

"Colombia was a world pioneer in peace processes": Robert Karl

Almost two decades of scouring public and private archives led the historian Robert Karl to conclude, against the grain, in his book *Forgotten Peace*, that the country was a model of reconciliation. He spoke from the United States about the hopes that led to peace and the disappointments that led once more to war, and the clues that our past gives us in the present.

By Lina Britto

A dark cityscape of empty avenues and street dwellers was what initially attracted Robert Karl to Colombia. It was a photograph of downtown Bogotá displayed in an exhibition at Harvard University, his *alma mater*. Months later, he visited the city for the first time, and one Sunday night he found himself walking alone inside that image. And the young historian realized that his path lay in that connection made of memory and reality, that connection between him and a country in twilight.

After years of archival research and interviews, informal conversations, published articles, conferences, and even failed drafts, Karl offers us a light on our riddle: *La paz olvidada : Políticos, letrados, campesinos y el surgimiento de las FARC en la formación de la Colombia contemporánea* (Lerner, 2018). The book, initially published in English [*Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia* (University of California Press, 2017)], is a journey through the hopes and efforts of different sectors that wagered on peace to put an end to what we call today La Violencia. And it is also the study of a process of disenchantment, of political moves and entrenched interests that led to the loss of hope and the return of war with its unrelenting logic.

From the panoramic perspective of history, Robert Karl, now a professor at Princeton University, spoke to *El Espectador* about the lessons and warnings that forgotten peace of the late 1950s and early 1960s has for Colombia, which is once again debating between an imperfect peace and a perfect war.

Your book is very provocative, because it starts from a premise that seems illogical, namely that Colombia, a country that for nationals and foreigners is synonymous with conflict and violence, was also an example of processes of peace, memory and reconciliation, because decades before Central America and the Southern Cone, with their dictatorships and truth commissions, stood us Colombians and La Violencia. Tell us about that argument.

The argument has two parts, because I differentiate between violence as an idea and violence as practice. As an idea, the biggest revelation is that La Violencia, in capital letters, did not exist at the time. It was a category later created by a generation of intellectuals politically committed to the construction of peace and of a memory of what had happened. And in terms of violence as a practice, the biggest discovery is about the origins of the FARC, which is not part of the history of the Cold War, or at least not completely. That image of the FARC as [FARC leader] Jacobo Arenas and the class struggle breaks down when we look at what [FARC founder] Tirofijo was doing in the '50s and '60s, the petitions he sent (to the

government) that dealt with cattle rustling and the civil rights that authorities were violating. That is, their concerns were local. There was some anti-oligarchic discourse, but it was not very marked, it was not what one associates with communism.

What then would be the most important aspects about the FARC that your book invites us to rethink?

As an economist from the National (University of Colombia) said in 2012 in [the Colombian public affairs blog] *Razón Pública*, when negotiations [between the FARC and the Colombia government] began (in Havana): "good news: the FARC are no longer communists." It seems a maximalist position, but it is not. When [President Juan Manuel] Santos said he was not going to revise the system of private property and the FARC said "all right," it was very telling. What happened is that there is a generation inside the FARC, mostly men, who grew up within the ranks or in left-wing urban circles and went to the mountains and they are the ones who control the narrative about the history of the organization. But that's not the whole story, only the surface. There's much more underneath.

Give us an example of a narrative about the origins of the FARC that is more in keeping with the historical evidences. For example, the 1964 Marquetalia operation, the moment in which the FARC were founded.

The official narrative is that (Manuel) Marulanda (alias Tirofijo) and about 40 fighters resisted the onslaught of 16,000 soldiers from the Colombian Army. But the numbers are incorrect, which tells us how imprecise the Marquetalia narrative is. The last request that Marulanda sent to the presidential palace, a couple of weeks before the operation, and which was signed by 300 people, shows that not all those who were in Marquetalia were armed. They were not all combatants; it was a community that was not necessarily on the verge of armed struggle.

And how do those findings reframe our understanding of this history?

As I said before, the requests the FARC's founders made were exactly the same as those of any rural community in the '50s and '60s: requests for a road, resources from the state. In the guerrilla's agrarian program of July 20, 1964 [the FARC's founding charter], seven of the eight points are on agrarian reform. Very similar to the current [peace] agreement, by the way.

That is to say, the FARC, in its origins, was a non-communist agrarian movement. But your book is more than a new history of the guerrilla, it is also about peace. What is your main finding in that regard?

The biggest discovery is that Colombia in the '50s and '60s was a world pioneer in peace processes and historical memory. It's a complex story that involves politicians, intellectuals, military officers, and peasants. It is from the interaction between these diverse groups that all those narratives about violence are constructed and national politics acquires its texture.

One of the most striking ideas is peace as illusion and disappointment, what do you mean?

