

# A Subversive Agent From Colombia

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In a letter to a friend in the United States dated May 16, 1969, a leading Colombian sociologist declared:

I have been trying to disattach myself from portions of the North American heritage which I had received, and with which I find myself increasingly at odds. For this reason, I cannot identify myself with any institution of the United States that would uphold or sustain the present economic and social policies pursued toward the Nations of the Third World.

One year later he declined an invitation to join Buckminster Fuller, Norman Cousins, Lester Pearson, Pietro Nenni, Jan Tinbergen and other intellectual notables in a consultative group on "The Future of the United Nations." He gave three reasons for his refusal: (1) The United Nations is engaged in merely palliative efforts to overcome underdevelopment; (2) the group invited is conspicuously elitist, leaving no room for ideological dissidents or militant Third World university students; (3) he must return to his native Colombia to contribute, as he put it, "as far as I can, to the liberating effort to make my country a better place for its people, and to its search for autonomy and dignity. For me this task is of the highest priority."

These are the strongly expressed and strongly held convictions of Orlando Fals-Borda. They reflect, however, the beliefs and convictions of a significant number of Latin American scholars. Though obviously unique, the career of Fals-Borda meshes with those of other scholars who respond to commonly

perceived problems, and it can be regarded as a prism which allows people in the United States to gain a new perspective on Latin America.

What "portion of the North American heritage" was this Latin American sociologist trying to flee? Born in the port town of Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1925, he pursued his secondary studies at an American school there and received his higher education in the United States (B.A., Iowa, 1947; M.A., University of Minnesota, 1952; Ph.D., University of Florida, 1955). Unlike many other Latin American intellectuals with international horizons and a multicultural education, he anchored his research in native rural field experience early in his career. His fidelity, not to his class or to his profession, but to the people of his land, led him in later years to insert himself in the rural zones of *La Violencia*. Out of this new experience came the landmark book *Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*, dedicated to his friend and fellow sociologist Camilo Torres, whom Fals-Borda labels "a moral subversive, the kind that blazes new paths." A thoughtful and active Protestant layman, Orlando Fals-Borda is above all a dedicated scholar and a committed agent for social change. His life, in recent years, has been an arena wherein conflicting loyalties have fought out their battles around three crucial options:

that of the detached scholar versus the active revolutionary intellectual;

that of the institutionally successful professional versus the marginalized outcast;

that of the "maker of history" versus the Christian witness to transcendence.

Fals-Borda's model of critical social science, and his life, as it functions as a stage for ethical dilemmas and political options, shed bright light on the ethics of development. Fals-Borda's drama is not purely personal; it typifies options faced by a whole generation of Third World scholars as they gain a new political consciousness of their society's problems.

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There are limits, though, to the "typicality" of Fals-Borda, even as a Latin American social scientist. His personal choices and value loyalties differ from those of prominent colleagues, many of whom have adopted a more rigorous Marxist social analysis and have committed themselves more overtly to partisan political action. Nevertheless, in the questions he poses and the internal contradictions he faces, Fals-Borda is representative of a new breed of scholars in "underdeveloped" countries.

One striking paradox in Fals-Borda's career is the combination of impeccable scholarly credentials and his increasingly vocal assault on the pseudo-objectivity, the élitism, the ethnocentrism, the biases and the distortions wrought in the name of objective social science. Lest we be misled by Fals-Borda's critique we do well to evoke the high regard he has always maintained for intellectual rigor, for factual evidence, and for impartial verification; he is an important critic because he is no mere iconoclast, disillusioned by the political failings of his first vocation. On the contrary, his aim is to restore sociological thinking to what is best in its origins and to theorize, as Paulo Freire puts it, "in the *praxis* mode."

When he launched his first field study in 1949, Orlando knew that most governmental programs were based on subjective impressions or partisan interests. Accordingly he wrote that

it is important to have a sound knowledge of the facts and problems of rural life in Colombia. This empirical knowledge is needed in order to arrive at so-called "scientific" legislation, and in order to plan intelligent campaigns and formulate intelligent policies. Precise diagnosis is the logical and indispensable preliminary to any possible prognosis.

