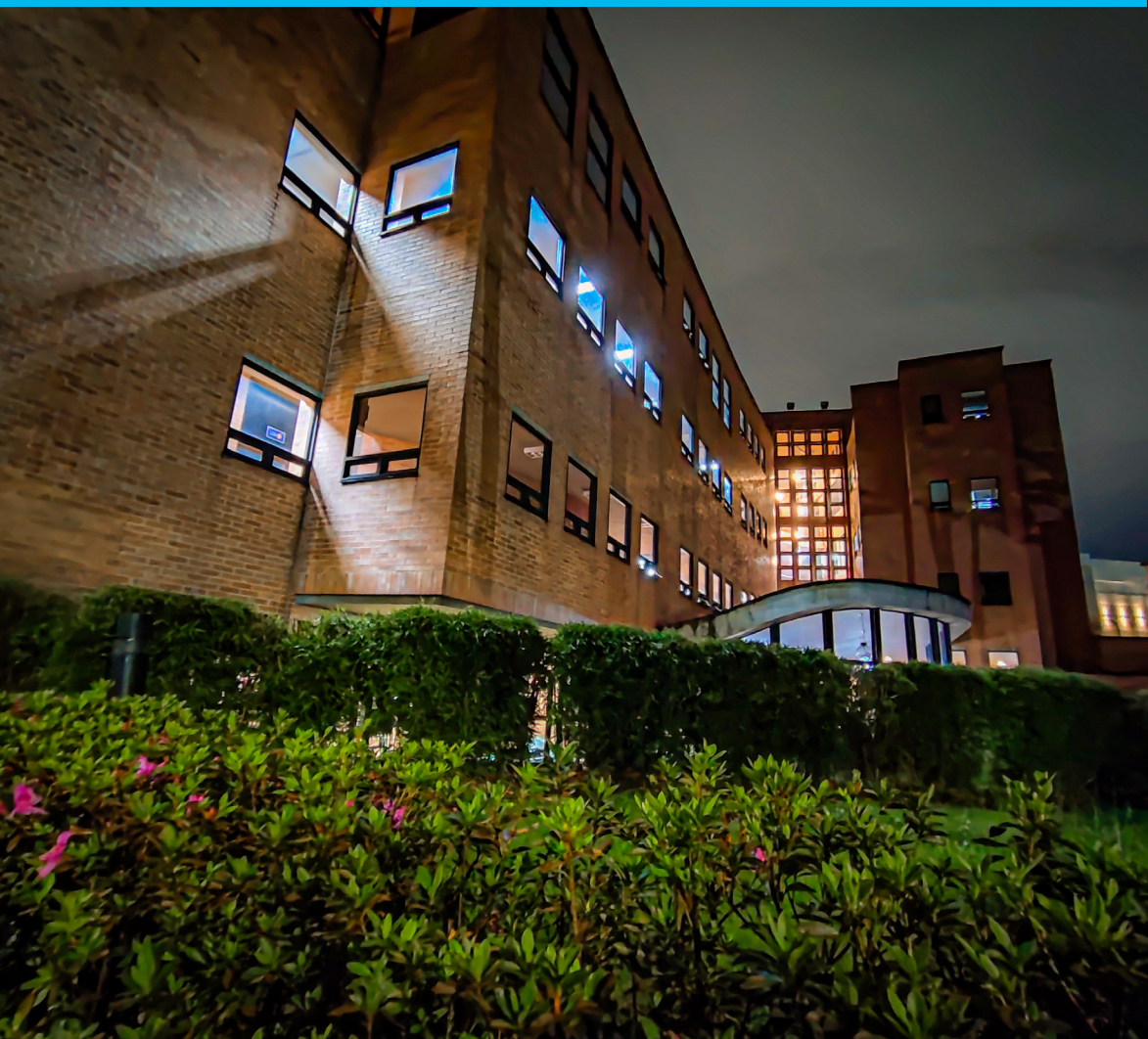




CUADERNOS DE ECONOMÍA

ISSN 0121-4772



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Cuadernos de Economía Vol. 43 No. 91 - 2024

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A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO STUDY ACCUMULATION REGIMES AND CRISES IN COLOMBIA

Manuela Mahecha Alzate

Mahecha Alzate, M. (2023). A theoretical framework to study accumulation regimes and crises in Colombia. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 43(91), 99-125.

The neorealist approach to institutional change has the merits of emphasising the importance of the Dominant Social Bloc (DSB) in institutions, and of integrating economics, society, and politics in the formation and breakdown of the DSB. Since this approach was not designed for Colombia, it is necessary to integrate certain characteristics, such as economic dependence, armed conflict, and drug trafficking. This paper presents the first theoretical adaptation of the neorealist approach for a Latin American country. This extended theoretical framework evinces the role of crime and violence in providing political stability to an accumulation regime that satisfies the demands of a narrow DSB.

Keywords: Institutions; Dominant Social Bloc; economic dependence; drug trafficking; armed conflict.

JEL: A12, B41, B52, E02, O54.

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Suggested citation: Mahecha Alzate, M. (2023). A theoretical framework to study accumulation regimes and crises in Colombia. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 43(91), 99-125. <https://10.15446/cuadernos.v43n91.106769>

This paper was received on January 16, 2023, revised on May 26, 2023, and finally accepted on August 2, 2023.

Mahecha Alzate, M. (2023). Desarrollando un marco teórico para estudiar los regímenes de acumulación y las crisis en Colombia. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 43(91), 99-125.

El enfoque neorrealista de cambio institucional tiene las bondades de enfatizar el papel del Bloque Social Dominante (BSD) en las instituciones, y de integrar las esferas económica, social y política en la formación y ruptura del BSD. Dado que este enfoque no fue diseñado para Colombia, es necesario integrar ciertas características, como la dependencia económica, el conflicto armado y el narcotráfico. Este artículo presenta la primera adaptación teórica del enfoque neorrealista a un país latinoamericano. Este marco teórico ampliado muestra el papel del crimen y la violencia en otorgar estabilidad política a un régimen de acumulación que satisface las exigencias de un BSD estrecho.

Palabras clave: instituciones; Bloque Social Dominante; dependencia económica; narcotráfico; conflicto armado.

JEL: A12, B41, B52, E02, O54.

INTRODUCTION¹

The social uprising in Colombia that began on November 21, 2019, and gained momentum on April 28, 2021, might be interpreted as a manifestation of “the lack of legitimacy of the oligarchic and mafioso regime, characterised by intertwining the interests of economic sectors, the governing class, the armed forces, and drug trafficking” (Bernal & Ortiz, 2022, p. 410). It may also be a manifestation of discontent with the effects of the neoliberal and extractive policies implemented in the last decades (Bernal & Ortiz, 2022). Thus, if one seeks to analyse social uprising as a crisis of prevailing dynamics, it is necessary to study these dynamics and observe how their very functioning may have contributed to the crisis.

