

To What Extent Can History Be Used to Predict the Future in Colombia?

Written by William Holmes

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WILLIAM HOLMES, APR 8 2021

Herbert Butterfield's essay *The Historical Novel* highlights the subtle, yet powerful, difference between the historical novel and the formal study of history. The historical novel is "a maker of history" that furthers nationalist narratives, as opposed to a more critically distanced historical study (Butterfield, 1924, pp. 42). Since Independence, Colombian history has been inextricably tied up with nation-building (Fowler and Lambert, 2006, pp.91-93). Therefore, the discipline of history has garnered an unusual amount of agency in Colombia. In this way, Gabriel García Márquez infers Colombian history has an eschatological weight through the narrative vehicle of Melquíades's manuscripts; the prophetic historical manuscripts become "un espejo hablado" to their reader (García Márquez, 1999, pp. 422). But to what extent are García Márquez's inferences about Colombian history true? Do Colombian history and historiography blur the line between the historical novel and the formal study of history? And, if so, what effect has this had?

This essay argues that Colombia's ideological perception of history has helped to fuel the longstanding struggle between central and local authority. This issue is crucial to determining the future of Colombia because, as Robinson argues, "it is this form of rule in the periphery that created the chaos and illegality that have bedeviled Colombia" (Robinson, 2013, pp. 44). First, I will consider the various ways in which guerrilla movements repurposed history in order to justify their cause. I will argue that the strength of their historical narrative correlates with the likelihood that the group can be maintained in the future. Second, I will consider the effect Colombian historians have had on Colombia's historical narratives and peace efforts.

The ideological dynamics of the Cold War were central to the foundation of left-wing guerrilla narratives. It is clear that, since the 1930s, the vacuum of state authority had left certain areas, like Viotà, as communist territories (Gott, 1970, pp. 176). These independent republics were not only enduring enough to make the Colombian Army think twice about attacking them, but had also become a force that, according to Colonel Gustavo Sierra Ochoa's accounts from 1954, demanded political and social preventive action (Sánchez and Bakewell, 1985, pp. 794). This interventionist approach provided the setting for a drawn-out ideological battle that was grounded in history.

Guerrilla groups fashioned a historical narrative of government exclusion that served as their foundational myth. The Colombian government's failed Operation Marquetalia, carried out with US bomber planes in 1964, served as a foundational moment for the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) (Leech, 2011, pp. 14-18). Marquetalia validated the mythic historical narrative that the FARC had been excluded from power and therefore had a right to achieve power by force: "we are revolutionaries who [...] are playing the historic role that corresponds to us, we have had to find another way: armed revolution in the struggle for power" (Farnsworth-Alvear et al., pp. 372). Furthermore, the foundational myth of Marquetalia functioned well in the Cold War narrative, confirming in the minds of FARC guerrillas that "the government, military officials, and Yankee imperialism spend hundreds of millions on arms, supplies, spies, and informers" (Farnsworth-Alvear et al., pp. 372). The historical connection between US intervention and imperialism here implies a Bolivarian ideology – a widespread form of ideological and historical reinterpretation amongst guerrilla groups (Ugarriza and Craig, 2013, pp. 463-466). The figure of Simón Bolívar is "a form of neutral signifier onto which political meaning was projected according to the preferences of the audience" (O'Connor and Meer, 2021, pp. 130). The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) have made similar claims that they had been excluded by the Colombian state. For example, the ELN's Simacota Manifesto argues that "reactionary

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violence, unleashed by the many oligarchic governments and continued by the corrupt Valencia-Ruiz Novoa-Lleras regime, has been a powerful weapon of domination for the last 15 years" (Farnsworth-Alvear et al., pp. 376). Hence, these leftist guerrilla groups were able to use history to justify their cause.

The same is true for the *Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame* (MAQL), for whom "Colombian history was an unbroken line of state repression against popular organizations, which justified revolutionary violence and focused on state responsibility" (Troyan, 2008, pp. 169). The MAQL, which emerged in 1982, chose the figure of the indigenous activist Quintín Lame to articulate their movement. As Rappaport highlights, Lame had been "most effective in interpreting history to contemporary ends" (Rappaport, 1998, pp. 200). The messianic status he garnered during his lifetime was bound up with the history he wrote in *Los pensamientos del indio que se educó dentro de las selvas colombianas*, where linked his genealogy to the historic indigenous leader Don Juan Tama de la Estrella. Thus, he repurposed the successes of Juan Tama to "frame a more general Indian history in opposition to the history of and by non-Indians". (Rappaport, pp.198-99). These enduring historical narratives inspired the MAQL guerrillas who found the exclusionary leftist guerrilla histories easy to reconcile with their ambitions.

