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On Dissident Peace: Autonomy, Racial Capitalism, and the Limits of Liberal Peace

It has been nearly a decade since the Colombian government and the FARC-EP concluded peace negotiations in Havana. Launched in 2012, the talks sparked a spectrum of reactions—hope, skepticism, fear, and in many quarters, open hostility. A decade later, the process remains still-unrealized promise. While it has led to institutional reforms and new mechanisms for participation, it has not dismantled the structural conditions underpinning Colombia's armed and social conflict.

Under the administration of Gustavo Petro—Colombia's first leftist president—a new initiative known as "Total Peace" has emerged. Yet rather than marking a clear break with the past, it seems to join a long list of incomplete transitions, reflecting the country's ongoing struggle to imagine an end to violence that is not simply an extension of war by other means.

In this context, *Dissident Peace: Autonomous Struggles and the State in Colombia* by Anthony Dest offers a timely, sharply focused intervention. Rather than evaluating institutional progress or compliance with the Havana accords, Dest turns his ethnographic attention to forms of autonomy and self-determination that resist the liberal peace framework. Drawing on fieldwork in Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Colombia's southwest, the book explores how these groups articulate dissident forms of peace that operate beyond—and often against—the state's logic of multicultural inclusion, economic development, and technocratic reconciliation.

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draws on long-term engagement with Colombia's post-conflict landscape. His book combines ethnographic insight with a grounded critique of state power and liberal peacebuilding. Dest argues that the dominant discourse of peace in Colombia not only reflects but actively reproduces a model of capitalist development rooted in colonial relations, including settler colonial practices. Far from breaking with past violence, the liberal peace operates through governance mechanisms that aim to incorporate marginalized populations—Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and mestizo rural communities—into neoliberal frameworks of legality, development, and recognition.

Against this backdrop, *Dissident Peace* proposes a provocative reframing: peace need not revolve around the state. Instead, Dest foregrounds forms of collective life that resist institutional legibility and reject the liberal grammar of post-conflict transition. These struggles, he shows, are not about reforming the system but about living otherwise—beyond recognition, beyond development, and beyond the state's terms of inclusion.

The Argument: Autonomy, Refusal, and the Liberal State

The book opens with an introduction that refuses to treat peace in Colombia as a self-evident good. Rather than focusing on policy or institutional frameworks, Dest grounds his analysis in the lived experiences of those most affected by war, peacebuilding, and development. From the outset, he unsettles the liberal peace by tracing its entanglement with racial capitalism and settler colonial expansion. The introduction also sketches an initial formulation of dissident peace—not as a normative ideal, but as a set of practices and horizons rooted in autonomy and refusal.

The first chapter, "Alfonso Cano's Grave: Vanguardism and the FARC-EP in Northern Cauca," critically examines guerrilla vanguardism in northern Cauca and how the FARC-EP's revolutionary project clashed with Black and Indigenous political practices. Dest illustrates how the guerrilla's hierarchical approach—anchored in a *campesinista*, class-based notion of "the people" and a static agrarian program—consistently sidelined ethno-political demands. When faced with dissent, coercion was a frequent response. As Dest writes, "the FARC-EP's particular class-based conception of the people along with their reliance on violence to settle disputes pushed away potential allies" (Dest 2025, 38).

Violence, however, did not come solely from the guerrillas. State actors viewed Indigenous and Afro-Colombian struggles as obstacles to capitalist development and subjected them to stigmatization and repression. In this context of militarized exclusion, many navigated survival without fixed ideological positions. "Living through war," Dest notes, "forces people to take positions that are not necessarily tethered to explicit political convictions" (Dest 2025, 38). The FARC's initial promise of anti-oligarchic struggle thus came to mirror statist logics, producing a centralized authority that "justified violence against perceived enemies" (Dest 2025, 43).

Chapter two, "The Coca Enclosure: Drug Trafficking and the Settler Colonization of Struggle," explores how coca cultivation expands capitalist and settler colonial relations in northern Cauca. Far from peripheral, the coca economy links rural communities to neoliberal markets, U.S.-backed militarization, and racialized control. Drawing on James Scott's concept of enclosure, Dest shows how coca operates as a frontier that reconfigures life to fit extractive logics, converting people and territory into "rentable" assets (Dest 2025, 66).

