BioOne COMPLETE

# Mountains in the Context of War in Colombia: Some Geopolitical Considerations

Author: Ospina, Guillermo Andres

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 26(1) : 90-91

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2006)026[0090:MITCOW]2.0.CO;2

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

Personal Views

# Mountains in the Context of War in Colombia: Some Geopolitical Considerations

*Mountains occupy a strategic place in the political ecology of the war in Colombia. The mountains have been converted into places for military operations, and territorial disputes have become the most important discursive and actual scenario in the so-called guerrilla war that has taken place in the country for more than 40 years. One particular discursive construction related to the mountains in the context of war is the category of "refugee place" for armed groups associated with illicit drug production. For many people the mountains are "dangerous territory." For rural inhabitants of the mountains, life takes place between conflicts. The present essay presents a brief analysis of how mountains are defined by categories and actions in one scenario involving the armed forces. It argues that social representation of mountains in the context of war overlaps with discourse established in anthropology about categories of culture and nature. It presents a point of view based on discourse and social representation of mountains that is becoming crucial for understanding the ways in which territories are controlled and these territories are perceived by local culture.*

## A focus on the social and discursive construction of mountains

The idea for this paper arose after listening to comments by one presenter during the Fourth International Symposium on Sustainable Development in the Andes held in Merida, Venezuela (2001), in which he referred to people in mountains as peaceful and living in harmony with nature. Whether or not this view becomes important in characterizing societies in general, it does not provide specific details on conflict relations—either with nature or among social groups that share a similar space.

While I accept the appreciation of native people's traditional knowledge inherent in this romantic view of how they use resources and live in an ancestral space, I propose to critique this view by analyzing how mountains are perceived in specific social and cultural contexts—in this case, the context of conflict and war.

A starting point is to look at the images disseminated through cinema and documentaries related to the search for inner peace and spiritual harmony in the mountains. These images are produced in the midst of the anguish of modern life. For example, some people want to take refuge in the Himalayan landscape amidst the mystic wisdom of the sacred and inhospitable geography of Tibet. This perception of peaceful mountains contrasts with scenes of warfare along the India–Pakistan border and in Afghanistan's mountains, where armed groups considered terrorists use the mountains as a refuge.

By contrast with frequent presentation of mountains as a place of refuge for peace and spiritual reconciliation, mountains are presented here as a place of refuge for the cultural and political resistance that affects the perceptions, attitudes, and social conditions of their inhabitants—for the case of Colombia in particular. What place do mountains occupy in the geopolitical context of armed conflict in Colombia?

## Illicit actors in the mountains

In Colombia, the Andes are split into 3 regions: the western, central, and eastern ranges, separating the Amazon from the Pacific Coast slopes. Approximately 75% of the population of Colombia is concentrated in the Andean region, which represents 25% of the country's total area. In this sense, the physical geography of Colombia is less mountainous than the Amazon-Orinoco area that represents 50% of the country and has less than 1% of the population. However, it is in the mountains or in areas surrounded by mountains where armed conflict is felt more intensely.

In the Colombian mountains, rural social actors build human landscapes under diverse ecological conditions related to altitude. Among these actors are peasants and indigenous societies, state and non-state institutions, and armed groups that control the most remote regions. All of them adapt and develop particular strategies to face the common problem of obtaining the means to survive. In the case of rural societies, subsistence is sometimes provided through activities considered "illicit" by the state and regulated by armed groups—as in the case of "illicit" crops and traffic in the context of the "war against drugs."

According to Echandía Castilla (1996), the concept of "illicitness" coincides with war and drugs in a condition of "isolation." It also refers to the lack of authority in remote areas, where productive and social dynamics are mediated by armed organizations that illegally control the social and cultural order at local and regional levels. On the other hand, some rural societies that inhabit areas disputed by guerrillas, paramilitary forces, and the national army are in the crossfire between combatants, subject to shifting local authority that restricts their access to resources, mobility, and survival.

Gros (1992), writing about conflict involving peasants in the mountains, suggests that "in some regions armed conflict and drug trafficking are coupled well; in others they are opposed and are scattered … the countryside continues to be a privileged place where they face the State, the guerrillas, and the paramilitary forces" (5–6). The current situation of war for control

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

of territory in Colombia shapes a particular view of the mountains as a place of military operations. However, this scenario is not fixed. It is perceived as fluid. Different actors such as military forces and drug dealers accordingly take their own strategic routes. Local people are hence perceived either as potential guerrilla or paramilitary collaborators with an active role in the conflict.

## Mountains as cultural signifier

Among local people in the mountains, the landscape evokes images that alternate between practical and ideal perceptions grounded in social and cultural significance. The mountain seen in terms of space evokes feelings of immensity. This suggests the infinite and the spiritual, related to the poetic meaning of the forest (Bachelard 1965). From a geopolitical perspective, the mountain is a place of refuge connected with perceptions of the wild, the unknown, and the dangerous. In this latter category, we can identify the following variables.

