

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: DARING TO THINK IS BEGINNING TO
FIGHT: THE HISTORY OF MAGAZINE
ALTERNATIVA—COLOMBIA, 1974-1980

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This case study of alternative, radical journalism in Latin America during the 1970s, seeks to clarify and define the characteristics and limits of this model in concrete, specific historical circumstances. It traces the history of *Alternativa*, a leftist magazine published between February 1974 and 1980 in Bogotá, Colombia when three groups of people from different backgrounds devised a journalistic alternative model based on four objectives (counter-informing; investigation, analysis and interpretation; divulging the people's struggles; and propitiating the unity of the left), to effect a lasting change in Colombia's society. The founders' common Marxist background determined the magazine's content and its approach. Initially, they declared themselves independent and neutral toward the left's groups and decided to reach a wide audience through mass circulation. The narrative shows how inner tensions resulting from principled differences among the magazine's creators and from political circumstances led to two crises that tested its founding principles and

determined its journalistic evolution. It also shows the struggle of the magazine to survive in a hostile climate, against a notoriously reckless and corrupt regime, testing the limits of the freedom of the press. In the first phase, the narrative reviews the history of the country as seen through the eyes of the publication, which contested the official version in the mainstream news media. In the second phase, the investigation highlights paramount issues such as human rights violations, corruption and the role of the press, through the magazine's critical coverage of Colombia's armed forces and police. In the third phase, the dissertation explores the magazine's complex relationship with the left, which eventually led to its demise. As author of this dissertation, I was witness to the events covered by *Alternativa*, and was part of the staff of writers in the magazine's third and last stage, with an inside view of a journalistic phenomenon crucial to understanding Colombia's present troubles.

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THE HISTORY OF MAGAZINE ALTERNATIVA, COLOMBIA, 1974-1980

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Dedication

To

The journalists of *Alternativa*, my friends and companions, the true heroes of this story.

To my wife Lucia Victoria, whose love gave me the strength I needed.

To my daughter Amanda, who is following in my steps, and to her mother Janis for taking care of her.

To my New York friends, Nelson, Orlando, Pacho, Naide, Germán.

To María Victoria Escobar de Segura.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

By analyzing the magazine *Alternativa* in Colombia between 1974 and 1980, I hope to contribute to the understanding of a type of press that falls within a variety of categories and definitions as practiced in countries in the so-called Third World. The very name of the magazine suggests the category of alternative press. Others may include revolutionary, Leninist, emancipatory, critical, leftist, radical or opposition journalism. In mentioning these names, I have to take into account the fact that there is no unanimous consent as to any of these typologies, as indicated in my review of the literature on the issue (Atton 2002, McQuail 1994, Downing 1984).

I will argue that *Alternativa* was unique, given the conditions of the country in which it was born and grew. Similar publications were spawned and grown in Latin America in the same period, but each was a product of its own time and the society that produced it, including the journalistic approaches under which their creators operated. While understanding that only a more thorough comparative study can qualify this assertion, I believe that no publication similar to *Alternativa* had such an influence as an opinion maker and as an actor in the political and cultural life of its country during its lifetime.

This research will be a case study. The aim is primarily to contribute a careful account of the life and times of *Alternativa*, rescuing it from oblivion as a part of Colombia's political, cultural and journalistic history. By narrating the events presented in the magazine's pages and how they came to be there, I believe a light can be shed upon the country's present situation. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that

many of the circumstances that today concern the life of Colombians had their genesis in those six years of the magazine's life.

As a printed periodical, *Alternativa* placed itself in the crossroads of history, politics, culture and journalism. At first it did so by adopting an uncompromising political position based on longstanding leftist ideals that went back to classic Marxist revolutionary theory. Consistent with those ideals, it tried to bring a lasting change in Colombian society.

In time it went from one extreme to the other in the left's spectrum: initially by openly advocating a socialist revolution and finally by fashioning an electoral alliance which ended up including progressive tendencies within the bourgeois Liberal and Conservative parties. I intend to show how this progression was reflected in the magazine's journalistic evolution. For analytical purposes, I divide the history of the magazine in three stages: the first from issue 1 to issue 31, when the magazine changed format and periodicity; the second from issue 32 to issue 111, when it stopped publication for four months and reorganized its staff; and the third from issue 112 to 257, when it folded. Each of those periods included a deep, soul-searching crisis that forced the staff to examine its principles and how to deal with the changing political landscape. Each crises represented a step in the road from a dogmatic, radical and aggressive position to a more informative and inclusive one. All this happened while the magazine fought for its economic and political survival in a very hostile environment for human rights. The climate for press freedom was precarious and this was the only mass-circulation medium in the country to oppose the bipartisan Liberal-Conservative regime.

Alternativa used the Marxist lens to look at the reality of the country, offering a starkly different perspective than that of the mainstream media. No other medium had ever challenged with such force and determination the virtual monopoly held on news and information by broadcast and print outlets openly allied with the political parties in power and depending upon official approval and advertisers' patronage. As I hope to show in this investigation, one immediate effect of *Alternativa* was to highlight the role of the mainstream press as an instrument of the political establishment, used to deliver a manufactured script on the state of the country.

Contrary to the few leftist party publications of the time, *Alternativa* declared its neutrality and independence from any leftist political group. Instead, it chose to air its opinions and differences, uncritically at first, rather than identifying with any of them, and working for their unity. From the beginning, it decided to cater to increase its power as an opinion maker by becoming a mass-circulation publication rather than preaching to the converted, so to speak: the militants and activists of the left.

As usually is the case with historical narratives, for such is the method adopted in this research, the tale of *Alternativa* is several stories in one. They all intersect at the temporal and spatial coordinates of Colombia of the time. I propose to follow those stories through the magazine's explicit political and journalistic objectives as defined in the four points I shall identify. My conceptual framework seems useful in classifying and understanding the place such a publication had in the theoretical and practical communication and journalism landscape of Colombia and Latin America.

Briefly, those objectives were: (1) counter informing, meaning to cast facts in a different light and to present other facts not touched by mainstream mass media; (2) doing investigative, analytical and interpretive reports from a leftist perspective; (3) informing the public about the struggles of the underprivileged classes and (4) helping to achieve the unity of the left. These goals placed the magazine squarely in opposition to the regime by using modern journalism methods hardly ever tried before in Colombia. They highlighted the struggle of lower classes against the undemocratic capitalist regime in order to bring about a lasting political change through an organized and belligerent left.