Rather than romanticizing coca growers or portraying them as criminals, Dest examines how *colonos* occupy a contradictory space. While national imaginaries frame them as mestizo pioneers, local Black and Indigenous communities see them as *foráneos*. Some settlers, however, sought affiliation with Afro-Colombian councils to access legal protections like prior consultation—despite not identifying as Black (Dest 2025). What emerges is a nuanced account of how coca economies undermine autonomy through both material and epistemic violence.

Chapter three, "Making Peasants Count: Creole Whiteness and the Politics of Recognition," shifts to the politics of recognition and how a particular form of peasant nationalism, "rooted in *mestizaje* mobilizes people who identify as campesino at this conjuncture of neoliberal multiculturalism in Colombia" (Dest 2025, 93). Dest traces how the term *campesino*, once a general marker of rural labor, increasingly referred to mestizo populations unaffiliated with Black or Indigenous organizations. Campesino organizing thus became a vehicle for articulating a "cultural-cum-racial demand for recognition that aligns with the project of mestizo nation-state formation" (Dest 2025, 124).

Taking as a starting point Senator Paloma Valencia's 2015 call to divide Cauca—"one for the indigenous… and a department dedicated to development" (Dest 2025, 94)—Dest unpacks how *creole whiteness* shapes Colombian national belonging.[1] Rooted in *mestizaje*, he argues, the refusal to adopt an "ethnic identity," such as Black or Indigenous, "extends the promise of national belonging even as it preserves racial hierarchies" and "suppresses insurgent expressions of blackness and indigeneity" (Dest 2025, 96). Creole whiteness is defined then not simply by phenotype but as an ideology of colonial-capitalist modernity that sustains classed, gendered, and racial hierarchies (Dest 2025, 96).

Campesino identity politics, according to Dest, reflect a shift within neoliberal multiculturalism in which recognition becomes a technology for governing difference. The result is a reactive politics. Drawing on what Judith Butler calls the "hegemony of the juridical subject," Dest argues that "adherence to the state's

1 Dest's analysis resonates with key insights from Latin American decolonial thought. As Mignolo argues the very notion of Latin America is grounded in a civilizational project that erases Indigenous and Afro-descendant epistemologies in favor of a Eurocentric ideal of modernity. Similarly, Castro-Gómez's critique of the "zero-point hubris" highlights how dominant forms of knowledge claim universality while denying their colonial and racial foundations. Dest's discussion of *creole whiteness* builds on this tradition by showing how mestizaje operates as both a racial and epistemic project—one that defines national belonging through whiteness, even when unmarked (see: Castro-Gómez 2021; Mignolo 2005).

definitions of racial difference creates fodder for racist resentment between the supposed beneficiaries of recognition" (Dest 2025, 123). In doing so, *campesinista* politics reinforce development logics that "emphasize the relationship between land ownership and labor," which in turn privileges land productivity over autonomy claims (Dest 2025, 103).

This is arguably the book's strongest chapter. Dest not only offers a rigorous ethnographic and theoretical account of the contradictions within campesino organizing but also introduces concepts—like creole whiteness and campesino identity politics—that are especially useful for scholars examining internal tensions within social movements.

Chapter four, "¡Tod@s Somos Primera Línea?: Preliminary Notes on the 2021 Uprising in Cali," turns to the protests mentioned earlier, locating its force not in ideological coherence but in the refusal of "disenchanted, disenfranchised, and disaffected people surviving in the ruins of capitalism" (Dest 2025, 135). Dest emphasizes that the uprising was not led by a vanguard but by those excluded from both revolutionary and liberal political orders. Participants, many from the so-called *lumpenproletariat*, rejected legibility and demands as such—an act that, Dest argues, constituted a form of self-determination. "The act of refusal itself," he writes, "embodied the potential for self-determination beyond the strictures of the state and capital" (Dest 2025, 129).

