

Prologue to the Second Colombian Edition

Between Legitimacy and Violence sets out a historical synthesis of Colombia's trajectory, from the 1870s through the present. The story begins with the notable increase in commercial, technological, and intellectual activity in the North Atlantic region after the mid-nineteenth century. The dynamism of the capitalist revolution gave Colombia's ruling classes a stark choice: integrate the country into the modern industrial world or perish in a backwater of barbarism. To incorporate the country into the world system they would again have to look to the institutional, political, and economic models of Europe and the United States.

This was a more difficult and controversial project than it might appear. There was, to start, no consensus about the real content of those models, and the models were constantly changing. Colombia's rulers and thinkers had been divided on political issues since the Enlightenment. But if consensus could be reached and if the challenges of applying the models to Colombia could be met, the rewards would be enormous.

This was, to be sure, not a new challenge: Colombia had been wrestling with modernity since the eighteenth century. The achievement of independence in 1819, by eliminating the formal obstacles to the embrace of modernity, laid bare the real obstacles: the immensity of Colombia's territory in comparison with its population, its overwhelming poverty, and the inadequacy of its public administration. By examining each of these elements of adversity and the unusual ways in which they combined over time and place, we can better understand the history of the years since the mid-nineteenth century.

Colombia's geography was a formidable obstacle to prosperity and democracy, and the difficulties it posed were exacerbated by technological backwardness, low economic product per inhabitant, and the corrosive concentration of wealth. High transpor-

tation costs gave day-to-day viability to sleepy regions and enclaves, which remained as self-sufficient and disconnected from one another as they were before independence. In the early twentieth century this characteristic was seized upon by business leaders, who wanted a national market, and by political leaders, who wanted a national electorate.

Social and ethnic inequalities, which probably increased over the course of the nineteenth century, produced economic and political effects. On the economic side, the small aggregate demand for goods and services combined with the unlimited supply of unskilled labor created a vicious circle of poverty that gave rise to open social conflict in the 1920s and thereafter. As the Colombian economy modernized, fitfully after 1880 and more decisively after 1910 with the rise of coffee, the ingredients were there for a Darwinian explosion: the survival of the fittest, as determined by the market and by recourse to violence.

Colombian capitalism, born as it was of waves of agricultural colonization, reinforced cultural patterns of agrarian individualism that were resistant to solidarity and collective responsibility—important features of modern society. Perhaps for this reason, the socialist appeal (as far back as the utopian socialism espoused by Manuel Murillo Toro in the mid-nineteenth century) had little resonance in Colombia. Catholic social thought (of the sort pioneered by Pope Leo XIII) had a better reception, since it could be locally rooted and led or manipulated by recognized local leaders; but it was at best a palliative for the indignities and deprivations wrought by an ostentatiously exclusionary society.

The role of statist nationalism, which was so central to the economic modernization of many Latin American countries, has been muted in Colombia. Colombia's leaders cast their lot with the model of modern capitalism represented by the United States rather than Europe, and in keeping with that model (and with preexisting notions of economic liberalism), the economic role of the Colombian state has been relatively passive and reactive. Even during the period of active state support of industrialization (c. 1945–90), the government was largely an agent of compromise between the interests of coffee growers, importers, and bankers on the one hand and industrialists on the other. Without strategic initiatives of its own (and without, perhaps, even the means to conceive of any), the Colombian state limited its interventions to cases in which social peace required government action, such as the strikes of the 1930s and 1940s and the rural unrest of the 1920s and 1930s. In the second half of the

twentieth century, policies on such issues as agrarian reform, urban housing, and social services such as health and education obeyed the same dynamic of necessity. At the same time, the urban and rural popular organizations that helped put these reforms on the government agenda were contained through co-optation or destroyed through repression.

The social and regional fragmentation of the country and the corrosive effects of partisan conflict have combined to produce a weak state. Between the letter of the law and its effective application is a huge chasm. The state's weakness is apparent in the fragility of its fiscal base: large-scale tax evasion restricts revenues, corruption and clientelism distort spending, and archaic values prevent the achievement of necessary social goals via the national budget. Public education is the most important example of this negative phenomenon, and throughout the book we will make reference to its progress.

Colombian geography strengthened the dominance of local political bosses and formed the basis for regionalist discourse on everything from cultural identity to electoral practices. The creation of a national state that could achieve meaningful goals such as economic growth and social peace had to face regionalist headwinds at every turn, and the consistent winners were local and regional brokers who were the only effective links between the citizen and the state. This situation set the stage for apathy and sometimes for disobedience, because there was no way for the popular sectors to partake of a sense of belonging to the nation when the promise of civic equality was so patently unfulfilled.