To facilitate the analysis of this issue, it is useful to resort to a political economy theoretical framework that allows us to understand how institutions, understood as rules that define politics and economics are organised in a certain period, and how they might trigger a certain outcome. Although there are many conceptual approaches in this direction, that have been applied to assess Colombia’s political economy, I argue that none of them has managed to grasp the complexity of the country. Hence, this paper aims to develop a theoretical framework, capable of explaining the stability and crisis of accumulation regimes in Colombia. This concept refers to “the organisation of production and distribution of value and surplus value” (Hein et al., 2014, p. 3), which is stabilised by a regulation mode, which is “an emergent ensemble of rules, norms, conventions, patterns of conduct, social networks, organisational forms, and institutions” (Jessop, 1997, p. 291).

Fergusson (2019), who is familiar with the school of New Institutional Economics (NIE)², characterised the political economy of the country. However, his explanation did not consider the underlying dynamics of capital accumulation and the social structure. The Regulation Theory (RT), on the other hand, acknowledges the latter. However, it subordinated the regulation of social conflict to capital accumulation and presented political stability as a consequence of economic stability (Amable & Palombarini, 2005). To compensate for this, the neorealist approach to institutional change (Amable & Palombarini, 2008) evidences how institutions and institutional change correspond to the stability or the break-up of a Dominant Social Bloc (DSB), and how this is shaped by the interactions between the economy, social structure, and politics. The DSB is defined as an alliance of social groups, whose demands are addressed by institutions, and who in exchange, provide political support to the latter.

¹ This paper is part of my doctoral thesis, in which I aim to characterise the accumulation regime in Colombia between 2002 and 2020, its Dominant Social Bloc (DSB), and how its dynamics contributed to the 2021 social uprising.

² NIE is associated with the mainstream economic literature since it relies on assumptions, such as utility maximisation and methodological individualism, that economists generally accept, and are conventionally taught at universities. Additionally, some NIE authors, such as Daron Acemoglu, are among the most cited authors in economics.

In this vein, I argue that the Neorealist approach offers a rich theoretical framework for explaining Colombia's political economy, especially, when one considers that the country has had a rather stable economic growth throughout its history and has not experienced economic crises like other countries in the region (Richani, 2013). When Colombia's macroeconomic indicators are viewed independently, the emergence of a crisis seems difficult to comprehend. Rather, the country has experienced particular social and political conflicts, which need to be considered in order to better understand its political economy.

Nonetheless, the neorealist approach was devised and has only been applied to France and Italy³, countries that are very different from Colombia, especially concerning the integration into the international division of labour. Hence, it is necessary to analyse how this permeates the social and political spheres and shapes institutions and the DSB. To this aim, we include central outcomes of the dependency theory in the Neorealist approach. Moreover, Colombia has also been impacted by drug trafficking and a protracted armed conflict. One key insight of this work stems from the examination of their role in the institutional dynamics of the country. In order to incorporate crime and violence into the Neorealist approach, we rely on the concepts developed in the literature regarding the political economy of armed conflict and crime.

This extended theoretical framework displays the versatility of the Neorealist approach in incorporating context-specific factors. In the Colombian instance, it shows how the institutional context, shaped by the economy, the social structure, and politics, was conducive to the rise of a protracted armed conflict and drug trafficking, which subsequently impregnated all these spheres, and resulted in the institutionalisation of violence and crime. All in all, this enlarged version of the Neorealist approach will allow us to apprehend firstly the role of the armed conflict and the illegal economy in granting political stability to the accumulation regime, and secondly the crisis as the manifestation of accumulated social tensions.

This paper is composed of five sections including this introduction. The following section presents NIE and its limitations. The third section discusses the Neorealist approach, which takes on the RT and explicitly considers social and political dynamics. The fourth section deals with the enhancement of the neorealist approach in order to grasp the political economy of Colombia. Finally, the conclusions are presented in the fifth section.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS AND ITS LIMITATIONS

The school of New Institutional Economics (NIE) argues that “institutions matter” for economic performance as they shape the incentives and constraints that

³ For the French case (Amable, 2017). Palombarini (2001), and Amable et al. (2012) for Italy.

increase or hinder economic activity (Greif, 2006; North, 1990). Douglas North, affiliated to NIE, defined institutions as the: “humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction” (North, 1994, p. 361). They are humanly devised because they result from the equilibrium outcome of a game (Aoki, 1988; Greif, 2006), in which each individual aims to maximise his own utility. Thus, the game theory becomes a prominent tool used by NIE to assess institutions and institutional change.

The latter has the drawback of not considering the social structure and the economic organisation that is embedded in institutional construction. NIE overlooks capitalism, the social contradictions that it entails⁴, and how its tendency to crisis shape institutions. Specifically, the social structure is characterised by social relations of dominance. This implies that some social actors are not able to take actions that maximise their own utility, rather their actions are subordinated to maximise the utility of others. Hence, the organisation of rules, codes of conduct, incentives, and constraints may respond to power relations. The non-recognition of this also leads NIE to ignore relations of dominance between countries and how they contribute to capitalist development in certain areas (Jessop, 2014).

Although several authors from NIE, such as Daron Acemoglu, have recognised that a small elite can seize political power, the mechanisms that allow this elite to do so are not clear. Robinson et al. (2003) suggest that the initial conditions in the colonies, such as natural resources and population size, along with the identity and institutions of the colonisers, dictate whether the colonisers were able or not able to capture political power in the colonies. However, little is said about the social interaction between the dominators and the dominated that enabled the former to have such a status.

Additionally, the methodological individualism of NIE and its unawareness of the social structure are conducive to not recognising the relevance of revolutions and social resistance. Eggertsson (2005) argues that revolutions rarely take place because agents may fear sanctions and prefer to not contest inefficient institutions. He refers to the “collective action problem” which means that for a revolution to accomplish its goal, it requires the participation of all individuals, but a revolution might be costly for each of them, so there is a free ride incentive. It is peculiar to depart from a game, where each individual maximises utility, and has a bad result for society as a whole. In contrast, with social resistance and mobilisation one may find an alternative to the prevailing bad institutions. In addition, this social resistance might start to create and accumulate social tensions, whose upsurge may trigger reforms and institutional change that benefits subordinated social actors.

NIE tends to qualify institutions according to economic performance. Greif (2006) defines good institutions as those that guarantee the functioning of markets by

⁴ Capitalism is defined as a societal system that relies on the accumulation and circulation of capital to establish the material, social, and intellectual foundations of community life. The reproduction of capital involves opposing forces that generate tensions, and lately crises (Harvey, 2014).

efficiently providing property rights, which secures contracts and encourages production, specialisation, and exchange. “Inefficient” or “extractive” institutions emerge when a narrow elite manages to seize political power, securing property rights for themselves and having the incentive to expropriate the gains of other groups⁵ (Eggertsson, 2005). These extractive institutions persist because the political elite do not want to implement good institutions due to the fear of becoming the losers after granting property rights to other groups, who might start to accumulate economic resources and therefore de facto political power⁶ (Acemoglu, 2012).