In terms of conservation, mountains represent a refuge for fauna and flora threatened by human pressure. They are also a natural refuge for native and traditional cultures threatened by the pressures of modernity and changes in the contemporary world. But in geopolitical terms, mountains are defined as a place of refuge for armed resistance groups that control mountainous territories as strategic territory.

This contrast of meanings and cultural representation of mountains as places of refuge becomes evident in different regions around the world where conflicts exist, ie mountainous regions of Asia, Africa, and America, where disputes exist among armed forces for the control of strategic mountainous territory. In 1999, 23 of the 27 major armed conflicts around the world took place in mountainous regions: "Mountainous areas—ranging from Afghanistan to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Andes, parts of the Near East and Africa—are the flashpoints of conflicts afflicting the world today. The reasons for this are complex and varied, but the effects on mountain people are universally devastating" (IYM 2002).

How do people perceive mountains in Colombia within this framework? For most rural societies in the Colombian Andes, mountains are synonymous with the word *Monte*. "Dense vegetation" takes precedence over the phenomenon of altitude—density bound with the perception of the infinite and inexhaustible. This is a category used by peasants to denote space that should be colonized and put at the service of human purposes. *Monte* belongs to the natural, which is opposed to the human-and-cultural; it is to be tamed and taken advantage of.

This concept of *Monte* as an inexhaustible resource is a guideline sought by politicians interested in development as a means of promoting "production" and "civilization" in a territory covered with natural vegetation. Recently, environmentalist discourse, based on the concept of sustainable development, has been contesting this official and private enterprise discourse. But it operates with similar notions of using the environment in an "appropriate" and "more rational" way, constructing *Monte* as a closed space, with a clearly defined outside and inside. This denotation of space can also be identified in the oral tradition and mental maps of the mountain people in different Andean regions of Colombia.

This perception of the mountain is the result of an entire history of the landscape condensed in cultural categories that have been established (as *habitus*) in relationships between society and resources. Burning the forest and the mountain represents the taming of a brave thing to make it useful for human purposes; yet environmentalists continue to underline the devastating consequences of these cultural activities. Similarly, murdering peasants in the mountains represents controlling land to armed groups, ie control of the most extensive social group in regions that become warlike corridors and fields of armed confrontation after selective murders have been carried out. For the armed groups disputing control of the country, the mountain represents a space where they have control, and where nature allows them to sustain resistance.

## Some final comments

Spatial distribution of the war in Colombia is not homogeneous, although it is possible to suggest that it could be generalized to the entire national territory and its frontiers. Mountains, like "natural" and "dangerous" places, constitute convergent categories that are part of a common problem: mountains today are a refuge for biodiversity, but also a place of refuge and trafficking for armed illicit groups.

A sole focus on mountains as a natural space in the national territory does not make visible the social groups that inhabit these regions, and in some cases it associates human activities with specific strategies of survival, related to "illicit" activity in regions regulated by armed groups, while the central government is in charge of elaborating rhetorical peace plans where foreign investment prevails, as exemplified by the application of Plan Colombia.

From an anthropological perspective, I have tried to approach some social relationships between mountains as a human landscape and a space where war is conducted in territorial disputes. The language of war and the technology of death use different means to generate and sustain a culture of fear.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

The powerless populations that inhabit territories where military operations take place are found largely in rural areas of the country. Many people in the mountains observe the manner in which their families are murdered and their neighborhoods destroyed while armed groups advance and take positions.

War in the Colombian mountains is sustained and fed by the peasants who live there. While armed groups regulate the social order in most of these mountainous areas, economic activities and the social life of people in mountain communities are declining as a result of coercive methods such as warnings, exile, or the threat of death in the event of backsliding into "bad behavior." Armed groups find in the peasants a means that facilitates their strategies of mobility, such as finding a workforce to obtain resources or a chance to escape to the trenches after subversive incursions.

Peasants in the mountains are killed, tortured, and displaced. The circumstances seem to point to a conflict where the extermination of the population inhabiting strategic areas is sought to serve the political interests of the armed elites: they are murdered because they are peasants, because they live in the mountains, and for the fact that the mountains have become a symbolic and practical representation of danger, refuge, war, and the power mediated by the violence.

## REFERENCES

***Bachelard G.*** 1965. *La poética del espacio*. Mexico City, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

***Echandía Castilla C.*** 1996. La amapola en el marco de las economías de ciclo corto. *Análisis Político* 27:3–23.

***Gros C.*** 1992. Los campesinos de las cordilleras frente a los movimientos guerrilleros y a la droga: ¿Actores o víctimas? *Análisis Político* 16:4–24.

***IYM [International Year of Mountains].*** 2002. *Peace.* Fact sheet of the International Year of Mountains. http://www.mountainpartnership.org/files/pdf/factsheets/peace-e.pdf; accessed on 20 December 2005.

***Guillermo Andres Ospina***
Departamento de Antropología, Grupo de Estudios Sociales Comparativos (GESC), Universidad del Cauca, Calle 4 # 3–65, Edificio El Carmen, Popayán, Colombia.
gospina@unicauca.edu.co

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use