By counter-informing, the makers of the magazine meant to neutralize the monopoly that the ruling class had, through its communication media, depicting the country's reality, from its history to its contemporary political, economic, social and cultural state. By doing investigative, analytical and interpretive journalism, the magazine proposed to process information available only to experts, in order to provide its readers, including the militants on the left, with enough reliable information to act according to their principles and goals. By informing on struggles of the people, it gave voice to the hundreds of thousands of people, the proletarians, the peasants, and minority groups who struggled for better living conditions against a notoriously ruthless and corrupt government. By helping to achieve the unity of the left, which included both legal forces and illegal armed groups, the magazine hoped to encourage revolutionary change.

Alternativa was possible only because of the peculiar historical conditions that gave it birth. In this sense, the history of the country and the story of the magazine are

the same. This research takes note of those circumstances preceding the magazine's start but it is mainly a story about the six traumatic years of its existence from 1974 to 1980. It deals with an alliance among the political class, organized mafias benefiting from the illegal drug trafficking and other criminal activities, Colombia's armed forces, and the police. At the time, the army and police were in charge of enforcing the State of Siege. It was an exceptional constitutional measure used to suppress the growing unrest generated by the unequal conditions in the country.

This alliance was to have paramount importance after the death of *Alternativa*. In the last two decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, it created the paramilitary armies that plunged the country into yet another period, through the chronic violence that has affected Colombia history, of land graft and indiscriminate terrorism. The alliance also fashioned, in this cyclical story, another pact called the Peace and Justice Law, sanctioned by Congress, which was designed to accommodate the common interests of the political class and organized crime under the protection of the armed forces of the country and irregular paramilitary armies.

At the other side of the equation, this is also the story of how Colombia's left, which, at the time of the birth of *Alternativa*, truly believed the country was in a pre-revolutionary situation, managed to largely defeat itself by the sheer force of its dogmatic beliefs, internal squabbling and international allegiances. By squandering a historical opportunity to become a meaningful actor in Colombia's future, the left cleared the way for the alliance among politicians, organized crime and armed forces to implement their shared strategy. Meanwhile, guerrilla movements monopolized the

opposition to the government and the legal left vanished into an obscure and completely irrelevant limbo.

Today, as the story of *Alternativa* shows, not much has changed in the fundamental causes of the inequalities and injustices that have plagued the country throughout its history. That is, in a way, a vindication of the magazine's political credo that unsuccessfully called for a fundamental change in Colombia. It is also a point of reflection for those who still believe that the causes of violence are in the nature of Colombians rather than in the historical inequalities fostered by a ruthless political class.

A personal story

This is also a personal story. I was hired as a staff reporter for *Alternativa* in April of 1977, at the beginning of the third phase of the magazine, which was publishing again after a four-month period of evaluation and reorganization. At the time, I was a book salesman at El Zancudo, which had been *Alternativa*'s bookstore chain until the end of the previous year. I was also half way through my undergraduate studies in communications at Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, a private institution, and was registered as a Philosophy major at Universidad Nacional, the country's largest public university.

Before entering the universities in 1975, I had worked as a clerk at Banco Popular for two years, where I participated in two strikes, as a union representative. It was during this period that I met Hernando Corral, also a union leader, whom I found later at *Alternativa*'s newsroom and who was instrumental in my being hired as a cub

reporter. At Universidad Tadeo Lozano I also participated in two student movements, in one of which we took over the university for several months, and in events in Universidad Nacional, where I took part in the regular clashes between the students in one side, and the police and the army in the other. These events—the strikes and the student movements—of which I was a witness and protagonist, were reported in *Alternativa*, a magazine which my colleagues and I read assiduously as the only medium that, in our opinion, told the truth about the situation in the country.

At *Alternativa*, I began to work with Antonio Caballero, who was my editor, writing articles for the international section. My only previous experience as a journalist, other than my communication studies, was as a writer for *Revolución Socialista*, the paper of the Socialist Block, a very active Trotskyite party at the time. I had become a militant while studying at Universidad Tadeo Lozano, so I was also very aware of political discussions and the position of the leftist groups on the socialist doctrine and the political situation of the country. At *Revolución Socialista* I had access to international media and other information, which later qualified me to write for *Alternativa*.

I left the party after I became disenchanted with constant bickering of the Trotskyite parties on doctrinaire issues, which left to breakups and divisions. As a staff reporter for *Alternativa*, and no longer a Trotskyite militant, I participated fully in the magazine's routine. Many times I traveled on assignment to other parts of the country and even went to Ecuador to cover the political crisis in that country. I covered political campaigns, cultural events, popular struggles, and many other events, and was kept permanently aware of and informed about the international

scene, which I covered until my departure from the magazine in November of 1979. In that year I went to New York as the accredited correspondent of *Alternativa* at the United Nations.

I suppose my experience as a leftist militant and as a member of *Alternativa*'s staff makes me not only a protagonist of the story being told here but also a primary source. Some thirty years have passed since the time I started to work for the magazine. Fifteen of those years, from 1980 to 1995, I lived in New York working as a foreign correspondent for, of all papers, *El Tiempo*, the main Colombian establishment newspaper, and as a journalist for other publications. Therefore, while taking advantage of my memory and participation in the life and times of *Alternativa*, I am also aware of the implications it may have for my research. The important thing, in my opinion, is to let the readers know about my connection with *Alternativa* and make up their own minds as to whether my participation has biased or enriched this dissertation. From my part, I can only say that it was a privilege and an honor for a 23-year-old kid still in college, to have been chosen as a member of what many consider, and I hope to be forgiven my lack of attribution, as the most important magazine my country ever had.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework, review of the literature and methodology

Previous and recent history of Colombia's journalism

Like most Latin American journalism, Colombia's was born of political necessities.

The earliest papers known in the country were related to the struggle against the Spanish Empire, including *El papel Periódico Ilustrad*, created by national hero Antonio Nariño, to spread the ideals of the French Revolution.