The national scope and vertical integration of the two parties simultaneously masked and attenuated the effects of social fragmentation. The system of partisan identities and conflict that came out of the nineteenth century came with a historical mythology that could incite and funnel the political loyalties of most Colombians well into the twentieth century. The relationship between this all-encompassing (and all-dividing) party system and the modernizing impulse to expand citizens' rights and democratic competition has unequal dimensions. The parties progressively increased participation in the electoral system until universal adult suffrage was attained in 1957, but the dominance of local party bosses and clientelism have effectively closed off genuine competition, creating an environment in which political leaders are never called to account for their actions. The main problem, in short, is that rep-

representative democracy has not reached maturity in Colombia, and neither has public administration.

The post-Cold War vogue of the concepts of civil society and participatory democracy (as opposed to representative democracy) shows that many Colombians recognize these failings and would like to overcome them. However, as noted in the Epilogue to this book, much recent thinking on the future path of Colombian democracy (expressed most cogently in the 1991 Constitution) has been insufficiently reflective and perhaps too quick to copy models from other countries with different economic, social, and political contexts.

I will leave it to the reader to make his or her own judgments about the achievements and mistakes of Colombia's ruling classes during the years covered in this book. I will take the liberty of citing one enormous error here: in the 1930s and 1940s large landowners were permitted to block any and all initiatives on land reform. The issue could not be addressed until the early 1960s, and then only weakly, in the context of counterinsurgency and the Alliance for Progress. The consequences for Colombia have been disastrous, not just for the countryside but for the entire country. Two opportunities to achieve social peace were lost, and the accumulation of errors has come to dominate the dark social and political panorama that Colombia faces as it moves into the twenty-first century.

Although I have tried to stick to a chronological rendering, in accordance with the usual reader expectations and intuitions about a work of history, sometimes the strands of society, economy, politics, and culture move at different rhythms. If a date permits us to close one period and open another (and that is how historians usually operate), the question inevitably arises: Is the period cultural, political, social, or economic? If all of these aspects are part of our narrative, which should have priority in the overall periodization?

There are various solutions to this problem. I have chosen to resolve it by weighing the relative importance of the four aspects of each epoch, and political periodization has generally gone by the wayside. For instance, this book does not follow the conventional division of Colombian history into a Conservative Republic from 1886 to 1930, a Liberal Republic from 1930 to 1946, and a Conservative (or quasi-Conservative) Dictatorship from 1948 to 1958.

Chapter 1 examines an era in which public discourse was dominated by politics and constitutional forms: federalist radicalism versus centralist con-

servatism. The struggle between these two political visions occupied center stage and managed to absorb all other questions, including those related to the overriding “civilizational” issue described at the outset, how to create a stable export-based economy. Against the prevailing (political) periodization, I believe the story starts in the mid-1870s, with clear signs of decay in the Radical Olympus regime forged by Colombian Liberals in the early 1860s, which culminated in the wartime coup of 1900. The era of the Regeneration (1878–1900) is, I think, best understood when it is separated from the explicitly Conservative Republic that followed.

Chapter 2 considers the 1903–1930 period in a similar light. The treaties that ended the last great partisan civil war (1899–1902) were elite pacts to make recourse to arms illegitimate once and for all. This was the necessary basis for the definitive rise of coffee in the Colombian economy, and for the ever more hegemonic presence of the United States in Colombian life, until it became what President Marco Fidel Suárez would call the North Star. It was a period of social change in a decidedly capitalist direction, sporadically opposed by Catholicism on the one hand and by the working class on the other. It was an essentially optimistic period that combined, more or less tranquilly, economic liberalism and political conservatism.

Chapter 3 starts with the decisive year of 1930. That year saw the confluence of two crises: the Conservative collapse that permitted the return of the Liberal party to power after half a century and a global economic depression that put an end to Colombia’s “dance of the millions,” the easy credit that propelled the country’s development in the previous decade. The new era would be one of social and political mobilization, and of a somewhat strengthened state. The social and cultural demands that accumulated during the previous period were partially addressed by government, but the new struggle would be between the imperative of widening access to effective citizenship and the reality of a new plutocratic elite that was somewhat less bound by partisan identities. The elite won: while bankers, coffee growers, and industrialists united when they needed to, the popular sectors were divided by competing mobilizations and by political sectarianism. Because of the importance of the *Violencia* in the overall history of Colombia, and in order not to impose its distinctive periodization (c. 1945–64) on the wider narrative, I have chosen to discuss it in Chapter 4.

Because of the *Violencia*, but also because of this historical victory of the new unified elite against the challenge of popular mobilization, Colombia

never went through a full-fledged populist stage of the sort proposed by the Liberal caudillo Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in the years before his assassination in 1948. Chapter 5, which begins with the bipartisan National Front agreement of 1958, focuses on the consequences of this absence for the creation of political legitimacy and a modernized state. In the intervening decades Colombia has teetered between this ideal and the creeping reality of “savage capitalism,” whose most recent protagonists have included drug traffickers and organized criminals of other kinds. This is the basis for Chapter 6 and the Epilogue, which take the story through the so-called 8,000 Case in the 1990s: this scandal, which involved President Ernesto Samper and a host of important figures inside and outside the world of politics, illustrated the corruption and exhaustion of Colombia’s political and judicial institutions and of public discourse itself.

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