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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

**Gwen Burnyeat**, 2022, *The Face of Peace: Government Pedagogy amid Disinformation in Colombia*. Chicago University Press. 320 pp., ISBN: 9780226821627

In a national referendum held October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, Colombians rejected the peace agreement their government had negotiated with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, commonly known as FARC. President Santos amended the deal, skirted the people and sent it to Congress, which ratified it. Implementation began December 1<sup>st</sup>. The Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, a state dependency, launched several projects under the aegis of “peace pedagogy”: a mission to educate Colombians on the contents of the 297-page document that was to end five decades of war. *The Face of Peace* is the result of Burnyeat’s ethnography of peace pedagogy, its bureaucrats, and their ardent belief that disagreement is a misunderstanding in need of a technical key.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, Anthrohistory of the Santos Government, spans the first three chapters. In Chapter 1, Burnyeat examines how Santos’ accession to power consolidated a liberal (or in Slobodian’s (2018) sense of the term, globalist) government worldview, including the hiring of global marketing agencies to woo combatants into peace (44). Formally declaring the conflict an internal war opened it to international humanitarian law and to a liberal peace paradigm; Chapter 2 examines how, in peace pedagogy, this paradigm is propelled forward by a “rationality drive” that sees its own work of explaining peace as technical as opposed to political in both the conversational sense of “governmental” and in the sense of the given hierarchy of values of a worldview (104). “The Antipolitics of Cultural Liberalism,” Chapter 3, opposes Juan Manuel Santos and ex-president and agreement skeptic (my term) Alvaro Uribe to flesh out how the liberal common sense conflates the political with politicking, manipulation and dishonesty, so that technocratic utopianism can dismiss its internal other: the irrational, backward populist (117).

The second part, Ethnography of Peace Pedagogy in Action, begins with Chapter 4, where we join a peace pedagogy officer during a town visit to examine how these officers produce

legitimacy for themselves, the agreement and the government in the key of explanations, “the culturally liberal mode of government communication with society” (133). Chapter 5, “State-Consciousness: Three Layers of Responsibility and Trust” shows how, having decided that “information” was “too technical” and “not emotional enough,” peace pedagogy practitioners organised popular sessions to target people’s emotions: always anxious about falling in the “populist” trap of “misinformation,” they aimed for a kind of cultural authenticity, lodged inside the suffering subjects of tokenised diversity, to complement their sense of their own rationality (163, 169). Chapter 6 looks at a version of the political these officers did not pathologise: liaising, be it with other organisations, popular leaders or local authorities. Chapter 7, the last one, examines how international organisations’ demands, funds and timing shaped the work of peace pedagogy consultants, comfortably middle class and liberal/globalist in outlook but increasingly set in the “elite precarity” (215) proper to short term contracts and project managerialism.

This is one of the first book-length ethnographies to come out on the issue of the post-truth, dis/misinformation and the political, speaking from a refreshing vantage in a singularly perfect case study. *The Face of Peace* is an exceptional examination of how technocratic reason co-opted the political philosophy of liberalism (in the historically accurate sense of the latter term), confusing its own penchant for trivial technicalities with the latter’s sense of what makes political virtue. Simply put: the entire book pivots on the paradox that these officers were charged with explaining the reasons the peace agreement was good – and, I add, the particular form of peace it proposed –but without campaigning for the agreement, or actually endorsing it in any way, even though they were hired by the very government that produced and negotiated that particular agreement. “Pedagogy but not politics” (15) is fine and dandy on paper, but as the inevitable question then becomes “how do we tell the difference?” great ethnographic potential ensues. Burnyeat’s analysis of these anxieties, and ultimately of the triangulations between liberal philosophy, technocratic cultures and populism they lead to (106-117) is particularly sharp, advancing debates on all three fronts.

Of interest is also the author’s judicious examination of how this reason found its ethnographic limits. These officers explained to themselves their defeat in the referendum as a result of having been too technical, “not emotional enough,” and of the success of the other campaign’s lies; doubling down on their own reasons they told themselves in order to succeed they had to educate the people and “be emotional” (101, 103, also 162). With both argumentative rigour

and ethnographic generosity, Burnyeat honors her interlocutors' explanation of their defeat without necessarily endorsing it, makes room for their frustration with their campaign opponents *and* refuses trivial nihilistic relativism: "Uribe's 'myths,' however, were often barefaced lies that deliberately sought to misinform. Critiquing liberal claims of objective truth should not create false equivalences between the inescapable biases of always-already situated knowledge and intentional post-truth" (52-53).

From a certain political reading, those ethnographic limits tease perhaps the boundaries of the argument. The author was herself a peacebuilding practitioner before the referendum (11), and when doing peace pedagogy for her ethnography she used a documentary she produced to discuss why the agreement and all its terms were necessary to end the conflict (93). She positions herself with frankness: "in everything I did, I was firmly on the side of civil society and of peace" (12). Recognising the crucial difference between *explaining* how a set of people saw "peace" as "technical" and opposed it as "political" and *endorsing* that opposition is partly what makes this book a success – but the analogous difference with respect to the opposition between "peace" as absence of conflict and "peace" as in the exact content of this 297-page agreement is now harder to find. It is, of course, not the author's work in this book to examine the arguments presented by anyone who opposed this agreement, simply because that's not what the book is about, but this positionality and ethnographic approach make it harder to develop a language for, for example, those who *did* want peace – just not this particular version of it. Or to understand other, equally technical, arguments someone may have made against this peace, against several parts of the agreement, or against the fact of declaring peace. By the author's own description in the second half of the book, many different parts of "civil society" actually disagreed with the agreement or even with declaring peace. "The side of peace" has, in a sense, collided with "Peace," such that the dichotomy technical-political the book so expertly problematizes now haunts us in the guise of peace-antipeace.

I suspect the author was aware of this risk, as the conclusion takes the argument forward by resorting to neurosciences and other such disciplines exploring in their own assumptions how humans are never rational, how affects, emotions and ambiguities permeate all our decisions, and so on. This is undoubtedly an exciting direction, but sceptical readers may find the turn to the brain and to affect as much of a fix as the turn to the technical, shying away from our *actual* political condition: that where they may be a perfectly "rational," reasoned, aseptic, case for not having *this* peace.

These considerations notwithstanding, *The Face of Peace* is an exciting, original, timely contribution to the growing field of studies concerned with truth battles, but also important to anthropologies of bureaucracy, technocracy, government, NGOs and the political, as well as sociology, geography, development studies and cultural studies. The prose is clear, all arguments are well contained and the book does not presuppose knowledge of Colombia or of the theories it uses, making great course material from early undergraduate years onwards.

#### Works Cited:

Slobodian, Quinn. 2018. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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