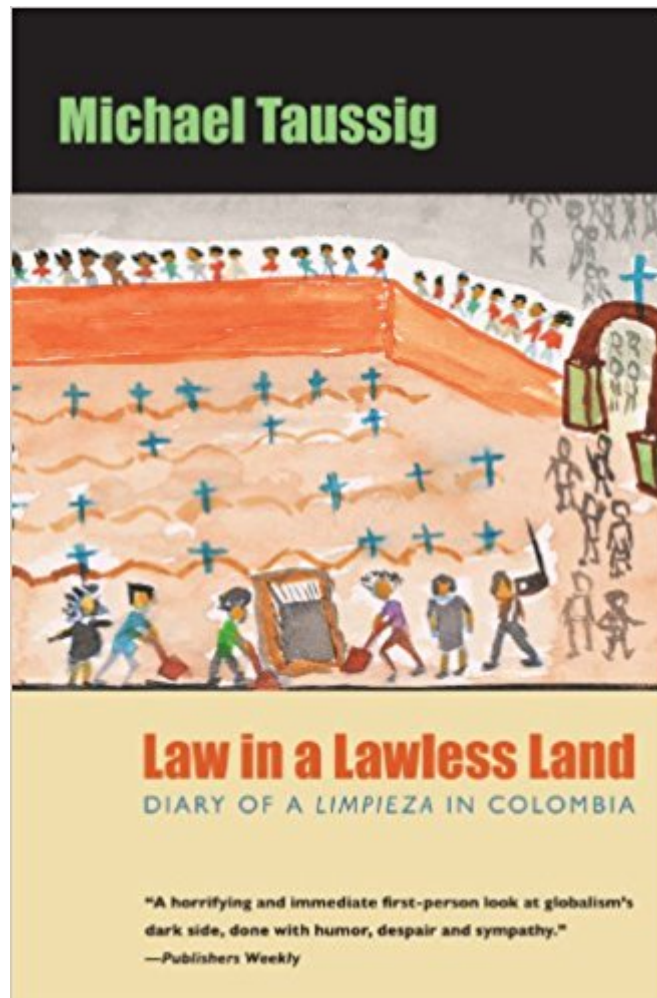




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# Law In A Lawless Land: Diary Of A Limpieza In Colombia



## Synopsis

A modern nation in a state of total disorder, Colombia is an international flashpoint—wracked by more than half a century of civil war, political conflict, and drug-trade related violence—despite a multibillion dollar American commitment that makes it the third-largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid. *Law in a Lawless Land* offers a rare and penetrating insight into the nature of Colombia's present peril. In a nuanced account of the human consequences of a disintegrating state, anthropologist Michael Taussig chronicles two weeks in a small town in Colombia's Cauca Valley taken over by paramilitaries that brazenly assassinate adolescent gang members. Armed with automatic weapons and computer-generated lists of names and photographs, the paramilitaries have the tacit support of the police and even many of the desperate townspeople, who are seeking any solution to the crushing uncertainty of violence in their lives. Concentrating on everyday experience, Taussig forces readers to confront a kind of terror to which they have become numb and complacent. "If you want to know what it is like to live in a country where the state has disintegrated, this moving book by an anthropologist well known for his writings on murderous Colombia will tell you."—Eric Hobsbawm

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In books like *The Nervous System* (1992) and *The Magic of the State* (1996), Columbia University anthropologist Taussig has revealed the spasms of state-sponsored murder, economic devastation and persistent belief in magic lurking beneath the supposed new world order. His latest recounts two week-long forays into several small towns in Columbia to witness the phenomenon of

