

AN INSIDER'S VIEW ON NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, CRIME AND STATE FORMATION IN LATIN AMERICA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

21st November the **UCL Colombian Society** hosted two events with **Aldo Civico**, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University and director of the International Institute for Peace. Both events were related to research presented in his recently published book *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads*.



The first event of the day was a **masterclass** led by Professor Civico. The group of 20 engaged in a deep discussion, grappling with what paramilitarism means in the Colombian context. Professor Civico's points, derived from extensive ethnographic research with non-state armed groups, stressed the existence of

intertwinement between them and the state. He raised interesting ideas about paramilitaries being both with and against the state, existing in grey areas that have yet to be effectively analysed. In this sense, Professor Civico highlighted the parallels between the Colombian paramilitary organisations and the Sicilian mafia Cosa Nostra, which is at once 'outside the state and within the state'. The larger argument being that although paramilitaries in Colombia are peculiar to their context, a common framework can be developed to understand the phenomena comparatively.

The **evening panel** discussion broadened the debate, comparing situations across Latin America: between Colombia's paramilitaries, Guatemala's gangs and Mexico's narcotics groups. The panel was composed of **Professor Civico**; **Dr Katherine Saunders-Hastings**, lecturer at the Institute of Americas, whose research focuses on changing patterns of gang violence and criminal economies; **David Pérez Esparza**, consultant on policing and security policy and current PhD candidate at UCL; and chaired by **Dr Ainhoa Montoya**, lecturer in Latin American Studies at ILAS, whose research focuses on post-conflict El Salvador.

All panellists, from different methodological approaches, highlighted distinct elements of the debate surrounding non-state armed groups. Despite the different manifestations and organisational makeup of the groups in question, all three panellists pointed out clear intertwinements with the state. Professor Civico again argued that in the case of Colombia, paramilitaries acted as an 'extension' of the state and expanded their mutual interests in both territorial scope and spheres of influence. Dr Saunders-Hastings highlighted how both state forces and gangs were inhabiting the same space. Although the state imposes territorial domination, it allows gangs to continue extorting people and communities. Whilst in Mexico, narcotics groups were rationally responding to changes in security policy in USA. Esparza illustrated correlations between production of guns in USA and violence across the border.

All three presentations, thus, argued that far from existing on the margins of the state, non-state armed groups co-exist with, respond to and impact state forces and policies. The panel discussion in many ways helped to reinforce the central arguments of Professor Civico's masterclass. They impressed upon the need for researchers to question the dichotomous conceptualisation of the state and non-state armed groups as antagonistic entities, when clearly the intertwinement between them give them shared interests.

The **UCL Colombian Society** thanks all sponsors (particularly SLAS for funding the event), participants and panellists, especially Professor Civico who travelled from the USA to present his research, for contributing to a day full of enriching conversations and thought provoking ideas.



Evening panel. From left to right: Professor Aldo Civico, Dr Katherine Saunders-Hastings, David Pérez Esparza, and Dr Ainhoa Montoya (Chair).



UCL COLOMBIAN
SOCIETY



INSTITUTE OF
LATIN AMERICAN
STUDIES

SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

UCL INSTITUTE OF
THE AMERICAS

