

“Vibrations of the Collective”: The Popular Ideology of Gaitanismo on Colombia’s Atlantic Coast, 1944–1948

W. JOHN GREEN

THE allure of Gaitanismo, the populist political movement led by Colombian politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, sometimes seemed otherworldly to contemporary observers. Juan Manuel Valdelamar, an influential labor leader, remarked that in the Colombian department of Bolívar, “all the campesinos have a portrait of Gaitán in their homes, and daily they tend it with a *mística* that approaches adoration.”¹ Nevertheless, the quasi-religious reverence Gaitanistas professed for their caudillo found its origins in the gritty substance of Colombian social reality. Gaitanista ideology sprang from its followers’ collective understanding of the world and their shared notions of how it ought to be. Colombia’s growing cities of the 1940s created ideological niches for alternative ideas about the social and political relations of Colombian society.

Studies of Gaitanismo generally focus on Gaitán’s home base in and around Bogotá, though the movement flourished throughout Colombia.² After Bogotá it was strongest, and perhaps most radical, on the Atlantic coast and in the Magdalena River Valley. This study deals with Cartagena,

The author thanks Aline Helg, Alan Knight, Keith Haynes, Medófilo Medina, César Ayala, Giomar Dueñas, Claudia Steiner, and the *HAHR*’s anonymous evaluators for their helpful comments. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 18th LASA Congress and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Mauricio Archila Neira graciously allowed me to read the transcripts of his extensive collection of interviews. Research for this essay was funded by a Fulbright grant. Thanks also to the staffs of the Instituto Colombiano de Participación JEG, the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, the Biblioteca Departamental de Atlántico, and the Archivo Histórico de Cartagena for their assistance.

1. Letter to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (JEG), Mar. 22, 1947; Archivo del Instituto Colombiano de la Participación Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, formerly Centro Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (hereafter AICPG), v.0061, “Cartas Bolívar y Nariño.”

2. The major exception is Gonzalo Sánchez G., *Los días de la revolución: gaitanismo y 9 de abril en provincia* (Bogotá: Centro Cultural Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, 1983), though he, too, ignores the northern coast.

Barranquilla, and Santa Marta, the principal cities of the Atlantic coastal departments of the period, Bolívar, Atlántico, and Magdalena. But it also discusses the movement as it existed in towns throughout the coastal region and along the Magdalena River. Outside Bogotá and the Department of Cundinamarca, Gaitán found some of his strongest support in these integrated regions.

The reasons for this strength and radical tendency are many. The northern coast was an area known historically as a Liberal and even radical-Liberal bastion. Its more pronounced rural landlessness made Gaitán's views on property very appealing. The population's racial makeup bolstered Gaitanismo in many subtle ways; and the popular memory of Gaitán's role as "defender of the working class" in the aftermath of the 1928 banana workers' strike was especially pronounced in the coastal region. The extraordinary vitality of Gaitanismo in the north would be dramatically illustrated in the presidential election of 1946.

Until recently, scholars looked on Latin American populism as primarily a vehicle through which ruling elites, or portions of them, maintained their supremacy. Investigations of populism were habitually pursued as studies of leadership, focusing on charismatic and Machiavellian leaders who mouthed progressive rhetoric while actually subverting the interests of their passive followers. New studies, however, point to autonomous, grassroots struggles. Many scholars have come to recognize that populism in Latin America embraced two opposite tendencies: elite social domination through controlled mobilization of the popular classes, and popular mobilization and resistance to the existing relations of power.³ While most movements leaned toward one side or the other of the populist continuum, both of these propensities could, and generally did, coexist in the same mobilization. Yet one of the telling differences between expressions of Latin American populism was the degree of popular influence reflected in a movement's program and ideological perspective.

In the case of Colombia, Gaitán led a pivotal movement of national scope from the late 1920s until his assassination on April 9, 1948. His effort represented a momentous surge of popular participation in the nation's political

3. See esp. Ernesto Laclau, "Towards a Theory of Populism," in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, and Populism* (London: NLB, 1977), 173-74; Robert Dix, "Populism: Authoritarian and Democratic," *Latin American Research Review* 20:2 (1985), 29-52. Other works dealing with the dual nature of populist mobilizations are Paul W. Drake, *Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1932-52* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), 1-13; idem, "Conclusion: Requiem for Populism?" in *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Michael Conniff (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1982), 217-45; Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988); and John D. French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992).

life. Its character as a mobilization, however, is still a matter of dispute. Gaitán's detractors on the left have long claimed that the movement he came to lead merely channeled discontent through the existing political establishment, blunting its impact. From the 1940s on, moreover, Gaitán's influence has been attributed to charisma. (With good reason; even today it is difficult to listen to recordings of his speeches and not feel his magnetism.⁴) Studies touching on Gaitanista ideology have overwhelmingly looked to Gaitán as the primary source of the movement's ideas.⁵ This essay, in contrast, will argue that on the Atlantic coast, Gaitanista ideology constituted a popularly grounded system of belief that oriented a radical mobilization.

Although, during the 1940s, Colombians on the left, including Gaitanistas, were relatively unfamiliar with the canon of socialist thought, this does not necessarily mean that popular and radical political mobilizations were lacking.⁶ Historians have argued that continued popular attachment to the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties has prevented the oppressed in Colombian society from recognizing their collective interests, and that the popular classes have consequently failed to create more appropriate, "class-conscious" political parties.⁷ Gaitanismo and the left-Liberal tradition

4. Excellent recordings of his speeches can be heard on *Caudillos y muchedumbres*, ed. Jorge Eduardo Girón Barrios (Medellín: Discos Fuentes, 1975), vols. 1, 2, 6.

5. The principal works on Gaitán and his movement are J. Cordell Robinson, *El movimiento gaitanista en Colombia, 1930-1948*, trans. Eddy Torres (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1976); Richard Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1978); Sánchez G., *Los días de la revolución*; Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia: Colombia, 1930-1954*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1987). Other works that deal in passing with Gaitanismo portray the movement as merely a slight variation from the course of Colombia's two-party system. See Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 274-375; Christopher Abel, *Política, iglesia, y partidos en Colombia* (Bogotá: Univ. Nacional de Colombia, 1987); Mauricio Archila Neira, *Cultura e identidad obrera: Colombia, 1910-1945* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1991); Mario Aguilera Peña and Renán Vega Cantor, *Ideal democrático y revuelta popular: Bosquejo histórico de la mentalidad política popular en Colombia, 1781-1948* (Bogotá: Instituto María Cano, 1991); Christopher Abel and Marco Palacios, "Colombia, 1930-58," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 8, *Latin America Since 1930: Spanish South America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 587-627; Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *La ofensiva empresarial: industriales, políticos, y violencia en los años 40 en Colombia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1992); David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993).

6. Daniel Pécaut and Mauricio Archila Neira argue that Colombia at midcentury was isolated from many ideological currents common in Europe, the United States, and other parts of Latin America. See Pécaut, preface to Archila Neira, *Cultura e identidad*, 12.

7. See, e.g., Orlando Fals Borda, *Historia doble de la costa*, 4 vols. (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia Editores, 1979-86), vol. 2, *El presidente Nieto* (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia Editores, 1979), 73B-74B. For an excellent critique of "false consciousness," including Gramsci's concept of dominant ideological hegemony, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), chap. 8; idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), chap. 4.

it represented, however, offered a dramatic challenge to the hegemony of the established parties. As the culmination of the popular currents of mobilization manifested during the 1920s and 1930s, Gaitanismo effectively retooled the Liberal-Conservative dichotomy for many Colombians. The contest was becoming one between the *pueblo* and the *oligarquía*, with serious overtones of class struggle. While both parties continued to include adherents from all social classes, the Gaitanistas' new dichotomy demonstrated the possibility of an alternative political system based on class interests rather than political labels.

Gaitán became the focal point of an ongoing, broad-based popular mobilization against the structures of power in Colombian society. Gaitanismo's ideological perspective, therefore, rested on more than Gaitán's personal outlook or his artfully delivered and emotionally charged words; it resulted from an interactive process between leader and masses. Far from being a collection of ideas handed down by the intellectual strata of the movement, Gaitanista ideology reflected popularly held notions that Gaitán identified, articulated, and eventually came to symbolize. Colombians in the 1940s agitated for increased democratic rights and more popular control of institutions. They also made widespread demands for social and economic justice. The ideas of democracy and social justice were intimately related in the minds of rank-and-file Gaitanistas. Gaitanista morality, consequently, derived its power from the social and economic content of Gaitanista ideology.

This study attempts to resurrect the meanings of democracy and justice, socialism and morality, *pueblo* and *oligarquía* as they were understood and used by the Gaitanistas in focusing their movement. These concepts had radical meaning for Gaitán's followers. The desire to fight, as it was commonly put, for "the well-being of the less favored classes of society" seemed more tangible to the Gaitanistas than vague references to class struggle and revolution. Understood in such terms, the popular ideology of Gaitanismo helps restore the movement's original status as a radical popular mobilization.

The Development of Gaitanismo

Born in 1929, Gaitanismo evolved during a phase of escalating social conflict. The first period associated with Gaitán falls neatly between his rise in the collective consciousness as the champion of United Fruit Company's striking banana workers in Magdalena in 1928–29 and his return to the Liberal Party in 1935, after a two-year attempt at more independent action through the Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria (UNIR). This early period was followed by years of problematic coexistence with a Liberal establishment intent on controlling more radical currents by partially absorbing them.