The best story of Colombia's journalism, from 1880 to 1980, when *Alternativa* disappeared, has been written by Mariluz Vallejo (2006). In her book, she cites almost all publications created during those 100 years, most of which had as a common thread their political, partisan (espousing political parties' views and principles) character. *El Espectador*, the oldest of the papers still alive, was born in Medellín in 1887 as a Liberal party publication just when the so-called Conservative Party Hegemony, which lasted until 1930, began. It reappeared in 1913, after eight years of censorship, with editions in Medellín and Bogotá. Most of today's surviving papers were founded in the 1910s: *El Tiempo*, Colombia's paper or record, and the most important daily in the country's history, in 1911; *El Colombiano*, a Conservative medium, in Medellín in 1912; *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga) and *El País* (Cali) in 1919. Shortly after buying *El Tiempo*, Eduardo Santos, who went on to be president of Colombia, said of his paper:

The journalism that many call modern, which only aspires to satisfy the childish curiosity of a frivolous public, to give sensational news, many times increasing and exaggerating trivial things, and that looks only for what is interesting, what arouses epidermis emotions—a completely Yankee

journalism to which most South American papers aspire—is not our ideal. (Vallejo 2006, p. 20)

Santos' quote reveals a constant tension in Colombia and Latin America between North American and European press models and news values, meaning between straight and objective reporting and writing and more interpretive, opinionated and literary journalism. As Vallejo notes in her book, a common thread in the history of Colombia's journalism has been its close identification with political parties and the use of their publications as tools in the struggles of their times. As we know, such identification gave way to entrepreneurial concerns in the United States and news media operations gradually adopted an independent and neutral stance toward political parties as they became valuable and profitable assets.

One consequence of the political nature of Colombia's press is a different conception of freedom of the press. While in the United States the First Amendment is there for all to read and invoke, in Colombia and Latin America in general the changing political landscape made such a principle a tough pill to swallow for many governments, which regularly resorted to controls, confiscations, closings and outright censorship when they thought the press threatened their regimes. As Waisbord (2000) notes,

the degree of separation between press and government best indicates the degree of press freedom. Inspired in the ideals of the modern democratic revolutions, this tradition holds the state under suspicion as being authoritarian and prone to suffocating the press. Consequently, monitoring power means monitoring political autocrats. What better place to watch the state than from a press firmly anchored in the market? Economic independence is the only ticket for arriving at press freedom and making concrete the ideal of a watchdog press.” (p. 4)

The term “watchdog journalism” is used by Waisbord in his book to apply the concept of “investigative journalism” as it is understood in the United States to the particular context of Latin America and the political circumstances of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking subcontinent. In his book, centered in Brazil, Perú, Argentina and Colombia, Waisbord attempts to characterize what he considers a trend in the last decades of the twentieth century toward a more challenging form of journalism in confronting of issues mainly related to corruption. What Waisbord offers, though, is an insightful historical perspective based on an implicit question as applied to Latin American journalism: What good is freedom of the press if it is used to hide the truth, as most of the news media allied with political parties did? As we will see, this was at the center of *Alternativa*’s argument against the press in Colombia.

The strong political identification of the press in Colombia made its independence from the state and politicians impossible. It became a protagonist in the struggle for power. Waisbord again:

For much of its rhetorical force and democratic appeal, the principle of press freedom, so dear to the liberal tradition, often clouds the essentially political nature of the press and the inextricable relation between the press and power. Although it may seem a cliché in times when the ruling dictum is that politics is everywhere, it is still important to bear in mind that all news making is political. The promise and ideal of an independent press uncontaminated by the down-and-dirty world of politics goes against the grain of standard research, which has shown that the press is, above all, a political institution whose functioning cannot be understood separated from a larger political dynamics. (p. 5)

Enrique Santos Calderón, *Alternativa*’s publisher, wrote a brief history of Colombia’s press in 1989. “Politicians and Journalists are the same because national journalism is and has been the seeding ground for presidents and party leaders”

(Santos Calderón 111). Santos' grand-uncle, Eduardo, owner of *El Tiempo*, was president of Colombia (1938-1942). Upon his death, he spread the shares of his paper among family and friends. One of those who did not get any was Santos' father and namesake, who was disinherited because of his sympathies for Spain's fascist dictator, Francisco Franco, but still remained as the paper's editor.¹

The political nature of Colombia's media was apparent during the 1940s, but more pronounced during the fifties as described by Alinski (1981). In 1950, Laureano Gómez, former publisher of *El Siglo*, became president of the country. Gómez opposed all social reforms proposed by the Liberals in the previous decade. Upon the assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the simmering violence in the country erupted and the mobs dynamited and burned *El Siglo*. At the time, the establishment press from the Liberal and Conservative parties, attributed Gaitán's murder to an international communist conspiracy, without any real proof of it, as did the main international press agencies and even United States Secretary of State George C. Marshall, who was representing his country at the Pan-American Conference in Bogotá. President Laureano Gómez censored and intervened in operations of *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo* in 1952, and after he was deposed by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in 1953 the control of the media intensified to the point that both papers were closed and began publishing under different names. Other publications, including small conservative papers, suffered the same fate.

After the fall of Rojas Pinilla Liberals and Conservatives decided to share power with the exclusion of everybody else by making a pact called the National

¹ Today in Colombia, one of Enrique Santos' brothers, Juan Manuel, former editor of *El Tiempo*, is the minister of defense and his cousin Francisco, former managing editor, is the country's vice-president.

Front in 1958. Censorship by the government became in many instances self-censorship. It is debatable whether the big dailies were at all interested in showing the negative face of the establishment.

Under these circumstances, the rise of an alternative press in opposition to the bipartisan National Front was improbable at best. As Waisbord notes, investigative or watchdog journalism was all but nonexistent until *Alternativa* came into the scene just when the pact was ending. The author quotes Gabriel García Márquez.

For alternative publications, journalism and politics were indivisible. Journalism was not a disinterested activity, separate from partisan and commercial interests, but it was politics by other means. Colombian Nobel-Laureate García Márquez's thoughts on why he participated in *Alternativa* represent the spirit that animated many journalists who worked in alternative publications. 'In *Alternativa*, I think, I have found a form of political participation (*militancia*) that I sought for years. Serious journalistic work, deeply and clearly committed to reality.' (p. 28)

As for the rest of Latin America, and particularly South America, *Alternativa* was an oddity. Although a few similar publications existed in other countries such as Perú for example, where a leftist military regime existed, in most Latin American countries the opposition press, or the radical press, was wiped out or simply did not exist. This bleak landscape is reviewed in detail and in all its crudity by Pierce (1979), who analyzes the circumstances in nine Latin American countries, going from one extreme (Cuba) to another (Brazil) of the political spectrum. In between, he analyzes the cases of Chile, with its violent regime change; Argentina, on its way to become yet another bloody dictatorship; and Perú, where the leftist military regime at one point expropriated all newspapers.

