

COSTA RICA AND THE 1948 REVOLUTION:

Rethinking the Social Democratic Paradigm

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¿DEMOCRACIA EN COSTA RICA? CINCO OPINIONES POLEMICAS. By OSCAR AGUILAR, DANIEL CAMACHO, RODOLFO CERDAS, JACOBO SCHIFTER, with an introduction by CHESTER ZELAYA. (San José: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1978.)

LA FASE OCULTA DE LA GUERRA CIVIL EN COSTA RICA. By JACOBO SCHIFTER. (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1979.)

LA SOCIAL DEMOCRACIA EN COSTA RICA. By JORGE ENRIQUE ROMERO PÉREZ. (San José: Editorial Trejos Hermanos, 1977.)

POLITICA Y REFORMA EN COSTA RICA, 1914–1958.. By JORGE MARIO SALAZAR. (San José: Editorial Porvenir, 1981.)

LUCHA SOCIAL Y GUERRA CIVIL EN COSTA RICA, 1940–1948. By MANUEL ROJAS BOLAÑOS. (San José: Editorial Porvenir, 1980).

Costa Rica's 1948 revolution and its triumphant political expression, the Partido Liberación Nacional, have enjoyed a remarkably favorable press in both popular and academic circles in the United States. Whether extolling it as a model to be followed by its neighbors or simply praising it as a working electoral democracy, academicians and journalists alike have assigned major credit for this phenomenon to Liberación and its pre-1948 core group that developed around both José Figueres and the Centro para el Estudio de los Problemas Nacionales under Rodrigo Facio.¹

This assessment dominates the interpretation of the 1948 revolution itself to such an extent that the establishment of electoral democracy and political modernization appear to have been both primary goals and legacies of those who made the revolution, despite important historical and contemporary evidence to the contrary.² Costa Rican leaders themselves artfully fomented this mythology about their past heroics, not as cynically as the nineteenth-century Brazilian elite paraded its parlia-

mentarism “for the English to see,” but within the more plausible march of “rural democracy” as national historical paradigm crossing party lines. The high point of academic confusion regarding *Liberación* and its character was reached when Torcuato Di Tella, in a conceptual essay, typified the party as “populist,” despite the disclaimers of more reflective party leaders and the previous existence of a typically populist movement, *calderonismo*, against which the 1948 revolution was made.³

Within the past few years, the facade of the post-1948 established order has begun to show cracks, inspiring a major rethinking of national history and politics that is no longer within the *liberacionista* triumphant democracy paradigm. The present critical trend shows many parallels with the trajectory of the reformist critics of the 1940s, although the focus of these latter-day analysts is the very model elaborated by *Liberación* since 1948 along with its limitations. This revisionism is most notable in non- or anti-*liberacionista* university circles, but it has shown itself among those who could be termed mainstream party thinkers as well.⁴ While no figure of the stature of Rodrigo Facio has yet emerged within this second critical generation, the authors to be dealt with here certainly have equalled the contribution of other major reformist thinkers of the 1940s and 1950s who were associated with the center and later the party in power.

A major beginning in this critical wave of revisionism was the publication in 1978 by the Universidad Estatal a Distancia (State Open University) of a volume examining the nature of democracy in contemporary Costa Rica. This work was organized by Jacobo Schifter and the Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos (IDELA) of the Universidad Nacional in the hope of spurring debate on a topic that Schifter himself would help to reinterpret historically. The collection includes four essays. The first two, by Oscar Aguilar and Daniel Camacho, do little to challenge the established wisdom: the former points to long-term democratic tendencies throughout local political history, and the latter adopts the orthodox left position in asserting the “unfinished” antilabor, bourgeois character of the 1948 revolution and contemporary politics.

Rodolfo Cerdas and Schifter, however, attempt to reconsider the origins of *Liberación* and the nature of its post-1948 model. Schifter builds his analysis on the argument that the “neutralization” of social classes in the 1948 conflict led, unexpectedly for both factions, to the establishment of electoral democracy as a stalemate solution. He situates the *Liberación* model and experience within the “third path” of political development amid state-interventionist and authoritarian models, as elaborated by Philippe Schmitter.⁵ According to this view, the bourgeois and middle-class coalition forged by *Liberación* followed a typically “transformist” modernizing program of economic and political reforms

that were designed to generate opportunity for the middle class in general and party supporters in particular.

