In September 2016, Colombia’s government and the leadership of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) achieved the unthinkable. After a four-year series of conversations and negotiations, President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC’s leader, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, Timochenko, signed a peace agreement that put an end to one of the longest armed conflicts in the world, and the most enduring internal armed conflict in the history of Latin America. Despite a few setbacks, including a marginal defeat in a referendum and a subsequent rewriting of the original language of the treaty, Colombia’s senate and chamber of representatives ratified the agreement and set in motion a comprehensive process of military demobilization, justice provision, and structural transformations. Pivotally among these points, the agreement includes the remaking of the Colombian countryside through an agrarian reform to establish territorios campesinos, lands of safeguarded and enhanced autonomies for rural communities. A land question of campesino justice lies at the core of FARC’s emergence in 1964, its deeper origins in the aftermath of La Violencia (1948-58), and Colombia’s broader experience of the Cold War.

Tim Lorek offers an extremely compelling analysis of the agrarian and political dynamics that led to the making of economic, social, and political structures of conflict in Colombia. He does so while employing an innovative geopolitical lens, largely underused in scholarship on Latin America beyond Mexico. Embedded within the legacy of Angus Wright’s foundational book on the impact of the Green Revolution on Mexico’s agricultural fields, scholars of the hemisphere’s countrysides, their peoples, and their struggles over the right to live rarely considered the legacies of the “modern agricultural dilemma” south of Mexico and the Caribbean basin.[1] Lorek places Colombia, and specifically the Cauca Valley, at the center of a major historical reconsideration of the intertwined trajectories of the Green Revolution and the Cold War. Equipped with a multidimensional interest that pays attention to international powers, local formations, political motivations,
agrarian ambitions, environmental constraints, peoples, landscapes, crops, and animals, Lorek reveals a total history of the material basis and political roots of the profound inequities that fueled Colombia’s cycles of violence.

Making the Green Revolution is organized in two large sections intermediated by a narrative turning point. The first section, “Developing Paradise,” is devoted to setting the various grounds upon which Lorek’s narrative unfolds. First acclaimed as the “paradise of America” by Alexander von Humboldt, the Cauca Valley offered to both international and local observers a seemingly unparalleled potential for the making of profits if properly capitalized. As happened elsewhere in Latin America, and other regions of the Global South, capitalist eyes perceived projected images and visions of “development” in order to transform a valley into an agricultural pantry for the international consumption market of cacao, cotton, rice, tobacco, livestock, and, perhaps more importantly, sugar. These projects usually came to be embodied in actual people with power—state makers, capitalists, technocrats, and bureaucrats whose visions came to redefine the constitution of the Cauca Valley, environmentally, economically, and ethnically. In the mindsets of Carlos Durán Castro, Ciro Molina Garcés, and Carlos E. Chardón, engrained within a discourse of scientific progress, the Cauca Valley became a pivotal hub for the circulation of agricultural knowledges that connected Colombia and the United States, via Puerto Rico. This circulation facilitated the establishment of networks of cooperation indispensable for understanding subsequent hemispheric dynamics of development, including the arrival of the Green Revolution to Colombia. Among those ideals of prosperity, the fixation on the expansion of the land frontier fostered an understanding of agrarian reform that favored the consolidation of large landowners and the eviction of colonos toward tierras baldías. One might argue that this specific outcome constitutes one of the deepest seeds of all forms of recent and contemporary violence in Colombia—revolutionary, military, and paramilitary.

The turning point of the narrative of Lorek’s book is a stand-alone chapter titled “Sugar Genealogies.” Here, the author delves deep into the racialized history of sugar in Latin America, Colombia, and the Cauca Valley and the transition from a seemingly diversified agricultural production to the agro-industrial monoculture that the Cauca Valley is currently known for internationally. The obsession for sugar and for the valley’s participation in the global sugar business seemed familiar to US and Puerto Rican technocrats, well versed in the transformation of sugar landscapes elsewhere, who came to advise on the implementation of sugar species and the improvement of refining techniques. Sugar planters of the Cauca Valley, with the Palmira experimental station at the center, hosted scientists, geneticists, and chemists in another episode of seemingly high-modernist endeavors that webbed together local plantations and USDA sites in the US South. As plagues unraveled throughout the sugar landscapes of Colombia, environmental and economic crisis favored the powerful and further disenfranchised the many.

The third section of the book, “A Reservoir of Experience and Materials,” centers on the intersected chronologies of the Cold War and the Green Revolution. Both of these geopolitical developments found the Cauca Valley in a pivotal position for being the subject and object of further domestic and transnational interventions. In most latitudes of the Americas, where “interventions” did not entail military invasions, the Rockefeller Foundation came to be a synonym of cultural and economic imperialism. Eager to provide a profit-making solution for the emerging modern agricultural dilemma, the capacity of feeding increasingly industrialized countries, the Rockefeller Foundation brought the Green Revolution to the Cauca Valley in the form of irrigation, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and overall farming tech-
technical assistance. As Cold War languages settled, Rockefeller’s vocabulary of assistance transformed into one of modernization and dissent containment. When La Violencia began, after the Bogotazo and the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Rockefeller-sponsored crops almost seemed to become tools of social and political disciplining through the projection of material progress. By 1956, though, the foundation’s itinerary had left Colombia behind. Fully imbued with the ideology of the Cold War and the emerging Alliance for Progress, President Alberto Lleras Camargo announced an agrarian reform (1961), summoned all interested international foundations in New York (1962), and established the Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario (ICA) as the next stage of agrarian development. The demise of the Rockefeller Foundation, completed by the end of the 1960s, ultimately set the conditions for a new age in the history of the Cauca Valley amidst deepening violence. Guerrilla, counterrevolutionary, and paramilitary warfare unfolded side-by-side with more silent processes of territorialization, displacement, and dispossession that have characterized the recent rural history of Colombia.

Making the Green Revolution is a careful meditation on Colombia’s rural past, the identities and trajectories of the powers that aimed to reshape the Colombian countryside, the rise and demise of hemispheric paradigms of development and prosperity, and the place of the Cauca Valley in a transnational history of the Green Revolution. Lorek should be praised for expanding the fringes of our geopolitical and geographic understanding of this hemispheric and global transformation, its idealistic aims and tumultuous materializations, and Colombia’s unexplored position within. This is a book that joins recent scholarship focused on revisiting the rurality of Latin America, and should be quickly positioned as an exemplary representative. Lorek’s masterful command of multinational archival resources and local published materials will be appealing to scholars, students, and readers in the United States and Colombia alike. A readable book with a clear organization, Making the Green Revolution is a mandatory stop for anyone interested in Latin America, Colombia, and the Global South’s entangled encounters with empire-making projects and processes.

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