The greatest value of Pierce's book is that it explains in detail why magazines such as *Alternativa* were possible in countries such as Colombia, with its nominal democracy, and how politics influences the media by sheer brutal force, with examples ranging from a radical socialist regime to the most right-wing dictatorships the continent has ever seen. Pierce' chronicles the changes the media suffered while going from one system to another—such as in the case of Chile, where the coming to power of Unidad Popular created a lively debate on the role of the press in a pre-revolutionary situation, until Augusto Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973.

Before the fall of Allende in Chile, a titanic struggle went on between the forces on the right and those on the left for the control of the media. The issue of the role of the press in pre-revolutionary situations had a long tradition, coming in our time from the Bolshevik revolution, when Lenin, Trotsky and other leaders wrote and theorized about the role of the press in organizing the masses. This was a conception of journalism that understood very well the power inherent in any medium to amplify the voice of the leaders and carry it into the political arena, based in a Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle as a mean to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat. Everything not only was an opinion but also like a political directive (Mattelart 1973). This conception was adopted by several Latin American theoreticians, and was applied in Cuba, where the press was completely controlled and used by the State as a political tool. In Chile, the whole school that grew out of the power achieved by the socialists included the Belgian scholar Armand Mattelart

(1973), Camilo Taufic (1973) and Ariel Dorfman (Dorffman and Mattelart, 1984), among others, who systematized what can be called the militant view of the press.

Perhaps the author who best represents the role of journalism and media in society from a Marxist perspective is Chilean writer Camilo Taufic (1973). In his work *Periodismo y lucha de clases* (Journalism and class struggle), he goes to another extreme, aligning himself not only with Lenin, Stalin and Mao, but also defining a totalitarian role for the media in a country such as Chile before Salvador Allende was deposed by Pinochet.

Mattelart, considered the most influential scholar in Latin America in the 1970s, attacked the domination of information in the media conglomerates in the developed countries and in the Third World. His book *Mito Burgués Vs. Lucha de clases* (Bourgeois Myth Vs. Class Struggle) was a required text in communications schools in Colombia and represented the best synthesis of what a communication theory should be from the point of view of the radical left. He also wrote, along with Ariel Dorfman (1984), a scathing critique of American cultural penetration in the book *How to Read Donald Duck*.

The opposite view in Latin America came from the developmental school, which saw the role of journalism and media in society from an American point of view. It was promoted by American scholars who played a pivotal role in shaping the academic landscape of journalism and mass communications in Latin America. Under the auspices of UNESCO, they brought to the subcontinent the same principles that they had applied in the United States, one of whose consequences was the disappearance of stand-alone journalism programs from Latin American universities

in favor of communication studies (Schramm 1976). Behind the developmental school was a classic positivistic and functionalist conception of the media in their different formats, as tools used by the governments in the Third World to help develop their countries (Shah 1996). Several books sum up this point of view. Perhaps the most important was Wilbur Schramm's *Mass Media and National Development* (Schramm 1976), a text commissioned by UNESCO when the organization was under United States control. In it, the American scholar outlined his thoughts about the role the media should play in developing countries. Similar views, extended to the rest of the developing world, were expressed in *Communication Change in the Developing Countries* (Lerner and Schramm 1967). Another distinguished American scholar interested in Latin America was Everett M. Rogers (Rogers 1984, 2003). His views are in the book *Communication and Development, a Critical Perspective*, in which he, like his colleagues, stresses the role of the media in economic development without venturing into complex contexts such as Colombia's at the time covered by this dissertation.

The ferment created by the discussion in Chile of the role of the press in a pre-revolutionary situation, and the ideas of the developmental school, clashed in the debate on how to balance the world's unbalanced flow of information, which by then had an overwhelming north-south direction. Known by the general name of the New World International Communication Order, the discussion was carried out at UNESCO, under the leadership of Sean MacBride (1984), against the bitter opposition of the United States, which ended up leaving the organization. The discussion around the NWICO greatly influenced views on the role of the media in

each country and in the world as a whole. It defined that role in political rather than in theoretical terms, all in the contexts of the non-aligned movement and the decolonization that was taking place in the former European colonies of Africa, the Cold War between the American and Western capitalist sphere and Soviet and Chinese Communism, among other historical events. The MacBride report, titled *One World, many Voices* (1984), elaborated by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, was a sober look at the panorama of world communication, a treatise on the state of media globalization at the time and an argument for the worldwide democratization of the flow of information. This was a debate which I, as an international affairs writer, covered in *Alternativa* at the time. The magazine was itself a testimony to the thesis of the MacBride report, for it was able to inform people about the international scene thanks to a profusion of sources of information through such as alternative press agencies as *Prensa Latina* and *Inter Press Service* and the access to international publications that the mainstream press either did not know about or did not care to review.

Alternative and radical media

One author who has attempted a typology of alternative and radical media is Atton (2002). While acknowledging that both categories “hardly appear in the dominant theoretical traditions of media research,” (p. 7) he attempts to define a theory on the subject. Atton’s work makes use of cultural studies to approach a problem, which defies classification using standard models such as those proposed in the *Four*

Theories of the Press (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1973) woefully inadequate and outdated, especially in relation to Third World media.

What is a theory of the press? In *Four Theories*, the question is never really answered because it is never explicitly addressed. The book assumed that the answer is obvious, and much of the commentary on it does the same. But in fact the book used the term “theory” in a very haphazard manner... If that is so, then a communication theory is not the same sort of thing as a communication system. *Four Theories* is ill-applied to the study of comparative media systems. Because these theories are really all different kinds of creatures, it is possible for any number of them to coexist in any given system. (Nerone in Semati, 2004, p. 29).

Atton’s work took its lead conception from Downing (1984), who attempted a typology when the information revolution based on computers was still in its infancy and before the radical transformation of communist countries after 1989. Downing defined four characteristics for Alternative media. He differentiated Alternative media from “Transmission-belt socialism”, which, he argues, rather than liberating media, constrain them by demanding unquestioning allegiance to the party, its intelligentsia and the institutions of the state. Those characteristics, as synthesized and interpreted by Atton, are:

1. the importance of encouraging contributions from as many interested parties as possible, in order to emphasize the ‘multiple realities’ of social life (oppression, political cultures, economic situations);
2. that radical media, while they may be partisan, should never become a tool of party intelligentsia;
3. that radical media at their most creative and socially significant privilege movements over institutions;
4. that within the organization of radical media there appears an emphasis on pre-figurative politics. (1984, p. 20)

Downing's typology was envisioned as a way to analyze Western and Eastern media Europe in the late twentieth century. Later, Atton adapted it to try to include new technologies and other manifestations of alternative media such as zines, a form of comic books directed mostly to youth groups.