For Schifter, the lack of more authoritarian political styles on the part of Liberación resulted from the social stalemate produced in the 1948 conflict and its aftermath, rather than from any antiauthoritarian principle of electoral purity. In this case, electoral democracy was more a rallying cry than a major goal motivating the revolutionary position of those who would later make up the party elite. Moreover, this early core group (center, Social Democratic party, etc.) had little popular electoral support of any kind and none of a typically populist character.⁶ Hence, instead of seeing the revolutionaries as electoral purists or political moralists, Schifter characterizes them as potentially authoritarian modernizers or “transformists” who were quite willing to expel from office, disenfranchise, or even exile both the local populist coalition (including the calderonista group of bourgeois politicians, leftist unions, and their leaders) and the rightist forces led by Otilio Ulate (the triumphant presidential candidate in 1948). The revolutionaries and subsequent founders of Liberación eventually had to recognize their popular, electoral weakness and returned power to the Ulate forces following the eighteen-month interim junta and the silencing of the more radical unions and intransigent calderonistas. During the entire period, and later as well, the goals of the liberacionista program remained the development of bureaucratic control of economic expansion, diversification, and the creation of a new class of property holders enriched through political favoritism. Electoral democracy was an important by-product of the 1948 revolution according to Schifter, but was not its *razón de ser*. Neither was there any guarantee that electoral democracy would continue if the state-interventionist model led to a deepening of the politico-economic crisis that threatened this newly powerful group of wealth holders. Rather, class neutralization led to this initially unstable standoff and probably would be necessary in the future to restrain the authoritarian tendencies of both Liberación and the forces opposing it.

Rodolfo Cerdas develops this same point, but with particular relevance for the politics of the 1980s. He demonstrates how Liberación ideology included many disparate elements taken from nationalist, socialist, and populist thought in Latin America and Europe, none of which corresponded organically to the underlying class position or social forces within the party as it developed after 1948. By adapting both an advanced socio-institutional structure and a political platform drawn from the experience of mature capitalist societies to a backward local economy, the state-interventionist party could present itself as something it was not (populist, social democrat, or socialist), all the while insuring the continued development of its transformist model. Cerdas

points to this as a major systemic contradiction in which advanced symbolism was used to justify unpopular, elitist policies, an example of proletarian or social democratic rhetoric at the service of bourgeois and mildly reformist politics.⁷

The second major contradiction, and this is perhaps Cerdas's principal insight, was the transition from the "political bourgeoisie" of the 1950s to the state or "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" of the 1970s and beyond. The early Liberación model had allowed the counterelite to enrich itself under state auspices, joining the ranks of existing wealth holders. Later, bureaucratic control of the state-directed productive processes (banking, oil refining, electricity, telecommunications, development corporations, autonomous institutions, and so on) had swung the political balance away from private wealth, new or old. The new power elite, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, no longer used the state merely for private enrichment but also to control the generation of societal wealth and its distribution, creating politico-economic fiefdoms within the state apparatus in the process.⁸ How this new group would handle relations with not only local private wealth holders but with foreign capital and mass groups was the basic question upon which rests the future of electoral democracy and social struggle in Costa Rica, according to Cerdas.

These groundbreaking essays by Cerdas and Schifter have been further developed in parallel, but unconnected, studies by Jorge Enrique Romero Pérez, Manuel Rojas Bolaños, and Jorge Mario Salazar. A leading Costa Rican jurist and Weberian sociologist, Romero sets out to achieve two ambitious and politically critical goals. First, he analyzes in depth the thought of Rodrigo Facio as the historical basis for Liberación ideology. Second, he traces the later evolution (or what he might term the degeneration) of this corpus within the party's intellectual history. Romero argues convincingly, often with the vehemence of one who has both intellectual and personal political axes to grind, that Facio's thought was not social democratic in any meaningful way, but rather a form of "constructive" or interventionist neoliberalism. Despite the author's visceral tone, Facio the intellectual emerges unscathed as a major thinker whose paradigm represented a notable advance for its time. This heritage, however, was subsequently misrepresented by Facio's political heirs as they grew accustomed to the prerogatives of power. Rather than attack or belittle the innovations of Facio, Romero emphasizes the lack of any real ideological heritage germane to a self-declared social democratic party. He explains this phenomenon as the "pretextual" or rationalizing function of official rhetoric. For Romero, an essentially middle-class, petty bourgeois ideology that was based upon Colombian liberalism, Aprismo, and general reformism may have been constructive in Facio's hands, but by the 1970s, this amalgam had come to serve a very different function as a self-justification for the "proprietors" of the state.

Given that Facio and the Centro para el Estudio de los Problemas Nacionales had no solid basis in populist or social democratic thought, the commitment of party leaders to an essentially state capitalist model was logical, not only on the basis of developing group interest, but also because the only effective ideological heritage of the centrist revolutionaries of 1948 was neoliberalism. Contemporary recourse to social democratic and neopopulist rhetoric and symbolism simply underscore for Romero the growing crisis of legitimacy that *Liberación* and its system face.

