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Colombia. Elusive justice

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Elusive justice. Women, land rights, and Colombia's transition to peace, by Donny Meertens, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019.

Imagine yourself as a female victim of violence in rural Colombia: Your husband or father murdered, you and your family displaced by armed actors and dispossessed of the land you cultivated for a living. Imagine yourself as a young widow having to move with your children to a foreign urban setting after such a displacement or being forced to sell your plot of land because the judges gave you a land title with a long-gone partner in an area without social support networks. Those are the experiences Donny Meertens describes in her important book on gender equity, land rights and war reparations in rural Colombia. She wonderfully sheds light on the often invisible role of peasant women and land ownership and succeeds in highlighting the legacies of war and possible trajectories towards the future.

A book about justice seems very timely for Colombia's post-peace accord society. The Victims and Land Restitution Law, which was adopted in 2011 during protracted violent conflict, lead to a change of perspective from the perpetrators' to the victims' experiences of war and has been internationally praised as a set of progressive transitional justice policies – at least in theory. What those reform measures mean in practice for rural women is key to Meertens' legal anthropological study. Her ethnographic focus is on the paramilitary affected regions of Montes de María and Cesar in the Caribbean lowlands where rural poverty and social tensions have hit the population hard.

Meertens touchingly describes what it means to return to one's land where the perpetrators or those loyal to them still live and where the social fabric after years of violence is turned upside down by suspicions and economic hardship. She carefully investigates the meaning of "return" after land restitution and poses the question of what a "normal life" for women could look like in a state where justice still seems to be highly elusive. Combining perspectives on engendering and localizing justice, Meertens analyses how justice can be restored in relation to questions of livelihood (*proyecto de vida*) which makes her book a critical addition in the field of transitional justice literature.

The book is structured in four chapters and is complemented by an epilogue showcasing narratives of three women involved in the Peace Accord. Transition (chapter 1) elaborates on universal transitional justice policies and traces their effects on "the local". Meertens demonstrates how gender has been crucial to many TI-policies in the world, particularly regarding sexual violence, while economic rights and social belonging of women remained under-researched. In Colombia's conflict history, land has always constituted an endemic force and was crucial for the peace negotiations. Meertens tackles the question of what transitional justice means for a rural gender order and asks if a transformation thereof is even possible where patrimonial institutions persist and landownership traditionally is related to men. But land here is also related to the idea of 'home' and Meertens presents a holistic picture of the livelihood it may generate for a sustainable future.

The second chapter 'Dispossession' gives a strong historical overview of how land dispossession and the Colombian history of violence are intertwined and recounts a twofold

gendered history asking “who owns the land”? Tracing the history of rare women peasant leaders in the Caribbean coast like the emblematic Juana Juliana in the 1930s, Meertens also illustrates with her decade-long research experience the activism and the new forms of sociability of recent urban women’s organizations after land dispossession. She impressively contrasts the success of collective land rights granted to displaced women with the reality of threats from armed groups and harsh market competition when returning to the countryside.

Conceptually, Meertens takes up Anna Tsing’s notion of Friction which is also the title of the third chapter. Here, she takes a fresh look at “Land restitution at Work” where friction becomes a fruitful lens to analyse the tensions between global policies and local interpretations while nevertheless opening up a space of agency for social actors. Meertens analyses whether the restitution process has been effective in restoring land rights and rural livelihoods from a gender perspective, connecting micro- and macro level and turning an eye to public offices and their interactions with women.

Transformation, the last chapter, highlights the dilemmas of justice in Colombia. For example, land restitution judges are far from rendering Salomonian verdicts but are strongly influenced by ‘traditional’ gender arrangements in a context where both land tenure and marital relationships are shaped by informality. As a society in transition, peace ultimately cannot be decreed and justice remains an extremely contested field in the political arena as well as in collective and individual experiences.

Meertens’ big acclaim is that with her highly readable style, she captivates the reader with touching narratives of the heterogeneity of rural women. We learn about a young woman who wants to follow the path of her murdered father, about the elderly widow who wants to avoid all conflict and return to “normal life” while she also presents women that have benefitted from urban organizational networks and aspire a transformative agenda. Methodologically,

she assembles narratives that take the women’s perspective and the local traditions seriously. Talking so much about narratives though – this would be a point of critique – the empirical case studies come relatively late in the book and a theoretical framing of what Meertens understands as ‘narrative’ would have been welcomed.

“Elusive Justice” will appeal to readers interested in postconflict debates and learning how more equal gender relations can be secured for social justice in rural societies. The intersection of gender and justice in Colombia’s long history of violence shows that land dispossession is more than just material loss but also displays social, political and affective dimensions. As an activist, Meertens contributes with this accessibly written book to rural reform measures and women’s empowerment. In conclusion, this is a read for anyone finding themselves concerned with transitional justice mechanisms and gender in general and in Colombia in particular.

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