The watershed banana workers' strike was the product of years of tension between United Fruit and its workers in the "banana zone," and of a determined organizing drive by anarchosyndicalists and the Revolutionary Socialist (later the Communist) Party.⁸ The Conservative government intervened by deploying troops, calling a state of siege, and carrying out the infamous "massacre" at Ciénaga in the early hours of December 6, 1928.⁹ Newly elected to the lower house of Congress, Gaitán traveled to Ciénaga for a theatrical "investigation" in July 1929. As he returned up the Magdalena River to Bogotá, he stopped in numerous cities and towns to tell of his findings, drawing large crowds. While still in his boat at Barrancabermeja, he told a gathering that he came "as a witness to the most miserable slaughter the country has ever seen," in response to which several people jumped into the river to meet him.¹⁰

Back in Bogotá, on September 3, Gaitán launched his so-called debate before packed congressional galleries and an attentive press. For 15 days he enthusiastically pelted the government with invective and scorn. His speeches served the dual purpose of demonstrating the culpability of United Fruit and the Conservatives in the killings and drawing attention to himself. As one Gaitanista would later maintain, "Gaitanismo began with the defense Dr. Gaitán made of the victims of the *zona bananera*."¹¹

Gaitán's exploits were followed not only in Bogotá, where crowds accompanied him home each evening, but throughout the country. Writing from Barranquilla "in support and admiration," one woman claimed that

8. The 1928 strike is perhaps the single most investigated event in Colombian labor history. See, e.g., Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 56–61; Miguel Urrutia, *The Development of the Colombian Labor Movement* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), 99–108; Judith White, *Historia de una ignominia: la United Fruit Co. en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Presencia, 1978), 73–102; Roberto Herrera Soto and Rafael Romero Castañeda, *La zona bananera del Magdalena: historia y léxico* (Bogotá: Caro y Cuervo, 1979).

9. Estimates of the number of strikers killed still vary widely: 80 to 100 in Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 57; 1,500 in Alberto Castrillón R., *120 días bajo el terror: la huelga de las bananeras* (Bogotá: Editorial Túpac Amaru, 1979 [1929]); more than 2,000 in White, *Historia de una ignominia*, 100. Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sud-americana, 1967), and Alvaro Cepeda Samudio, *La casa grande* (Buenos Aires: J. Alvarez, 1967), have immortalized the strike in fiction; but Maurice Brungardt points out that historians have yet to sound the depths of the repressed strike's influence on Colombians. "Mitos históricos y literarios: *La casa grande*," in *De ficciones y realidades: perspectivas sobre literatura e historia colombiana*, ed. Alvaro Pineda Botero and Raymond Williams (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1989), 63.

10. Erasmo Egea, interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, Barrancabermeja, May 19, 1985. Egea worked for Tropical Oil in Barrancabermeja from 1924 to 1935. He goes on to say that because of its isolation, Gaitán brought Barrancabermeja its first real news of the strike.

11. Heliodoro Cogua P. (a smallholder in Valle in the 1940s, lifelong Gaitanista, and guide at the Casa Museo Gaitán), interview by the author, Bogotá, May 17, 1990. The point is confirmed repeatedly in the correspondence found in AICPG.

people cheered him on because of their frustration with “the domination of the *gringos*” and the mockery of justice.¹² The 31-year-old Gaitán was catapulted into a position of authority in the Liberal Party on the eve of the 1930 presidential election, in which a divided Conservative Party would lose power for the first time since 1885. Thus, at the very birth of the “Liberal Republic,” he had already established himself as “the future Messiah” of the working class.¹³

The administration of Enrique Olaya Herrera (1930–34), a former ambassador to Washington, was anything but fertile ground for the Liberalism Gaitán and his followers sought to foster. Yet in the short timespan between his swift rise through the party ranks in 1930 and his frustrated rejection of Liberalism in 1933, Gaitán attempted many policy-related innovations, such as proposing legislation on land redistribution and voting rights. Focusing largely on Gaitán’s activities in Congress during this period, some interpretations have stressed his relationship to “the salaried middle class and . . . rural *colonos*” rather than the “urban proletariat.” This is hardly surprising, given Gaitán’s statement that the “middle sectors” were in the process of developing a social consciousness and would “form the vanguard” of Colombia’s socialist forces.¹⁴ Yet Gaitán also played a role as the most prominent labor lawyer of the period, which qualifies the view of Gaitanismo as merely a middle-class or petit-bourgeois movement.¹⁵ When serious, organized labor conflicts erupted in the 1930s and 1940s, Gaitán was most often called in as the unions’ advocate.¹⁶ Ignacio Torres Giraldo, apostle of the early Communist Party and never an advocate of its most threatening rival on the left, has pointed to Gaitán’s repeated “failures” in strike negotiations in Medellín and Cali.¹⁷ Torres Giraldo ignores, however, the significance of this habit among so many unions of turning to Gaitán to look after their interests.

Stymied by the Liberal “notables,” his initiatives mostly subverted by his detractors in the party or disregarded by the leadership, Gaitán resigned from the Liberal directorate in July 1932. While he was out of the country on an official trip, his name was removed from the Liberal list, and he consequently lost his seat in Congress.

Gaitán officially split from the Liberal fold in October 1933 and founded UNIR, which, along with the Communist Party, represented one of many

12. Carmela Ramos P. to JEG, Barranquilla (B/quilla), Sept. 27, 1929, AICPG, v. 0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

13. Heliodoro Linares U. (“Helius”), *Yo acuso: biografía de Gaitán y Fajardo. Diez años después, 1948–1959* (Bogotá: Editorial Iqueima, 1959), 59.

14. Braun, *Assassination of Gaitán*, 60; Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 63.

15. Both Sharpless and Braun ignore this aspect of Gaitán’s career.

16. Archila Neira, *Cultura e identidad*, 285.

17. Ignacio Torres Giraldo, *Los inconformes: historia de la rebeldía de las masas en Colombia*, vol. 4 (Bogotá: Editorial Latina, 1967), 1105–12.

competing currents of popular mobilization in the early 1930s.¹⁸ Its charter proclaimed the “struggle for socialism,” and in March 1934 Gaitán asserted, “Unirismo is an autonomous, independent force of preparation and struggle, guarding the firm principles of the left.”¹⁹ He stressed discipline, mass mobilization, and a hierarchical organizational structure (which gave him a nagging reputation as an authoritarian). UNIR even came to be known as the Revolution of Soap because of Gaitán’s stress on hygiene. The strategy of “state intervention” in the nation’s economic and social organization, carried out especially as land redistribution, occupied center stage in Gaitán’s scenario of programs and policies, presented in the Manifesto of Unirismo and the Platform of Action for UNIR.²⁰

Although the Unirista experiment represented an intense period of activity on Gaitán’s part, the organization was short-lived. From the moment of its conception, one of UNIR’s greatest problems was in making appeals beyond “certain groups of the population” and overcoming strong attachment to the old parties.²¹ Meanwhile, loyal Liberal Party members were beginning to express many of the same basic concerns. Indeed, Liberals delivered their most devastating blow to UNIR (and other popular movements) by usurping much of its program. Thus in May 1935, Gaitán declared victory in his struggle to push Liberalism left, and ran for Congress once again on a Liberal list.

During the nine-year interlude between the end of UNIR and the dramatic resurgence of Gaitanismo in 1944, Liberal governments enacted reforms that were eventually ignored in practice, thereby exciting the political wrath of Gaitán’s *pueblo*. In his first administration (1934–38), Alfonso López Pumarejo instituted the *Revolución en Marcha*, a program that focused on state intervention and constitutional reform. The reformed Constitution of 1936 instituted universal male suffrage and authorized the state to intervene on behalf of workers, while Law 200 of 1936 attempted to adjust landholding patterns and incorporated Gaitán’s ideas on the social responsibilities of land ownership. Through such measures, López effectively won the support

18. For discussion of other movements in the early 1930s, see Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, vol. 2; Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*; Archila Neira, *Cultura e identidad*; Abel and Palacios, “Colombia, 1930–58”; Catherine C. LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1850–1936* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1986); Medófilo Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Colombia* (Bogotá: CEIS, 1980); idem, *La protesta urbana en Colombia en el siglo XX* (Bogotá: Aurora, 1984).

19. Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 72, 75. It was no accident that the acronym “UNIR” means “to unite” in Spanish.

20. The manifesto can be found in Luis Emiro Valencia, ed., *Gaitán: antología de su pensamiento económico y social* (Bogotá: Suramérica, 1968), 220–51; the platform in *Unirismo* (the movement’s newspaper), Aug. 23, 1934.

21. A. Amador y Cortes to JEG, Cartagena, Oct. 27, 1933, AICPG, v.0088, “Adhesiones y quejas Bol.”

of large portions of the “popular classes,” including the leaders of organized labor and the Communist Party.

The *revolución* endured a pause under president Eduardo Santos (1938–42), which actually began under López himself in 1936 and which López’ return to office in late 1942 did little to alleviate. Wracked by scandal and opposition, López withdrew from the presidency in favor of Alberto Lleras Camargo in 1944; but he had set the stage for more radical movements. The roller-coaster of emotions and aspirations produced by Liberal reform, López’ eclipse, and the growing mood of disillusionment and discontent among groups that had not benefited permitted Gaitán to present himself as Lopismo’s logical alternative and successor.

The years between 1935 and 1944 saw Byzantine political maneuvering between Gaitán and the Liberal establishment. Gaitán served in both houses of Congress, was appointed mayor of Bogotá (but dismissed after an elite-manipulated taxi drivers’ strike), served as minister of education and minister of labor under the López and Santos administrations, and regularly held an elected spot on the Bogotá City Council. For his part, Gaitán was willing to be in the world of Liberal politics as long as he could convince people he was not of that world. In the north, this apparently was not a problem. Nowhere was Gaitanismo’s flowering after 1944 more avidly supported than on the Atlantic coast and in the Magdalena River Valley, where the popular memory of Gaitán’s dramatic role as “protector of the workers” in 1929 continued to burn brightly.²²

The Atlantic Coast

By custom there are two Colombias: the highlands, whose residents are known as *cachacos*, and the coasts, inhabited by *costeños*. To speak of the northern coast is to include the Magdalena River, which for centuries linked Caribbean and Andean Colombia. In the 1940s the populations of such important river cities as the oil production center of Barrancabermeja, situated hundreds of miles upstream, were composed largely of *costeños*.²³ Before the 1950s, neither Bogotá nor Medellín enjoyed a direct rail link to the

22. The AICPG virtually brims with references to Gaitán’s role in the aftermath of the 1928 strike. See, e.g., the following letters to JEG: Juan de Dios Romero, B/quilla, Feb. 3, 1944, v.0021, “Cartas adhesión”; Antonio Ribera, Santa Marta, Sept. 22, 1937, v.0017, “Adhesiones Magd.”; Antonio Caballero Cabarcas, Dirección Liberal Izquierdista Revolucionaria, Cartagena, Feb. 21, 1939, v.0053, “Cartas Bol.”; Federación de Trabajadores del Magd. (Aracataca), July 6, 1938, v.0011, “Cartas Magd.”; Manuel F. Robles (speaking of banana workers), Santa Marta, Feb. 5, 1942, v. 0011, “Cartas Magd.”; Luis Sandoval P., B/quilla, Mar. 27, 1946, v. 0043, “Cartas Atl.”; Benigo Villa, B/quilla, Jan. 22, 1944, v.0026, “Cartas adhesión.”; Ignacio Salazar H., Pato, Jan. 31, 1946, v.0017, “Adhesiones Magd.”