The two volumes by Rojas and Salazar are largely unrevised doctoral dissertations presented at UNAM in Mexico (Sociology) and Tulane (History) respectively. They are both orthodox Marxian interpretations of the (non)revolution of 1948 and its aftermath. Salazar begins by distinguishing between social revolution and reformism from the Marxian perspective. He bases his analysis on the hypothesis that elite-led or bourgeois reformism within an essentially capitalist model characterized the entire period of 1940–58, with clear antecedents as far back as the González Flores administration of 1914–17. Consequently, the armed conflict of 1948 did not lead to any profound social revolution, but to a violent and sudden realignment of bourgeois factions with different, but equally subordinated, bases of mass support. The essential continuity of Costa Rican political reformism in the twentieth century, according to Salazar, has been based on making an amplified capitalist society and economy more viable rather than on attacking it.

Salazar's work may help to rehabilitate the long-range perspective on Costa Rican politics, which has been divided so neatly and damagingly into pre- and post-1948 eras by contemporary *Liberación* apologists, the antediluvians being the villains in this redemptive opera. Beyond this virtue, however, Salazar's study presents some serious problems. The cutoff date of 1958 is not justified conceptually and cannot be, given the author's broader point of continuity in reform. Moreover, despite the exhaustive use of the English-language literature on the subject, including dissertations, as well as considerable U.S. State Department documentation, no substantial empirical advance is achieved regarding local socioeconomic structure or tendencies over the period. For the development of any globally coherent Marxian analysis, particularly given the present limited state of our knowledge of local socioeconomic history, this shortcoming is a particularly troublesome aspect of an otherwise convincing argument. The theoretical framework considerably outdistances the essentially traditional documentary and expository approaches that are employed here.

Perhaps the major shortcoming of this framework is its deduction of the bourgeois origins of *Liberación* leaders from the party's reformist, nonrevolutionary ideology and practice after 1948 (pp. 187–89, 227–28).

In effect, Salazar obviates what may be the most intriguing hypothesis of the Cerdas-Schifter-Romero position, that of the progressive "bourgeoisification" of a middle-class counterelite through its capture of the state itself in 1948 and thereafter. Also, Cerdas's idea of a growing contradiction between bureaucratic capitalists and private local and multinational capital cannot be considered here because of the somewhat artificial cutoff date of 1958. The author highlights the bourgeois manipulation of mass politics through different reformist platforms over the entire period. While this general point is perhaps important to clarify, its singular emphasis results in a considerable loss of subtlety regarding the shifting sands of contemporary politics within a reformist, but neither homogeneous nor wholly consensual, elite paradigm. Prospects for any future revolutionary mass politics may indeed be highly dependent, as Cerdas suggests, upon the internal contradictions of reformism that are so well documented through the early *Liberación* period by Salazar.

The last work to be reviewed is essentially a historical and sociological essay that argues for a class-based interpretation of the politics of the 1940s, which led to civil war rather than to class antagonism or social revolution. Like Salazar, Manuel Rojas Bolaños considers both the party leaders of *calderonismo* and *liberacionismo* to be "fractions" of the bourgeoisie and ultimately reconcilable in their most basic interests. Rojas, however, does draw on a variety of local sources (newspapers, obscure periodical literature, official statistical publications, etc.) to document the internal socioeconomic structure of the period. Rojas continues to accept, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, the designation of social democrats for the early *liberacionistas*. He quickly demonstrates, however, that this ideology was essentially neoliberal in the local context, and one fully committed to a reformist vision of capitalist society. Here too, little attention is given to the process of bourgeoisification after 1948. *Liberación* is simply portrayed as a "bourgeois party" (p. 113), despite the author's earlier reference to the middle-class, professional (but in many cases rather humble) origins of the core founding group within the party (p. 107). Overall, Rojas shows considerable flexibility in analyzing the historical actors and actions, but his primary emphasis remains upon the limits of bourgeois reformism that characterize the entire period of the 1940s and beyond.

From all of this critical revisionism several common concerns emerge. First, all agree that the traditional paradigm of the 1948 revolution and *Liberación Nacional* has been seriously challenged for the first time as to both the movement's ideological origins with Facio and the Center of Study of National Problems and the policies developed by the party thereafter. Romero's work is clearly the most exhaustive and thought-provoking on the ideological dimension. Schifter provides a coherent alternative model of the party's policy once in power, and both

he and Cerdas suggest some of the major contradictions inherent in this developmental reformist model. The deepening contradiction between mass groups and the state capitalist model followed by Liberación forms a theme among the three works, with Cerdas presenting the most detailed analysis of the internal contradictions of the powerholders as possible future sources of crisis and destabilization.

