

**Aristizábal Uribe, Anacristina**

***Medellín a oscuras. Ética antioqueña y narcotráfico***

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**Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky / Oakland University**

With its target readership clearly in mind, *Medellín a oscuras* sets out to illustrate to Colombians under 30 the mayhem unleashed on the state by the Medellín Cartel. This undertaking is prompted by the questionable practices of today's mass media, which instead of teaching the sobering truth of narco violence and corruption, celebrates the narco lifestyle, thereby turning the worst criminals of yesteryear into cult figures (10). The author, journalist Ana Cristina Aristizábal, focuses on Antioquia, posing the question of whether the outbreak of lawlessness in the region was conditioned by its people's predisposition for making a quick buck, or whether this outcome was merely accidental. This question about the stereotypical *Paisa* (person from the Antioquia region) is by no means new, as Alonso J. Salazar's 1992 *Las subculturas del narcotráfico* (co-authored with Ana María Jaramillo) addressed it a full generation earlier, ultimately rejecting the belief that violence is an intrinsic *Paisa* trait (109).

Nonetheless, Aristizábal repeatedly raises this question, finding confirmation in the opinions of the six public figures she consults. Her book is largely a collection of interviews conducted in 2017 with Gustavo Duncan (columnist for *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*), Carlos Alberto Giraldo (journalist, editor of *El Colombiano*), and the mayors of Medellín during the most turbulent years of Escobar's war on the state: Juan Gómez (1988-1990, 1998-2000), Omar Flórez (1990-1992) and Luis Alfredo Ramos (1992-1994). Her other discussant, Alonso Salazar, is an indisputable authority on the topic, not only on account of numerous publications that inaugurated the socio-cultural investigation of the narco phenomenon, but also owing to his career in politics, as Medellín's mayor between 2008 and 2011. The introductory and final remarks address the question of society's faltering ethics in the face of quick narco enrichment both in Escobar's time and today, when cocaine production is far more robust than ever before. The work concludes with a list of countless terrorist attacks and assassinations between January 1988 and December 1993 (Escobar's death), all attesting to the mayhem suffered by the nation at the hands of the drug cartels.

As Aristizábal delves into anthropological accounts on how *Paisas* saw themselves and how others saw them over time, she points out that in the 1930s drug trafficking was a business

for the elites, where the crème de la crème of Colombian society such as the direct descendants of Colombia's former presidents, the Herrán Olózaga brothers, dabbled in crime, setting up international corridors for illicit business (38). Only when the poor elbowed into the business did the privileged retreat, thereby turning away from crime due to class anxieties more than moral apprehensions. On the subject of class and crime, Salazar places emphasis on how, contrary to common views, many of Escobar's *sicarios* originated from the middle class, and how people with substantial money (such as the Ochoa family, 72), but not the Colombian elite, reinforced the narco business. Even if the elites did not accept the narcos into their ranks and their exclusive clubs, Duncan contends that these families' daughters quickly established romantic connections with the criminal nouveau riche, thereby initiating the cultural trend of dating drug lords. In a sweeping diachronic analysis, Giraldo asserts that complicated money operations could not have been carried out by neighborhood thugs, thus implicating the highest echelons of the national economy—shady businessmen protected to this day (103).

Aside from the issue of social class, subjects vary, often returning to narco culture, to Pablo Escobar, to his *sicarios*, and to the problem of state neglect (or ignorance) of the urban underprivileged, who, spurred by poverty and their own irrelevance, responded with zeal to Escobar's call for an all-out war against the privileged. Giraldo recalls the *sicarios*' smug visibility at festivals and concerts at the time of heightened terrorism, as if their detention or arrest was unthinkable ("se paseaban 'como Pedro por su casa'" 93), a comment that underlines the impunity, corruption, and general lawlessness reigning in the Medellín of the 1980s. Another example cites the *sicario* lairs in the Manrique neighborhood, where everyone knew that the buildings of more than one story were inhabited by those who could afford them—the narco gangs—yet no one did anything about it (94). Presently, as Duncan asserts, narco culture is less visible to the general public but more obvious in how gangs control urban zones by charging fees for "protection" (50). Readers learn that ineffective policemen from other regions were sent to work in Medellín as punishment, which invariably resulted in them quickly striking deals with Escobar to stay alive. Another interesting detail on the era's security measures was the order

to keep the inside of cars lit at night, so that the passengers would remain visible.

Salazar's interview includes interesting comments on Escobar's apparent lack of direction in that, unlike some other narcos who used their riches to live large, the capo in fact spent most of his time in hiding, surrounded by thugs, rather than in luxury and with the people he loved. Salazar refutes the idea that drug trafficking aligned itself best with the *Paisa's* entrepreneurial spirit, as other cartels emerged simultaneously in other parts of the country (84). He further observed the conservatism of the narcos, who never allowed counterculture movements (such as punks, for example) to flourish in Medellín, whereas Bogotá was more open to these cultural phenomena (82). Further, Duncan addresses the invisibility of the narco culture in the streets of Colombia, in contrast to its high profile in Mexico (55).

Overall, Aristizábal's book offers a compelling window into an era of infamy, with insightful questions and commentaries that further our knowledge of narco culture, despite significant overlaps in subjects discussed in each interview, such as how Escobar defied the state, how the underprivileged youth was abandoned by the state and thus became easy prey for Escobar, and how Antioquia is or is not unique in its close relationship to the narco business. Interestingly, Aristizábal emphasizes from the start that her book is not about Escobar, yet the frequent mention of his name attests to the opposite, thereby suggesting that writing about him is not seen favorably among intellectuals, who fear it only adds to his overblown notoriety in the media. Yet ultimately the specter of Escobar lies behind all analyses of Medellín's not-so-distant past.