

A Case of Intellectual History Archival Research: Orlando Fals Borda's Critique of Violence, Colombia, 1948–1974

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My experience as a PhD researcher (2012–2016) resembles, perhaps, that of many researchers who, while genuinely interested in Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda's (1925–2008) legacy, undertake their projects unaware of the vast richness of his archives, possibly even of their existence.¹ When I began my project I was aware of Fals Borda's pioneering role as a sociologist in Latin America and his contributions toward Participatory Action Research (PAR), but I hadn't yet come across all of these meticulously kept records of his personal, intellectual, and sociopolitical endeavors, relationships, and experiences. This material not only provides the inquisitive researcher with a wealth of unexpected findings but also offers fascinating insights into Fals Borda's understanding of his own work. This article discusses the archives that were essential to my research and how I used them to deal with the most neglected aspect of Fals Borda's intellectual career: the theological basis of his criticism.

Research Abstract

My thesis, "Orlando Fals Borda or The Ethics of Subversion: Towards a Critique of Ideology of Political Violence in Colombia, 1948–1974," is a primary-source based incorporating critical theory analysis across disciplines such as history, philosophy, theology, and sociology. It looks at the foundations underlying his critique of political violence in Colombia. To reconstruct the period between 1948 and 1974, I gained access to thousands of Fals Borda's unpublished documents, works, notebooks, and letters held in five archives in Colombia, the United States, and Switzerland. Using these my thesis sheds new light on the relationships between Fals Borda's critique of

political violence and the origins and development of his social research method Participatory Action Research (PAR).

The years 1948–1974 comprise three periods of Fals Borda's intellectual career: his postgraduate formation (1949–1955); his first independent jobs, his work as the Vice-Minister of Agriculture, his role as cofounder and then dean of the first faculty of sociology in Latin America (1955–1969); and his opposition to the traditional leadership class by civil resistance as an independent researcher and political activist (1970–1974)—which Fals Borda called the "iconoclastic" and "anti-intellectual" stage of his career.

The framework which supports this interplay between intellectual history and critique was Walter Benjamin's "Critique of the Violence" (1921) and "Theses on Philosophy of History" (1940). I not only sought to identify essential affinities between these two authors but also gain philosophical understanding of Fals Borda's main concerns and articulate them against the backdrop of his praxis.

In 2017, the thesis was awarded a honorable mentioned by the Association of Colombianists.

The Project's Background

Between 2006 and 2008 I was preparing a seminar on Walter Benjamin for my undergraduate students. Benjamin's reflections on violence and history planted a seed which led to my questioning of the possibilities of an investigation along the lines of Benjamin's dialectical historiography relating to the Colombian conditions.

Another powerful drive of my urge to carry out this project were the conditions in Colombia during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Colombia was (as its peace process is now) in a real state of emergency. Despite the then government's denial of the existence of political conflict and its historical background, the country was at the start of the new century reminiscent of the darkest period of its history: *la Violencia*, 1946–1958.

Preliminary Research Questions

From the late 1970s onward, Fals Borda's reputation became so inextricably associated with his contributions toward Participatory Action Research (PAR) that his early works on the sociohistorical analysis of the violence in Colombia were almost forgotten. Moreover, much collaborative research, as Ulrich Oslender (2015, 65) pointed out, reinvents itself today without reference to the pioneering work of Fals Borda and others.

However, in 2005 and 2008, Fals Borda decided to edit and republish both *La Violencia en Colombia* (1962), which was coauthored by Fals Borda, Germán Guzmán, and Eduardo Umaña, and *Subversión y cambio social* (1967, 1968, English edition in 1969), respectively. By republishing these almost forgotten books, Fals Borda wanted to remind PAR's practitioners of a quintessential truth of his work: "PAR had a demonic midwife: ancestral political violence that climaxed in the 'bogotazo' of 1948" (Fals Borda 2013, 162). Thus, ignoring the element of civic resistance against structural violence, which called for a radical critique and a reorientation of social theory and practice, is to a certain extent denying PAR's *raison d'être* in Colombia.