In Latin America, the concept of media has been analyzed by Simpson Greenberg (1986), who finds two predominant tendencies in the conceptualization of alternative media: as opposition to the mass media, giving it an eminently non-professional, and self-governing quality; and as every communication phenomenon that implies opposition to the dominant discourse of power. He also identifies two fundamental currents in the treatment of the issue by Latin American scholars. One is seeing alternative communication as an exclusive antidote to the transnational capitalist structures, with researchers in this group considering alternative communication an answer to the transnational, unidirectional, and authoritarian character of mass media. The second is the insertion of alternative media into strategies for structural change worked out by self-designated political-ideological "vanguards," by which he meant intellectuals organized in parties or groups that guided the working class with their theoretical knowledge. According to this line of thought, the soundness of communication experiences, other than those within the transnational power structures, depends on their insertion in a totalizing strategy such as that of a Marxist persuasion geared toward taking over political power.

In this historical context, *Alternativa* provides the basis for understanding and alternative press's nature and role within existing press models and theoretical

frameworks inasmuch as the magazine conceived as its mission to change the system and certainly, as we shall see, the over qualified staff had “vanguard” characteristics.

As told in the third chapter of this dissertation, *Alternativa* originated in the confluence of three currents of thought converging. Each of these three currents is a point of entry to frame the theoretical aspects under which the phenomenon of the magazine can be considered; they all brought with them their experience with media and its application to the professional and political activities they were engaged in at the time. All of them believed that journalism could be a vehicle to help create a lasting change in society, a concept that put journalism in the intersection of media, politics, culture, and power. Summarizing, the currents were:

- The journalists, a group centered in the person of Enrique Santos Calderón, a seasoned reporter and writer and columnist at the most important paper in the country, which belonged to his family. He was at the time involved with a group of artists in a counter-information project in the Southeastern neighborhoods of Bogotá, fighting along with the community against a highway project. The group used alternative methods of communication such as posters and mural *dazibaos* to reach and unite the communities.
- The economists, headed by Bernardo García, expert researchers and handlers of hard data, who had the wherewithal to interpret figures and numbers with a macro-economic perspective. It was the economists who provided the expertise and knowledge to attempt something rarely done in Colombia’s journalism, which was to interpret and analyze, through the figures they

gathered in their research, the country's problems, with aiming to explain what the political class was doing to the country. García had created a magazine called *Alternativ* while studying in Belgium and was the editor of the government's National Statistics Bulletin, which sought to use hard economic data to interpret the nation's reality.

- The sociologists under the leadership of Orlando Fals Borda, creator of the participatory action research methodology, with many years behind him working in the countryside trying to understand and change the conditions of the working peasantry. Fals and his group had contacts with the popular organizations, especially in the countryside, and were able to gather the necessary information to illuminate struggles such as strikes, land recovery actions and popular protests through on-site correspondents. Fals had used techniques such as comic books to educate the peasants and poor communities about their own history and avenues for change.

Hovering above them was Gabriel García Márquez, a world-famous fiction writer, who had been and continued being a journalist with an impressive track record of reporting, who embodied the confluence of literature and journalism since his days as a reporter for *El Espectador* during the 1950s. García Márquez, along with murdered Argentinian journalist Rodolfo Walsh, had founded *Prensa Latina*, an alternative press agency. Before and after working for the magazine, his non-fiction articles appeared in the most important publications in the world.

Besides being useful to analyze the contents of the magazine, the four objectives described below can also be seen as constructs, which define this particular phenomenon, comparing it to other models or theories. They highlight the magazine's similarities but also its differences and uniqueness in the context of Colombia and Latin America. Each of those objectives was the responsibility of the three currents that made possible the magazine.

Counter-informing, the role of the journalists. In my opinion, inasmuch as counter-informing seeks to challenge the current representation of reality based in the mainstream's news values, it also seeks to dispute the hegemonic interpretation of the ruling class. The existence of the magazine itself was a counter-information fact. It put into question the whole script that the dominant classes fed the people through the system's media. The challenge went way beyond the news, which the dailies carried in their own de-contextualized manner. It offered a completely new interpretation of what was going on in the halls of power, creating a homogeneous picture of a country accustomed to perceiving partial and de-contextualized bits and pieces of its reality. That is why counter informing automatically puts on the table the role that the mainstream media played in public opinion. In a way, the magazine helped the people to understand that whatever was taking place in the mainstream press was politically motivated to assure domination of one class over the others, in a capitalist system of exploiters and exploited. The story in the media was one of deception, of a paper democracy in the name of which all the crimes of the past, all the violence and deceit, the poverty, the inequalities and injustices, were justified. The magazine put forth a

different explanation of how the society worked and it hoped its readers would understand and act accordingly.

Doing investigation, analysis and interpretation, the role of the economists. As Waisbord (2000) points out, investigative journalism, understood here not only as uncovering malfeasance in the government, but also as the necessary research for analysis and interpretation, was practically nonexistent in Latin America. The magazine not only called attention to the widespread corruption in almost all spheres of government, but used the expertise of his staff to shed light on the articulation of Colombia's class system, thus presenting a coherent explanatory picture of the country from a leftist perspective.

Informing readers about the people's struggles, the role of the sociologists. By informing readers about the people's struggles, the magazine opened up a completely new information agenda, based on different values and interpretations. Suddenly the readers realized that there were people struggling everywhere against the government and against the dominant classes and that such struggle originated in conditions and circumstances that very few people knew about. In fact, chances were that not even the mainstream media knew about them since they were not considered as news.

Atton qualifies this role in the following manner:

The aim of that part of the alternative media interested in news remain simple: to provide access to the media to encourage and normalize such access, where working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protesting groups—people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals—could make their own news, either

by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news relevant to their situation. (p. 11)

Promoting the unity of the left. This is what Downing referred to as “The privilege of movements over institutions (which) inform his entire approach to the extent that he considers radical media as the media of social movements.” (Atton p. 21) A Marxist, leftist ideological interpretive persuasion, which permeated its content and objectives, informed the magazine. The promotion of the unity of the left presupposed its independence and neutrality, with the implicit belief that open discussions based on persuasion and arguments could prevail over Marxists fixed dogmas and conceptions, all in the name of the fulfillment of the magazine’s ultimate goal: to change the political system. It was not local or regional change the magazine was seeking; it was revolutionary change at national and supra-national levels. As we can see in the narrative that follows, both the first and the second crises came when the group of the sociologists first and the economists afterwards, tried to deny the principles of neutrality and independence toward the left, which eventually caused the model to collapse.