The qualification of institutions as “good” or “bad” arises from ignoring capitalism’s contradictions. Otherwise, it would be difficult to talk about “good” institutions (Jessop, 2014). At some point, even with secure property rights, some groups may find that they are not reaping enough benefits. This discourages them from offering their productive factor, leading them to push for a change in institutions that will enable them to invest. In other words, no matter the institutional arrangement, the contradictions of capitalism cause social tensions, which sooner or later explode, giving way to another institutional arrangement.

Fergusson (2019), who in his work quoted Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson several times, analysed Colombia’s political economy. According to him, the country is characterised by a weak state and a persistent armed conflict due to three factors. First, the state’s weakness is explained by the poor supply of public goods, which leads to their private provision. This generates inequality and causes the demand for this kind of goods to remain low, which in turn does not encourage its supply, so the state remains weak. Second, some groups in society having political power, benefit from violent conflict and therefore have the incentive to maintain it. Third, a weak state favours clientelist behaviour, which in turn helps to maintain a weak state. Although these conclusions seem accurate, his definition of state weakness is limited by the low supply of public goods, thus leaving aside how the contradictions of capitalism, the social struggles it entails, and social power relations permeate the structure of the state.

Fergusson (2019) also claims that the armed conflict in the country did not adversely affect the main economic activities and investments of the country’s elites. He referred to a common saying in Colombia: “*El país va mal, pero la economía va bien* (the country is doing poorly, but the economy is doing well)” (Fergusson, 2019, p. 673). Moreover, as stated before, he identified the country as having a weak state with clientelist behaviour as well as a persistent armed conflict. This poses a problem with the definition of good institutions provided above. Although investments and economic growth have taken place in Colombia, institutions with these characteristics could hardly be characterised as good. In other

⁵ In this sense, good institutions should constrain the political power of a narrow elite.

⁶ De facto and de jure political power are different. De jure political power is granted by political institutions, such as the Constitution. De facto political power refers to the ability to influence political institutions, be it through the use of violence, engagement in collective action, lobbying, or bribery (Acemoglu, 2012).

words, Colombia would have extractive institutions with good economic performance. This evidences the issue of economic determinism; the quality of institutions should not only be defined by economic performance.

NEOREALIST APPROACH TO INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Considering the limitations of NIE, it becomes necessary to resort to another theoretical framework that takes the contradictions of capitalism and social relations of domination into account. The neorealist approach to institutional change (Amable & Palombarini, 2008) derives from the Regulation Theory (RT), which follows the Marxian theory that capitalism is a mode of production based on social relations between capital owners and labour-force owners, as well as between commodity producers (Lipietz & Vale, 1988). These are characterised by dominance and conflict,⁷ and may pose an obstacle to the accumulation of capital (Boyer, 2018; Chavance, 2009).

The RT analyses how the contradictions of capitalism are temporarily regulated by institutional forms to guarantee capital accumulation (Aglietta, 1998). Thus, capitalism has taken different forms or modes of development, and each of these seeks to neutralise its contradictory tendencies. However, sooner or later these tendencies manifest themselves causing a crisis, whose temporary regulation will give way to another mode of development (Lipietz & Vale, 1988). In short, the RT studies the rise and crisis of modes of development. A mode of development is given by a combination of the accumulation regime and the mode of regulation (Chavance, 2009).

Although the RT considers the importance of social organisation in economics, it subordinates the regulation of social conflict to capital accumulation and evinces political stability as a result of economic stability, which leads to not explicitly recognising the centrality of political processes (Amable & Palombarini, 2005). Taking into account that “Colombia is doing poorly, but the economy is doing well”, as mentioned before, a theoretical framework that includes politics in the analysis of the accumulation regime is necessary. The neorealist approach to institutional change (Amable & Palombarini, 2008) goes beyond economic functionalism by encompassing several elements of Gramscian thought and integrating the relationships between the economy, social structure, and politics in the regulation of social conflict, as well as analysing the centrality of dominant social groups.

⁷ In the case of the capital-labour relation, the capitalist depends on the worker for the production of the commodity and the realisation of surplus value, which will, in turn, enable the production of further commodities, while the worker depends on the capitalist for the transference of labour power into money that allows the procurement of the means of subsistence and reproduction. As for the relationship between commodity producers, it is characterised by competition that leads to concentration, that is, some capitalists will survive, whereas others will fall into bankruptcy (Boyer, 2018).

The Neorealist approach drawing from RT, states that the contradictions of capitalism contribute to a social structure composed of heterogeneous agents with different and even contradictory interests. However, the Neorealist approach is more explicit in that the regulation of social conflict is undertaken in the political sphere, where political actors⁸ decide which expectations⁹ to address (Amable & Palombarini, 2008; Misas, 2019, p. 21). For this purpose, political actors consider factors such as resource availability, macroeconomic performance, the content of the expectations, and their compatibility, but most importantly the ability of social groups to provide stable political support (Amable & Palombarini, 2008, p. 131)

The capacity of social groups to provide stable political support is related to the balance of power in the social structure. The latter is composed of diverse social actors, who identify their position and their interests according to the perception they have about the functioning of the world¹⁰ (Amable, 2017). This is influenced by the endowments coming from certain economic dynamics; the relations of power structured by politics; and the incentives, ideas, rules, and practices shaped by an institutional arrangement. Agents having similar interests and the same position in the social structure may compose a social group. Simultaneously, the institutions define the limits between one social group and another by establishing the mechanisms of exclusion between them, for instance, rules concerning private ownership of the means of production, or the criteria to access higher education (Wright, 2009).

When a social group shares common expectations and orients political behaviour in one same direction, this is referred to as a socio-political group. Its formation is established by current institutions, which define the mechanisms for political participation. Social agents within a socio-political group may or may not be aware of their membership. If they are aware and manage to organise in order to express their expectations and demands to civil society and political actors, for example through strikes or mass mobilisations, they increase their political weight (Amable & Palombarini, 2022).

To obtain political support, political actors design institutions that embody rules, practices, incentives, and constraints which respond to the expectations of dominant social groups. Thus, political actors regulate social conflict by designing institutions that aggregate a Dominant Social Bloc (DSB)¹¹, which is a socio-polit-

⁸ Political actors are different from social groups. Following Antonio Gramsci, civil society is defined as private organisms such as schools, churches, clubs, journals, etc. In contrast, political society refers to public institutions that exercise dominance, such as courts, police, and the army (Bates, 1975)

⁹ Expectations are the representation of interests. An expectation is what social agents expect from political actors.

¹⁰ Note the resemblance to the role attributed to ideology by Gramsci.

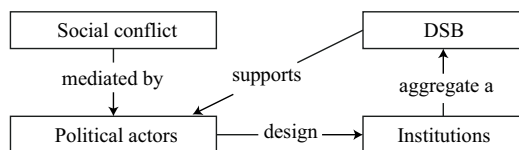
¹¹ The concept of the DSB draws on the historical bloc of Gramsci in the sense that it refers to the alliances and compromises made by different social groups in order to establish through intellectual and moral leadership a dominant social order, which reproduces the ideas of these dominant groups.

ical alliance between dominant groups. Institutions are then defined as: “the result of socio-political compromises over the rules of the social game, a way of settling fundamental conflicts of interest between agents” (Amable & Palombarini, 2008, p. 133) Political actors cannot afford to ignore the demands and expectations of these groups. Otherwise, these groups could mobilise to remove the current political actors and place in power those who respond to their demands¹².