Yet such refusal comes at a cost. Dest documents how even within social movements themselves the deaths of some protestors are reified—as *muertos políticos*—while others, particularly young, Black, and poor, were dismissed as *muertos que merecen morir* (Dest 2025, 140). In neighborhoods like eastern Cali, community leaders like Vicenta Moreno challenged this hierarchy of mourning, demanding recognition for anti-Black violence.[2] Still, even within the uprising, white-mestizo activists sidelined Black-led resistance, exposing the fractures of race and power within oppositional movements.

This racialized erasure also appeared in the visual culture of protest. The *anti-monumento* at Puerto Resistencia—a white fist raised in defiance—became a national icon. Its whiteness, however, highlights how creole whiteness continues to shape the affective and symbolic grammar of resistance, even in predominantly Afro-Colombian contexts such as Cali, a city with one of the largest Black populations in the country.

In shifting the lens from formal organizations to fugitive acts of resistance, the chapter opens a path toward Dest's conclusions. He links the practices observed during the uprising—*ollas comunitarias, mingas hacia adentro*—to a broader conceptualization of autonomy. These are not calls for institutional inclusion, but

2 Although Dest does not explicitly invoke the term, the concept of *continuum of violence*—developed by feminist scholars such as Cynthia Cockburn—offers a useful framework for understanding how structural, racial, and gendered violence persist across contexts typically labeled as "war" or "peace." In this case, the normalized devaluation of Black life in Cali reveals how anti-Black violence continues even in moments framed as democratic rupture or civic protest (see: Cockburn 2009).

enactments of what he calls "the doing of dissidence"—a refusal to be absorbed by the state's logics, even at great personal cost (Dest 2025, 157). The chapter culminates with the cases of Sandra Lilian Peña Chocué and Fredy Campo Bomba, whose assassinations signal the danger of embodying radical autonomy outside armed struggle.

The "Conclusion: The Doing of Dissidence" pushes for a rethinking of autonomy not as legal status but as a way of life. Dest critiques "authorized autonomy," the bureaucratic version codified by multicultural reform, arguing that it facilitates what others have termed "state creep" (Dest 2025, 158). Against this, *Dissident Peace* proposes a vision of autonomy as everyday practice that confronts the political economy of colonial capitalism from within its interstices.

Framing Dissident Peace: Theoretical and Political Lineages

Dissident Peace sits at the intersection of academic and political debates that question the nature of peace, the durability of violence, and the colonial foundations of the Latin American state. Rather than conceiving peace as the absence of war or the institutional resolution of conflict, Dest frames it as a contested terrain—one shaped by the entanglements of race, capital, territory, and governance. His central argument is that Colombia's peace process, far from dismantling structures of domination, has helped consolidate a neoliberal model of development anchored in settler colonial logics.

This critical stance places *dissident peace* in conversation with scholarship that challenges liberal peacebuilding (see: Chhang 2007; Clarke 2019; Gallaher 2007; Quinn 2017; Sharp 2012). While Dest acknowledges familiar categories such as positive and negative peace, he avoids taxonomic definitions. Instead, he critiques the technocratic frameworks that render peace a matter of institutional reform or policy inclusion. Liberal peace, in this account, is not the antithesis of violence but a mode of governance that redistributes it—often along racial and gendered lines. The concept of dissident peace emerges precisely at this impasse. It does not name a solution or a program, but a set of practices and political orientations that reject the state as guarantor or horizon. These are not demands for rights or recognition, but actions grounded in autonomy and political refusal that unsettle the grammar of post-conflict transition.

Dest's ethnographic orientation draws on long-standing debates on social movements, particularly in Latin America, where Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities have articulated projects of self-determination that exceed legalistic claims. In this sense, the book aligns with scholarship that views autonomy not as a legal status, but as a set of embodied practices—land defense, communal labor, ritual, and everyday self-governance—that challenge the racial capitalist state without necessarily seeking its validation. It also contributes to a growing body of work that interrogates how neoliberal multiculturalism manages difference by rendering it governable.