23. Liberal merchant and longtime Barrancabermeja resident Flavio Vásquez affirmed that after 1928, it was home to more *costeños* than people from the interior. Interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, Barrancabermeja, Apr. 22, 1985.

northern coast; paddle-wheeled steamboats on the Magdalena (most based in Barranquilla) were the principal form of transportation for both cargo and passengers.²⁴ After the turn of the century, most of Colombia's primary commodity, coffee, passed down the Magdalena and through Barranquilla and its port on the Caribbean, Puerto Colombia.²⁵ At the end of the 1940s, Cartagena remained the main petroleum port, through which the *oleoducto* completed in 1926 operated with a 70,000-barrel-per-day capacity. In the 1930s and 1940s, Santa Marta was the impoverished sibling among the coastal cities, suffering from the decline of Colombia's banana industry as United Fruit concentrated its operations in Central America.²⁶

The economy of the northern coast revolved around agriculture (especially cattle raising) and river transport, with some limited activity in mining and oil production. Coastal land tended to be held in large haciendas; between 1880 and 1930, relatively little public land was distributed among the landless population, though many of the largest haciendas actually expanded.²⁷ This situation, combined with the collapse of the banana trade, produced a steady stream of migrants to the coastal cities, particularly Barranquilla, the nation's third-largest city and principal port.

The primeval dichotomy between the coast and the highlands even today remains a fundamental divide in racial terms.²⁸ In general, the highlands have predominantly white, Indian, and mestizo racial elements, while the coasts and the river valleys are black and mulatto in character, with some white and indigenous influences.²⁹ Indeed, for many highland Colombians, *costeño* is a synonym for mulatto. This image, perhaps pejorative and certainly ambivalent, is significant because "darkness" has long been a relative handicap for both blacks and mestizos in Colombia's supposedly mestizo society.³⁰

24. Eduardo Acevedo Latorre, *El río grande de la Magdalena: apuntes sobre su historia, geografía, y sus problemas* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1981), 50.

25. Theodore E. Nichols, *Tres puertos de Colombia: estudio sobre el desarrollo de Cartagena, Santa Marta, y Barranquilla* (Bogotá: Banco Popular, 1973), 241.

26. From the production peak in 1930 of 11 million bunches, yields dropped to 3.4 million in 1941, and fell off completely between 1942 and 1944. *Ibid.*, 249–51, 253–58.

27. Eduardo Posada Carbó, "La economía del Caribe colombiano a comienzos del siglo: 1900–1930," *Estudios Sociales* 2 (May 1988), 69–71.

28. For economic and political aspects of the divide, see Eduardo Posada Carbó, "Notas para una historia de la costa atlántica: identidad y conflicto en la formación de la regionalidad, 1900–1930," *Huellas* (Univ. del Norte, Barranquilla) 3:7 (Sept. 1982), 4–13.

29. See Lynn T. Smith, "The Racial Composition of the Population of Colombia," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 8:2 (1966), 219–20. Though Smith's observations are still generally correct, more recent works bring these issues more into focus. See esp. Fals Borda, *Historia doble*; Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993).

30. On the persistent fiction of Colombians' blindness to race, see Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*, 3; Miles Richardson, *San Pedro, Colombia: Small Town in a Developing Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 16.

Gaitanismo was unquestionably a “dark” movement. The caudillo himself was referred to maliciously in elite circles as “el negro Gaitán.” His dark complexion and facial features marked him unmistakably as a mestizo; he alone among Colombia’s prominent political movers was denied membership in the elite Jockey Club, in no small part because of his appearance. Yet Gaitán subtly turned his “darkness” to his own advantage. Herbert Braun reveals that during his presidential campaign, most pictures “show a dark-complected Gaitán, his eyes half closed in the culturally recognized sign of suspicion and distrust held to be characteristic of *malicia indígena*. . . . [He] was now forcing his image” onto the Colombian consciousness.³¹ All the same, Gaitanista mobilization never mustered along overt color lines. Race was an omnipresent but largely silent issue.³² Gaitán observed the Colombian convention of ignoring race when he spoke of the *pueblo*, while Colombians of all races accepted the dogma of a “mixed nation.”

The Presidential Campaign

Gaitán’s contemporaries recognized his campaign for president from March 1944 to May 1946 as a mobilization truly without precedent. In the context of the Liberal Republic’s crisis of leadership, Gaitán and his closest supporters saw the perfect opportunity to grab the Liberal nomination. When the party leadership predictably decided to follow tradition and impose its own candidate, Gaitán had little choice—or inclination—but to continue as an independent Liberal candidate through the “Moral and Democratic Restoration of the Republic.” The chosen candidate was Gabriel Turbay, an intellectual who, despite radical sympathies, had worked his way up through the party ranks; he was therefore more dependent on the old Liberal political networks and had little popular following of his own.³³

Spurned by Liberalism’s leaders, Gaitán concentrated on mobilizing the disparate groups and social strata attracted to Gaitanismo into a viable political movement and on building an electoral network that could rival the long-established Liberal and Conservative political machines. Not surprisingly, the Gaitanistas had their biggest organizational successes in the urban areas where the hold of the local party bosses, *gamonales* or caciques, was less firm. In March 1946, the 12 Liberals on Barranquilla’s 15-member city council (elected officials all) declared in favor of Gaitán’s candidacy as the “only one for the Liberal Party.”³⁴

31. Braun, *Assassination of Gaitán*, 82–83.

32. Race seldom comes up in the correspondence in the AICPG.

33. See Agustín Rodríguez Garavito, *Gabriel Turbay, un solitario de la grandeza: biografía de una generación infortunada* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1977), 61–63.

34. Consejo Municipal de B/quilla to JEG, Mar. 30, 1946; AICPG, v.0043, “Cartas Atl.”

Establishment Liberals in Bogotá angrily and fearfully opposed Gaitán's campaign, though many in the party hierarchy believed that Gaitán's drive was really an attempt to position himself for a prominent appointment in the next administration. This apparently was Turbay's belief until just days before the election. The editors of Eduardo Santos' *El Tiempo* and Juan Lozano y Lozano's *La Razón*, both of Bogotá, however, immediately launched counter-offensives. They called Gaitán an anti-Liberal demagogue and a traitor to the party. *El Tiempo*'s columnist "Calibán" argued that Gaitán was not only a danger to Liberalism but also a fascist threat to democracy.³⁵ This motif was especially popular with Gaitán's longtime rivals in the Communist Party (by then renamed the Partido Socialista Democrático, or PSD). In their paper, *Diario Popular*, and through their control of Colombia's principal labor federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores Colombianos, the Communists backed old-time Lopismo and Turbay, whom they took to be its representative.

In March 1946, when the Conservatives launched Mariano Ospina Pérez as their first presidential candidate since 1930, they found the Liberals utterly divided. As election day drew close, the Liberals frantically tried to mend the gap between official and Gaitanista Liberalism. Most distressing was the common knowledge that behind Ospina loomed the despised influence of Laureano Gómez, leader of the most militant wing of the Conservative Party, who openly sympathized with Italian Fascism and German National Socialism.

At the beginning of April 1946, Gaitán joined Turbay, López, and Santos in a series of private meetings, in which Gaitán and Turbay discussed concrete economic and political reforms designed to increase popular participation in Colombia's institutions. These had to be accepted before Gaitán would withdraw from the race.³⁶ They discussed forming a Liberal "anti-oligarchy pact," in which Turbay would stand for president in 1946 and Gaitán in 1950. Such wording quickly alienated the party's leaders, however, and both López and Santos turned against a merger. More important, Gaitán's followers definitively rejected such a compromise. At one of his periodic radio addresses at the Municipal Theater immediately following his meetings with Turbay, Gaitán faced an ugly crowd that would hardly allow him to speak. He quickly realized that there was no turning back.

The outcome of the election on May 5, 1946, shocked the Liberal "notables" and their PSD allies. Ospina Pérez won the election with 565,260 votes; Turbay came in second with 440,591. Gaitán trailed relatively closely

35. Reprinted in *El Nacional* (B/quilla), Sept. 24, 1945, p. 1, next to a very large picture of Gaitán, "Gaitán es Fascista." Enrique Santos, better known as "Calibán," was the brother of former president Eduardo Santos, who owned *El Tiempo*.

36. Luís David Peña, *Gaitán íntimo* (Bogotá: Iqueima, 1948), 160-62.

with 358,957 votes. More significant, however, was that Gaitán decisively carried the urban masses. He won most urban centers and departmental capitals, including Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, and Cartagena (four of the five largest cities in Colombia); Santa Marta, Neiva, Ibagué, and Cúcuta; and narrowly missed carrying Popayán, a traditionally Conservative city.³⁷ Gaitán won Bogotá with 57.5 percent of the vote cast, Santa Marta also with 57.5, Cartagena with 65.9, and Barranquilla with a whopping 71.1 percent.³⁸ He did poorly in Ospina Pérez' hometown, Medellín; but although this was a Conservative Party stronghold, and although Gaitanismo in the Department of Antioquia suffered from incessant bickering among its leaders, the movement had a noteworthy following even there.³⁹ On the northern coast, Gaitán enjoyed outright majorities in the departments of Atlántico (52.8 percent) and Bolívar (50.4 percent)—the only places he did so—and won the majority of the Liberal vote in Magdalena.⁴⁰

The election showed that while Gaitán owned the cities, the Liberal and Conservative machines still controlled the countryside, where the majority of Colombians still lived in 1946. It was, nevertheless, a watershed in Colombian history, the most serious threat to the preeminence of the Colombian political elite in living memory. Gaitán's independent candidacy had finally forced the Liberal leadership to recognize his political strength, especially on the Atlantic coast.