With this framework in place, I went to look at Fals Borda's published works and secondary sources to trace PAR to its origins and its relationship with the history of these "60 years of national suffering that continue with the current government," as he stated in 2007 (Fals Borda 2013, 162).

The Things That We Can't Do Without

My first efforts yielded rather disappointing results. First, Fals Borda's early concerns seemed to gravitate around elements unrelated to *la Violencia*; for instance: "Notas sobre la evolución del vestido campesino en la Colombia central" (1953), "Fray Pedro Aguado, the forgotten chronicler of Colombia and Venezuela" (1955), "Costos de producción agrícola en un minifundio: trigo y ajo" (1956), and his MA (1955) and PhD (1957) dissertations on areas that did not suffer directly the blows of *la Violencia*.

Second, when I went to the Archivo General de la Nación in search of official documents of the period of *la Violencia*, the most relevant document I found was the decree which ordered the destruction of 79 sacks containing the documents of the government's Ministry of Internal Affairs between 1949 and 1958.²

Third, I learned that Monsignor Germán Guzmán's personal archive, the main source of information for the book *La Violencia en Colombia* (1962), was unavailable. Guzmán was one of the eight members of the National Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Present Situation of *la Violencia* in the National Territory, created by the interim government in 1958; he was the only member who kept records of interviews and local agreements.³ In 1969, Stanley Ross, director of the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote to Fals Borda, coauthor of the book, to ask his opinion about his institute's intention to acquire the collection, which Guzmán had taken with him to Mexico. Fals Borda disapproved of the idea. He wrote: "I regret to tell you that I do not agree with such a sale. Ever since I cooperated with Guzmán on our book on *la Violencia*, I have insisted with him to deposit the valuable materials in respectable Colombian institutions, where they should be logically located. I believe it most unfortunate that he is attempting to sell those papers to foreign institutions and I will tell him so when I see him next month in Mexico."⁴ In spite of Fals Borda's efforts, the archive is still in private hands in Mexico.

Therefore, despite having read Fals Borda's anthologies from cover to cover, voluminous studies on the political violence in Colombia, and relevant (and irrelevant) secondary sources, I still lacked the material for a narrative able to both amalgamate the various elements in my project and deal with the many questions that were cropping up.

Amid this "mid-project crisis," I found myself facing the predicament posed by a character in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. As George says: "We must not think of the things we could do with, but only of the things that we can't do without." It was then that I came to know about the Fondo Orlando Fals Borda, which had recently been relocated to the new building of the Archivo Central e Histórico, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. This impressive collection (which I had initially mistaken as Fals Borda's personal library, donated to the Library of the Universidad Nacional, Bogotá), become the main source of information for my thesis, and soon led me to other relevant collections in Bogotá, the United States, and Switzerland.

Archives from Which Data Was Collected for My Research

- Fondo Orlando Fals Borda, ACH-UN, FOFB (Archivo Central e Histórico, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá), already digitally conserved, is an impressive and vast collection of documents donated by Fals Borda himself. Although the information regarding the period 1948–1974 is abundant (around 4,400 documents were checked), it still constitutes a minor section of the whole collection. The bulk of the collection comprises documents dated 1977 onward, the year after which Fals Borda threw himself into the twofold task of consolidating PAR and fostering the creation of a national and international network of grassroots movements.
- Fondo Acumulado Facultad de Sociología, ACH-UN, FAFS (Archivo Central e Histórico, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá), the academic and administrative archive of the Faculty of Sociology of the National University, provided invaluable data about Fals Borda's work as dean of this institution from 1959 to 1966; about his participation in the Latin American Committee

on Church and Society; and in the preliminary discussions and preparation between 1963 and 1966 for the World Council of Churches World Conference, 1966. More than 3,200 documents, from 92 folders in 24 boxes, were checked. The documents are not available in digital version, and most of them have not been catalogued.

- Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá, particularly the Camilo Torres collection, which contains a few documents relating to Fals Borda.
- Archive of the Presbyterian Historical Society of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States, which contains valuable information about the controversy between the Presbyterian Synod of Colombia and Fals Borda, and also the letters and documents of Richard Shaull and John Sinclair. This information was obtained thanks to the generosity of Dr. Mónica Moreno.
- Archive of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, from which I collected documents of Fals Borda's participation in the World Conference on Church and Society, 1966.

