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Territorial Rule in Columbia and the Transformation of the Llanos Orientales by Jane M. Rausch

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Territorial Rule in Columbia and the Transformation of the Llanos Orientales by Jane M. Rausch, University of Florida Press, 2013. 186 pp., illustrations, notes, glossary, references, index.

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This latest monograph on the Llanos Orientales helps establish Jane M. Rausch as a leading scholar of frontier regions. The Llanos are tropical plains lying to the north of the Orinoco River covering about 550,000 square kilometers in Venezuela and Colombia. The land was a difficult environment of “clouds of insect pests, a brutally hot climate, and unappetizing pasturage” (p. 2) that constrained conquest and settlement efforts. This changed when cattle introduced in the sixteenth century adapted to the land, becoming the base for a distinctive *llanero* subculture—a mixed people of European and indigenous ancestry (p. 2). Despite Bogotá’s political and economic neglect of the Llanos, the government has “consistently regarded these vast grasslands as ‘Lands of the Future’ that might one day hold the key to Colombian progress” (p. x).

The book covers the years 1947–2010, a period between the outbreak of an undeclared civil war known as *La Violencia* and the region’s emergence as a fast-growing oil-producing economy. A brief history leading up to 1947 describes numerous projects that failed to transform the “highly stratified social order” that consisted of poor settlers, servants, ranch hands, and marginalized indigenous communities under the control of missionaries and ranch owners (pp. 3–4). President Alfonso López Pumarejo’s 1934 liberal program known as the “Revolution on March” was the first serious, and partially successful, attempt to modernize the frontier, but it ultimately also failed to break the old social order.

Rausch demonstrates in the next few chapters that this inability to uproot illiberal social hierarchies set the region on a violent course. Cattle ranchers and merchants continued to exercise unchecked political and economic power over a growing population of impoverished, disenfranchised people looking for opportunities to legalize their property or protect their lives. The Llanos’ traditional isolation, lack of state infrastructure, ineffective governance, and failed reform eventually helped to place it at the center of conflict (p. 31).

For Rausch, *La Violencia* is critical to understanding subsequent events that radically transformed the Llanos. Starting in the 1940s, it became the site of Liberal Party elites’ insurrection against the Conservative government. Soon, however, local guerrilla leaders took control of local organizations, severed ties with Liberal directives, and emerged as a resistance movement with region-wide, multiclass support and permanent sites of refuge, all aiming to protect the lives and property of ordinary people. The guerrillas produced their own codes of conduct that applied to their controlled territories, the most renowned being the Laws of the Llanos. By 1951, local *hacendados* created their own counter-guerrilla forces. All of this were new phenomena in Colombian politics (p. 49). Ultimately, the rebels failed to unify as a revolutionary force given divisions between Liberals and Communists.

In 1953, the populist Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla came to power, ending the partisan conflict, and achieved a short-lived peace after signing an armistice with guerrilla leaders. Though new institutions delivered some relief to the civil war’s victims (about 20 percent of the Llanos population had suffered in some way), when *hacendados* complained of extortions, the army moved in and targeted peasants. This convinced the guerrillas who had laid down their weapons that the government could not be trusted. Failure to end official persecution, poverty, and isolation helps explain why the conflict transitioned into a new phase of communist, and later, paramilitary and drug trafficking, violence.

The National Front (1958–1976), a power-sharing bipartisan agreement between Liberals and Conservatives, replaced Rojas Pinilla and represented a government

commitment to rehabilitate violence-stricken areas. The Front allowed the organization of colonies on public land, offered credit, developed infrastructure, and motivated the political organization of peasants under state-sponsored associations (p. 89). Though the new arrangement offered *hacendados* economic and political benefits, they vehemently opposed the democratization measures that enfranchised peasants in the Llanos. Weak government presence and failure to protect people from abuse opened the door for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to grow and build a social base in the Llanos (p. 114).

The 1990s represented a period of state restructuring and decentralization. The 1991 Constitution finally gave the four Llanos departments of Meta, Casanare, Vichada, and Arauca equal status to other subnational jurisdictions. This necessary reform nevertheless offered local power-holders opportunities to capture new institutions for their own benefit. The Constitution also formalized indigenous communities' collective titles to their lands but placed them in the crosshairs of oil development.

The discovery of large oil deposits starting in the 1980s turned Colombia into Latin America's third-largest oil producer and globalized the Llanos economy (p. 128). Vast oil wealth further enhanced the economic power of local elites (p. 121), attracted many migrants, and changed the natural environment, as a badly regulated oil industry devastated resources, increased labor conflict, and violated indigenous people's rights.

In her conclusions, Rausch examines the "three ways twentieth-century historians have used frontier concepts to analyze the role of the Llanos in the shaping of the Colombian nation" (p. 128). They include "neo-Turnerian," "regional," and "international frontiers" frameworks, each offering important insights for the study of Latin American frontiers. She places her scholarship in the neo-Turnerian school, a perspective that highlights how frontiers not only represent imaginary lines separating civilization from backwardness but also concrete places from which to extract resources for nation-building purposes. The study of the Llanos as a region underscores how regional strength thwarts Colombia's centralized nation-building efforts. Fractured geography has sustained relatively independent cultural, economic, and politically self-contained regions that have resisted national integration. Finally, an emphasis on international frontiers proves useful in a context of globalization, where international pressures drive local socioeconomic change and de-territorialize centers of decision-making. Colombian scholars seem to prefer the regional and international approaches, which better aid understanding the historical challenges to nation-building.

Rather than arbitrate between these perspectives, Rausch builds bridges between them. The conclusions however, are rather brief and could have explored further links between these theories to present a more cohesive view of the theoretical diversity regarding frontiers. Still, regional histories such as this one advance our understanding of how frontier lands, usually dominated by unaccountable local elites, may turn into places that sustain popular resistance or unrestrained wealth accumulation, causing fundamental tensions in the nation-building process that remain unresolved.