



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(3) 2024: 758-760

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i3p758

Published 15 November, 2024

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BOOK REVIEW

Davide Riccardi and Jairo Agudelo Taborda (2024), *Más allá de los ideales. La política de ayuda exterior de Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea en Colombia (1998-2016)*, Editorial Uninorte-Editorial Bonaventuriana, 2024, 278 pp., ISBN-13: 9789587895889

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It is common to read about Colombia in academic articles on civil wars. The country is a privileged case study for scholars interested in the dynamics of internal conflicts, as it offers several examples related to a wide range of topics, from rebel governance (Arjona, 2016) to civilian resistance (Masullo, 2021), from counterinsurgency strategies (Delgado, 2015) to the impact of the coca-cocaine economy in the persistence of violence (Fisher and Meitus, 2016). Nevertheless, the authors' dedication, in the book's opening "to those people who still firmly believe in unconditional solidarity among human beings" is a reminder of how Colombia has not only been the setting of prolonged violence, but has been-and continues to be-a laboratory for peace. Stemming from this consideration, the book provides a fine-grained analysis of the United States (US) and European Union's (EU) engagement with the Latin American country, focusing on the drivers, approaches and outcomes of their foreign aid policies along the path initiated by former Colombian President Pastrana in 1998, which eventually led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016 under the Santos presidency, ending the five-decade-long conflict between the Colombian state and the rebel armed group. The book is composed of four chapters, the first of which presents a detailed conceptualisation of 'international cooperation' drawing from traditional IR theories, namely, (neo)realism, (neo)marxism, (neo)liberalism, and constructivism. Thirteen hypotheses are formulated revolving around a distinction made between international cooperation as (instrumental) 'self-help', inspired by the principles of the (neo)realist and (neo)marxist schools, and as (idealist) 'aid', based on (neo)liberal and constructivist theories. The research design is carefully presented in chapter two. The method is that of 'multiple triangulation', whereby, through linear regression, the authors prove the relevance of their hypotheses by testing the correlation between the given independent variables (i.e., the presence of counter-hegemonic governments, coca cultivation and production, commercial exchange, number of political killings, governing party in donor countries,

GDP per capita, poverty gap, number of IDPs) and the level of foreign aid in the timeframe under scrutiny (1998-2016). The quantitative results are then substantiated through a qualitative analysis drawing on relevant primary and secondary sources. Chapter three provides a detailed historical overview of US and EU foreign aid policies towards Colombia from the end of WWII. The US-Colombia cooperation between 1946-1997 has been framed by Cold War competition, and later by the (so-called) war on drugs, while the EU-Colombia relationship took a leap forward especially after Spain and Portugal joined the Union in the eighties. In the studied period (1998-2016), the two actors presented themselves as the main foreign aid suppliers to the Latin American country, adopting two different models of cooperation. That of the US rooted in hard power, that of the EU inspired by emancipatory claims and bottom-up solutions. The findings are described in chapter four. These only partially confirm a positive correlation between the thirteen variables outlined in the theoretical section and the increase in foreign aid flows. Although in fact the US involvement in Colombia was mainly driven by instrumental reasons, these were less related to a balance-of-power logic and more to the economic goal of maintaining “a trade dependence of the Colombian (semi-)periphery” (p.150). Similarly, if it is true that the EU institutional stance was more genuinely value-oriented, the main contributing countries, Germany and France, pursued their national agenda largely inspired by economic interests. Thus, according to the authors, the two actors' approaches would be best interpreted through (neo)marxist lens (variables), whereby foreign aid appears as a facilitator for the commercial penetration of Western companies and the acceptance of detrimental regulations by the host government(s), in contrast to the solidarity principle that (should) underpin international cooperation. Although, as said, the findings partly invalidate the hypotheses deductively put forward by the authors, they maintain, if not increase, their significance as they challenge a series of deep-rooted assumptions, especially by shedding light on the detachment between policy discourses and actual policy practice. For instance, by characterising US action as an expression of a ‘spurious’ and therefore not genuine instrumentalism, and European one as split between principles and realpolitik, the authors implicitly problematise the dichotomy of ‘normativity versus pragmatism’, which fell short in attempting to characterise US and EU’s foreign policy approaches. Such an insight is particularly relevant in today's international (dis)order, where geopolitics is on the rise and the temptation to oversimplify international affairs by dividing the world between principle-driven actions and selfish interests is just around the corner.

In the book's final part, the authors present their assessment of US and EU foreign aid policies. Accordingly, the former, under *Plan Colombia*, reached some meaningful results in the security domain by strengthening the Colombian military and debilitating the guerrillas, but it also triggered negative externalities with an impact on civil society’s human rights, especially of youth, women and ethnic minorities. The latter fostered the creation of localized peace(s) by strengthening already existing initiatives (e.g., the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme-PDPMM), but it lacked impact at the national political level. In both cases, the great emphasis on the economic sectors most beneficial to the donors contributed to maintaining a centre-periphery dependency.

The only real flaw in this meaningful work is that it leaves us wondering about trends and the role of international cooperation in Colombia in the light of a deeply changed international landscape since 2016, one that has become increasingly competitive and contentious with major changes also at the national level, with the election of former M19 rebel Gustavo Petro as Colombian president in 2022 and the start of a new round of peace negotiations between the government and the remaining rebel groups (so-called *Total Peace*). The authors, however, showed awareness by briefly addressing the issue in the book's final pages. According to them, the US and EU will continue to engage in the implementation of the Havana Peace Agreements in the short term. This persisting interest towards

Colombia would also be explained by the country's potential role in containing the pro-Russian and pro-Iranian governments of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua. However, they show scepticism in relation to the changing priorities of donor countries and decreasing resources. Finally, they express concern about compliance with the 2016 Peace Agreements, especially with regard to the protection of ex-combatants and social leaders and the return of land.

In sum, the book is a must-read for Spanish-speaking readers interested in a critical view of international cooperation rigorously grounded in theory and supported by solid empirical work; for students and scholars engaged in untangling the Colombian peace puzzle; and finally for practitioners and policy-makers looking for novel evidence-based solutions to foster horizontal solidarity.

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