It must be noted that the DSB is composed of different social groups, each having a different capacity to provide political support. Therefore, the political strategy by political actors to aggregate the DSB will not have the same benefits for all the social groups that compose it. This means that some groups within it may feel dominated. The DSB is not only characterised by establishing the borders between dominant and dominated groups but also by the internal cohesion between central and peripheral groups. Central groups are those whose main expectations are met by the strategy of political actors, peripheral groups are those who at least partially benefit from said strategy (Amable & Palombarini, 2022).

In light of the contradictions of capitalism and social conflict, institutions can no longer be considered functionalist in their role of regulating social conflict. No matter the institutional arrangement there will be social groups whose expectations are disregarded. Initially, such voices are either a minority or can be suppressed with legal force, thus not threatening current institutions. Their discontent, however, may drive them to organise and push political actors to respond to their demands. Political actors might change institutions to aggregate these groups into the DSB if they believe that they are becoming increasingly significant for providing political support. Hence, the existence of a DSB means the temporary regulation of social conflict, a situation denominated as political equilibrium, shown in Figure 1. This notion of equilibrium does not mean the absence of change, rather institutions might change to preserve the DSB (Amable & Palombarini, 2008)

Figure 1.
Political equilibrium

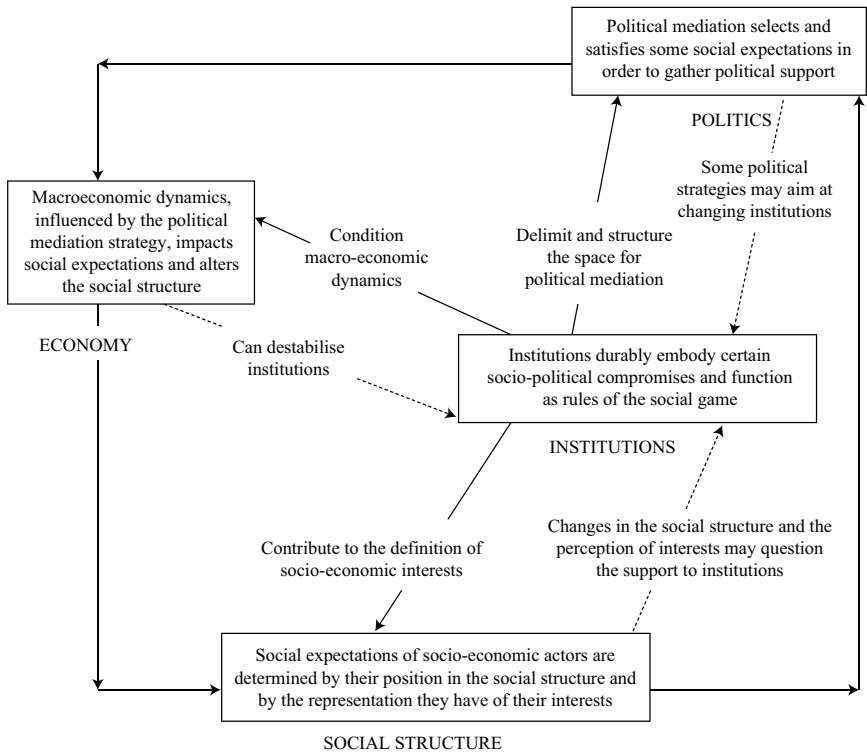


Up to this point, an attempt has been made to demonstrate the relationship between the economic, social, political, and institutional spheres. In conclusion, macroeconomic dynamics, shaped by certain institutional arrangements, have an impact on

¹² This should not lead to the conclusion of the instrumentalisation of political actors, since the latter have the autonomy of launching the strategy and aggregating the socio-political groups which they consider the key providers of political support

perceptions of the social structure and the interests of social groups. According to the latter and the institutional mechanisms for social groups to present their expectations in the political sphere, political actors identify dominant groups. These will be aggregated in a DSB by political actors, who in order to obtain their political support, design institutions, which embody rules, practices, and incentives. These will structure economic, social, and political dynamics, that are favourable to the DSB. Figure 2 shows all these relationships and the sources of institutional change, which are represented by the dotted arrows.

Figure 2.
Institutional change and economic dynamics



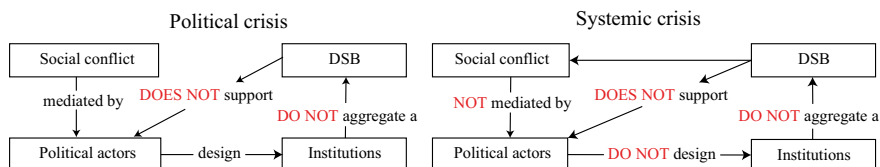
Source: Amable (2017, p. 45).

In the case that economic, political, or social dynamics modify the balance of power or social expectations such that institutions do not satisfy the demands of the DSB, a political crisis will arise since support for political actors might be put in question. Political actors would need to change institutions either to stabilise the former DSB or to aggregate a new one. If they fail to do so, that is, if a DSB cannot be established, a systemic crisis emerges, as illustrated in Figure 3. A systemic crisis

is characterised by a period in which political actors change institutions constantly in the hope of finding political support. At the same time, the conflict between social groups intensifies as they fight for the recognition of their interests as general interests (Amable, 2017).

Figure 3.

Political and systemic crisis



It is pertinent to note that an economic crisis does not necessarily translate into an institutional crisis, as long as the DSB is not affected. This means, institutions may manage to absorb the economic crisis such that the social order remains untouched. Here, it might be useful to recall the concept of the hegemony of Gramsci, as a crisis would not only be brought about by the contradictions of capitalism but also by its feedback on ideology (Bates, 1975). Accordingly, an institutional crisis is the result of civil society no longer supporting the socio-political alliance in pursuit of its interests (Keucheyan & Durand, 2015). In this sense, the resolution of an institutional crisis does not simply consist of economic recovery, but also of society supporting the strategies of political actors in addressing the interests of a DSB, which are considered to be the general interests.

ENHANCING THE NEOREALIST APPROACH TO STUDY THE COLOMBIAN CASE

The neorealist approach to institutional change has been applied to Italy and France, which occupy a different position than Colombia in the international division of labour. Thus, the dependency theory is incorporated into the neorealist approach to display how integration into the international economy shapes internal accumulation, social structure, politics, and institutions. Additionally, Colombia has certain particularities, such as a protracted armed conflict and drug trafficking. These are also added to the Neorealist approach by using the literature on the political economy of armed conflict and crime.

Dependency theory

The contradictions of capitalism and the associated social struggles may spread beyond the limits of the nation-state, they might expand geographically and reach

the international economy, thus contributing to relations of dominance between countries¹³. Therefore, it becomes important to analyse how a certain country is inserted into the international economy, the contradictions that this generates, and the internal feedback regarding the relationships between capital and labour, between different commodity producers, the monetary regime, the way the country interacts with other countries, and state intervention.