"limpieza," an outgrowth of a seemingly endless civil war between various guerrilla insurgents and the country's fragmented government. Limpieza, or "cleansing," is carried out town by town and involves the seemingly random killing of those who may or may not be contributing to the persistent disorder and violence, and may or may not be sympathetic to the FARC, ELN or M-19 guerrillas. The murders are carried out, frighteningly, by militias on motorbikes with laptops, called, variously and confusingly, paras (for paramilitary), autodefensas and pistoleros, in towns that often welcome their arrival. Taussig brilliantly recounts his own bewilderment in trying to understand, day by day, what is happening around him, and the ways in which the people there experience and talk about it. Taussig's forays take place in May 2001, and he notes in an afterword that the year's totals included 4,000 political murders and untold numbers of kidnappings, with two million people of the 43 million population displaced overall. With cocaine, sugar conglomerates and other First World interests participating indirectly, as Taussig shows, this is a horrifying and immediate first-person look at globalism's dark side, done with humor, despair and sympathy. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Taussig offers us a very readable, often amusing and at the same time disconcerting insight into what it means to live in the midst of the paramilitary. . . . This beautifully observed account is given depth by Taussig's three decades' knowledge of the locality. . . . We gain insights into the anthropologist's craft, his need to get under the skin of the social processes he observes, even to the point of endangering himself." (Jenny Pearce Latin American Studies)"This is a horrifying and immediate first-person look at globalism's dark side, done with humor, despair, and sympathy." (Publisher's Weekly)"The diary is a tour de force by an anthropologist whose work has been a sustained exploration of the relationship between language, images, violence, and power. . . . This book seizes the reader and does not let go, testimony both to the terror in which so many Colombians live as well as to the powerful contributions that ethnography can make in conveying the hallucinatory reality in which far too many people are forced to make their way." (Kimberly Theidon Journal of Anthropological Research)

With this diary over two weeks Taussig not only explains but makes us desperately feel the violence of today's Colombia, the fear permeating people's life and consequently the breaking down of social networks, and the appearance and interplay of constant new "actors" on the war-scape. It is just such kind of war (maybe thought of as low-intensity), which is easily ignored by the medias and

therefore by European citizens, too accustomed of feeling safe when there is a democracy in a faraway country, no matter, what is really moving around it. Taussig also invites us to think about the very sense of writing a diary, which of course also means the sense of being "there", an anthropologist going back to a country where he worked during decades. Old friends are met, and some of them can not be met anymore or have taken other roads. Two weeks, embedded in a historical depth that helps to understand certain aspects of the today's terror. I certainly recommend this book (as all the books of the author) not only to anthropologists and persons interested in Latin America, but anyone eager to understand the intimate relationship of local grinding poverty and violence, and global decision making.

Michael Taussig offers a glimpse of the possibilities in his book *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia*--limpieza being the term the paramilitaries use to refer to "cleansing" a region of its undesirable elements. Taussig, an anthropologist at the other Columbia (the one on the Upper West Side of New York City) has been doing fieldwork since 1969 in a small city in the Cauca River Valley, a few miles from Cali. Some time around the year 2000, a tax-free, free-trade industrial zone was established just outside town. In February of the following year, a group of paramilitaries move in, hired--Taussig's informants tell him--by the "town's business elite." In the 1990s, in other regions of Colombia, the style of the paramilitaries would have been to move into a town such as Taussig's, identify the supposed guerrilla sympathizers and massacre them all at once, thereby creating headlines and embarrassing human rights inquiries. But in the new millennium the paramilitaries operate in a more discreet fashion, and their enemies are no longer so much political as they are economic. In Taussig's town, they move into El Cupido, a love hotel downtown, with computer lists helpfully provided by military intelligence and go about the work of cleansing the town of its delincuentes--"undesirables," a few at a time. Their victims include not so much leftists or even political activists but street people: kids who've had "problems with the law," beggars, a madwoman, prostitutes not affiliated with El Cupido and a young man who, drunk in the middle of town one evening, makes the mistake of yelling at the paras: *Que salgan hijeputas*--"get out of here, you sons of whores!" He's killed for his outburst and his body lies on the street all night because people are afraid to move it. In neighboring towns other paramilitaries ban long hair or earrings on men, miniskirts on women, baseball hats worn backward and a gay beauty contest. Life under the paramilitaries doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun. Taussig's book is based on a diary he kept during two weeks he spent in the town in May of 2001 during the fourth month of its paramilitary reign. His most interesting discovery is the support the paramilitaries have in town. One of his informants tells