In 1966, lecturing in New York on "The Ideological Biases of North Americans Studying Latin America," he said that what is needed in Latin America and other developing countries

is a science committed to development, with its practitioners identified with the national struggles to build a new and better social order. There are illustrious forebears in this regard, whose example is stimulating. It was a committed sociology and a committed social science that enhanced the contributions of such men as Malthus, Smith, Comte, Marx, Ward, Ortega and even Durkheim (the last chapter in his book on suicide is entitled "Practical Implications"). We need to go back to Ward to borrow the term "teletic." This is the kind of research we need: teletic, anticipatory or projective research. We need to study the actual performance of institutions against the mirror of future needs and unachieved goals.

In his major work, *Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*, Fals-Borda calls for a return to historically rooted scientific study. Because they lack such rooting, most social scientists erroneously brand those who advocate extralegal means to effect needed changes as subversives or deviants. Such labeling has, he writes, "been formulated in such a way that it becomes an element in the justification of the prevailing social order of a given historical moment. He who subverts is antisocial, no matter what the condition of society or the justice of his challenge."

Social science should not avoid value-laden or conflictual questions; it *should* stop buttressing the interests of the privileged in societies whose basic structures are inequitable. What Orlando Fals-Borda wants "is a sociology and a history [which], far from being instruments of domination and traditional exploitation, serve the nation, thanks to the serious and arduous application of scientific methods, so as to help it escape from economic and intellectual colonialism, a spiritual vacuum, and the cultural and technical prostration which frustrate it as a people." This is why he concludes that "To eliminate from the idea of subversion its traditional immoral ingredient is to provide a scientifically productive concept." Since purpose and conflict are inherent in all strategic endeavors for collective self-improvement, only a model of social disequilibrium does justice to the social realities.

New patterns of sociological study are needed because domination by privileged élites is facilitated by the passive ignorance of the populace. Dominant groups in societies like Colombia consider sociology to be a "subversive science." Accepting the challenge head on, Fals-Borda advocates a form of action/research which is openly committed to the cause of revolutionary transformation of his country's social structures. For him, to engage in "neutral" or "objective" social science is simply to mask one's loyalty to the prevailing imperialist system. And it is subversion, newly defined, which energizes a wide array of efforts at radical correction of social ills.

Fals-Borda is not alone, of course, in attacking the "objectivity" of social science. Gunnar Myrdal criticized his own value assumptions while writing *Asian Drama* and enlarged on his reflections in *Objectivity in Social Research*. Alvin Gouldner, in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, likewise points to the need for a conscious value-committed mode of research. And the radical caucuses which proliferate within U.S. professional associations further testify to the disaffection many scholars have with studies unrelated to contemporary struggles. But the precise manner in which revitalized social science is to incorporate subjective perceptions of committed change agents to its quest for "objectivity" remains undiscovered. It is Fals-Borda's hope that new experiments on research "with the people" will point the way.

Participant-observer researchers observe social reality by sharing the life of the community under study. Fals-Borda, who has engaged in participant observation in the past, now pushes one step further and pleads for full "insertion" in the milieu to be examined. What does such insertion entail?

At the very least it means accepting the ordinary conditions of life endured by the populace being studied. In Saucio, Fals-Borda performed farm chores and dressed in the typical *ruana* (a kind of poncho), boots and khaki pants. More important, he explains, "I made a point of never trying to appear excessively different or superior; by doing this, I was attempting to close the cultural gap which exists between the educated Colombian élite and the mass of campesinos, a gap which, needless to say, is one of the reasons for their mutual misunderstanding and antagonism." He even altered his mode of speech so as to eliminate traces of class superiority in his dealings with peasants. The only badge of full acceptance he never won is that of the godfather: He never became *compadre* to anyone, thus proving, as he puts it, "that, in spite of my efforts, I did not become a complete insider."