Gaitán and the Left-Liberal Tradition

Gaitán matured in the 1920s in an intellectual tradition known variously as left-Liberalism, popular Liberalism, Liberal Socialism, or what may be referred to as a homegrown Left. This tradition guaranteed the enduring popularity of the official Liberal Party, and it helps to explain the weakness of the Communist Party in Colombia. It also assured that the form Gaitanista mobilization took would be idiosyncratically Colombian. Gaitán and other left-Liberals drew on Liberalism's activist tradition in the economic and moral realms while acknowledging that to maintain political viability,

37. Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, "Tendencias electorales, 1935-1968," *Boletín Mensual de Estadística* 221 (Dec. 1969), 111-13.

38. Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:394.

39. Numerous letters and telegrams from Antioqueños in AICPG, v.0016, "Adhesiones y quejas Antioquia," demonstrate that simple election returns were not the only indicator of the depth of Gaitán's support. Electoral fraud also undoubtedly affected Gaitán's showing in Medellín, where the Santos machine controlled the Liberal Party.

40. Gaitán also won the Liberal majorities in Cundinamarca, Huila, Cauca, Valle, and the intendency of Meta. Anita Weiss, *Tendencias de la participación electoral en Colombia, 1935-1966* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1968), 90. See also Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:394.

they had to preserve their access to the Liberal political designation and the votes it ensured.

Gaitán acknowledged the Liberal Party's enduring influence, as well as the political irrelevance of the Colombian Socialist Party of the 1920s. So, despite Liberalism's considerable nonradical baggage, Gaitán remained in the party's left wing before 1933. Meanwhile, after 1929 Gaitán became both symbol and rallying point for a growing company of Liberals—intellectuals, workers, and peasants. Dario Samper, another left-Liberal, described him in early 1932 as “a socialist who wants justice for Colombian proletarians,” claiming that no one else had so penetrated “the hearts of Colombia's masses,” that Gaitán spoke to his “comrades, the workers,” and that he was “the principal captain of democracy.”⁴¹

Left-Liberals believed that only in “recent times” could they argue whether Liberalism was or was not a “popular” party. Certainly in the “heroic age” of nineteenth-century Liberalism, some maintained, it was not. By the early 1930s, however, left-Liberals who wanted to take the party in a more radical direction asserted that Liberalism should stand for the cause of the *pueblo*, the “dispossessed,” and equality before the law; “in a word, democracy.”⁴² Yet like the Liberal establishment it challenged and hoped to commandeer, left-Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s also found its origins in that nineteenth-century party. Left-Liberals traced their lineage to Liberal general and politician Rafael Uribe Uribe, whose writings constituted the prism through which nineteenth-century Liberalism refracted into Gaitanismo. “Uribe's ideals,” as the ideological bases of Liberalism were often called, proved to be an ambiguous heritage, but provided nonetheless a base for more critical perspectives.⁴³

The quintessence of Uribe Uribe's enduring fame among Colombian left-Liberals found expression in one widely celebrated phrase. Near the turn of the century he argued, “If Liberalism hopes to maintain its presence as a political entity, it has to drink at the fount of socialism.”⁴⁴ Many prominent left-Liberals and Gaitanistas referred repeatedly to this statement, as did

41. *El Crisol* (Ibagué), Apr. 9, 1932, p. 1.; *Acción Liberal*, May 1932, p. 36., both dedicated to Gaitán.

42. Armando Solano, comp., *Caudillos liberales* (Bogotá: Antena, 1936), v–vi.

43. See Guillermo Cobanella, “Rafael Uribe Uribe, creador de una doctrina social,” in *El pensamiento social de Uribe Uribe*, ed. Otto Morales Benítez (Medellín: Ediciones Especiales Sec. de Educación y Cultura de Antioquia, 1988), 17, 21; Milton Puentes, *Historia del partido liberal colombiano* (Bogotá: Editorial Prag, 1961), 574; Eduardo Santa, *El pensamiento político de Rafael Uribe Uribe* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1980), 9; idem, *Rafael Uribe Uribe: un hombre y una época* (Bogotá: Triángulo, 1962).

44. “El liberalismo si aspira a mantener su vigencia como partido político, tiene que beber en las fuentes del socialismo.” Quoted (but no source given) by Javier Henao Hidron, ed., *Uribe Uribe y Gaitán: caudillos del pueblo* (Medellín: Bedout, 1986), 140.

Gaitán himself.⁴⁵ Gaitán overtly paraphrased Uribe Uribe by declaring that Liberalism had to “become socialist” or be “condemned to perish ideologically.”⁴⁶ This utterance established a dual heritage for Uribe Uribe, because the historical caudillo’s personal notion of socialism was rather different from that attributed to him by his later admirers. The Liberal left appropriated him, nevertheless, as an important Liberal proponent of socialism.

Uribe Uribe believed in what can be called preventive socialism, “socialism from the top to the bottom, carried out by the state.”⁴⁷ He called for a “strongly interventionist state” to assure justice, order, liberty, and economic development.⁴⁸ His notion of the interventionist state would be embraced by Gaitán’s UNIR, the Liberal reformers of the 1930s, and the Gaitanista program of the 1940s (although the Gaitanistas also stressed the necessary fusion of political and economic reform, as did Uribe Uribe himself). Uribe Uribe advocated the rights of the *pueblo* in a country where “individualistic ideals” predominated among the elite.⁴⁹ In so doing he helped legitimate the word *socialism* in the left wing of the Liberal Party.

It is ironic, but not unbelievable, that in calling for “socialism from the top,” Uribe Uribe became a symbol of popular mobilization, the icon under which the Gaitanistas would later sanctify their status as socialist Liberals. In the 1940s, Gaitanistas knew less the letter of Uribe Uribe’s thought than what they took to be its spirit. This, in essence, is the difference between the “historical” Uribe Uribe and the Gaitanistas’ mythical caudillo. Among the Gaitanistas on the Atlantic coast, Gaitán was seen as Uribe Uribe’s intellectual and moral descendant. Many who called Gaitán the leader of the *izquierda colombiana* saw him as a reviver of the glory days of Uribe Uribe.⁵⁰ Gaitán, for his part, actively sought that mantle.⁵¹

Gaitán was conspicuously influenced by Marx in his materialistic stress on the economic bases of politics and social relations, and by Uribe Uribe in

45. E.g., José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo, *Ideas de izquierda: liberalismo, partido revolucionario* ([Bogotá?] Editorial ABC, 1935), 13–14; José María Córdoba, *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: tribuno popular de Colombia* (Bogotá: n.p., 1964), 82; Gonzalo Buenahora, *Los orígenes del gaitanismo* (Bogotá: n.p., n.d.), 23.

46. Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 66.

47. Rafael Uribe Uribe, “El socialismo del estado,” speech given at the Teatro Municipal, Bogotá, October 1904, reprinted in *Escritos políticos* (Bogotá: El Ancora, 1984), 109–36.

48. Santa, *El pensamiento político*, 30–31. See also Rafael Uribe Uribe, “Exposición sobre el presente y el porvenir del Partido Liberal en Colombia,” in Henao Hidron, *Uribe Uribe y Gaitán*, 132, 134, 136.

49. Eduardo Santa, *Rafael Uribe Uribe: el caudillo de la esperanza* (Bogotá: Iqueima, 1962), 290.

50. See the letter from the self-styled “proletarians” of the Comité Liberal Pro Movimiento Popular, Morales, Bolívar, to JEC, Feb. 12, 1947, AICPG, v.0061, “Cartas Bol. y Nariño.”

51. For the development of Gaitán’s personal thought see esp. his law school thesis, “Las ideas socialistas en Colombia,” reprinted in Valencia, *Gaitán: antología*, 49–213; and for commentary on it, Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 48, 49; Braun, *Assassination of Gaitán*, 45.

his advocacy of "socialism of the state."⁵² The state would furnish the general economic orientation through control of prices, rent, and credit, while implementing a progressive tax structure, land ownership limitations, and restraints on private capital. It would implement a broad agrarian reform giving control of the land to those who worked it, provide an all-encompassing social security network, and give workers a voice in the control of their firms and industries while regulating disputes. Command of the state apparatus, therefore, was essential to his plan. But instead of being simply the customary prize of traditional Liberal and Conservative struggles, the centralized state, as Gaitán envisioned it, would be the focal point of planning and policy execution.

In both the ideological and political realms, Gaitanismo vied with the Communist Party for popular support, a conflict the PSD ultimately lost. The origins of this sibling rivalry on the left are not hard to grasp. The relative isolation of Colombian leftists from socialist thought reinforced the Communists' general difficulties in distancing themselves from the Liberal Party. To compound the problem, many Colombians maintained simultaneous attachments to different political labels—socialist, left-Liberal, leftist, Communist, Lopista, Gaitanista, and so on. The Liberals' continued strength denied the PSD (with its internationalist outlook) its desired role as the workers' party, while Gaitán capitalized on the strike they had organized in 1928. A Communist militant and labor organizer active in Barrancabermeja in the 1940s later recalled party members' displeasure over PSD support for Turbay: "The mass of the radical oil workers were Gaitanista. Those sympathetic to the Communist Party, therefore, took a dim view of the party's decision to favor Turbay, candidate of the *oligarquía*."⁵³ In April 1946, PSD national representatives traveled to Barranquilla to encourage support for Turbay but faced serious opposition from rank-and-file Communists.⁵⁴ Much later, former Communist activists remembered the support for Turbay as "absurd politics" because "the proletarian masses" were with Gaitán.⁵⁵

Thus, although the Communist Party was largely irrelevant politically, leftist mobilization did occur in Colombia. The truly Colombian form it took was not without its drawbacks. For many Gaitanistas, "godo," the derogatory nickname Liberals gave Conservatives, equaled "oligarch," demonstrating that class struggles had yet to be extracted from partisan struggles. But while

52. For Gaitán's relationship to Marxism in his views on private property, see "Función social de la propiedad," in *Los mejores discursos de Jorge Eliécer Gaitán*, ed. Jorge Villaveces (Bogotá: Jorvi, 1968), 72–82; and Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, 45.