Alternativa targeted readers who bought magazines at newsstands or subscribed to them, readers who were curious, inquisitive and had an open mind regarding the state of the country. They were progressive intellectuals, students, and leftist militants, as well as people in the mainstream interested in knowing more about the system. Unfortunately, the price of the magazine was too stiff for low-wage earners, who were, according to the Marxist credo, those called to lead a possible

revolution. To compensate, the magazine tried to use alternative distribution channels to reach those segments of the population. In addition, every single copy of the magazine circulated among a relatively large number of people, thus making the readership much bigger than what copy sales told. However, once all issues were counted and the readers considered, *Alternativa* was never able to shake the burden of being a magazine written for the people and bought by the petit bourgeoisie.

An important difference with the alternative press models and typologies postulated above is that, although the magazine presented itself as a radical publication bent on socialist values, the operation as such was not. Fals Borda and his team tried to instill in the working routines of the magazine some semblance of democratic discussion of the content of the magazine and of the participation of the staff in the decision-making process, but this proved too cumbersome, so much so that it threatened to lead to a paralysis of the magazine. In fact, Fals was borrowing from the standard Leninist model according to which the media workers themselves were the ones controlling the whole process and not the managers. He also borrowed from the likes of Mattelart (1973) and Taufic (1972) when he brought workers in to teach them journalism and its language.

Other aspects in the review of the literature

A variety of works has been valuable to me in framing the concepts for this dissertation. Here they are explained briefly.

On Colombia's history

Colombian and foreign scholars have extensively treated the historical context in which *Alternativa* existed. Jenny Pearce, a British professor and researcher currently at the University of Bradford, has written extensively about Latin America, and particularly about Colombia. She defines her book (1990) as “an attempt to find some threads in Colombia’s labyrinthine past and present which may explain its contemporary crises to non-Colombians” (p. 4). It traces the country’s history back to Simón Bolívar and up to the beginning of *La Violencia*, a civil war between partisans of the two main political parties waged in the 1950s. The second part goes from the end of *La Violencia* to 1986. “The thread running through this part is the political order’s inability to deal with the dramatic social and economic change which accompanied economic modernization, in particular the shift in just a few decades from a predominantly rural to an urban society” (p. 5). Part three describes the aftermath of the period in which *Alternativa* was published, a continuation of the genocide in the countryside and the cities, orchestrated by the far-right allied with the army and the drug traffickers. Pearce had the benefit of an outside look at a reality whose complexity was challenging and daunting. In her book, she includes a contextual look at the forces of the left. At the beginning and at the end of the book, she offers a very useful list of organizations and acronyms. “There is one thread which runs through Colombia’s history which is clearer than any other. That is the way the country’s ruling elite has always identified the fate of the nation with its own,” (10) she concludes at the end of the introduction.

Daniel Pécaut (2006) a Belgian researcher and scholar traveled to Colombia in the 1960s as a visiting professor at Universidad Nacional. Like Pearce, he has written

extensively about the country whose reality he knows intimately. His book *Crónica de dos décadas de política colombiana* is a compilation of articles published between 1968 and 1986. He begins with an analysis of the government of Lleras Restrepo and ends with a summary of the governments of presidents Betancur and Barco, (1982-1988) and their attempt to reach the elusive peace. The sequence of these articles offers a dynamic view of the progression of events and circumstances in the country, written with the clear intention of illustrating the complexity of the forces in play to those looking at the country from outside. Pécaut's knowledge of the economical context of Colombia's history is a useful complement to the country's political history during the years prior, during and after the existence of *Alternativa*.

In William Avilés' *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civic-Military relations in Colombia*, (Avilés 2006), the author explores the history of the country's armed forces, from the middle of the twentieth century, from the Rojas dictatorship, through the period of *Alternativa* and all the way to the first Uribe administration (2002). In this sense, the book offers a useful time line of the military involvement in the country, specially, for purposes of this dissertation, of the times when the armed forces had an almost complete power under the State of Siege and controlled many of the accompanying mechanisms of justice administration.

In *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant movement in Colombia* (Zamosc, 1986), makes an in-depth analysis of the role played by the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos*, ANUC (National Association of Peasant Users) a primer for those wishing to understand the issues that were written about in *Alternativa*, especially in its first stage. Zamosc' book goes to the roots of the movement that

tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to hold the political class accountable for its unkept promises of an agrarian reform and a lasting solution for the country's poor, and places the issue of land ownership at the center of Colombia's violence, up to the present time.

The work by Dix (1987) does not get as close to the present time but it has the value of going back farther into the past, analyzing the situation from the perspective of the political parties, Liberals and Conservatives, which monopolized public life in the country throughout its whole history. Instead of doing a chronological review, however, the book takes one aspect at a time, such as the political parties and elections, interest groups, government institutions and public policy.

Perhaps the most interesting work from this perspective is "Popular Liberalism, Radical Democracy, and Marxism: Leftist Politics in Contemporary Colombia, 1974-1991," written by Marc C. Chernick and Michael F. Jiménez, in Carr and Ellner's *The Latin American Left Movement, From the Fall of Allende to Perestroika* (1993). The book offers a rundown of the prevalent theories as to why the opposition, both legal and armed, grew in Colombia so much, in the context of the permanent violence and the State's repression of popular movements and the opposition. The author of the article offers his own theory:

We argue the recent history of the Colombian left is not principally the result of the failure of modernizing elite coalitions or of the survival of atavistic revolutionary ideologies ill suited to a new era or merely the outcome of a crisis in dependent capitalism exacerbated by the drug traffic trade. Rather, leftist politics after 1974 are best understood as the working out of long-standing forms of opposition to elite rule within a major redesign of Colombian capitalism and the state (p. 62).

The seminal text on the violent period of the 1950s is *La Violencia en Colombia*, (Fals, Guzmán and Umaña 1986) consequently updated in later editions. The book was a scholarly watershed where factual material embracing the warfare geographically as well as chronologically, using primary sources, empirical evidence and professing a degree of objectivity demonstrates that the strife was a mayor incident in hemispheric history deserving of serious consideration.