Today, amidst a brutal economic crisis and the gathering storm of Central American strife, these revisionist hypotheses certainly should stimulate and orient substantial research into Costa Rican prospects for the future. A solid conceptual basis for such research is being established by Costa Rican authors themselves for the first time, which surely will lead to further advances in the near future. The reflection of the systemic crisis is clear within Liberación as well as among its critics. The end results of this crisis and the viability of different political options cannot be predicted with such clarity, however. Yet whatever options are ultimately chosen will be based on a more realistic appraisal of those available, thanks in part to the works discussed above.

NOTES

1. The classic study of the 1948 revolution is John P. Bell's *Crisis in Costa Rica: The 1948 Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971). Other major studies that emphasize the middle-class and modernizing elements of the revolutionary program, as well as the triumph of electoral democracy, include: James Busey, *Notes on Costa Rican Democracy* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1962); Burt H. English, *Liberación Nacional in Costa Rica* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971); Harry Kantor, *The Costa Rican Election of 1953: A Case Study* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1958). An early English-language critique can be found in Susanne Bodenheimer, "The Social-Democratic Ideology in Latin America: The Case of Costa Rica's Partido Liberación Nacional," *Caribbean Studies* 10 (1970): 49–96. In addition, Robert Trudeau's doctoral dissertation, "Costa Rican Voting: Its Economic Correlates," (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1971) provides important evidence of incongruities with the traditional paradigm. Two recent Costa Rican theses have elaborated upon the ideological content of Liberación party terminology. See Jaime Delgado Rojas, "El pensamiento ideológico-filosófico del Partido Liberación Nacional: análisis de la social democracia costarricense" (Universidad de Costa Rica, 1977); and Rodrigo Quesada Monge, "Los estereotipos político-ideológicos del Partido Liberación Nacional" (Universidad Nacional, Heredia, 1977).
2. Schifter cites declarations on the part of Figueres and his collaborators to the effect that the revolution had not been made simply to "replace one government with another [like it]" nor primarily to insure electoral continuity (pp. 84, 116). These admissions, far from being criticized by the author, help to reveal the larger "transformist" designs of the minority revolutionary group and their unwillingness to accept purely electoral solutions to national problems.
3. Torcuato Di Tella, "Populism and Reform in Latin America," in *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, edited by Claudio Véliz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 64. The current president of Costa Rica, Luis Alberto Monge, clearly recognizes that Liberación lacks a populist trajectory or support base. For interviews with Monge, see José Luis Vega Carballo, *Hacia una interpretación del desarrollo costarricense: ensayo sociológico* (San José: Editorial Porvenir, 1980), pp. 211, 221–22.
4. In addition to the work cited above, Vega Carballo has also published a kind of call-to-arms directed at fellow liberacionistas and based on a return to the more radical

elements of Facio's nationalistic thought. See "Rodrigo Facio: aspectos de una reflexión sobre el desarrollo nacional," *Debates sobre la teoría de la dependencia y la sociología latinoamericana*, edited by Daniel Camancho (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1979), pp. 739–60. This call for a return to poli-class reformist movements sidesteps the question of whether the party itself is any longer willing to tolerate such struggles, much less lead them.

5. Philippe C. Schmitter, "Paths to Political Development in Latin America," *Changing Latin America: New Interpretations of Its Politics and Society*, edited by Douglas Chalmers (New York: The Academy of Political Science, 1972). This framework is developed at greater length in Schifter's *La fase oculta*, which is a revised edition of his master's thesis at the University of Chicago.
6. Here Schifter uses Trudeau's data to show the lack of Liberación support among working-class and urban lower-class groups in general.
7. In essence, Cerdas repeats Bodenheimer's judgement that social democratic parties and ideologies in Latin America have been bourgeois or middle-class reformist movements and paradigms that had neither predominantly working-class structural support nor notable internal ideological coherence. Thus, Romero's claim that the ideological heritage of Liberación was not social-democratic but neoliberal would come as no surprise to these authors, nor would it prevent them from continuing to refer to such movements as social-democratic in the Latin American context.
8. For a recent attempt to refine this hypothesis in the case of a major new state enterprise or bureaucracy, see Mylena Vega, *El Estado costarricense de 1974 a 1978: CODESA y la fracción industrial* (San José: Editorial Hoy, 1982), 184 pp.