53. Jorge Mateus, interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, Barrancabermeja, Sept. 5, 1985.

54. *El Liberal* (Bogotá), Apr. 12, 1946, p. 1.

55. See interviews with Bernardo Medina, June 13, 1986, and Andrés Barandica Troya, Apr. 15, 1986, both in B/quilla, by Mauricio Archila Neira.

Gaitanismo had to be both “leftist” and “Colombian,” its radical nature could not be denied.

A Radical and Popular Mobilization

One of the general themes of Charles Bergquist’s book *Labor in Latin America* is that Latin American radicalism is most likely to flourish where the means of production are owned by foreign capital.⁵⁶ The areas accepted as radical in Colombia—the *zona bananera* of Magdalena, the oil production center of Barrancabermeja, and the coffee regions of western Cundinamarca and eastern Tolima, along with the sugar plantations in Valle (all dominated by large landholdings)—are often referred to as anomalies in a nonradical Colombian whole. Barrancabermeja and the banana zone especially are the classic examples of foreign penetration with which Bergquist supports his thesis. Yet Gaitanista mobilizations throughout Colombia are evidence of a more generalized “radical culture.”

It is interesting that all those “radical” areas were Gaitanista strongholds; though, ironically, Gaitán’s influence in other regions of Colombia is often referred to as proof of their inhabitants’ less-than-radical tendencies. Gaitanista strongholds, moreover, were traditionally organized labor strongholds. Such was the case with Barranquilla, which one worker called “the workers’ city” while claiming it “was totally Gaitanista.”⁵⁷ The same might be said of Bogotá, Cali, or the decidedly proletarianized Barrancabermeja, which began to move decisively into the Gaitanista camp after the broken oil workers’ strike of 1938.⁵⁸ That support would be dramatically affirmed in Barrancabermeja’s tenacious uprising after Gaitán’s assassination.⁵⁹

The editors of *El Estado* in Santa Marta maintained that Gaitanismo’s insurrection against the old parties had “all the characteristics of a true revolution.” Gaitán led the “cry of rebellion” against the political culture that “undermined the meaning of democracy.”⁶⁰ Gaitán’s followers (and enemies) undoubtedly regarded him as radical, a portrayal that followed him throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁶¹

56. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 12–13. Anti-imperialist feeling, a recognized indicator of radicalism in other parts of Latin America, manifested itself on the Atlantic coast, but not as strongly as in other countries. It did not figure consistently in Gaitanista discourse.

57. César Ahumada, union leader in B/quilla in the late 1930s and 1940s, interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, B/quilla, May 19, 1986.

58. Gustavo Almarío Salazar gives a detailed and emotionally powerful account of this process in *Historia de los trabajadores petroleros* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios del Trabajo, 1984), 120–27.

59. See Apolinar Díaz Callejas, *Diez días de poder popular: el 9 de abril 1948 en Barrancabermeja* (Bogotá: El Labrador, 1988).

60. “El capitán del pueblo,” *El Estado*, Apr. 9, 1946, p. 3.

61. See Buenahora, *Los orígenes del gaitanismo*, 21; Córdoba, *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: tribuna popular*, 1; Osorio Lizarazo, *Ideas de izquierda*, 41; José María Nieto Rojas, *La batalla*

One of the best pieces of evidence for the popular spirit of the movement was Gaitán's declaration, "el pueblo es superior a sus dirigentes" (the people is superior to its leaders). This pronouncement exposed something basic about the movement's character, and Gaitanistas consistently referred to it.⁶² In early 1944, for example, Gaitán's followers on the coast seized on the phrase as a description of their movement. In an editorial titled "Liberalism is Democracy," *El Estado* argued that Gaitán cut directly to the problem. Gaitán, the paper said, charged that Colombians were offered a false dichotomy, in which the Liberal establishment held that only a change of López' beleaguered government was needed, and outsiders said that no real solution could be found in the morally and intellectually bankrupt political system. The first was "duplicity," which ignored the deep and organized currents of dissatisfaction. The second was a "cruel" underestimation of the *pueblo's* capacity for mobilization. Neither of these positions acknowledged what Gaitán had recognized to be the truth of Colombia, that "el pueblo es superior a sus dirigentes."⁶³ In the coming years, Gaitanistas would often remind the caudillo of this statement.⁶⁴ Even decades later, Gaitanistas would repeat the maxim with reverence.⁶⁵ Its eventual status as something of a mantra signifies its deeper meaning to the rank and file of the movement.

It is true that Gaitanismo encompassed seemingly conflictive class interests, claiming to represent both working- and middle-class elements. The movement never completely reconciled the tension between those followers who advocated struggle and those who sought social "equilibrium."⁶⁶ Yet Gaitanismo's driving social elements on the Atlantic coast were urban workers and artisans. In Barranquilla, famous for its working-class and leftist character, Gaitanismo found some of its most ideologically focused and militant adherents. In the city's Rebolo neighborhood, "as in other neighborhoods," resided a "great number" of ideologically "conscious workers" who

contra el comunismo en Colombia: capítulos de historia patria que deben ser faro y brujala para las futuras generaciones de Colombia (Bogotá: Empresa Nacional, 1956), 38.

62. Herbert Braun admits that it "was the most far-reaching of all his slogans, for it pointed to an overturning of the social order," though he then argues that this statement was not really a representative remark and soon forgotten. *Assassination of Gaitán*, 101. Braun continues that the "slogan seemed to take Gaitán back to the egalitarian spirit that was at the heart of *Las ideas socialistas* but did not fit comfortably with his more recent emphasis on the meritocratic ideal," and adds that "the slogan hardly ever came up in the interviews with Gaitán's followers." *Ibid.*, p. 101, n. 94. This was probably because his interviewees were drawn heavily from the ranks of political insiders.

63. "Liberalismo es democracia," *El Estado*, Mar. 16, 1944.

64. E.g., AICPG: Julio Vélez Micola, Departmental Liberal Directorate of Bolívar, to JEG, Cartagena, Apr. 10, 1946, v.0053, "Cartas Bol"; Samuel Guerrero to JEG, B/quilla, Apr. 30, 1946, v.0043, "Cartas Atl."

65. As did Gaitán's secretary, Pascual Del Vecchio R., interview by the author, Bogotá, Apr. 2, 1992.

66. Daniel Pécaut emphasizes a lack of "class synthesis" in the popular movement, which he believes restricted Gaitanismo's more radical tendencies. *Orden y violencia*, vol. 2.

supported Gaitán.⁶⁷ In Cartagena also, Gaitanistas running for office had “the confidence of the workers” because they advocated the “revolution of ideas” headed by Gaitán.⁶⁸

Thus, while the Gaitanista *mentalité* accommodated both conflictive and conciliatory messages, the mass of supporters on the coast revealed a powerful ideological penchant for themes of struggle against the status quo. Some adherents even went so far as to characterize theirs as a violent struggle in which they were ready to shed blood (theirs and their enemies’).⁶⁹ The rank and file of his movement, after all, associated Gaitán with Uribe Uribe, who had tried to take the government by force during the War of One Thousand Days. Gaitán generally called for nonviolent political action, but his rhetoric often projected stark images of conflict and struggle, and his rallying call, “A la carga” (Charge) was a military cry. Under pressure from Conservative attacks from 1946 to 1948, such images became more overt; and in the Colombian political context at the beginning of La Violencia (1946–65), no political mobilization could really be devoid of tendencies to armed action.

Interactive Ideology

As its more radical and defiant messages demonstrate, Gaitanista ideology was not a homogeneous commodity handed down by the leadership; nor was the ideological relationship between official and popular Gaitanismo the one-way flow students of populist movements sometimes describe. It was instead an interactive process between leader and masses, which played itself out in Colombia’s mass media and in the movement’s correspondence.

It is true that Gaitán and his lieutenants carefully attended to the job of consciousness raising. One of their more innovative means was radio, which proved highly effective in spreading the Gaitanista message and also gave the leaders in Bogotá considerable control over its content. Gaitán deliberately held his Friday radio talks, or *viernes culturales*, at an hour when workers could listen. As Gonzalo Buenahora, a doctor and Liberal politician in Barrancabermeja, remembers, “They would return from work, bathe, and listen to Gaitán on the radio.” In this way, phrases like “down with the Liberal and Conservative *oligarquías*” worked their way into common usage.⁷⁰

67. Pedro Osorio Cervantes, “Comité JEG No. 2,” to JEG, B/quilla, May 16, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atl.”

68. Comité Liberal Gaitanista del barrio Manga de Cartagena to JEG, July 11, 1947, AICPG, v.0060, “Cartas Bol.”

69. See a “soldier of Colombian liberty,” Arturo Besada to JEG, Cartagena, Dec. 9, 1944, AICPG, v.0074, “Cartas políticas”; and a member of “the rebellious youth,” Eduardo A. Price O. to Dir. Nacional Gaitanista, B/quilla, Jan. 28, 1946, AICPG, v.0012, “Cartas Atl. 1946–47.”

70. “Workers said to themselves, ‘this man will carry us to power.’” Or perhaps they would carry him. Gonzalo Buenahora, interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, Bogotá, Aug. 31, 1985.

Another observer noted that Gaitán could count on substantial audiences for recordings of his speeches rebroadcast on the program *Voice of Barranquilla*. During one such broadcast, this correspondent drove through the city's "popular neighborhoods" and realized that most radios were tuned to Gaitán's talk.⁷¹ Organizers of Radio Barranquilla's program *Jornada gaitanista* claimed to influence 50 percent of the public opinion on the coast, and especially in Atlántico.⁷² Newspapers sympathetic to the movement often helped by reporting on Gaitán's radio addresses and summarizing their content.⁷³

Its popular appeal notwithstanding, the use of radio faced both political and logistical hurdles. In Barranquilla, Gaitanistas spoke of the *oligarquía*'s attempts to "sabotage" Gaitán's programs.⁷⁴ In Cartagena, the movement's Sunday broadcasts were often missed because most of the towns in the department had no electrical service during the day.⁷⁵ The Gaitanistas therefore also had to rely on more traditional means to spread their message. The most common form of mass communication in Colombia during the 1940s was, naturally, the press; and newspapers proved significant especially because they were relatively autonomous.

