

Prologue

For a country that is roughly tied with Argentina as third most populous in Latin America, that is the closest part of South America to the continental United States, that produces the world's best coffee and the greatest mountain-climbing bicycle racers, Colombia has been curiously neglected by North American historians. This possibly would not have been the case in the nineteenth century, when Colombia gave birth to the most enduring and, at least in outward appearances, most clear-cut of the conventional Liberal vs. Conservative party struggles that dominated the Latin American political landscape. However, North American scholars were seldom writing Latin American history in the last century. By the time that specialists in the field became a standard feature of U.S. universities, which is really just since World War II, Colombia instead of exemplifying the accepted stereotypes of Latin America seemed to defy them—for here was a Latin American nation in which the nineteenth-century parties refused to die when they were supposed to, in which military dictators were a rare exception, and in which the populist and left-nationalist movements that gave excitement to the contemporary histories of sister nations were conspicuously weak. Rather than trying to explain these Colombian paradoxes (and there were more), scholars preferred to turn their attention to other lands. Or at least so it has seemed to me.

Charles Bergquist, happily, is one of the exceptions. Moreover, the present study, which began to take shape as a doctoral dissertation at Stanford, quickly established itself as a landmark in its field on publication in 1978; it became further established thanks to the favorable reception of the first Spanish edition in 1981; and it will be able to reach an even wider audience by the addition now of an English paperback edition. Its importance derives both from the careful research and analysis on which it rests and from the subject matter it treats, which had been largely ignored by foreign scholars and had been discussed by Colombians chiefly in anecdotal or polemical terms. This was unfortunate, because the topic in question is nothing more nor less than the process of transition from a situation of semipermanent civil war that characterized the second half of the previous century and culminated in the ruinous War of a Thousand Days to the climate of relative peace and progress of the first decades of the

present century. In this new situation the leaders of the two dominant parties managed to tone down the traditional conflict between them, as they turned to the urgent task of national reconstruction following the twin disasters of the Thousand Days War and the loss of Panama. The three-year civil war itself inevitably occupies a large part of Bergquist's work, but he has not written a mere military or even political-military history. He is seeking always to clarify the social and economic significance of the political and military data, whether he is presenting an interpretation of party platforms in terms of contrasting economic sectoral interests or, say, pointing out the fear that took hold of upper-class Liberals as well as Conservatives once they observed the seeming deterioration of social control in areas afflicted by guerrilla operations.

Naturally not all aspects of the author's interpretation will appear equally convincing to all readers. There is much to be said for Bergquist's central thesis that more was at stake in Colombian political rivalries than mere competition for jobs and status among the members of a single oligarchic caste. It is likewise plausible that different political factions should have functioned at times as representatives of economic sectors, and that their differences had something to do with the degree of linkage between the various sectors and the capitalist world economy. Nevertheless, in a country such as Colombia, which during most of its past has had a very modest level of external economic relationships, those external factors must be used with care in explaining internal developments, and some historians have suggested that Bergquist carries his interpretative scheme—owing much to what has been loosely called “dependency theory”—a bit too far. Maybe he does. Yet any future historian who deals with the same events that Bergquist has studied will have to keep his interpretation very much in mind, even if the aim is to modify or refute it. Others will simply build further upon it: which, after all, is what landmark studies are for.

Nor is this book of importance only for the select minority of scholars already established or in formation who have chosen Colombian history as a specialty. The problems of interparty conflict on one hand and of growing integration within the world capitalist economy on the other were repeated from one country of Latin America to another. Hence Brazilian or Peruvian or Costa Rican historians, not to mention U.S. and European specialists in the histories of those countries, can gain valuable insights into the historical dynamics of their own areas of study. And on that note I shall end this prologue—so that the reader can turn more quickly to the work itself.

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