

# **The Relationship between the Sociology Program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation: A Preliminary Description of its Dynamics<sup>1</sup>.**

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Material in the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) documents the important relationship between the sociology program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNC), the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the Ford Foundation (FF). Two factors stand out: the significant assistance the program received from those institutions during its first eight years, and secondly, the major role the FF played in a controversy that occurred in 1966.<sup>2</sup> A central figure during the program's first years was Orlando Fals Borda, a Colombian who studied rural sociology in the U.S. during the 1950s, and was recognized by academics and politicians in the U.S. and Latin America as an outstanding sociologist.<sup>3</sup> In the following pages I will briefly describe the relationship between the UNC's sociology program, the RF and the FF, as well as the polemical elements of FF assistance.

## **Rockefeller Foundation Assistance**

A series of grants from the RF's Division of Social Sciences allowed the sociology program, which began as a part of the UNC's Faculty of Economy, to establish its first library and to purchase necessary research equipment. Funding also provided scholarships for some students to continue their studies abroad at important universities and it supported religion and

migration research by Father Camilo Torres and research on community development by Fals. Both Torres and Fals played important roles in the sociology program and Torres' research was approved by Francois Houtart, who had a close connection with the program. Torres and Fals shared similar political ethics and both were sociologists. However, only Torres received academic support from Oscar Lewis, who had written about migration in Mexico and on community development. The community development study was conducted by Fals in a small rural area in Colombia (Saucio–Choconta-Colombia) with the assistance of sociology students (Olga Cardozo, Juan de J. Cifuentes, Carlos Neissa and Hector Pedraza) and Paul J. Deutchman, director of the \_\_\_\_\_, ” with whom he co-authored the study's results. Fals, on the recommendation of Lynn Smith (an American sociologist who directed Fals' dissertation at the University of Florida in the 1950s, and an eminent rural sociologist in the U.S. who had worked in Colombia and in Brazil with agricultural divisions from both governments), wrote to Kenneth W. Thompson, assistant director of the RF's Division of Social Sciences, requesting an RF grant. Fals included one of his papers in support of his grant request and Smith provided a recommendation letter for Fals, which also stated that two of his students from the University of Florida had gone to the UNC sociology department to do their thesis.

The formal application to the RF included documents that referenced the method of “experimentation by participation” that Fals had been using since 1953 and which he planned to utilize under the grant. This was a central research methodology used not only by Fals, but also by students in the early sociology program. The method, closely related to agricultural development research, allowed the investigator to find out first what agricultural practices peasants were using; then suggest to peasants new practices on agriculture and then hopefully

convince peasants to change their agricultural techniques and instruments. To accomplish this, the confidence and respect of the researcher had to be established in the peasant communities.

### **Ford Foundation Assistance**

As was the RF, the FF was a fundamental institution in the beginning and early development of the sociology program. It appears to have been the main external funding-institution assisting the faculty. A developmental grant of \$35,000 was approved in 1962 and was used to make contributions in the social development of areas the country considered vital: agrarian reform, community development, health improvement, industrial and labor relations, education, justice, crime and “violence,” and public administration.

The grant request was divided along topics and sought funding for scholarships, professorships, a library, new construction, research, and publications. Fals and Guillermo Briones expressed positive results in a March 28, 1967 report to the FF. The grant had permitted an important internal process at the Universidad Nacional: the re-organization of departments and faculties.

The graduate school of sociology received part of the grant for the development of the sociology program, but in 1964 the graduate program received its own specific developmental grant. A grant to the graduate program in sociology was recommended internally by the FF on May 8, 1964. An excerpt from the approval document reviews the positive results of the sociology program:

On February 15, 1962, the President approved a grant of \$35,000 to the National University of Colombia for the program of the Faculty of Sociology (62-173). The letter of grant notification stated that the Foundation was willing to consider in addition up to five man-years of visiting professors under travel and study awards for the new and promising Faculty of Sociology of the University. During the past two years the Faculty has more than justified the Foundation's investment in its future. Enrollment has jumped from seventy-five to one hundred forty-eight; the teaching staff has increased from five to

twenty-one, eleven of whom are full time; research projects have shed valuable light on a number of critical social problems such as rural violence; and publications include twenty books and monographs which are creating teaching materials in Spanish. Under the energetic leadership of Dean Fals Borda, this institution has earned the reputation of having Latin America's best undergraduate program in sociology.

A 1970 report written by Rose Golden from the FF provides information about the professors who visited the graduate program (Shulman-1966, Ratinoff-1967, Briones-1968, Nebbia-1968, German Rama-1970, Luis Costa-1970, Riquelme-1970), as well as the students who were expected to be teachers in the faculty once they had finished their studies, thereby eventually replacing visiting professors. The students included Rodrigo Parra, who began a Ph.D. in rural sociology at the University of Wisconsin; Humberto Rojas, a University of Wisconsin Ph.D. in rural sociology; Cecilia Muñoz and Carlos Castillo, who studied in Lovaine 1964-1965; Fernando Uricoechea, a Ph.D. in sociology from Berkeley and one professor, Carlos Escalante, a MA (1966) in rural sociology from the University of Florida.

The graduate school was regarded by the FF, and by Fals and Andrew Pearse, a professor in the sociology program, as a research center for Latin America, not just for Colombia. Thus, most of its students were expected to be from other countries. The grant for the "Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios para el Desarrollo" or PLEDES, as the graduate school was called, was rather significant (\$220,000 U.S.) and supported PLEDES for three years from 1964 through 1967.<sup>4</sup>

The FF also supported the Colombian Association of Sociology's 7th Congress in 1964. At the Congress, the FF faced accusations based on an article published shortly before this Congress, in a Colombian newspaper, that called the sociology program "charlatanism." The 7th Latin American Congress allowed public attention to focus on the debate about the role sociology played in the development of Colombian society.

