cultivation by 2019. This staggering figure can be explained in part by the current world-wide hype over the production of biofuels into which palm oil can be converted, and which Uribe clearly wishes to exploit.

The African Palm industry had already received an important boost as part of the ‘Economic Opening’ development strategy in Colombia under the government of Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994). A strategic development alliance was established between the government and the National Federation of African Palm Companies (Fedepalma) and a fund was created (Fondo del Fomento Palmero) to support the commercialisation of oil palm products. Under President Pastrana (1998-2002) African Palm plantations were promoted as an alternative to illegal coca crops, with funding under Plan Colombia, the largely US-sponsored drug eradication campaign, a strategy also pursued under Uribe’s policy of Democratic Security.

Yet in the Colombian Pacific region this development model has encountered significant resistance. First, the planting of a monoculture such as the oil palm is considered detrimental to the environment and the biodiversity in the region, which Law 70 was meant to help conserve. Second, the forcible establishment of African Palm production runs against the kind of development envisaged by black communities, who are also nominally protected under the same legislation. One state-sponsored method of overcoming resistance has been the cooptation of individual members or entire villages through the establishment of ‘strategic alliances’ between palm companies and Afro-Colombian communities. These alliances give incentives to local people to cooperate and provide land and labour for cultivation. They have been partly successful, and have driven a wedge into many communities, where individual members may see immediate personal benefits through the employment promised by the palm companies. But where cooptation does not work, coercion is applied. Many are the reports that have denounced
the forced sale of lands by peasants under pressure from armed groups. As an Afro-Colombian lawyer and activist put it very simply, in an interview in November 2004: ‘You know that when the power comes with a gun in hand, basically people end up collaborating’.

In order to break the organisational capacity of black communities, their leaders are targeted by paramilitary death squads. Some are forced to leave their homes, towns, or, as in the case of Marino Córdoba, even the country. Others are silenced by killing them, as is the case of Orlando Valencia. Moreover, it is not just the individual who is intimidated and chased, but, for maximum effect, their families are also terrorised. When I met Ana María (not her real name), a displaced activist from the Pacific region, in a cafeteria in Bogotá in November 2004, she told me how hard it was for her to part with her home, after paramilitaries had turned up at her door one day and left a message with her mother, giving her 24 hours to leave: ‘This was so difficult to swallow. Because you just have to leave. It’s not a decision that you take. No, you have to leave because they are going to kill you. So you just leave. And it is not just yourself, your family is in this also and everyone around you runs the same risk because of what you do’.

Another activist, whom I interviewed a few days later, was about to return to his native river basin where he had been at the forefront of organising local communities. He was determined not to give in to the armed groups, despite the killings of several of his family members:

In September 2000, paramilitaries stormed into the house of one of my sisters in a neighbourhood in Buenaventura. I had entered a few minutes earlier, but they didn’t realise that I had left through another door. They opened fire on everybody who was in the house and killed seven people then and there, cousins and nephews of mine. I got away by a few minutes. Then, in another neighbourhood of Buenaventura, they shot dead one of my brothers. Two more of my nephews were killed at the home of my other sister. …On 11 May [2004], paramilitaries disappeared another nephew of mine, also in Buenaventura. …This just shows the intensity of the threat and the persecution that we have been subjected to. Because the first thing they ask my family is: where is this relative of yours?

CONCLUSIONS

I needed this essay to conclude the way it began – with a personal story. These lived experiences are often absent in the waves of analysis offered
by *violentólogos* proper. But in my eyes they form an important part in our understanding not only of the physical manifestations of violence in particular places, but also of the wider underlying structures of domination and oppression. Trade unionists and social movement leaders bear the brunt of systemic state violence directed against all voices of dissent. Their personal experiences show the real nature of the dominant power structures and the way in which patterns of oppression are played out on the ground. Moreover, the voices of the activists interviewed and cited give a raw dimension to the narrative that disrupts the moral high ground and the very possibility of detached armchair analysis, in the face of the lived experience of terror and violence. They add urgency to efforts to break the cycles of violence. Black leaders, for example, internationalise or globalise their struggle by stressing the link between palm oil production in Colombia and the global demand for biofuels, holding ‘us’ in the West directly co-responsible for the massacres and the forced displacement of black peasants so that their lands are planted with African Palm trees. They also remind us that in the early 1990s global concerns were largely responsible for the Pacific coast region being temporarily transformed into a laboratory for biodiversity conservation. Biofuels or biodiversity? The wrong answer to this question will continue to see rural black populations terrorised.