Most of Colombia's big Liberal dailies were either cool to Gaitán's 1944-46 campaign (some ignored it outright) or openly hostile, following the lead of Bogotá's *El Tiempo* in calling Gaitán a fascist. (An important exception was *El Espectador* of Bogotá.) Provincial Gaitanista supporters consistently maintained that the elite newspapers of the capital and elsewhere were anti-Gaitán and controlled by the *oligarquía*. But as one important Gaitanista in Cartagena said, despite the "conspiratorial silence" about Gaitán's successes in the capital's Liberal press, the *pueblo* was with him.⁷⁶ Speaking of the "campaigns of the enemy press" against Gaitanismo in the river port of Honda, one steadfast activist believed that they would come to naught:

The U.S. consul in Barranquilla observed "many others who listened to him over their home radios." Leonard G. Dawson to U.S. Ambassador John C. Wiley, B/quilla, Oct. 1, 1945. U.S. State Dept., Consular Post File-B/quilla, National Archives, Record Group 84, Foreign Service Post, United States.

71. Arturo Quintero P. to JEG, B/quilla, May 28, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl."

72. Rafael Arévalo Arenas to JEG, B/quilla, June 12, 1946, AICPG, v.0012, "Cartas Atl. 1946-47."

73. E.g., *El Estado*, Santa Marta, described one speech given at the Teatro Municipal, Bogotá, Apr. 3, 1946, and asserted that the entire country had heard it. Apr. 4, 1946, p. 1.

74. Manuel Hernández R. and Arcadio de la Torre del C. to JEG, B/quilla, Apr. 24, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl."

75. Esaú Conde Ribón to JEG, Cartagena, Dec. 1, 1945, AICPG, v.0053, "Cartas Bol." Conde Ribón suggested moving the broadcasts to the evening.

76. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, Cartagena, Apr. 25, 1944, AICPG, v.0053, "Cartas Bol."

"People conscious of our movement are alerted against such hoaxes."⁷⁷ Another in Santa Marta maintained in July 1947 that *El Tiempo* and *El Liberal* of Bogotá continued their "suicidal labors." When Gaitán was elected president of the senate, said this writer, he received only "diatribes" from the elite press; but though "the organs of the *oligarquía*" still cultivated their political deceptions, the Liberal masses had turned their backs on such campaigns.⁷⁸

Recognizing the virulence of the elite Liberal press opposition, Gaitán founded his own nationally distributed newspaper, *Jornada*.⁷⁹ From March 1944 until early 1947 it appeared as a weekly, then switched to a daily format. In February 1944 Gaitán described his "alternative news source," saying that it would "call things by their names and attempt to break up the systems of disinformation that hold the national consciousness in oblivion."⁸⁰ A supporter admired *Jornada* as the only "free" paper in Colombia, which contained many cruel and bitter truths in its pages.⁸¹ *Jornada* was therefore an effective mouthpiece; José María Córdoba, who managed Gaitán's 1946 campaign, characterized the paper as "the organ of the movement," the medium through which Gaitanistas stayed abreast of the course of the "Moral Restoration."⁸² This role, however, should not be exaggerated. While *Jornada*'s influence also spread through reprints in other Gaitanista papers, production and distribution proved difficult and sporadic. It often lacked funds to purchase paper, and many towns and neighborhoods complained that it seldom reached them.

The local and independent Gaitanista press therefore played a vital role in the Gaitanista mobilization; and they were never as easy for the leadership in Bogotá to control. In Barranquilla, the U.S. consul reported that although neither of the city's leading dailies supported Gaitán, two weeklies, "both scandal sheets," seemed "to be increasing their circulation" on this basis.⁸³ While he did not specify the names of the papers, he probably had in mind *La Tribuna* and *Protesta Liberal*.⁸⁴ They promoted Gaitán's campaign

77. Fidel Murillo to JEG, Honda, Dec. 28, 1946, AICPG, v.0052, "Cartas Tolima."

78. Manuel Robles, "La prensa oligárquica y Gaitán," *El Estado*, July 25, 1947, pp. 3, 6.

79. Gaitán even sought coverage in Laureano Gómez' Conservative *El Siglo* (Bogotá).

80. Estheiman Amaya Solano, "*Jornada*: el periódico del pueblo" (Undergraduate thesis, Fundación Escuela Superior Profesional-INPAHU, Bogotá, 1989), 51-55.

81. Arturo Besada to JEG, Cartagena, Dec. 9, 1944, AICPG, v.0074, "Cartas políticas."

82. José María Córdoba (hereafter JMC) to Jorge Ospina in Medellín, July 1945, AICPG, v.0069, "Cartas despachadas," tomo 1.

83. Dawson to Wiley, Oct. 1, 1945.

84. *La Tribuna* under Rodolfo Ponce had been active on the Liberal left since the early 1930s. *Protesta Liberal* was newer, but claimed influence in the worker neighborhood of Rebolo or "Zona Negra." Carlos J. Moreno, Editor of *Protesta Liberal*, to JEG, B/quilla, May 16, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl."

in their pages and even plastered his messages on billboards, on walls, and in theaters.⁸⁵

Some Liberal papers showed a good deal of initial hesitation in supporting the independent candidacy, but quickly acknowledged the writing on the wall. In Santa Marta the brothers Julio and Asdrubal Amarís, who had often supported Gaitán in the 1930s, published *Vanguardia*. Though rather paternalistic in tone, it was a hard-core Liberal paper of leftist orientation. It carried substantial amounts of working-class news, often published messages from unions to the government, and even covered the activities of the local Communists. During the first half of 1945, *Vanguardia* hedged its bets by reporting on both Turbay and Gaitán; by October, it stood solidly behind Gaitán, recommending a Gaitanista "convention of the people" on the Atlantic coast, in which the caudillo could reaffirm his program.⁸⁶

Many smaller papers rallied to Gaitán or sprang up to support his campaign; others were founded after the May 1946 election. These were ephemeral publications, grounded in short-term electoral politics, with limited financial backing that permitted only a few editions at irregular intervals.⁸⁷ Many of these weeklies never found their way into any archive. Their significance lies in demonstrating the kind of grassroots support Gaitán could expect.⁸⁸

In addition to the vibrant Gaitanista press, the correspondence between Gaitán and members of his movement readily exposed Gaitanista concerns and how they influenced the caudillo. Many different layers of Colombian society generated ideas; Gaitán received sophisticated political discussions

85. Rodolfo Ponce reported on their activities to JEG, B/quilla, Mar. 7, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl."

86. Asdrubal Amarís to JMC, Santa Marta, Oct. 23, 1945, AICPG, v.0011, "Cartas Magd." In April 1946 the paper called Gaitán's movement "the most transcendental event in the country's recent political history." "Una atenta carta del director de *Vanguardia*" to *El Estado*, Apr. 11, 1946. See also how *El Estado*, Santa Marta's leading daily, got behind Gaitán (after some hedging), in issues between the latter half of 1945 and April 1946.

87. Aureliano Gómez Olaciregui, *Prensa y periodismo en Barranquilla, siglo XX* (Barranquilla: Lallemand Abramuck, 1979), 209.

88. A partial list of those along the coast and the Magdalena: *La República* (Cartagena), "semanario liberal," had a "Gaitanista page." *El Frente Obrero* (Cartagena), Juan Manuel Valdelamar, probably very small. *El Sesquiplano* (Santa Marta), weekly, dir. Juan del Villar. *Voz Nacional* (Barranquilla), Carlos J. Moreno after 1946. *Mundo Nuevo* (Cartagena), owner/pub. Esaú Conde Ribón. *El Pueblo* (founded Ciénaga?), Oct. 1946. *La Razón* (Santa Marta), called "principal organ of our movement" by Manuel F. Robles (who later edited *El Estado*), Feb. 5, 1942, AICPG, v.0011. *La Voz Liberal* (Santa Marta), dir. Aquileo Lanao Loaiza. *Correo de Sabanas* (Sincelajo), "semanario liberal independiente," dir. Juan Jaraba. *La Voz del Pueblo* (Sincelajo), associated with Carlos Támara L. and Edmundo Pizarro after June 1946. *La Suegra* and *Liga Commercial* (Barranquilla), both called Gaitanista in 1945. *La Región* (Bolívar), weekly, started Feb. 5, 1948. *Ahora* (Chinú Bolívar), weekly, first issued July 1947. *La Bandera Liberal* (Cartagena), founded July 25, 1947. *Rojo y Blanco* (Ciénaga), begun October 1946. *El Trópico* (Barrancabermeja), 1946.

not only from politicians and lawyers but also from government employees, medical doctors, engineers, teachers, union leaders and activists, workers, artisans, shopkeepers, and peasant smallholders. In 1938, slightly more than one out of two Colombians was literate; that is, 56 percent of the population, though the literacy rate was much higher in cities and particularly high (70 percent) in Atlántico and Barranquilla.⁸⁹

Upwards of one-third of the one hundred thousand-plus letters and telegrams to Gaitán in the archive of the Instituto Colombiano de Participación JEG originated in the coastal region, rivaled only by the number received from Bogotá and Cundinamarca. But the movement unquestionably represented more than just the literate; a large percentage of letters were from organizations claiming wider influence (such as labor unions and local political committees) or actually had multiple signatories, sometimes in the hundreds. Even allowing, as with any political movement, that “activists” who might write a letter were a minority, it is clear that the Gaitanistas’ correspondence represented broad ideological currents.