## **Controversy about Ford Foundation Assistance**

The above text concerns the first stage of the sociology program, in which Fals was the main player and in which the FF and the RF were key actors. However, a second stage of the program began in 1966. Motivated by the political and social struggles in Latin America, some students and teachers in the sociology program became critical of the relationships the sociology program had created, particularly the one with the FF.

Certainly, it was not the first time that students reacted to the internal problems in sociology and the UNC, but rejection of FF support was a new factor. The FF's perception about the sociology program changed as well, particularly its expectations of, and confidence in Fals. They considered his role at the university very undefined, because his role in the sociology program and at the university had changed. Previously his influence was widely accepted, but this was no longer true. Internal evaluations between the FF and its consultants occurred. Doubts about the FF's future involvement in sociology, as well as recommendations about stopping involvement altogether, began in 1966.

In a report to Harry Wilhelm, Cotter wrote that the anti-FF movement in the sociology program had not extended throughout the UNC. The FF members were critical and self-critical about these problems. For instance, they criticized UNC's students by being exclusively against help from the United States. The situation was humorously presented in one internal report:

For some reason I'm reminded of the joke about the two guys in the Jewish restaurant. The first orders a glass of tea with lemon. The second hesitates, orders the same, and adds, "And make sure the glass is clean." The waiter returns and says, "Gentlemen, two glasses of tea. Who ordered the one with the clean glass?" I'll leave it to you to figure out why your Colombian situation reminded me of that joke.

A shared belief at the FF was that there had been a negative centralization of FF grants to one person: Orlando Fals. Because of this, FF plans and, in part, those of the sociology program, to

engage teachers who had studied abroad were frustrated. The idea that the sociology program would serve as a strategic and strong center for research on Latin American social sciences with the participation of non-Colombian students was also compromised.

Based on Rose Golden's report, two ideological branches struggled in this controversy: a "cosmopolitan view," which believed that the sociology program could serve as a center for research for Latin America and thereby strengthen mainly Ph.D. programs versus an "academic populism," centered generally in Colombia and on one sociology masters degree program. In 1970, according to Golden, the sociology program was run by "populists." It was also in this year that the FF planned to end its support of sociology.

In April 1970 the "cosmopolitans" sent a group letter of resignation to the director of the department of sociology. In it they stated their disagreement with the new curriculum of sociology that had been created without discussion, and that, in their opinion, would not positively contribute to Colombian reality. This action coincided with the end of the relationship between the FF and the UNC sociology program, and also marked the completion of the first stage of professionalization of Colombian sociology, which occurred under the leadership of Orlando Fals, with the support of the FF and the RF.<sup>5</sup>

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## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks to a grant from the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) I was able to review this material in the summer of 2013.

<sup>2</sup>In its first years, the sociology program was regarded by both foundations as a key place to develop Latin American social sciences and that its leader, Orlando Fals, was one of the better sociologists in Latin America. The program received support from the rectors of the UNC (mainly Mario Laserna); from the UNC Faculty of Economy (which had prior contact with both foundations and was the UNC section in which sociology was founded as an independent department); and from the national government (specifically during the presidency of Alberto Lleras—a period in Colombia called “Frente Nacional,” that began with the promise to finish a long stage of violence known as “La Violencia”). These factors explain, at least partially, the initial success of the program and the subsequent help the foundations provided.

<sup>3</sup>Fals had worked with the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the Centro Interamericano de Vivienda y Planeamiento Urbano (CINVA) and the Servicio Tecnico Colombo-Americano (STACA) during the late 1950s. He also worked simultaneously with the UNC sociology program and the fundamental agricultural section of the Colombian national government from 1959 to late April of 1960, when he decided to leave his role as sub-secretary at the Institute for Agriculture.

In his resignation letter to Hugo Ferreira (director of the Instituto de Agricultura) Fals noted that he had served in the process of national reconstruction under President Lleras. Fals had been motivated to enter this process by ex-minister Espinosa Valderrama who encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunities the Institute could provide to put into practice the agrarian reforms Fals presented in his texts. In his letter Fals also explained why he had not left the Institute some months earlier in order to work fulltime in the UNC sociology program: the agrarian reform projects remained unfinished and it was necessary to reorganize the Institute. He wrote to Ferreira that because new projects on tenure regimes and land registry were almost ready, he decided to leave government and dedicate all his time to the sociology program.

<sup>4</sup>Fals reported to the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the Ford Foundation (FF) on any kind of progress, expectations or changes in the sociology program (e.g., when it became an independent faculty; then when it was divided into departments); changes at the University (e.g., new directors, the relationship between its problems and national political problems) and in the country (e.g. expectations about presidential changes). In these letters, calls and reports, Fals not only informed the foundations, but also asked for their opinions and suggestions.

<sup>5</sup> A recent interview with one “cosmopolitan” informed me that the teachers who sent the letter were mainly individuals who had received RF and FF scholarships to study abroad or who had been students in the undergraduate sociology program. The interviewee also commented on the atmosphere that surrounded the controversy. At the time, the Universidad Nacional was extremely politicized with a varied range of political organizations present, including guerrillas. There were strong doubts about all relationships with U.S. organizations, including study at American universities. This created a very intolerant attitude towards teachers who had studied there, i.e., most of the “cosmopolitans.” The “cosmopolitans” was not a homogeneous group, there were individual differences. Nevertheless, they were united by their universal discomfort with a very theoretical program. As a result, they submitted a letter of resignation (the letter mentioned above) which, as I see it now, marked the end of the first developmental stage of the sociology program.