At the end of the first half of the 20th century, some Latin American authors attempted to understand and theorise the economic development (or underdevelopment) of the region. Among them were the structuralist thinkers, prominently Raúl Prébisch. This approach initially recognised that underdevelopment was due to the subordinated position of Latin American countries in the international division of labour, as their export structures focused mainly on raw materials. However, the solution proposed relied on endogenous factors, such as internal industrialisation. Thus, structuralism did not deepen the nature of relations of power between countries (Osorio, 2003). Even if Latin American countries were to achieve a certain degree of industrialisation, this would continue to generate imbalances given the development of world capitalism (Marini, 1993). Bearing in mind that this paper puts the power relations and contradictions of capitalism at the centre, the dependency approach is preferred to the structuralist one.

The integration of Latin American countries into international circuits of capital accumulation and circulation has caused their economies to be conditioned by the expansion or development of other economies. Thus, they depend in some way, for example technologically or financially, on the accumulation of capital taking place beyond their borders (Dos Santos, 1970). This dependency impacts the internal economy, generating backwardness (Frank, 1966). It is important to note that this is not uniform for the entire region. In fact, different relationships with countries at the centre of capital accumulation give rise to different types of economic structures. For instance, Bambera (1985) distinguishes between early industrialisation countries (Argentina, México, Brasil), later industrialisation countries (Perú and Venezuela), and agro-export countries without industry (Paraguay).

In this vein, dependency should not be understood as a synonym for underdevelopment. It may be that at a certain point, dependency favours development, this case might be referred to as dependent development (Palma, 1978). Cardoso and Faletto (1977) were more emphatic on this by highlighting the relationships between local ruling groups and central countries. These authors claimed that these relationships are different according to the context, and this gives rise to specific kinds of dependent capitalism, and therefore to different social orders. Additionally, Cardoso and Faletto (1977), as well as Marini (1993), and Dos

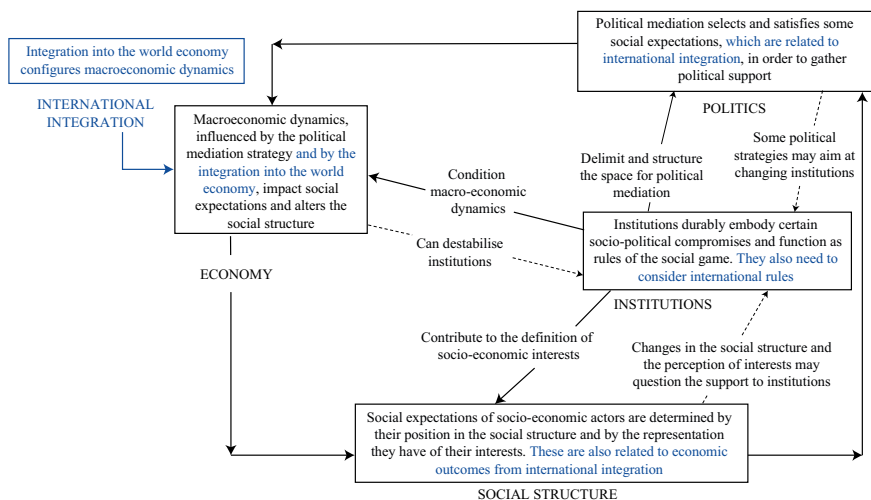
¹³ According to imperialist theories from authors such as Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin, or Nikolai Bukharin, in order to deal with the crisis tendencies of capitalism, its contradictions can be transferred geographically. For example, to counteract the tendency of the profit rate to fall, one may find cheap labour in non-capitalist areas. Similarly, to avoid an overaccumulation crisis, peripheral countries represent an outlet for excess production and investment.

Santos (1978) contended that dependency is not an imposition by countries at the core of capital accumulation. Instead, the local bourgeoisie acts as a partner of foreign capitalists.

Figure 4 shows the incorporation of the dependency theory into the Neorealist approach. The integration into the capitalist world economy impacts the internal economy. In the case of countries on the periphery of capital accumulation, they follow the needs of the centre, given that they furnish raw materials, buy technologies, or take credit. These outcomes benefit some internal social agents, who are inclined to support a relationship of dependence towards core countries. Social groups representing the interests of foreign capital compete in the political sphere. Depending on their political power, political actors may establish institutions that shape an economy, a social structure, and a political organisation that reproduce a certain international dependency.

Figure 4.

International integration and institutions



The relationship between this complex social structure and the political sphere is worth analysing in more detail to observe the impacts on institutional construction. For this purpose, it is useful to refer to the concept of the peripheral state¹⁴. According to Evers (1979), the state brings together the economy and the political sphere. He posits that the peculiarity of the peripheral state is that capital accumulation depends on the insertion into the international economy as well as external actors who must form alliances with internal ones in order to assert their inter-

¹⁴ The state is defined as the relationship between civil and political society, following Gramsci.

ests locally. Furthermore, Evers discusses the differences in state functions at the periphery and at the centre. For example, the state in core countries pursues the expansion of national capital towards the international market. In contrast, the peripheral states direct the interests of foreign capital to the interior of the country.

Becker (2008) points out that economic dependence and the structural heterogeneity of society¹⁵ lead the peripheral state to be characterised by a weak civil society and limited hegemony. On the one hand, subordinated groups would have difficulties in organising and expressing their demands in the political arena¹⁶. On the other hand, it would not be so easy for the peripheral state to formulate global hegemonic projects and grant material concessions to the masses so that they can be incorporated into the hegemonic bloc. The state apparatus in the periphery is thus organised to address the interests of external capitalist agents and their internal allies. This omits a large part of society, contributing to a disruptive relationship between civil and political society.

Considering the latter, it might be argued that the organisation of institutions follows different mechanisms in peripheral countries. While in core nations, institutions are seen as the result of a social compromise, in peripheral countries, the non-inclusion of a large part of society can be characterised as institutional weakness, since they would not be able to resolve social conflict nor set the rules of the social game. To make up for this, the peripheral state may resort to violence or clientelism to force the excluded groups to accept institutions. However, these might provide instability, as the masses grant consent against their will and do not adopt the dominant interests as their own (Becker, 2008).

It can be argued that not only in peripheral countries but also in core nations, political actors overlook certain social groups and their expectations, thus not including them in the socio-political compromise. However, the difference between both lies in economic dependence, its effects on the relationship between civil and political society, and the establishment of institutions (Becker, 2008). In core countries, the material base is reproduced internally, so that the state has more maneuverability and does not necessarily have to respond to the interests of foreign capital. Nevertheless, this may be changing with neoliberal globalisation. The concentration of wealth and the links with international capital suggest that political actors increasingly choose to respond to these needs. It is important to note that although some economic dependence is observed in the core countries, it is very different from that of the periphery. In the former, this

¹⁵ This refers to the coexistence between capitalist and non-capitalist social relations of production.