With insight, one Gaitanista insider argued that Gaitán’s candidacy originated “deep in the popular consciousness.”⁹⁰ “From the core of the Colombian collective soul,” echoed Gaitanistas in Santa Marta, emanated “a powerful longing for transformation and social betterment and change, which Gaitán recognizes and interprets.”⁹¹ Seventy-two Liberals in Honda who marched “decidedly toward the left” declared their continued support for Gaitán in October 1946. Gaitanismo represented “a movement of the revolutionary left” on the path toward transforming Colombia’s institutions, “through legal and constitutional means,” into “an effective democracy.” Gaitanismo correctly interpreted the “popular desires” and “symbolized the anguish and rebellion of the dispossessed classes.”⁹² One labor activist from Barranquilla argued that with Gaitán, “the candidate of Liberal leftism,” the words *solidarity* and *fraternity* ceased to be empty sounds. Another recognized the existing social laws as a great improvement over the past, but was sure that Gaitán’s program for the “oppressed classes” would bring advances of a more transcendent nature.⁹³

It is important to note, however, that the production of Gaitanista ide-

89. Aline Helg, *La educación en Colombia, 1918–1957: una historia social, económica, y política* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1987), 197–98.

90. Speech by Francisco J. Chaux to the Liberals of Antioquia, reprinted by *El Estado*, Apr. 12, 1946, p. 4.

91. *El Estado*, Feb. 12, 1947, p. 3.

92. Poster titled “Decididamente hacia la izquierda,” Honda, Oct. 10, 1946, AICPG, v.0063, “Cartas convención liberal/46.”

93. Gilberto Henríquez Gil, “Jorge Eliécer Gaitán,” essay, sent to JEG, B/quilla, early 1948, AICPG, v.0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atl.” See also letter from “Un Barranquillero Gaitanista” to JEG, B/quilla, July 16, 1947, AICPG, v.0012, “Cartas Atl. 1946–47,” stating, “circunstancias especialísimas me obligan [sic] a ser anónimo.”

ology was not a simple case of leadership aspiration for social “equilibrium” diluting rank-and-file tendencies toward so-called radicalism.⁹⁴ “Radical” elements of the “official line” were also in evidence. José María Córdoba, perhaps the most militant member of Gaitán’s inner circle, often sounded such a note while answering Gaitán’s ever-increasing correspondence.⁹⁵ Responding to one supporter as Gaitán’s presidential campaign surged into high gear, Córdoba wrote that the country had entered a new age, in which the *pueblo* would, “through reason or force,” bring to power the men capable of redefining Colombian politics.⁹⁶ Stressing Gaitán’s role as a proponent of class struggle more than of social conciliation, Córdoba later wrote, “Gaitán became an omen of foreboding for the upper classes. . . . Gaitán referred concretely to the struggle between the people who work . . . the *país nacional* . . . and the speculators and salon stuffed shirts . . . the *país político*.”⁹⁷

Discourse and Symbolism

Terms such as *país nacional* and *país político* (peculiar Gaitanista variants of *el pueblo* and *la oligarquía*) so permeated the letters and other writings of the Gaitanistas as to qualify as obsessions. *Democracia* and *justicia social*, if their near-universal espousal by Gaitanistas of different social classes is any indication, were the bedrock concerns of popular Gaitanismo. Social justice attained through democracy represented the ultimate tenet of and key to understanding Gaitanista ideology; and from this root other basic terms in Gaitanista discourse took clear and logical meaning.

Democracy, the Gaitanistas on the coast argued, did not yet exist in Colombia, despite the reform efforts of the 1930s. For the Gaitanistas at *La Tribuna*, the customary practice of professional politics continued to manifest itself as “the art of deceiving and defrauding the masses.” Gaitanismo, therefore, demanded “genuine” democracy.⁹⁸ The editors of *Vanguardia* advocated the “high ideal of humanity and social justice,” defining social justice as the maximum degree possible of well-being for the majority

94. A similar ideological tension was apparent in the case of Peronism. See James, *Resistance and Integration*, 33–37.

95. Braun notes that while Córdoba claimed membership in the “JEGA,” the band of close supporters who looked after Gaitán’s interests and identified themselves collectively with Gaitán’s initials, he “also tried to establish his distance from it.” *Assassination of Gaitán*, 88, n. 52.

96. JMC to Sergio Gómez, Tamalameque, Magdalena, Oct. 31, 1945, AICPG, v.0070, “Cartas enviadas.”

97. Córdoba, *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: tribuno popular*, 41.

98. *La Tribuna*, Aug. 18, 1943, p. 3. See also Carolina and Teresita Barrera to JEG, Cartagena, Apr. 8, 1947 (on women and democracy), and José Francisco Gómez Negrett to JEG, Magangué, Feb. 1, 1947, both AICPG, v.0061, “Cartas Bol. y Nariño.”

or, inversely, the smallest possible amount of misery. In Barranquilla the Gaitanistas were the “friends of social justice.”⁹⁹

In Riohacha the *pueblo* had faith in Gaitán’s voice as “the revolutionary force” propelling Colombia toward “economic democracy and social justice,” while in Cartagena others longed for the implementation of the “economic politics” of Gaitán’s program. A “working man” equated “the betterment of our democracy” with “the well-being of the *pueblo*,” while in Cartagena, Gaitanistas believed that “justice and democracy” were “embodied in the popular movement of moral and democratic restoration of the republic.”¹⁰⁰ A medical doctor and member of the Liberal directorate of Bolívar believed that the Liberal Party would apply to all the concept of “distributive justice, the essence of the most pure ideology.” The party no longer struggled for bureaucratic power but rather democratic government, “by, of, and for the people.” He finished, predictably, by invoking Uribe Uribe’s counsel that Liberalism must rejuvenate itself in the tenets of socialism.¹⁰¹

The connections between democracy and social justice were reflected in the opposition of the *pueblo* and the *oligarquía*; this was not an overt vision of class struggle, but tended toward it. The word *pueblo*, although used by Gaitán in reference to a multiclass grouping, in practice had a more specific meaning. For many Gaitanistas on the coast, the essence of Gaitanista Liberalism was “the working people,” and they demonstrated a strong inclination to equate the *pueblo* with workers.¹⁰² The *oligarquía* or *país político* of Gaitán’s dichotomy represented all the corrupt, privileged castes, and the *pueblo* or *país nacional* represented the “honorable workers.”¹⁰³ The existence of the *oligarquía* negated “real” democracy. In Ciénaga, a supporter

99. *Vanguardia*, Apr. 5, 1943, p. 3, May 19, 1943, p. 3; Julián Meléndez, owner-operator of radio station “La Voz del Litoral,” to JEG, B/quilla, May 7, 1946, AICPG, v.0012, “Cartas Atl.” See also Rafael Azula Barrera, *De la revolución al orden nuevo: proceso y drama de un pueblo* (Bogotá: Kelly, 1956), 60. For similar statements from the Gaitanista leadership, see Córdoba, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: *tribuno popular*, 82; Peña, *Gaitán íntimo*, 97; *El Estado*, Dec. 13, 1945; “Plataforma ideológica del liberalismo,” *El Estado*, Feb. 4, 1947, pp. 2, 4.

100. See AICPG: Miguel P. García, merchant, to JEG, Riohacha, Dec. 2, 1946, v.0011, “Cartas Magd.”; J. Carrillo P. to JEG, Cartagena, Dec. 17, 1947, v.0053, “Cartas Bol.”; Julio Flórez R. to JEG, Tibacuy, Aug. 12, 1945, v.0073, “Cartas políticas”; Comité Gaitanista de Manga, Cartagena, to JEG, Jan. 9, 1946, v.0074, “Cartas políticas.”

101. Rafael Alvear Terán, M.D. (enfermedades tropicales), to JEG and Departmental and Municipal Liberal Directorates of Atl., Bol., and Magd., Cartagena, Mar., 1946, AICPG, v.0053, “Cartas Bol.”

102. See, e.g., Directorio Municipal Liberal Gaitanista de Baranoa, Atlántico, to JEG, Mar. 25, 1946; and Gilberto Henríquez Gil to JEG, B/quilla, Apr. 16, 1945, both AICPG, v.0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atl.”

103. Braulio Henao Blanco, commenting on Gaitanismo in *Diario de la Costa* (Cartagena), Sept. 23, 1945, p. 3. A very similar dynamic was evident in Argentina under Perón. Daniel James argues, “‘The people’ frequently were transformed into ‘the working people’ (*el pueblo trabajador*): the people, the nation, and the workers became interchangeable.” *Resistance and Integration*, 22.

believed that politics as usual had “disfigured” Colombian democracy by allowing small groups to dominate the process. The *oligarquía* was defined in Barranquilla as the old political and economic insiders who would continue the closed, personalistic system (as opposed to those “true leaders” of the people whose support rose above “deep roots in the popular consciousness.”)¹⁰⁴

These ideas were intensely charged moral issues for the Gaitanista faithful. Gaitanista morality, however, always had a strong economic flavor. Thus the “moral” in the “Moral and Democratic Restoration” harmonized perfectly with popular Gaitanista concerns. A biography of Gaitán written during the presidential campaign hinted at the economic underpinnings of Gaitanista morality. Under Liberalism’s “canopy of humanitarianism” gathered all who sought “the social and economic good of the collective.” This explains Gaitán’s assertion, in a speech in Cartagena, that “human history has been the struggle for morality.”¹⁰⁵

Gaitanistas in Barranquilla, along with *La Tribuna*, called for “morality” over all else. Municipal councilmen need not be individuals of “robust mentality,” the paper declared, as long as they were honest and served the public good. Another Gaitanista in Barranquilla pledged to aid in Gaitán’s ideological struggle to liberate the “working classes and the middle class” who suffer from “immoral politics.” A textile worker and Communist militant in Barranquilla who supported Gaitán voiced the typical sense of moral outrage the movement represented: though he claimed to be no intellectual, only a worker who had risen to a leadership position, he had felt the exploitation of his class as soon as he had begun working in the 1930s.¹⁰⁶

Beyond Gaitanista discourse, concrete expression of the movement’s concerns found articulation in the *Plataforma del Colón*, a policy statement sanctioned by the popular Gaitanista convention of January 1947, and the *Plan Gaitán*, a legislative package submitted by Gaitanistas to the national congress the same year.¹⁰⁷ While the overall Gaitanista agenda was reformist in appearance, it introduced concepts that proved radical in the Colombian context and, by implication, clearly threatened the elite’s privileged role in politics and the economy. The *plataforma*, a general blueprint for Gaitán’s vision of the Liberal Party as a democratic and interventionist party of the masses, carried the subtitle “Political democracy cannot exist without

104. Julio Dangond Ovalle to JEG, Ciénaga, June 6, 1945, AICPG, v.0011, “Cartas Magd.”; *La Tribuna*, Jan. 21, 1944, p. 3.

