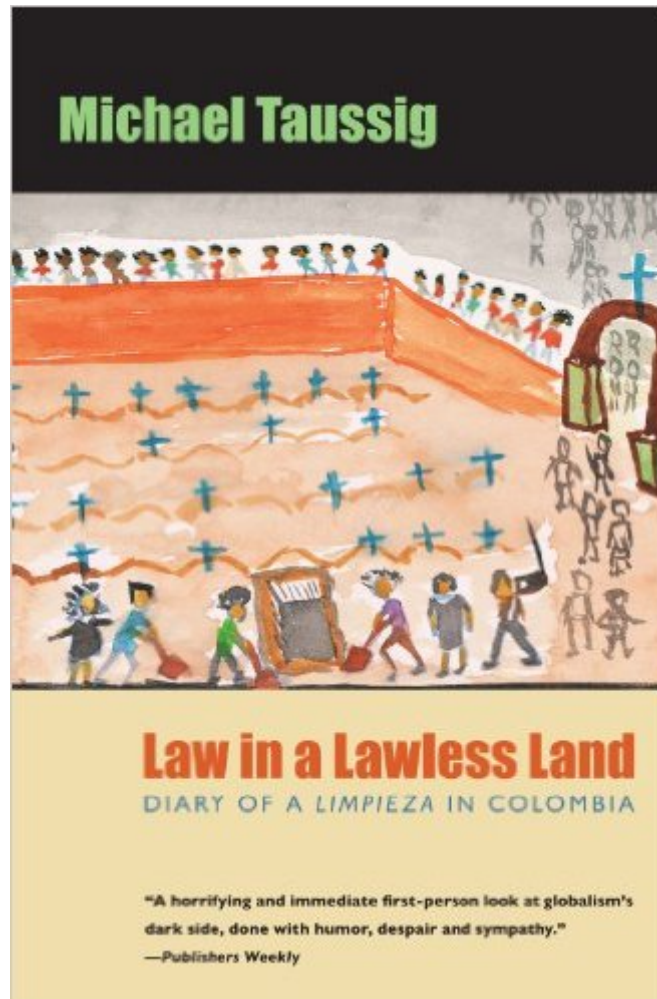


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# Law In A Lawless Land: Diary Of A Limpieza In Colombia



## 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

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...

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.

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