¹⁶ For example, the coexistence between waged labour and non-waged labour, not only may lead to contradictions and social struggles between these groups but also implies that even if these groups manage to ally, they would lack a material base for their demands to compete within a state that depends on capital accumulation.

dependence is exerted on more or less homogeneous forces¹⁷, while in the latter there are relations of dominance.

The political economy of armed conflict and crime

The constitution of the Colombian state has been outlined by the political predominance of the oligarchy, the influence of foreign capital, and the exclusion of subaltern groups. This consists of and at the same time facilitates the reproduction of an unequal socioeconomic structure dependent on the export sector (Tauss et al., 2019). All this sheds light on the weakness of Colombian institutions, which carry out a selective and disarticulated mediation between diverse and contradictory social expectations¹⁸. For instance, they have delegated the control of rural populations to local and regional elites. As a consequence, the relationship between the central state and the local powers has been characterised by clientelism (González, 2014; Moreno & Zamora, 2012).

To this extent, the demands of subaltern groups have not been articulated with those of dominant groups (Tauss et al., 2019). Subsequently, the former may have a sense of belonging to ethnicity, race, or community rather than to a nation-state (Thoumi, 2002). Social groups being excluded from the socio-political compromise, not finding in institutions the mechanisms to represent their interests, and not being subjected to state control, may resort to means outside institutions to assert their interests, such as crime or violence (Estrada & Moreno, 2008). For example, institutional weakness in carrying out the land reform of 1936 caused a political crisis that fueled “La Violencia”, between 1930 and 1958¹⁹.

The way of dealing with the above-mentioned political crisis was also framed by institutional weaknesses that reproduced more violence. The “Frente Nacional” was a political pact, which consisted of the alternation of power of the liberal and conservative parties in the presidency and an equal number of congressional seats until 1974. Although this solved the intra-elite conflict, it excluded subordinate groups from politics (Richani, 2013), which prompted the rise of guerrilla forces,

¹⁷ For example, the United States has become increasingly dependent on goods and capital imports from China. However, if the extraversion of the two countries is compared, similarities between imported and exported goods are observed. It is also unclear whether either economy can impose its conditions on the other.

¹⁸ For example, at the end of the 19th century, land disputes that were brought to the state were judged in favour of landowners. This generated animosity among peasants and settlers. To incorporate the interests of the latter, in 1936, the government of Alfonso López Pumarejo launched a land reform (law 200) to eliminate unproductive latifundia. Nonetheless, this was strongly opposed by landowners, who through their access to political power and municipal governments, were able to change the interpretation of this law in their favour.

¹⁹ This was a period of armed confrontations between the liberal and conservative parties, which were the main political parties in the country. The confrontations mainly took place in rural areas between peasants, except for “El Bogotazo”, which was a series of riots in Bogotá set off by the murder of the liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) – Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)–National Liberation Army, and the 19 April Movement (M19)(González, 2014).

Institutional weakness has not only been conducive to the intensification of the armed conflict but also to the rise of drug trafficking. Social actors not finding economic opportunities in the peasant subsistence economy, nor the labour market in urban areas, found an alternative in illicit crops production, their industrial transformation into illicit drugs, and their sale. Additionally, the drug economy could flourish thanks to the absence of the state and the lack of mechanisms to ensure compliance with the rules and penalisation of non-compliance (Duncan, 2010; Forero, 2011).

Another manifestation of Colombian institutional weakness can be observed in the failure of dealing with the aforementioned guerrilla movements, leading the Colombian government to approve Law 48 of 1968, which supported civilian self-defence. Thus, landowners and cattle ranchers started to form private defence armies against the land occupation and attacks from the guerrillas. The rise of drug trafficking and its need for protection²⁰, fueled these private defence groups, which by means of the resources coming from this illegal business strengthened their military capabilities, thus giving rise to paramilitaries. These turned out to be useful to the Colombian state and its armed forces as they targeted as an enemy the guerrilla and political opposition (Richani, 2013).

Violence from non-state actors and drug trafficking also have in common that they do not conform to the rules of the social game, so they are characterised as illegal²¹ (Forero, 2011). These illegal practices may change the social structure. On the one hand, social agents making illegal use of coercion become powerful due to their intimidation mechanisms. On the other hand, the illegality of these activities entails risks that render high profitability (Palacio & Rojas, 1990). Thus, these actors accumulate high amounts of capital. All of this may cause the perception that these criminal agents occupy a prominent position in the social structure.

The incorporation of illegal revenues into the legal economy depends on the institutional mechanisms which regulate or fail to regulate the accumulation and circulation of capital (Tauss et al., 2019). Money laundering, or increased demand and labour that comes from illegality, is likely to cause the profits from these activities to spread to other actors not directly involved in crime or violence. In consequence, these dynamics receive support from certain fractions of society, that expect to continue to benefit from them (Duncan, 2010).

The fact that crime and violence are not part of institutions does not mean that they lack norms, practices, incentives, and restrictions that correspond to the demands

²⁰ Drug trafficking led to a high concentration of land. To launder money, drug traffickers bought land (Forero, 2011).

²¹ For example, the social compromise establishes that some actors from the state, like the army and the police, are the ones able to use force.

of certain social groups. Indeed, their prohibition and criminalisation by formal institutions might end up consolidating these dynamics (Estrada & Moreno, 2008). This is because the perpetrators need to find ways to organise their practices so that they can escape formal control. Hence, it is possible to observe the difference between crime and organised crime. The first refers to an illegal action to achieve a certain goal e.g., economic profit, recognition, personal vengeance, etc. The second suggests the organisation of a group to attain a goal and avoid prosecution. For this, it may be necessary to have control over certain areas or form certain alliances (Forero, 2011).

These criminal groups, with economic power and intimidation capacity, take advantage of institutional weakness in areas, where institutions are unable to regulate social conflicts, to establish their own social order. The FARC, for example, not only provided protection to peasants and settlers but also managed to regulate family disputes and conflicts within the territories under their control. Similarly, drug traffickers built hospitals, sports facilities, and schools, and provided employment opportunities, which allowed them to have popular support (Richani, 2013).

These changes in the social structure may put pressure on political actors, such that they believe that criminal groups, through their intimidation and economic power, can provide political support (Duncan, 2010). Hence, political actors are prone to capitulate to the demands of drug traffickers and violent groups. Nonetheless, criminal and violent actions affect other fractions of the social structure and generate rejection among them. Some social groups might have expectations regarding the intent of these illegal activities, and therefore push political actors to deal with them.

This creates a socio-political conflict between those who want to keep profiting from crime and violence and those who do not want these dynamics. Given the contradictory nature of these expectations, political actors cannot launch a strategy that satisfies them both. Political actors then would have the following options: first, end crime and violence through negotiation with the groups that benefit from them, so that their previously ignored interests are recognised, and a consensus is reached on an institutional environment that is not conducive to the reproduction of crime and violence²². The other option is to tolerate illegal activities in order to continue making profits from them²³. It would be possible to implement the first strategy when the state has adequate resources, institutions, and support from society; otherwise, the permissive option would be chosen (Duncan, 2010).