Theological Basis of Fals Borda's Criticism

The analysis of Fals Borda's intellectual life between 1948 and 1974 made it possible to identify radical changes. However, looking at this period, through his correspondence, ethnographic notebooks, drafts, and so on, it was possible to identify his consistent, lifelong aims, principles, and values. The fact that between 1955 and 1957 he declined professional opportunities at three universities at the United States is highly illustrative in this respect. As he explained to G. M. Couchman, president of the University of Dubuque, and Leo Nussbaum, dean of the College of Liberal Arts: "I certainly would like to enjoy the advantages and the great teaching opportunities offered by the University of Dubuque. But I feel morally obligated to continue my present work, a mission for which I have trained and to which I feel that I should devote my life. I owe this loyalty to my country and its people. Thus I am unable to accept your offer."⁵

Within the dialectics between continuities and disjunction in Fals Borda's intellectual career between 1948 and 1974, my thesis analyzed the development of three elements at the core of Fals

Borda's critique of political violence, namely, his ethical-theological praxis, his historical inquiry into social reality, and his criticism of the sociopolitical role of social sciences in Latin America.

By and large, it has been accepted that Fals Borda's Presbyterian upbringing and education, and his relationship with the Catholic priest Camilo Torres, influenced both his ethical stances and religious values. However, to what extent such an ethical-religious background influenced his critique of political violence had remained unexplored.

Interestingly, Fals Borda's first approach to la Violencia was not academic but musical: an expression of "incipient musical sociology," as he put it.⁶ As director of the Presbyterian Choir in Bogotá, Fals Borda composed a polyphonic piece of music named "Mensaje a Colombia" after the assassination of the Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in April 1948.

This, as well as a few others pieces of music he wrote during his years at the University of Dubuque, where he was one of the tenors of the choir, were, in Fals Borda's words, religious but also inspired by a sense of patriotic duty—they expressed concern for the need of social reconstruction, something like a resurrection.⁷ More than 50 years later, "Mensaje a Colombia" and two other pieces also composed in 1948 were played at the First Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla in January 2002. It was an act of reconciliation since Fals Borda had been excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church of Colombia in 1972.

In 2003, it was also performed by the Philharmonic Orchestra and the Polyphonic Choir of the National University. In his short speech, Fals Borda stated: "En 1948, cuando lo compuse conmovido por la catástrofe del comienzo de la Violencia, esa pieza expresó una esperanza de redención que no pudo tener eco. Tampoco cuando me convertí en sociólogo y junto con respetados colegas, estudié más a fondo tan trágico destino."⁸ He was referring to the attempts to silence his book *La Violencia en Colombia* after its publication in 1962.

From this initial piece of information, it was possible to look at other activities in which Fals Borda was involved. As director of the Presbyterian Youth Centre he also collaborated in a half-hour weekly radio program broadcast every Sunday. This program was an initiative of the new pastor of that church, Richard Shaull, and his wife, Mildred, who settled in a working-class neighborhood. Shaull, who would later become one of the founders of liberation theology, began intensive work with young people, leading them into service of teaching and preaching in deprived areas in Barranquilla. He organized evangelistic teams and a regular theological seminar in his own home. Years later, when Fals Borda completed his postgraduate degrees, Shaull also influenced his involvement in both the Latin American Committee on Church and Society and in the preliminary discussions and preparation between 1963 and 1966 for the World Council of Churches World Conference, Geneva, 1966. In this conference, at which Fals Borda was a delegate, Shaull presented his "Theology of Revolution." In 1967, Fals Borda published *La subversión en Colombia* (translated as *Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*, 1969), some ideas of which seemed inspired by Shaull's theological ideas. Shaull, for his part, totally identified with Fals Borda's sociological approach to the point that he not only wrote the first review in English on *Subversion and Social Change* but set for his newly created organization, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), New York, the twofold goal of supporting the political struggle in Latin America and establishing a similar strategy of subversion in the United States.⁹

Another decisive influence in Fals Borda's life came from his professional and personal relationship with Camilo Torres. In his own words: "The idea of commitment to the problems of society in order to understand them and then to solve them, is one of the roots of participatory research. . . . And this we owe to Camilo Torres" (Cendales, Torres, and Torres 2005, 25). Indeed, this was an element that identified the Faculty of Sociology at the National University that both had created in 1959—the first one in Latin America.