This essay makes no claim to analyse the complex phenomenon of violence in Colombia as a fully comprehensible, transparent phenomenon. I agree with Pécaut, who argues that ‘no single coherent intellectual or political framework or category is able to explain this violence’.28 The framework I have applied here draws on Marxist insights into the capitalist imperative of ceaseless expansion and accumulation. It insists on a global dimension that is often absent from debates that stress the peculiarity of Colombia as a ‘poster child for studies of violence’.29 Of course the precise ways in which violence is carried out are particular to the geographical and historical context, and draw on the specific historical repertoire of violence in Colombia. The barbarities committed by paramilitary groups today, for example, are clearly linked to forms of torture, massacre and mutilation practiced during *La Violencia*. Yet, focusing on the exceptionality of this ‘poster child’ it is easy to forget the global dimensions of an expanding drive of capital, pushed through by violent means, which lies at the heart of current patterns of displacement and dispossession in Colombia and elsewhere. The Pacific coast region is only one of the latest instances of the age-old tendency for peasants to be forcibly pushed off their lands. A new round of primitive accumulation has gripped the capitalist globe, and as we (should) know, capitalism’s ca-
pacity for ceaseless re-structuring and its thirst to penetrate the most hidden
corners of unchartered terrain knows no end (as yet).

NOTES

Thanks for research support are due to the EU’s Marie Curie International
Fellowship and the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council.

1 For info on the conference, see http://www.lwr.org/colombia/con-
vention.

2 Daniel Pécaut, ‘From the Banality of Violence to Real Terror: The
Case of Colombia’, in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt, eds., Societies of Fear:
The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America, London:

3 Ibid., p. 142. When Pécaut talks of the ‘banality of violence’, he wishes
to stress the ordinariness, or triviality, with which violence is perceived
and enacted. He does not refer to the Arendtian notion of the ‘fearsome,
word-and-thought-defying banality of evil’ that stared Hannah Arendt
in the face at the trial of Nazi Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann
in Jerusalem in 1961. In fact, he doesn’t mention Arendt at all. See
Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,

in Colombia’, Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, 39(2),
1997, p. 67.

5 R. Zelik, ‘Gewerkschaftssterben in Kolumbien: über den Zusammenhang
von neoliberaler Deregulierung, staatlicher Politik und Paramilitarismus’
[The Death of Trade Unions in Colombia. On the Relationship be-
tween Neoliberal Deregulation, State Policy and Paramilitarism], Prokla,
33(1), 2003, pp. 51-75.

6 See, e.g., Alexandra Guáqueta, ‘The Colombian Conflict: Political and
Economic Dimensions’, in K. Ballentine and J. Sherman, eds., The
Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance, London:
Lynne Rienner, 2003, pp. 73-106.

7 David Harvey, The New Imperialism, Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2003, pp. 137-82. See also David Harvey, ‘The New Imperialism:

8 Ibid., p. 148.

9 There is an enormous body of literature on violence in Colombia.
Excellent introductions are Catherine LeGrand, ‘The Colombian Crisis


23 For an illuminating interview with leaders of the Afro-Colombian displaced community, see http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch20_voices.htm.

24 On the history of alluvial gold deposit exploitation, see Robert West, *Colonial Placer Mining in Colombia*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952, and this US geographer’s seminal work on the


26 Ibid., p. 252.


28 Pécaut, ‘From the Banality of Violence to Real Terror’, p. 142.