It is pertinent to point out that in the Colombian case, the strategy chosen is strongly related to international dynamics (Richani, 2013). It is not enough for the Colombian state to be willing to negotiate with drug traffickers and armed groups.

²² Note the difficulties of this strategy in gaining support from some sectors of society, as they may see it as unjust and unpunished.

²³ Political actors may also decide to use violence to eliminate crime. However, this does not imply the end of violence. Instead, there would be a violent state that is not legitimised by some fractions of society, therefore its institutions may not be considered strong i.e., as the result of a social compromise.

For example, regarding drug trafficking, it must be taken into account that demand comes from abroad, especially from the USA and Europe, which already have a whole set of regulations that prohibit this consumption. Consequently, the legalisation of production only by Colombia would not only be insufficient to end the violence and criminality of this business, but it could also have serious economic consequences due to dependence on foreign capital.

A permissive strategy would benefit those social groups that directly and indirectly profit from violence. In return, these groups may provide political support by sharing their income or using their repressive mechanisms. In this vein, these social groups are a part of the DSB. However, it might be difficult to incorporate the expectations of these groups into institutions. If the political constitution or laws include the permissiveness of crime and violence or enact rules for these activities, these would not be considered illegal. Due to the risks involved, it is the illegality that results in high profitability. Considering that powerful groups and perhaps political actors benefit from illegality, they may not want to give up the extraordinary profits (Guáqueta, 2003).

Given the difficulty of incorporating illegal dynamics into institutions and the fact that these activities also require organisation, institutions then tolerate criminal groups establishing their own para-institutions²⁴ to resolve the social conflict that was not previously resolved through formal channels. Hence, para-institutions result from the permissiveness of formal institutions with respect to allowing criminal and violent social groups to establish rules and practices that address their demands (Palacio & Rojas, 1990), in exchange, these groups provide political support. Hence, para-institutions end up complementing institutions. While the latter regulate social conflict between social groups included in the socio-political compromise, the former regulate social conflict between included and excluded groups (Richani, 2013).

It is important to emphasise that para-institutions have emerged from a context of institutional weakness, which makes it difficult for para-institutions to substitute institutions. The fact that para-institutions resolve social conflict from the fraction of society excluded from institutions means, at their conception, they ignore the interests and conflicts of the other part of society, the one included in the social compromise. Additionally, the leaders of criminal and violent groups might have difficulties in taking over institutions. This is because they, as well as political actors and other dominant social groups, find themselves at a comfortable impasse. This means that the balance of power is such that it does not deliver a clear winner. If this is not the case, then the winning party could impose itself, whether it is the violent actors who establish their institutional order and replace the formal institutions, or whether it is political actors who manage to deal with violence and crime (Richani, 2013).

²⁴ Para-institutions mean that they are parallel to formal institutions.

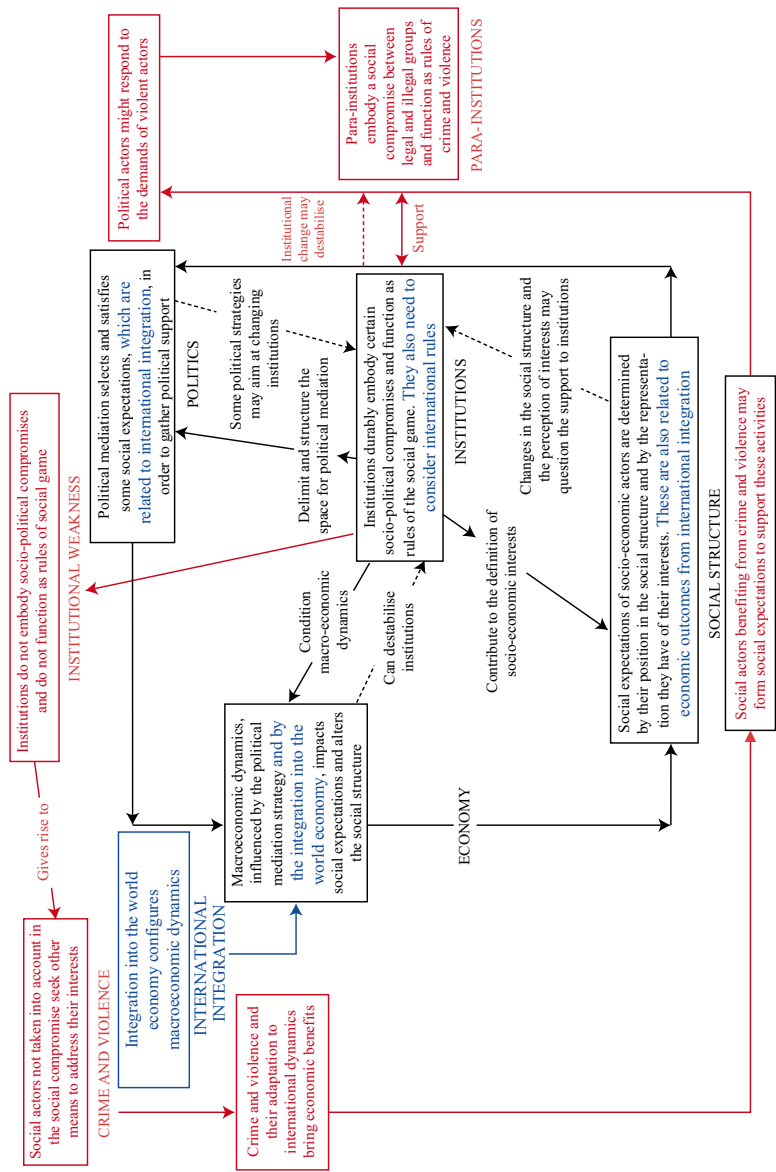
Colombia has been able to live together with institutions and para-institutions because neither the state nor any of the armed groups have been able to gain dominance in society and establish institutions that would temporarily mediate the entire conflict. Colombian armed forces have not been able to deal with guerrilla groups²⁵. Similarly, the guerrillas have preferred to attain local power than to assume the central state apparatus. The paramilitary fight, as well as U.S. military aid through Plan Colombia, has shifted the balance of power away from the guerrillas. However, because of their violent tactics, they have won the population's fear rather than its consent. Finally, the coupling of interests and forces between the paramilitaries and the army has called into question the legitimacy of the army (Richani, 2013).

Figure 5 shows the incorporation of crime and violence in the Neorealist approach. The basic theoretical framework and its international dynamics shown in Figure 4 are represented in gray. Red illustrates the concepts added considering the consequences of institutional weakness in Colombia's experience. Institutional weakness, which means that institutions do not contain a social compromise and do not determine the rules of the social game, causing a situation of crime and violence. Social actors not participating in the social compromise resorted to these activities in order to assert their interests. Crime and violence, because of a demand for drugs, a supply of weapons, and military training from abroad, brought economic gains that were incorporated into the legal economy. These activities then modified social dynamics, so that those who benefited from them, positioned themselves higher up in the social structure. In addition, they formed expectations related to sustaining the benefits of crime and violence.