105. Milton Puentes, *Gaitán* (Bogotá: ABC, 1945[?]), 44; *El Figaro* (Cartagena), July 2, 1945, p. 3.

106. See *La Tribuna*, Aug. 18, 1943, p. 3; Pedro J. Durán to JEG, B/quilla, May 6, 1945, AICPG, v.0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atl.”; Andrés Barandica Troya, interview by Mauricio Archila Neira, Barranquilla, Apr. 15, 1986.

107. Both found in Valencia, *Gaitán: Antología*, 329–47, 258–95.

economic democracy." The establishment of "economic" democracy would mean much wider distribution of societal resources through state oversight and broader ownership of Colombia's productive forces. Production, the *plataforma* declared, should be for man and not man for production.

The *plataforma* also addressed issues of immediate relevance to Gaitán's working- and middle-class supporters. The Gaitanistas called for a minimum wage linked to the cost of living at a socially defined level for the support of a family, with supplemental income given for each child; profit sharing with employees; equal pay for women; state management of the labor market; state protection of an independent labor movement; a labor code that guaranteed the right to strike, collective bargaining, and state-supported legal aid for workers; the extension of social security to all workers and campesinos; and a national public health system. Last but not least, the Gaitanistas meant to distribute land to those who actually made it produce, productive squatters or *colonos*. The election returns notwithstanding, Gaitanismo had significant rural support, harking back to UNIR, which had been largely an agrarian movement.¹⁰⁸

Important as Gaitán and his charismatic presence were to the movement, emotion alone did not motivate the faithful. Gaitanistas were drawn to the movement's program, which they themselves had a hand in creating. Gaitán had come to symbolize their interests.

As Gaitán often said, "No soy un hombre; soy un pueblo" (I am not a man; I am a people). Gaitán became the symbol of struggle and action, democracy and social justice, hope and change, workers' rights, and the left-Liberal tradition. Admiration for the caudillo was very often expressed in religious terms. Supporters called Gaitán interchangeably a "new messiah," "the only salvation of the oppressed classes," "the apostle of social justice," the "savior," and the "redeemer" of Colombia.¹⁰⁹ One group in Bolívar proclaimed that "as Jesus came into the world to save us from sin, so came [Gaitán] . . . to defend the working *pueblo* against the mortal sins of the *oligarquías*." Another supporter foretold the "resurrection" of the Liberal Party under the redeemer Gaitán, "crucified by President Lleras and sold by that Iscariot, Eduardo Santos," while Gaitán's "visionary" supporters in

108. While the urban setting proved more conducive to Gaitanista mobilization, Colombians consistently addressed land problems in correspondence throughout the years. See the similarities between the letter from 15 citizens to JEG, B/quilla, Oct. 9, 1931, AICPG, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl." (Gaitán, answering in his typical fashion, assured them that he was working on the problem in Congress); and the letter from Gilberto Castillo and 80 others to JEG, Morroa, Nov. 20, 1946, AICPG, v.0034, "Cartas Bol. 1946."

109. See AICPG: José Domingo Arciniegas A. to JEG, B/quilla, May 5, 1945, v.0091, "Adhesiones y quejas Atl."; Carlos M. Luna M. to JEG, San Bernardo, Magd., Jan. 15, 1946, v.0011, "Cartas Magd."; Julio Vélez Micolao to JEG, Cartagena, Mar. 18, 1944, v.0053, "Cartas Bol."; Dago Barboza to JEG, B/quilla, June 5, 1946, v.0012, "Cartas Atl. 1946-47"; Buenaventura Campo to JEG, Santa Marta, Sept. 26, 1946, v.0017, "Adhesiones Magd."

Mompós held that Liberalism could be saved only if the “popular will united around a steadfast leader” who, “with the lash of his tongue,” would “drive from the temple of the party the business interests that had plunged it into anarchy and chaos.”¹¹⁰

A poem by a self-styled “Gaitanista fanatic” called Gaitán’s “popular” candidacy “the roar of the oppressed *pueblo*,” which struck fear in the hearts of the *oligarquía*. Among the cowboys of Bolívar, Gaitán’s name was “pronounced with affection . . . as the symbol” of their “economic redemption.”¹¹¹ Gaitán was characterized as the liberator and defender of the *pueblo*, of the exploited and subjugated, and especially of Colombia’s workers and proletarians.¹¹²

Longtime Gaitanista judge and Magdalena politician Dionisio Rincones Ponce called Gaitán “a symbol” who represented “the aspirations of a people” while understanding its “anguish, suffering, and needs.” Those who believed the movement would end with Gaitán’s electoral defeat on May 5, 1946, deluded themselves, he argued. Gaitán was not the leader merely of an electoral campaign, but also of a “revolutionary enterprise” whose immediate objective was “the fundamental change” of Colombia’s political customs while acknowledging that “man is the fundamental factor of the economy,” who had to be spared from his misery.¹¹³

Also proclaiming Gaitán a “symbolic figure,” one group of Gaitanistas in Popayán summarized Gaitanista ideology. His attraction was not a case of “infantile personalism.” Gaitán’s supporters were “adults.” The movement’s ideology was “its banner and star”; it led “the caudillo to express the many vibrations of the collective with his voice.” Gaitán was not, they affirmed, the demagogue the elite press claimed. Gaitán represented the “promise” and “spirit” of “transformation.” The movement’s program, contrary to elite criticism, was more complete than any liberal program before it. “Men of the left” now could “fight in defense of something concrete and fundamen-

110. AICPG: Renulfo A. Navarro and 199 others to JEG, Sucre, Apr. 1946, v.0053, “Cartas Bol.”; Julio Barrios C. (“gaitanista hasta más allá de la muerte”) to JEG, Montelibano, Mar. 17, 1947, v.0061, “Cartas Bolívar y Nariño”; Comando Liberal Gaitanista de Mompós to JEG, June 17, 1947, v.0060, “Cartas Bol.”

111. Delores Prieto de Silva, poem dedicated to Gaitán on the day he proclaimed his “popular” (and independent) candidacy, Sept. 23, 1945, B/quilla, AICPG, v.0043, “Cartas Atl.”; Pablo Vergara Barrios, Sindicato de Vaqueros y Capeteces de Bolívar, Sección de El Guamo, to JEG, Mar. 21, 1945, AICPG, v.0074, “Cartas políticas.” See also “A la carga contra la oligarquía,” *La Tribuna*, Apr. 5, 1944, p. 1.

112. See, e.g., AICPG: Gilberto Henríquez Gil to JEG, B/quilla, Jan. 9, 1945, and 50 “jóvenes” to JEG, B/quilla, June 21, 1945, both v.0091, “Adhesiones y quejas Atl.”; Comité Gaitanista de Calle Nueva Del Espinal, Cartagena, to JEG, June 6, 1945, v.0074, “Cartas Atl.”; Sociedad Pro-Vivienda del Barrio Sur, B/quilla, Jan. 1946, and Rafael Reales A., B/quilla, Sept. 26, 1947, v.0043, “Cartas Atl.”

113. “El movimiento de la restauración no es electoral sino revolucionario, dice Rincones P.,” *El Estado*, Apr. 12, 1946, p. 1.

tal.” Now the “political fossils” were separated from the Gaitanistas, not only by their hate but also by doctrine. Ideology, the Gaitanistas claimed, was “greater than the leader. It can survive him; ideology does not die.”¹¹⁴

Conclusions

This study has focused on Gaitanista ideology as it developed on the Atlantic coast. The northern coast was perhaps the most radical Gaitanista region; but ideas are fluid, and further research is very likely to demonstrate the ideological cohesion of Gaitanismo from region to region. Not only is it probable that Gaitanistas in different places shared similar concerns, but there is also good reason to stress the ideological parallels between Gaitanismo and populist mobilizations in other countries.

The basic Gaitanista worldview on the Atlantic coast reflected an amalgamation of the left-Liberal tradition, Gaitán’s ideas, and popular notions, which new urban social conditions allowed to emerge in a forceful way. The Gaitanistas’ shared moral sense of social justice and demands for more popularly based political representation unified their multiclass mobilization and drew them to Gaitán, the symbol of their aspirations. Gaitán served as a catalyst for the movement’s ideological content, but he did not bring it down from the mountain. Gaitanista ideas matured through an interactive relationship between Gaitanismo’s leadership and its rank and file, and represented an embodiment of the currents of popular mobilization prevalent in Colombian society. Gaitán’s influence, commonly attributed to his charisma, resulted from the hope he offered of completing and expanding the promise of López Pumarejo’s *Revolución en Marcha*.

Although it derived from the Liberal tradition, Gaitanismo offered a popular alternative to the two established parties in the mid-1940s. And while it constituted an ambiguous inheritance, Gaitanismo had a consistently radical character. Gaitanismo was an authentic popular mobilization that effectively challenged the hegemony of the economic and political establishment. In the mouths of the Gaitanistas, “democracy” and “social justice” proved to be powerful stimulants of popular mobilization, partly explaining the weakness of more conventional leftist organizations.

Gaitán’s independent run for the presidency from 1944 to 1946 exposed many cracks in Colombia’s traditional political culture and social fabric. In the short span between his move to conquer the Liberal Party and his assassination in 1948, Gaitán demonstrated the depth of his movement and proved himself the popularly anointed leader of Colombian Liberalism.

114. “Una figura simbólica,” *Orientación Liberal* (Popayán), reprinted in *El Estado*, Feb. 24, 1947, pp. 1, 6.

When Gaitanismo lost its focal symbol, it became engulfed in the regional and partisan struggles of Colombian history.

The movement was ultimately defeated and the Gaitanistas' political victories were lost to violence, but only at great and enduring cost. Even so, this was perhaps less true of the Atlantic coast. There, where the *violencia* was much less pronounced, it can be postulated that left-Liberal currents survived to a greater extent in the Liberal Party. Those currents of mobilization were ultimately pushed from the Liberal Party in the late 1940s and 1950s, creating new and often violent political entities that could trace their lineage directly to Gaitanismo.