Such insertion, however, still remains superficial; what is more important is that the researcher fully identify with the goals and values of a group committed to radical change. Research, Fals-Borda argues, must be conducted in allegiance to the cause of the masses and against the interests of their exploiters. Research insertion in the midst of peasant groups actively engaged in the struggle for land, justice and power ultimately requires that social scientists become actors in the process they study. Thus conceived, it is a political option. According to Fals-Borda and his associates:

Insertion conceived as a technique of observation and analysis of processes and factors includes, within its ambit, militancy aimed at achieving certain social, political and economic objectives. . . . Simultaneously, insertion as technique incorporates researchers to popular groups, no longer in the old exploitative relationship of "subject" and "object," but rather in a mode which values the informational and interpretative input of the groups studied. These groups, moreover, have the right to use the data and the other elements obtained in the course of the research.<sup>1</sup>

It does appear, nevertheless, that Fals-Borda still employs instruments dictated primarily by his discipline, in contrast to the pioneer efforts of others whose approach allows the populations studied to define the research agenda and the hypotheses to be studied.<sup>2</sup> In this approach, the people's own perceptions take precedence over those of the trained scholar in formulating researchable questions. Fals-Borda and his associates have recently experimented with new research instruments designed by the peo-

ple themselves. The people are "self-studied": Colombian peasants ferret out their forgotten recollections of past events, reconstruct the history of earlier struggles against landowners, and interview members of their own community to control the interpretations advanced by the trained researchers who adhere to their struggle. At a later stage illustrated pamphlets using simple daily language are widely distributed.<sup>3</sup>

By insisting on political commitment to exploited masses, Fals-Borda castigates any form of research or theorizing which is divorced from social *praxis*. He does not relinquish, however, the special claim of social scientists to the validity and legitimacy of their professional endeavors. He once replied to a questioner in the United States that he had to struggle mightily, while studying violence in rural zones controlled by revolutionary guerrillas, to defend the usefulness of his "scientific" research on subversion.

Social change takes a variety of forms: It may be endogenous or exogenous, spontaneous or guided, evolutionary within a given system or aimed at overthrowing the status quo. Change becomes subversive only when it is fostered by rebel groups committed to the transition from one social order to another. For Fals-Borda subversion is a modern form of "heresy": Jan Hus and Thomas Munzer are "symbols of subversion-as-heresy," and their successors in the present age are Fidel Castro, Mao, Guevara, Ho Chi-Minh, Marighela, Cabral, Torres and countless others. The foundations of subversion are supremely moral, as evidenced both in the writings of revolutionaries and in their lives of sacrifice so that others may enjoy justice. And the counterviolence they are obliged to employ does not destroy social welfare; rather, it removes obstacles to the construction of authentic social good. Lest we fall prey to the stereotypes created by our own "bourgeois" culture, Fals-Borda reminds us that

The guardians of the established order often forget that many subversives have in time become the heroes of a new society and the saints of a revitalized Church. Their attitudes and beliefs had not been accepted in their own time because these threatened vested interests. With historical perspective, the anti-social elements are seen to be others: those who defend an unjust social order, believing it to be just only because it is traditional.

Not only is subversion the forerunner of social construction, it is the vital moral force which transforms passivity and exploitation into human dignity and liberation. In Latin America, writes Fals-Borda, "subversion represents a real possibility for renovation, freedom and collective fulfillment. It may afford a chance for Latin America to find itself and follow its own way in the universal concourse." Since most

"legal" change measures constitute mere palliatives and self-defeating summonses to failure, there can be no doubt that subversive groups in Colombia constitute the key category of change agents.

What is noteworthy here is not Fals-Borda's argument; the same case has often been made by others. But he articulates his case in the very terms of conventional sociological wisdom. He tries to demonstrate that even in the eyes of social scientists subversives must not be viewed as "deviants," "aberrants" or "marginals," but rather as constructive social change agents. In so doing he himself acts as a linguistic subversive within the arena of sociological discourse. And like all subversives he glories in the label!

Historical circumstances have conspired to make Fals-Borda's professional life an arena of divided loyalties. Born into a Presbyterian family in the most conservative Catholic nation of Latin America, he was understandably attracted to the American schools with which, in Colombia, Protestant missionaries are identified. More important, he reached adulthood at a time when Latin American social science was passing from a stage of infancy to instant maturity. Fortunately his desire to be relevant led him to seek firsthand knowledge of peasant realities in Colombia. This was later to produce a painful cleavage between his aspirations to scholarship and his commitment to social justice.