The *Movimiento 19 de abril* (M-19), founded in 1970 by former FARC members, attempted a different strategy to other left-wing guerrillas. They operated both in rural areas and in cities and focused more on a nationalist ideology and less on Marxism (O'Connor and Meer, pp. 131-132). But, as a former M-19 commander explained, they faced a significant challenge: "we did not have our own history" (O'Connor and Meer, pp. 134). The group became the first of the guerrillas to repurpose the figure of Simón Bolívar. The M-19 rearticulated Bolívar into a revolutionary narrative in the anti-American imperialist Cold War context. They also claimed that he had constructed Republics from the grassroots and considered his military tactics to be akin to guerrilla fighting (Aguilera Peña, 2003, pp.16). In order to declare this historical connection to Bolívar, the M-19 even stole Bolívar's sword in 1974. The message was made clear in a formal statement by the M-19: "Bolívar's struggle continues. Bolívar is not dead. [...] [His sword] is passed into our hands. To the hands of the people in arms. And now aims at the exploiters of the people. Against the national and foreign bosses" (O'Connor and Meer, pp. 136).

It is clear that these guerrilla groups' 'historical' sources should be considered historical novels against Butterfield's definition. They are all powerful "makers of history" that offer an alternative national story to suit the user's goal. This means they can be dangerously distanced from reality. As Bushnell (amongst others) points out, the left has historically been weak in Colombia compared to other Latin American states (Bushnell, 1993, pp. 183). Colombia's electoral history clearly rebuts the claim that these leftist groups were being prevented from achieving power democratically. Since the end of power sharing in 1974, the left has only managed to be a significant third party in 1990. Nevertheless, it appears that the strength of a group's historical narrative is essential for its longevity. The FARC is the best example of this. The FARC's use of criminal activity during the 80s and 90s might have risked undermining the guerrilla group's legitimacy and divided its members as happened to the right-wing paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (Rozema, 2008, pp. 429-30). However, as Leech points out, it appears that the FARC maintained their ideological commitments. Whilst other groups saw infighting as certain individuals enriched themselves, the egalitarian lifestyle and values were maintained (at least symbolically) by FARC leaders (Leech, pp. 73). Therefore, the FARC's invented history is a crucial factor to their longevity.

Whilst the guerrilla groups' history is categorically in line with the historical novel, the influence of academics' and social scientists' interpretations of history has arguably had a similar effect on Colombian society. Robert Karl argues that historical narratives emanating from academia have both clouded the achievements of the National Front and helped to engrain a culture of violence. He makes the point that, when contemplating the effectiveness of the National Front and its "desarrollismo" ideology, we must "pinpoint when certain narratives arrive and moreover remember that the term "failure" has accompanied the developmentalism of the early 1960s nearly from its inception" (Karl, 2018, pp. 98).

The social scientist Orlando Fals Borda was especially influential in developing a critique of the National Front. His 1962 work *La Violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un proceso social* (co-written with Germán Guzmán Campos and Eduardo Umaña Luna) exacerbated tensions, pinning blame on the Conservative Party for the partisan violence of the 1940s and 1950s (Karl, pp. 87). This affected the functioning of government; the then new Conservative

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President Guillermo León Valencia faced 80% of the Planning Department walking out in 1962. But crucially, these academic theories damaged the 'pact of forgetting' (as Fals and others sceptically viewed it) that the National Front had installed by preserving Colombia's two traditional parties. The consequence of the National Front's weakened democratic history was the erosion of the atmosphere of *Convivencia* and the established peace.

Furthermore, widespread disillusionment in the National Front ultimately opened up the ideological space to alternatives. The historical interpretations of Fals and others had helped to shift public perceptions of the National Front and the US-funded aid program Alliance for Progress from being a legitimate and effective government to an unrepresentative institution that did not deliver the development it had promised. Many academics and students attacked US development policy in Colombia as pro-imperialist, with a new generation of academics even criticising Fals for their ties to US developmentalism (López, 2019, pp. 195). Professors whose principal inspiration was US-modernisation theory were expelled for being the main obstacles to a "true public and independent university" (López, pp. 195). The disputed 1970 Presidential elections saw these factors erupt with the creation of a less isolated guerrilla group M-19 who were able to harness peoples' disillusionment in cities as well as in rural areas.