Besides the books mentioned above, out of many others on the subject, two books provide a wide perspective, both on the formation of the left as well as the circumstances in which its struggle took place. Fabio López de La Roche (1994), attempts to answer several questions that are central to the purpose of this dissertation. How did the 1960s and 1970s generation break with previous cultural molds such as those of the two political parties and of the Catholic Church? How did it go from that break to the idealization of socialism, a reality that Colombians ignored almost completely? What were the beliefs and dogmas that the new generation believed in and which formed the basis for their struggles? A book that has the merit of including many perspectives on these subjects is *Entre movimientos y caudillos*, edited by Gustavo Gallón (1989). The book offers perhaps the most complete panorama of the different political trends of the left as well as the political context in which its actions took place. Its main merit is that it includes many authors who were themselves witnesses to the events they analyze.

Other books present different takes on the history of Colombia during the last part of the past century. One that is quite important for the reconstruction of the history of *Alternativa* is the biographical study *Bateman*, on Jaime Bateman, the

historic leader of M-19 and a behind-the-scenes-protagonist of the story of *Alternativa*, written by Darío Villamizar (2002). The book was the first to mention publicly the close relationship of *Alternativa* and the public guerrilla group, besides offering a detailed and dramatic view of one of the most important revolutionary leaders of the last fifty years in Colombia.

A complete historical overview of the popular protest in Colombia between 1958 and 1990 is in *Idas y venidas, vueltas y revueltas* (Archila 2005). The book offers the most complete assessment of the situation of the country during that period, making it a useful companion for the story of the magazine and its political milieu. Other contributions have been made by authors working at research centers in public universities, of which perhaps the most important is Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, IEPRI (Institute for Political Studies and International Relations) at Universidad Nacional in Bogotá. The institute has produced several books on the recent history of Colombia, all of them geared to explore the genesis and development of the chronic and permanent civil conflict in the country (IEPRI 2005).

On Latin American journalism

Three other books could be considered as companions to the previous texts, with the added advantage that they address the issue of media and communications in the context of the political landscape. *Watchdog Journalism in South America. News, Accountability and Democracy* (Waisbord 2000) traces the uneven development of alternative and investigative journalism in the subcontinent, a topic necessarily linked to the political conditions of its countries. Although the book deals mainly with the

last decades of the twentieth century, it offers a useful and well-documented historical context, acknowledging, among other things, the role of *Alternativa*, quoting both Gabriel García Márquez and Enrique Santos Calderón.

Useful overviews of the practice of journalism in Latin America are offered by Salwen and Garrison (1991) and by Alinski in *Latin American Media. Guidance and Censorship* (1981). A thorough analysis for the specific situation in Colombia presenting a range of practical research possibilities is offered in “Trends in Alternative Communication Research in Latin America” by Maximo Simpson Grinberg in Atwood and McAnany, (1986). Simpson Greenberg attempts a typology of the research trends and currents and offers some ideas linked to alternative media, mainly related with leftist political ideas. He qualifies the contributions made by authors such as Taufic and Mattelart, placing them in an adequate historical and political context.

Approaches to the phenomenon of Alternative communication—whose origins date back to the 1960s—are varied. First of all, diverse adjectives are attached to the phenomenon, such as “popular,” “participatory,” “indigenous,” “self-governing,” and “emancipatory.” Each of these expressions stresses certain aspect of a complex reality. Their common denominator lies, in my opinion, in the sense that this form of communication constitutes an alternative to the dominant discourse of power at all levels. (169).

A more ambitious and recent work in terms of time span is *Centuries of Silence. The story of Latin American Journalism* (Ferreira 2006), which goes back to pre-Columbian times to try to establish a common trend in the continent’s media history.

On the history of journalism in Colombia

As for the history of Colombian journalism, the most complete panorama is presented in the recent book *A plomo herido. Una crónica del periodismo en Colombia, 1880-1980* (Vallejo 2002). Few books on the history of Colombian journalism offer such a complete landscape on its evolution in the twentieth century, up until the year *Alternativa* ceased to exist. The book has many references to the magazine, which it considers as the epitome of the leftist press in Colombia. Santos Calderón, one of the protagonists of this story and a person who knew intimately the story of journalism in Colombia, wrote a chapter on this topic in a monumental historical encyclopedia.

One of the consequences of the agitation in the 1960s and 1970s was the birth of a vigorous, albeit not particularly profitable or professional, editorial industry of the left, which parallels and intersects with the life of *Alternativa*. This story is told in the book *Cultura Intelectual de Resistencia* (Gómez 2005). Besides publishing lists of translations of books by Marxist scholars, such as those of Marx himself, Engels, Mao Tse Tung, Lenin, Stalin, Trotski, Luxemburgo, Mandel and many others, the book registers the genesis of several texts related to the historical context for this dissertation. They were the product of a new generation of scholars emerging from universities and research center across the country. They included: *Estudios sobre el subdesarrollo colombiano* (Studies on Colombia's underdevelopment) by Mario Arrubla (1978), a groundbreaking book published by at least five different publishing houses that went through 13 editions between 1962 and 1984; Jesús Antonio Bejarano's *El Capital Monopolista* (1972), which chronicled the formation of the capitalist economic institutions in Colombia in the twentieth century; Alvaro Tirado

Mejía's, *Introducción a la Historia Económica de Colombia* (1979), an impressive text due to the rigorous and exhaustive use of documentary information, among others.

In terms of culture, cultural industries and the search for identity in the country as related to mass media and new technologies, the books by Jesús Martín Barbero stand out (1998, 1998). Professor Martín Barbero is one of several Latin American researchers who has taken upon themselves the issues created by the advent of what they call modernity in the cultural makeup of Latin America.

Finally, among Colombian scholars, López de la Roche (in Ayala, Ed. 2004) has proposed a research agenda on media with its many possibilities, as part of the historiography scholarship in Colombia.

On critical communication theory

On the use of history as a method of inquiry, the author that best reflects the spirit of this investigation is Marxist scholar Hanno Hardt, (1992, 1998). In his books, Hardt speaks of the centrality of historical research in communication studies, in that the acts of human beings in society have to be understood as part of a political, economic, social and cultural context that gives them meaning. Hardt is an authoritative critic of the a-historical approaches to research by the old functionalist and positivist schools of communication theory and advocates for an approach to cultural studies and critical theory as a more adequate methodological framework for the analysis of media. It only seems fitting, then, that an appropriate theory in which to frame phenomena such as the creation, existence and demise of *Alternativa*, a publication

created upon a Marxist conception of society, is one which gives primacy to social and political practices in concrete and real settings that are explained through a class struggle analysis.

Taking the issue further in more up-to-date terms, the work of cultural studies theoreticians such as Jane Stokes, (2003) and John Street (2001) propose concrete methodologies of interpretations and practical applications to issues of media in the contemporary world.