Fals-Borda urges students of social change to examine the ethical dilemmas, value conflicts and criteria for decisions which underlie research on societies. This is why one may usefully examine his writings and decisions with a view to analyzing the *structure of ambiguity* which envelops serious moral agents nowadays. Indeed, Fals-Borda's conflicting loyalties provide an *objective* arena in which contemporary social forces exercise their conflicting pulls. Two such conflicts merit comment here.

Fals-Borda's work and life hold out lessons to others because he struggles to remain both a scholar and a committed agent for social change. I noted earlier the importance he attached to an objective examination of Colombia's rural problems. He complained that "Colombian literature is rich with eloquent description of the *campesino*, his way of life, his customs, his beliefs. But nearly all these descriptions have romanticized him so much, certainly with good intentions, that it becomes difficult sometimes to tell where fancy ends and reality begins." Therefore, he wants to base his scholarship on direct contact with peasant communities. At all times, however, his fidelity to the "demands of scholarship" abides. He is never one to despise the merits of theory, nor does he endorse the view which would confer legitimacy solely on active militancy. Even in the name of revolutionary commitment he will not countenance any simplistic anti-intellectualism.

One senses in Fals-Borda's unending struggle to reconcile scholarship with militancy a special regard for the dialectical complementarity between the word and the deed. And as he wrestles endlessly with the conflicting demands of scholarship and commitment to change, Fals-Borda repeatedly chooses the role of committed scholar. "Scholar" is the operative noun here, "committed" the adjective. Two value judgments are hereby implied:

1. that the two exigencies can coexist, and
2. that scholarship is Fals-Borda's primary identity.

This assessment is confirmed by his own insistence that the canons of objectivity must be reinterpreted so as to include commitment to historic social change. He never tires of patiently showing to other scholars that not one iota of the rigor or respect for evidence which they rightly value is sacrificed by commitment. And in his daily existence he has continued to labor as a sociologist. This is the strongest proof that he does not consider scholarship to be superfluous or irrelevant to revolution. Yet Fals-Borda has made great personal and professional sacrifices so as to *situate* his study in a context of social struggle. His theoretical position is stated clearly in an appendix to *Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*:

It does not seem possible to study violence and its effects on Colombian society in a profound way, using the intellectual equivalents of prophylactic gloves and face mask, or to arrive at the strategic arenas of change in urban slums or in humble peasant communities with the august, aloof attitude of the scientist who thinks only in terms of accumulation of knowledge. . . .

Commitment is in no way a matter of rebellion against classical scientific method, because basic principles of inference are observed, and the control of intervening factors and elements is sought. Objectivity is also maintained, within adequate bounds. . . . The primary reason for a scientist to adopt this position of commitment to social change and identification with the processes of socioeconomic development of a country is to be found in the verification that these processes have a purpose or *telos* whose transcendence and meaning may be understood only through active participation in them. . . .

Fals-Borda does not claim that revolutionary social change is best served by scholars, merely that *he* can best serve it by critical scholarship. Like other "committed" intellectuals, he asks in return only that those who are committed in other modes not reduce revolutionary authenticity to their own form of struggle, a tendency often manifested by political militants. There is no "only way" to be a revolutionary!

The second tension—that between institutional professional or creative outcast—derives from the first; hence it can be treated briefly. It matters greatly to any committed agent to decide for whom

he/she is working, in whose interest and at whose expense. The question can be answered only by evaluating the political and ideological stance of the *institutions* within which one could operate. Nevertheless, one cannot be a purist or a fundamentalist in this regard: there are degrees of collaboration with institutions just as there are limits to the alternatives one may find or create.

One central feature in Fals-Borda as a case study in conflicting loyalties is his conscious decision to remove himself from institutions wherein he could normally have expected to exercise his talents very fruitfully. He has severed his ties with the National University of Colombia because universities, at least in Colombia, have become, in his words, "factories to produce personnel for capitalist imperialism." His option testifies to a conviction that his energies should not be placed at the service of palliative solutions to the ills of underdevelopment. Former colleagues in the academy or in international service have sometimes criticized him for these choices. Yet he never judges or condemns others who take other options.