This has to do with a generation of intellectuals who were just coming of age, men and women, like Orlando Fals Borda and (Father) Camilo Torres. They had a great influence on the reform policies, such as agrarian reform and community development, that were seen as crucial for avoiding a return to war. But along the way they were disappointed with the clientelist politicking that swallowed up [government] resources. And that frustration was reflected in their studies on violence, which they began to write at the same time that the Conservative Party engaged in a fierce attack against peace. After they came out with the book *La violencia en Colombia*, in 1962, they received death threats and had to hide. And that disillusionment is what eventually led Camilo Torres to join the ELN [guerrilla group], while Fals Borda went into exile.

But there is a third protagonist, Father Germán Guzmán Campos.

By the way, less than a year ago, Pope Francis beatified Father Pedro María Ramírez, (assassinated in Armero, Tolima, during the [1948 uprisings known as the] Bogotazo), whose corpse Father Guzmán was sent to collect. Father Guzmán had experienced violence personally and then on a massive scale. He was a Conservative, the parish priest in Fresno, Tolima, a man of humble origins who sought education, ended up involved with schools and the Church, and became a priest. That is why he was named to the hybrid truth and reconciliation commission of the late '50s. And his participation was crucial. He was the one who compiled the archive that later served as the basis for the book published in 1962. And thanks to Father Camilo (Torres), Guzmán took on a role as an advisor to INCORA [the Colombian land reform agency]. With the threats that followed the book's publication in 1962, Guzmán went to Mexico and then, with the death of Camilo [in 1966], he definitively exiles himself and takes the commission's archive with him, leaves the Church and marries an ex-nun. It seems to me that his disappointment was deeper than that of Fals Borda and Torres. The second edition of *La violencia en Colombia*, published in 1968, is much more critical and anti-oligarchic in tone.

You assert that the military were central figures in the development of that commission that Father Guzmán was part of, What was the role they played?

There is a big difference here with what is happening today, when the military has supported the peace process. In the 1950s there was more regional fragmentation and the military hierarchy was not operating as strongly. In the '50s, you had (General) [Álvaro] Valencia Tovar carrying out land restitution programs yet at the same time several officers, in Caldas, chasing Chispas [one of the period's most infamous "bandits"]. And that was crucial for the collapse of the peace process. In addition, we must consider the military as intellectual actors as well, who studied French [counterinsurgency] theories produced in the Algerian war, that arrived in Latin America through Argentina. And they thought about development, about civic action, and they studied the experiences of U.S. generals in the Philippines [in the 1940s and 50s]. These military intellectuals were crucial in the design and implementation of the counterinsurgency [programs of the 1960s].

In short, what great lesson does that forgotten peace have for the country?

What happens in the countryside is reinterpreted by the national political class in the cities, not only in Bogotá, in a way that complicates peace efforts in the provinces. Debates about who was favored by the peace process, who was more responsible for the violence [of the 1940s and '50s] affected the government coalition of (Alberto) Lleras Camargo [Colombia's president, 1958–62] and led to the withdrawal of government support for certain programs, and that ultimately exacerbated conflicts in the countryside. Other historians have written about how under Lleras Camargo his onetime allies became the opposition and suddenly the country had a group that was against peace within the governing coalition itself.

That is, the gap between the countryside and the city, and the centralism that characterizes our politics, is the main problem?

But it is not a unidirectional process. There is a constant interaction between the countryside and the city. Violent acts of relatively minor importance in the countryside can have exaggerated repercussions on the political system and serve as a catalyst for attacks on the peace process.

And what are the possible lessons for the implementation of the [current] agreements [with the FARC], in terms of development, what at the time they called rehabilitation?

In fact, the logistical challenges were not so different from those we see today. In the late 1950s, a major problem was the lack of surveyors to quantify the land problem. Some colleagues have written about that with respect to earlier decades in the twentieth century, about how many settlers and peasants could not obtain formal land titles because there were no inspectors or a land census. And that historical constant, the lack of technical capacity of the state, makes one wonder if the Colombian elite really cares about development. It is a mentality. It comes down to apathy and individual interests.

In fact, one of the last points that you rethink refers to mentality and culture, the so-called "culture of violence." You propose instead a culture of peace. What do you mean?

I would say cultures of peace, in the plural, and beyond the intellectual class. One of the most important innovations of the past was the connection between peace efforts, developmental reforms, and democratization. In the National Front period [1958–74] this took shape through the Community Action Boards [Juntas de Acción Comunal]. Many of the first promoters of the JACs worked for the rehabilitation programs of the peace process under Lleras Camargo and were trained by Fals Borda and Camilo Torres. The Boards were a response at the micro, local level, to violence and an effort to build peace. People organized around material development projects but also citizenship and rights. And they ended up being the ones who clashed with the narco-paramilitaries in the '80s and '90s. If we see who is being targeted today, it's social activists [like JAC leaders]. That is, today's peace projects are connected with those of the past, and not only at an intellectual but also at a practical level, in terms of lived experience.