In exploring how race, territory, and governance shape the conditions of peace, Dest's work resonates with critiques of transitional justice that highlight its complicity with liberal democratic teleologies. Rather than assuming a clean break between violence and peace, *Dissident Peace* aligns with arguments that transition often operates through a *justice imaginary*—a "teleological transformation from a state of authoritarianism to one of liberal democratic being" (Hinton 2018, 6). This imaginary, while promising inclusion, frequently remains superficial, as "the justice facade… may not necessarily penetrate far below the surface" (Hinton 2018, 21). Dest implicitly challenges this facade by showing how the temporal and moral assumptions of peacebuilding obscure the persistence of structural and racial violence. His ethnography not only brings this continuity into focus but also traces how the very notion of autonomy can be co-opted within the same political economy it seeks to resist.

At the same time, *Dissident Peace* raises important critical questions that the book itself does not fully resolve. While Dest powerfully deconstructs state-centric approaches to peace, his strong preference for autonomy and self-determination risks romanticization. This is especially evident in his treatment of fugitive and collective practices that fall outside statist legibility. Although these practices often embody a powerful refusal, they are not immune to internal contradictions—including the potential for internal hierarchies or elite cooptation within subaltern movements. Dest acknowledges this risk in passing, particularly through his engagement with the concept of *subject elision*—defined in Wendy Wolford's terms as "the process of conflating the individual with the collective, for reasons that are strategic, ideological, and analytic" (Dest 2025, xi–xii). Yet at times, the book's narrative seems to fall into the very trap it warns against: treating collective political practices as inherently emancipatory while overlooking the uneven dynamics that shape them from within.

This tension is especially relevant when autonomy becomes the organizing horizon. Dest is careful to distance his argument from legalistic or bureaucratic definitions of autonomy. He critiques what Indigenous leaders ironically call "authorized autonomy"—a framework institutionalized through multicultural reforms and codified by state bureaucracy. This form of autonomy, as he argues, does not subvert the state but facilitates "state creep" (Dest 2025, 158), reinforcing the expansion of capitalist relations under the guise of legal protection. However, the alternative model that Dest promotes—autonomy as a "form of life" or "everyday practice"—raises its own questions. To what extent can such practices evade enclosure, especially when they are also embedded in networks of transnational solidarity, NGO support, or development aid? And when does the celebration of opacity or refusal risk idealizing marginality as political purity?

By shifting the analytic focus from institutional peace to insurgent forms of living, *Dissident Peace* offers a powerful provocation to rethink the spatial and temporal coordinates of peace. Its chapters demonstrate how practices of refusal—whether enacted behind a barricade, in a *minga hacia adentro*, or through communal land defense—disrupt the linear narrative of progress that underpins the transitional

justice imaginary. As Castillejo-Cuéllar (2017) reminds us, transitions are shaped by both rupture and continuity; they promise new futures while reproducing long-standing structures. Dest's account makes a compelling case for refusing the illusions of peace as technocratic settlement. And yet, it also invites us to ask: what happens when refusal becomes a politics of its own—one that risks masking its internal contradictions under the guise of authenticity?

Ultimately, *Dissident Peace* does not offer a prescriptive model. Its strength lies in its ethnographic grounding and conceptual clarity, as well as in its refusal to settle for the easy optimism of institutional peace. Dest's work challenges peace, conflict, and post-conflict transition scholars to reckon with the messy, uneven terrain of autonomy—and to resist the temptation to romanticize it. In doing so, he opens a space for a more radical critique of liberalism, one attentive not only to the violence of the state, but also to the fragilities and limits of subaltern resistance. In this regard, the concept of dissident peace resonates with the idea of *paz en pequeña escala*.[3] Both frameworks shift attention away from institutional reforms toward the fractured, situated practices of coexistence and everyday survival that define life after violence. This perspective—rooted in proximate socialities, not abstract metrics—invites us to recalibrate how peace is studied, imagined, and inhabited.

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3 The concept of *paz en pequeña escala* (*small-scale peace*) was developed by Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar and has become a cornerstone of the Programa de Estudios Críticos de las Transiciones Políticas (PECT) at Universidad de los Andes, which he directs. It refers to the situated, fragmented, and unfinished practices through which individuals and communities build livable futures in the aftermath of violence. These practices often fall outside dominant frameworks of transitional justice and liberal peacebuilding (see: Castillejo-Cuéllar 2019).

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