This became the platform for several projects undertaken within an atmosphere of ecumenism and cross-fertilization between theology and sociology. In 1963, for example, Fals Borda was offered the position of scientific project director of a study, involving several countries, of the impact of the Christian churches in social and economic development. The study, directed by Egbert De Vries, Protestant Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, and François Houtart (Camilo Torres's teacher at Louvain), Catholic International Federation of Institutes for Social and Socio-Religious Research (FERES), Belgium, was sponsored by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches and had the financial support of the Ford Foundation.

These experiences and his participation in the World Conference of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, prepared Fals Borda to enter into another field of theological debate, Liberation Theology, whose ideologues spearheaded the struggle for social justice in Latin America.

In Liberation Theology there was a convergence of both theology and social science, on the one side, and Protestants and Catholics, on the other. Through social analysis and theological reflection, and based on their own experience, these theologians interpreted the meaning of Christian life through their solidarity with the oppressed and their struggle for social justice. My research looked at some aspects of Fals Borda's search for a method of research and political participation which moved in parallel with the theology of liberation in a time when he was radically at odds with the Presbyterian Synod of Colombia.

My inquiry into the relationship between music, religion, and criticism did not conclude at that point. It examined another dimension, more intimate, of Fals Borda's religious experience. According to Fals Borda, his love for music, in particular choral music, formed his personal ecumenical attitude as much as his professional approach as a sociologist. The homages that both the Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla (2002) and the National University (2003) paid to Fals Borda by playing his music were interpreted by Fals Borda not only as acts of reconciliation but

also as a recognition of what he called "his second nature": "Es mucho, pues, lo que mi musicalidad debe a la Iglesia, en lo que puede ser una segunda dimensión de mi persona, tanto o más satisfactoria que la científica; en realidad pienso que la una me ha ayudado con la otra, si analizamos las estructuras multivocales de algunas de mis obras" (2009, 26).¹⁰

Indeed, in the town of Vianí, the place of his first short post, music was the means to establish contact with the people and to bridge the gap between himself and culturally different groups. Fals Borda's musical sensibility made him aware that music was one of the few elements that had connected the rural world with other cultural contexts. Cultural and linguistic elements had made their way to isolated regions of Cundinamarca and Boyacá through the peasants' fondness for Colombian Caribbean music (*porros*, *cumbias*, *paseo*) and Mexican *corridos* and *rancheras*. His study of the peasant community of Saucío dedicated one section of discerning analysis to the history, evolution, features, and meaning of music for this community. Nor was this aspect neglected in *La Violencia en Colombia* (1962). As he observed: "El pueblo no dejó de cantar ni en las adversas y calamitosas condiciones de los grupos errantes."¹¹ New lyrics using the rhythm of popular songs exploited and enhanced individual and collective feelings, ideas and hatreds of groups engaged in the conflict. Some ditties and songs, testimonies of *la Violencia*, became popular with the peasantry (Guzmán, Fals Borda, and Umaña 2005, 236-244). In Fals Borda's *Historia doble de la Costa*, music was a core element; this study of the Colombian Caribbean resembles, as was Fals Borda's purpose, a true polyphony.¹²

Fals Borda's ecumenism was not only a form of criticism of the dogmatisms and fanaticisms that drove *la Violencia* and the subsequent political violence in Colombia. It also led his critique to the threshold of its aesthetic and celebrative dimension.

To Conclude: A Word on Profane Theology

Fals Borda's theological basis constitutes, par excellence, the Benjaminian element of his ideology critique. This Benjaminian characteristic appears in at least two correlated forms. First, in its profane nature. *Profane*, in its most literal meaning of "outside the temple" (from *pro* "before" and *fanum* "temple"), refers to a theology concerned with transcendence, faith, and hope in the secular realm. Second, it resignifies the way history and criticism relate to memory: "history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [... which] forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological" (Benjamin 1999, 471). However, Benjamin warns us, little will be achieved in trying to write such experience with specifically theological concepts. If so, how does the theological element operate in a text stripped of theological concepts? Benjamin provides us with an image through which is possible to consider in dialectical terms such relation. As he says: "My thinking is related to theology as a blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain" (1999, 471).

