

Securing the Port against the Black Poor in Buenaventura, Colombia

On 16 May 2017, the community of Buenaventura, Colombia's main city-port went on a general strike. After years of unfulfilled government promises to provide basic services and improve security, the social and economic emergency continued unabated until the locals, nearly 90 per cent of them Afro-descendants, took to the streets. Against a backdrop of 80 per cent poverty and 68 per cent unemployment, the strikers demanded not just the end of poverty and the violence that had plagued the city since the late 1990s, but more importantly, autonomy and recognition of their ancestral way of life within the city. By looking at this event, this article reveals some shades of the entanglements of race, class, political subjectivity, security, neoliberal development and histories of colonialism that structure the racial dynamics of space. It is argued that violence and coercion have been central techniques to harnessing the local poor population in accordance with the needs of the port as the emblem of neoliberal development. The article pays particular attention to how law is implicated in the violence deployed in the city-port either as a legitimising factor or as discursive formation which portrays the local population as dangerous and thereby as a security threat to the port. This narrative about the insecurity of the poor, created and recreated by the law, reinforces the image of the black population as undeserving poor, while at the same time legitimises the coercive interventions that have characterised the control of criminality and social mobilisation in the city-port. However, the strike allows us to see that precarity and violence have resulted in a politically active population and in sophisticated levels of mobilisation which have managed to stop neoliberal development, at least for a while.