As a consequence, the expectations related to violence and crime compete in the political sphere and may be taken into account by political actors. In this case, due to the difficulty of incorporating such expectations into formal institutions, political actors tolerated para-institutions in order to establish the rules of the game for criminal activities and to deal with previously unresolved social conflict. In this vein, para-institutions complement institutions in their role of setting the rules of the social game in the economic, political, and social spheres. Any change in the economy, the international sphere, the social structure, or politics that destabilises institutions, can put into question their connection with para-institutions.

²⁵ From the beginning of the armed conflict, the army undertook a containment strategy, which consisted of hindering the access of guerrilla groups to political power in urban areas. This was due to Colombia's limited military capabilities. Later on, Plan Colombia and democratic security managed to weaken the FARC, but they were not dismantled. According to Richani (2013), the army saw the advantage of continuing the armed conflict as it justified the increase in military budgets.

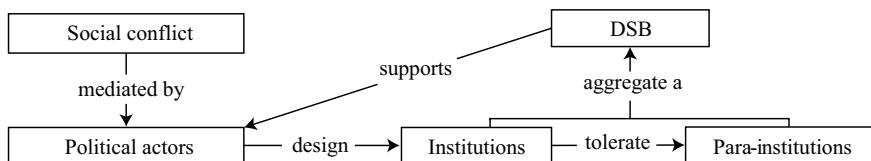
Figure 5.
Institutional weakness giving rise to para-institutions



Para-institutions allow for the incorporation in the DSB, of violent and criminal groups, who violently resolve social conflict not addressed by formal institutions. For instance, their repression mechanisms have weakened social movements (Pardo, 2013) and have allowed political actors to establish an accumulation regime that favours a narrow DSB (Galichini, 2019). Thus, para-institutions may promote political stability to institutions. This political equilibrium is shown in Figure 6. Nonetheless, the former are not merely an instrument of the DSB, they operate on their own, meaning that they are outside the control of formal institutions (Tauss et al., 2019). Thus, institutions might be considered democratic, while para-institutions might be regarded as authoritarian and repressive. (Palacio & Rojas, 1990). The existence of para-institutions shows a discrepancy with the original neorealist approach, where a narrow DSB is conducive to social contestation and, eventually, a systemic crisis.

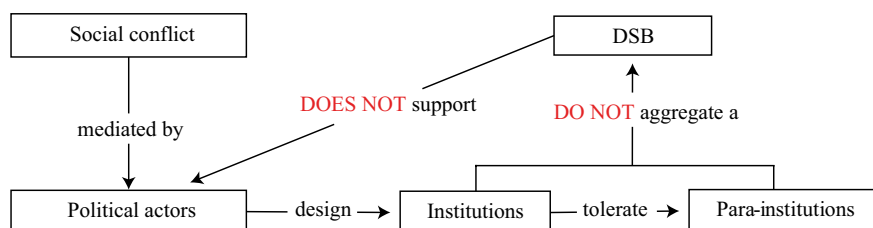
Figure 6.

Political equilibrium between institutions and para-institutions



The institutionalisation of crime and violence does not imply the absence of crisis. These dynamics have limits, especially since these are not ideologically accepted mechanisms to address expectations. Figure 7 displays the political crisis, in which institutions and the tolerance towards para-institutions do not answer the demands of the DSB, thus political actors would not be obtaining support. Hence, the latter would need to change institutions in order to stabilise the DSB. This institutional change might jeopardise the existence of para-institutions, as this may lead to institutional strengthening, where social groups that were not previously taken into account are incorporated into this new institutional configuration. In case political actors do not manage to aggregate a DSB, a systemic crisis as shown in Figure 3 would emerge.

Figure 7.
Political crisis in presence of para-institutions



To examine the stability of para-institutions during a political crisis, it might be useful to consider the changes in power relations, especially between criminal groups, political actors, and dominant social groups. It is important to understand how changes in the social, political, economic, international, or institutional spheres modify the behaviour of violent groups. If the latter feel that they are in a winning or losing position regarding other social groups, they might try to transform their para-institutions into formal institutions, or they may surrender, and try to find a place in formal institutions (Richani, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

In order to comprehend the background of the Colombian social uprising between 2019 and 2021, it is useful to resort to a theoretical framework capable of explaining the emergence and crisis of social order. Among different theoretical tools, Fergusson (2019) referred to NIE to characterise Colombia's political economy. He argued that it was outlined by protracted armed conflict and a weak state. Nevertheless, his definition of state weakness is limited to the provision of public goods. He did not consider how the state deals with the contradictions of capitalism and social conflict.

Considering the RT and moving away from economic determinism, the neorealist approach to institutional change explains how the relationship between the economy, the social structure, and politics shapes institutions. Particularly, social conflict is shaped by economic forces and ideas and is mediated by political actors, who acknowledge social expectations and powerful groups within the social structure. Thus, political actors design institutions that address the expectations of a DSB, in exchange this DSB provides political support. In this vein, institutions are considered the result of a socio-political compromise. The integration of all these spheres makes the neorealist approach an appropriate analytical tool to study Colombia's political economy, especially since the latter cannot be reduced to its macroeconomic factors.

Since the Neorealist approach was neither designed nor applied to Colombia, it should be enhanced to include some country-specific features. Considering that Colombia, like other countries in the region, is not at the centre of capital accumulation, it is necessary to examine how integration into the international economy influences institutional construction. Adding the dependency theory to the Neorealist approach allows one to see how the subordination to capital accumulation needs of core countries alters the social structure and puts pressure on political actors to design institutions that incorporate certain international interests. Thus, institutions are organised to privilege expectations related to international dependency, which may trigger institutional weakness.

Institutional weakness, in the sense that institutions do not result from a social compromise nor embody the rules of the social game, was conducive to the rise of crime and violence in Colombia. These dynamics permeated the social structure and generated political pressures. Institutions were unable to deal with the crime stemming from drug trafficking and the violence resulting from armed conflict, so they tolerated that criminal groups establish para-institutions to set rules for their activities and resolve social conflict that had not previously been addressed.

Through the lens of this enhanced framework, one understands the recent Colombian social uprising as the accumulated tensions of prevailing institutional dynamics. Crime and violence were instrumental in handling the pitfalls and the opposition to the accumulation regime that was aggregating a narrow DSB²⁶. Because neither violence nor crime is a legitimate mechanism for asserting interests or demands, these are susceptible to changes in the economic, international, social, or political spheres. In other words, any event that makes institutions unable to satisfy the demands of such narrow DSB will jeopardise the institutionalisation of crime and violence through para-institutions.

The objective of this work was to develop a theoretical framework to study the most recent institutional crisis and its relationship with prevailing accumulation dynamics in Colombia. This enhanced framework might prove useful to study the political economy of other countries, with dependent accumulation, and with armed conflict or illegal activities. Even this might shed light on how the neorealist approach to institutional change can be shaped to fit other contexts. Nonetheless, this is outside the scope of this work. A comparative study of how this enhanced version of the Neorealist approach can be applied to other contexts is left for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am grateful to the three anonymous referees for their valuable comments.

²⁶ The characterisation of this institutional arrangement and this DSB will be described in the aforementioned PhD thesis.

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