Notes

- ¹ I carried out my doctoral research project thanks to a University of Roehampton full scholarship for the period 2012–2015. I worked under the supervision of Dr. Carrie Hamilton and graduated in July 2017. For my research, I did two three-month periods of fieldwork in Colombia. There, Dr. Mónica Moreno generously shared archive material obtained for her own research. I also obtained relevant documents from the Centro de Documentación Regional, Banco de la República, Montería, thanks to Professor Joanne Rappaport. I express my thanks to the staff of the Archivo Central e Histórico of the National University, Bogotá (ACHUN/B), especially to Gabriel Escalante, whose unconditional help enormously facilitated my work; the Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá; the Biblioteca de la Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, especially to Lucila Herrera, Janneth Londoño, and Judith Rodríguez for their readiness to help with my many requests; the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá; the British Library, UK; and the Library of Roehampton University. Special thanks are due to Martin Higgitt and Gill, my skilful and patient editors. My greatest debt of gratitude is to Gill for her dedication to the entire final manuscript.
- ² Acta Número 1 del Comité de Archivo y Correspondencia Ministerio de Gobierno, January 4, 1967, in Archivo General de la Nación (AGN).
- ³ Formed by eight members: two Liberals, two Conservatives, two military officers, and two clergymen, the commission interviewed more than 20,000 people in more than 54 areas in the country and established 50 local pacts with groups still armed on behalf the government. Since the

commissioners were instructed to present their findings and recommendations privately to the president, there were no written reports (Jaramillo Marín 2011, 37–62).

- ⁴ Letter to Stanley Ross, Director Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, October 30, 1969, Archivo Central e Histórico Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Fondo Orlando Fals Borda (ACHUN/B, FOFB). Digital. Folder Relaciones_Internacionales, Subfolder Europa II_Suiza_31.
- ⁵ Letter, July 12, 1956, ACHUN/B, FOFB. Digital. Folder Universidades, subfolder University_Dubuque_03.
- ⁶ ACHUN/B, FOFB. Digital. Documentos_Personales, subfolder Iglesia_Presbiteriana_Música Coral_23.
- ⁷ "Las había empezado cuando con mis amigos del Centro Juvenil Presbiteriano sentimos el impacto desastroso de la revolución del 9 de abril [1948]. Con ellas quise combinar las preocupaciones políticas con la esperanza de una intervención superior y divina para sacar a nuestro país de los peligros inminentes. Mi plegaria entonces sigue vigente." ACHUN/B, FOFB. Digital. Folder Documentos_Personales, subfolder Iglesia_Presbiteriana_Música_Coral_22-23.
- ⁸ Fals Borda, 'Speech,' May, 28 2003. ACHUN/B, FOFB. Digital. Folder Documentos_Personales, subfolder Iglesia_Presbiteriana_Música Coral_19. "In 1948, when I composed it after the catastrophe of the beginning of violence, that piece expressed a hope of redemption that could not be echoed. Not even when I became a sociologist, and along with respected colleagues, did I study more thoroughly such tragic events." Translations by Juan Mario Diaz.
- ⁹ *NACLA Newsletter*, December (1967). ACH-UN, FOFB. Digital. Folder Libros, subfolder Libro_Subversión_Colombia_123.
- ¹⁰ "My passion for music owes a great deal to the church. Music has been a second dimension of my person, perhaps as much or more satisfactory than the scientific one. When the polyphonic structure of my works is analyzed, it is not difficult to find out that they have complemented each other."
- ¹¹ "Not even in the most adverse and dire conditions did uprooted groups cease to sing."
- ¹² Fals Borda, "Memo sobre la Música Sociológica," January 16, 2002. ACHUN/B, FOFB. Digital. Folder Documentos_Personales, subfolder Iglesia_Presbiteriana_Música_Coral_23.

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