Fals-Borda is a skilled and experienced professional. He helped found the modern sociology department at the National University of Colombia in 1959; he has served as visiting professor or lecturer at Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin, at the London School of Economics, at universities in Chile, Cuba and Sweden; he has acted as program director at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in Geneva. Hence his decision to become an institutional outcast is a significant one. Professional marginalization is simply a risk he must run to be true to his commitment to radical social change in Colombia, Latin America and the Third World at large. He does not take the step with a light heart, nor does he disdain communication with those who have remained within conventional scholarly circles. For he knows that these circles too must be revolutionized, from within as from without.

Fals-Borda's moderate position in this conflict of loyalties has led some fellow Latin Americans to criticize him, to claim that he was so "compromised" by the Establishment in his earlier years that no one will fully trust him now, neither Left nor Right.

As far as I am able to judge, this accusation overlooks two crucial realities. First, as a man of deep moral sensitivities Fals-Borda understands the difference between subjective responsibility for his own choices and an objective judgment about historical institutions. Second, because he has witnessed violence at first hand, he is not tempted to glamorize or idealize it. What is more important, his sense of history prevents him from assuming a posture which might at first glance seem heroic or pure, but which, over time, would isolate him from those very masses whose consciousness must be transformed if revolution is to become possible.

In short, Fals-Borda is not indifferent to results and to effectiveness; he tries to work where results are possible and where the specificity of his own contribution can complement the labor of others. This is why he repudiates all improper or unfocused kinds of "insertion" in the populace. Many change agents, he explains, are nothing more than "manipulators" or "agitators," whose ultimate purposes and loyalties are incompatible with the genuine liberation of those they profess to "help."

To condemn Fals-Borda because his position seems ambiguous is to misunderstand the structurally ambivalent condition of any society in the travail of unprecedented social change. Here is a sociologist who may become an outcast from professional institutions, but is willing to run that risk. If he must be an outcast, he wants to be a creative one who helps liberate oppressed groups.

No arena of conflicting loyalties is more troubling to Latin Americans than that of revolutionary violence. On the one hand, serious advocates of social change recognize the permanent systemic violence imposed on the populace at large by repressive regimes at the service of a privileged social structure. Consequently, they readily endorse the view that revolutionary violence is basically a form of counter-violence, at times necessary to create the possibility of justice. What is more, they grasp the social impact of advocating nonviolence, a stance which favors the status quo and deprives opponents of established disorder of the moral legitimacy they need to wage their battles.

Fals-Borda reiterates Che Guevara's distinction between the moral system of the guerrilla and that of the regular army soldier in these terms:

The former is willing to offer his life to the cause and forego all comforts, while the second is a simple mercenary. Moreover, the use of violence is conditioned to the resistance shown by the reactionaries who impede the birth of the new society; thus, the guerrilla is not a violent man *per se*, and should not be confused with a bandit. He uses counter-violence, that is, the revolutionary violence of the just rebellion, or the just war. Therefore, on moral grounds his superiority may appear undeniable. . . .

It is under this light that painful acts like the kidnapping of foreign ambassadors and national personalities by truly revolutionary groups should be understood. Counter-violence of this type depends on the violence executed previously by reactionary groups in power. . . . The strategy of subversive war therefore requires to respond in kind to the onslaughts of those who oppose radical progress because this social change would end their selfish, vested interests. If there were less selfishness in theory, there would be less violence.

But resistance to change and the establishment of more repressive regimes in the area thus far anticipate even more violent encounters.

Throughout most of his work, however, Fals-Borda takes revolutionary violence for granted: It is simply a necessary instrument for achieving subversion and the new social order. Whatever may be his private reflections on the matter, his writings do not reflect the anguish of conscience one detects in the writings of Camilo Torres. Fals-Borda accepts subversion as an historical social process, endorses its objectives, praises its heroes and reinterprets it as socially constructive without bothering to justify violent means in the name of ethics or religion or even of good politics, as Torres does. He is very much more the historical analyst than Camilo. Fals-Borda keeps his distance from the *practical* arguments over violence in such passages as this:

It is impossible to enter here into the polemic over the justification of the use of violence, which has been going on for several centuries. . . . Nor is it necessary to turn to the classical thesis of Saint Thomas Aquinas concerning the just war, even though it is important to recall the way in which it was revived in the sixteenth century to legitimate the Spanish conquest and the Christian subversion. . . . Translated to present situations of internal conflict in which the control of the social order is fought over, the same positive argument for the use of subversive violence appears.