History had become an important battleground in Colombia's public sphere. During the 1970s, a variety of political magazines and educational initiatives, such as *Alternativa*, the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* and Fals's *Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social*, sprung up in the search of new narratives. Democracy was at the heart of many of these initiatives. For example, the sociologist and M-19 member Alberto Otalora ran literacy programs in poor areas of Bogotá where he explained how "the failures of Colombian history" were inextricably connected with "the lack of a true and real democracy" (López, pp. 206). By reframing independence (in line with M-19's Bolivarianism) as a moment when "all members of the Colombian nation became free . . . [and] democracy triumphed", these educational initiatives set many members of the petit bourgeoisie against the National Front and Colombian state (López, pp. 207). Ultimately, the search for the history of *La Violencia* was used to delegitimise the state and its peace efforts. Instead, it shaped a variety of new historical narratives in Colombia's public sphere.

Academics also helped to turn *La Violencia* into a powerful national narrative. Fals's 1967 work *La subversión en Colombia: Visión del cambio social en la historia* first introduced the term "La Violencia" in Colombian social sciences. Fals described his generation as the "generation of La Violencia" (Fals Borda, 1969, tr. Skiles, pp. 15) in a way that inscribed violence as a permanent element of Colombia's national history. This was continued in Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens's 1983 classic work *Bandoleros, gamonales y campesinos: El caso de la violencia en Colombia*. Sánchez and Meertens's book "transformed a term with which to describe the past into the past itself" (Karl, 2018, pp. 223) and enshrined the image that Colombia has been a country of permanent and endemic warfare.

Sánchez's generation of historians, known as *Los Violentólogos*, were commissioned by the Colombian government to investigate the causes of *La Violencia* in Colombia. However, later historians have argued that their 1987 report inadvertently reinforced the idea that conflict was engrained in Colombia (Marín, 2014, pp. 131-135). The report reflected the anti-democratic sentiments that I have already discussed, arguing that social exclusion and lack of political participation was the root problem. The repeated narrative (that ironically had been appropriated earlier by anti-government groups) blurred boundaries between the past and the present. This historical confusion has only "impeded public engagement on behalf of peace" (Karl, pp. 223). *La Violencia*'s cultural legacy became omnipresent in the Colombian public sphere. It is central films such as *Condores no entierran todos los días* and *Confesión a Laura* and in popular literature (Stock and Fernet, 1997, pp. 94-113). Laura Restrepo argues that "no author has failed to touch up" *La Violencia* over the past three decades "either explicitly or beneath the surface" (Restrepo, 1976, pp. 17-18). *La Violencia*'s relevance in the present is a testament to Colombia's entrapment in the historical novel. The enduring effects of academics' work is, therefore, more consistent with Butterworth's definition of a historical novel than a formal study of history.

In conclusion, I have shown how excluded groups have been driven by their historical narratives, whilst history has delegitimised the state and desensitised its citizens to peace efforts. Colombia's approach to its traumatic history is worth critical attention as it can determine the country's trajectory. History's wars demand historical reinterpretations (Curthoys and Docker, 2010, pp. 232-234). Historical fiction "provides a space for political intervention and reclamation; for innovation and destabilisation" (De Groot, 2009, pp. 139-140). The future of Colombia is therefore to

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a large extent in the hands of the historian in Colombia. Carrier underlines the importance of historians as “the workhorses of long-term social memory” (Carrier, 2002, pp. 520). Without historians to “explode myths” then “society will not flourish, but will stagnate and devour itself, breaking into divided units set against each other” (Carrier, pp. 524). This essay provides the Colombian case study for Carrier’s argument. So, what now? Dennis argues the Colombian state must use its education system and the media “to offer more inclusive reinterpretations of myths to underpin more positive and inclusive concepts of national identity” (Fowler and Lambert, pp.105). Since Colombia’s 1991 constitution, the country has taken a more inclusive post-modernist approach to the treatment of its history. Following the MAQL’s complaints, the 1991 constitution recognised indigenous historical narratives for the first time. The focus of the Centro Nacional de la Memoria Histórica, under Gonzalo Sánchez’s directorship that ended in 2019, has opened up the historical narrative to memory and is “lejos de pretender erigirse en un corpus de verdades cerradas” (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2013, pp. 16). Allowing for a more democratising approach to history has yielded some success. However, this memory only dates back to 1985, leaving the events that shaped the present conflicts less democratised. Indeed, postmodernist historical documents such as *Basta Ya!* do little to rectify the false narrative that the FARC have built their ideology on. It remains to be seen who will write the narrative in the future and who will question it.

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