him that eight of ten of the townspeople are for them. There's a reason for this. Until the 1950s Taussig's part of the Cauca River Valley was dominated by small peasant farms. In their river-valley plots, the peasants (descendants of former African slaves) grew cacao trees, plantain trees, banana trees, coffee trees, orange trees, lemon trees, avocado trees, papaya trees, guava trees and many other trees besides. The peasants thereby created a mixed harvest that mimicked the tropical rain forest, required no store-bought fertilizers, no pesticides, little labor, little capital and, perhaps most important, created a continuous, year-round income. But, sometime in the 1950s, the sugar industry arrived. The peasant farms were plowed under and everyone went to work on the new plantations (for the ultimate benefit, as Taussig points out, of a few white-skinned families in Cali). At first there was plenty of need for labor, but then, as Taussig puts it, "chemicals and machines made the workers idle." By the time the paramilitaries arrived, a shantytown of the unemployed had grown at one end of town, a slum that became so unruly that the police were afraid to enter. With no prospects for education or work, the kids formed gangs and turned to crime. Gradually, the town fell victim to a youth-gang-based crime wave that it would apparently do anything to solve. Taussig happens upon a gang funeral and witnesses the anarchic violence, the fights, the boombox hip-hop, the weird (for provincial Colombia) fashion, and the weird (for provincial Colombia) hair-dos. He notes one of the kids wearing an English-language T-shirt that says: Death Is Nature's Way of Saying Slow Down. In Taussig's town, he notes that the paramilitaries have also been recruited out of the ranks of the unemployed. Former soldiers unable to find other jobs dominate their ranks. The murder of the street kids--the children of other unemployed Colombians--is bad enough, but beneath this obvious terror, Taussig perceives a deeper kind of terror. What he sees is an economic "culture of terror" that afflicts everybody in the neoliberal world of his town. The principal arm of this culture of terror is unemployment. Neoliberalism is supposed to generate jobs and solve unemployment, but that's an act of faith, really, and not enough attention has been given to the possibility that it might just be the problem cruelly masquerading as the solution. Although each town in Colombia has its own logic, Taussig makes a convincing case that in this new Colombia, "like the plants that went under, like the forest that disappeared, human nature as much as nature is facing a brave new world for which there is no history or pre-history."

Michael Taussig is acclaimed in the New York Times as "one of the brightest and most original thinkers in anthropology." I would like to add that Taussig is also a profound student of philosophical anthropology, "the study of the nature and essence of humankind." To this end, "Law in a Lawless Land," is an enormous opening into the minds of Colombia's forgotten poor. This book is like no

other written on Colombia. Taussig does not borrow from the research of legendary historical graybeards like Vernon Lee Fluharty, Richard E. Sharpless, Orlando Fals Borda or German Archiniegas. He does not use academic journals, newspapers or magazines to prove a point. Instead he presents a lyrical diary of his extensive fieldwork. In doing so, the author provides a raw and unnerving documentation of Colombia's long tradition of violence. Taussig's work is easy reading for students of Colombian - American affairs and Latin American specialists. However, this book will be a tough road for those unfamiliar with Colombia's culture of denial. For instance, Taussig condemns the government. His work is a glaring spotlight on the government's paramilitary utilization of "limpieza" or "social cleansing" of the bottom dwellers of Colombian society (desechables or throwaways). The author does not rely on Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International or even the U.S. State Department's repeated annual reports on the government's feeble human rights record. Taussig lives with the relatives and friends of victims and dumps eyewitness accounts on the reader instead. The author laments how a handful of wealthy families underhandedly bought and then destroyed an enormously fertile valley for thousands of families...in order to establish the Cali sugar industry and institutionalize poverty for the same families as cane workers. He also reports how Colombia's Army & Police intelligence officials create "lists" of people that are handed to paramilitary leaders for execution. Union leaders, teachers, priests and other defenders of the poor often make the lists. Taussig does not defend the guerrillas...he knows they are not angels. This book is more about how the poor are caught in a violent sandwich with no hope in sight. This book discloses a simple fact of life in Colombia. That the ruthless paramilitary death squads are a part of the State strategy...particularly today. The leaders of the paramilitary death squads employ terror and this book is an honest chronicle of regular public assassinations in broad daylight. Yes, it is indeed tragic, that in Colombia the Army will stand aside and allow poor unarmed civilians to get cut to pieces because powerful members of society think this is how you protect democracy. Highly recommended. Bert Ruiz

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