Later in this passage Fals-Borda evokes Lenin, Ortega y Gasset, Kautsky, Marx, Torres, Hobbes and Max Weber. One definitely gets the impression of an historian of ideas, not of a polemical advocate.

Nevertheless, both Fals-Borda and Torres state categorically that churches should line up on the side of the oppressed. For both men, revolutionary violence is the violence of the just rebellion or the just war. On one vital point of interpretation, however, Camilo Torres and Orlando Fals-Borda part ways: in their assessment of the impact of the years of *La Violencia* in rural Colombia (1949-57). For Torres *La Violencia* has been a major positive force in transforming social structure and attitudes in rural Colombia. He concludes that "violence has constituted, for Colombia, the most important socio-cultural change in peasant areas since the Conquest by the Spaniards."<sup>1</sup>

Fals-Borda, notwithstanding his central conviction that subversion is both a moral and a socially constructive category, assesses *La Violencia* quite differently. He writes:

in the end, *la violencia* was no more than a blind, leaderless conflict that undermined ancient customs of the peasant population, demolishing at the same time their yearnings for significant change and disorienting their angry reaction. It is im-

probable that this phenomenon was anticipated by the dominant groups, even with all the cunning at their disposal. But it undoubtedly served to alienate the people from the goal of their previous ideals. Even though there were efforts to channel and rationalize peasant violence and formally organize it, it escaped all bounds to the point of becoming a confused expression of predominately [*sic*] personal conflicts by peasants incapable of gauging the great transformation that might have been carried out. They could not seek the support of an ideology, and there was no national leader or any institution that might show them the way and redeem them from their deep tragedy.

Otherwise stated, *La Violencia* was not revolutionary, and it did not serve the cause of subversion.

On balance, Fals-Borda's own ethical values are no less historical and no less religious than those of Camilo Torres. He too can bring himself to accept violence only as "exasperated reason" (Ortega y Gasset) or as the "midwife of history" (Marx). Camilo preaches more overtly the utopian term of revolutionary violence: reconciliation in justice and brotherhood. Fals-Borda, on the other hand, chooses to live in private ethical tension between the acceptance of violence and the call to limits. When he discusses these issues, he treats them as historical *prises de positions* in an age-old debate. The Marxist philosophy, which has been paramount in the evolution of thought, offsets his early training in the sociology of Durkheim and Weber. Fals-Borda is thereby more easily led to the analysis of social conflict, which, in his view, is the key to understanding the reality of underdeveloped societies.

I have tried in this essay to do two things:

1. to present Fals-Borda as a moral agent in revolutionary times, whose ethical dilemmas and ideological options are those faced by countless others as they reach new levels of critical consciousness;
2. to highlight his major contribution to the study of social change.

Fals-Borda has recast the debate on subversion in terms which make of theory and research themselves instruments of revolutionary transformation. By centering his analysis upon subversion as a moral category, Fals-Borda links the universe of moral decision to those of political action and scientific study.

#### NOTES

1. Orlando Fals-Borda, with Victor D. Bonilla, Gonzalo Castillo and Augusto Libreros, *Causa Popular, Ciencia Popular* (Bogotá: Publicaciones de la ROSCA, 1972).

2. On this, cf. Denis Goulet, "An Ethical Model for the Study of Values," *Harvard Educational Review* (May, 1971).

3. Two representative samples of such pamphlets are *Lomagrande, El Baluarte del Simu* (Montería, Colombia, 1972), 20 pages; and *Tinajones, un Pueblo un Lucha por la Tierra* (Tinajones, Colombia, 1973), 20 pages.

4. *Camilo Torres por el Padre Camilo Torres Restrepo* (1956-1968). SONDEFOS No. 5 (Cuernavaca, 1966).