For the state of communication' theory and a conceptual context of the issue of media and society. McQuail provides an invaluable primer in his *Mass Communication Theory* (1994).

I would like to finish with a reflection by Hanno Hardt on the subject at hand.

History as a record of human experience is a source of understanding the meaning and importance of social phenomena, including the role and function of the media in society. In addition to the view of the media as symbols of power and profit or as measure of political and commercial interests and success, questions of human needs and the relationship between the individual and the media as a potential source of societal reform are equally important for comparative and international communications research. The presence of social trends, the rise and fall of cultural epochs, and the impact of politics and economics on social communications raise questions about the mechanics of these changes and about the involvement of particular groups, including elites, in decision-making processes. (1998, 153)

Methodology

This dissertation is the historical narrative reconstruction of the magazine *Alternativa*, as a case study of an original experience in left-wing, opposition and activist journalism carried out in the second half of the 1970s. The primary source and main

body of the dissertation is based on the review and analysis of the 257 issues of *Alternativa*, which were compiled by the author and bound in 13 volumes located in libraries, old used bookstores, files of friends and the author's personal collection. This allowed for a reconstruction of the story of the magazine, and through its pages, of a period of the history of Colombia, spanning six years from 1974 to 1980.

Except for 14 issues, which had to be photocopied, all were studied in original, mint form and will remain as part of the record with the hope that this research will create an interest in the use of the magazine as a historical research tool among Colombian and foreign scholars. The materials can be consulted at the library of Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. For methodological purposes, the magazine's trajectory has been divided into three stages, based on as many milestones in its history. I thoroughly reviewed all the issues of the magazine and analyzed them for thematic content. I looked for examples of articles that illustrated the magazine's commitment to its four principles. The magazines, from issue 112 onward, contain articles I wrote as part of its staff. In that sense, I was a personal witness to the story narrated here and that give me inside and direct knowledge of the issues at hand, both political and journalistic. Despite my reluctance to write in the first person and my desire to establish a distance with the subject, I have included myself in some instances, in order to alert the reader of my participation in the life of the magazine. As told in the introduction, I witnessed many of the events the magazine covered and had enough knowledge of the political scene at the time to be able to interpret it and write about it as a committed journalist.

In the course of this work, *Alternativa* revealed itself as an extraordinary source of first-hand material, which this dissertation only begins to explore. It includes references to articles on topics the magazine touched upon for the first time in Colombia, in its quest for counter informing and disputing the hegemonic hold of the mainstream press on mass-disseminated information. As this dissertation hopes to show, *Alternativa* is probably one of the finest primary sources available to study a host of issues of the time, and to understand the current conditions of the country. In fact, the magazine took it upon itself to treat many themes for the first time in print, while confronting the mainstream press on issues that were either ignored, or insufficiently treated.

In order to complete the picture of the magazine, I interviewed several key protagonists of its story, all of whom I knew or met personally at one time or another during the life of the magazine. Although most of the material referred to here comes from those interviews, the fact that many of the people who participated in the life of the publication were my friends necessarily makes my use of the material the result of an ongoing conversation of many years. It is the consequence of the collective memory of a whole generation of Colombian journalists, many of whom are still alive and in dominant positions in the country's media and literary worlds. The interviews mainly concerned the years I was not with the magazine, especially during its conception and beginning. The interviews also included recollections about the background of the political scene against which the magazine moved, particularly its political relations with the armed guerrilla groups, which I did not know about at the time. These revelations, especially its relation to the armed group M-19, which is

explained for the first time in this research, are an authentic new contribution to the political and journalistic story of the country. Finally, the interviews asked about the interviewee's views and opinions on the journalistic aspect of the publication and its evolution according to the changing political situation.

Both Enrique Santos Calderón and Orlando Fals Borda gave me access to their archives related to the magazine, which included handwritten minutes of *Alternativa's* board meetings held during the second stage of the magazine. Other unique documents, copies of which remain in my possession, are typewritten letters, which the protagonists of the magazine's crises sent to each other explaining their positions. The originals remain in the hands of Santos Calderón.

Because of space limitations, a thorough comparative study with the mainstream press at the time was not possible. This remains, however, a fertile ground of research for future projects. Instead, I chose to refer to the mainstream media through the magazine's own pages, thus offering the same criticism that the magazine so thoroughly exercised. Nevertheless, I searched for mentions of the magazine in the mainstream press, some of which are cited here.

A secondary source are the mentions of the magazine in scholarly works, most of which are noted in the review of the literature, and in publications where partial stories of the magazine were told. I should also mention here that as an associate professor of Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín Colombia, I wrote a previous research paper on the subject. Out of that project came a complete index of the magazine's articles in Excel format. That index is not part of this dissertation, but I used it for this research and I plan to make it available to other researchers.

Chapter 3: Historical context

The history of Colombia since the birth of the country in the early 1800s, when it became independent of Spain, has been plagued by social conflicts arising from the confrontation among the groups that fought for power and wealth at one time or another. The ruling class, which governed over urban dwellers and artisans, manufacturing workers, peasants and minorities such as Colombian Indians and blacks, aligned into two political parties: the Conservatives, representing big landowners and the old establishment, and Liberals, representing mostly merchants, traders and a section of the modern learned bourgeoisie.

Since its independence in 1819, Colombia has been a nominal democratic republic, with an elected government distributed in executive power headed by the President and a bi-cameral Congress, and a judicial apparatus. The social contract was written in constitutions, which contained consecrated principles inspired mostly by western democratic ideals, particularly those stemming from the French and American Revolutions.

The history of the country, however, has not always followed the written principles of the Constitution and Colombia has been ruled by the force of arms as much as by the rule of law. All through the nineteenth century, the country was the scene of numerous regional and national civil wars fought in the name of higher values, of insurrections, and open or veiled dictatorships seeking to control the political power of the state for the benefit of the ruling class. The fight for the supremacy of either one of the two parties was waged on the backs of the Colombian

poor, who made the armies that fought for their interests. The numerous wars and conflicts never translated into a better standing for the working people of Colombia, most of whom remained disenfranchised, either at the mercy of, or abandoned by the State, controlled by politicians and the oligarchy for their own benefit. In that sense, the country did not achieve the level of national unity or consciousness achieved in modern developed democracies such as the United States.

After a long period of Conservative control, which started in 1886 and ended in 1930, the Liberals took power and the modernization of the country began. The institutions of the state gradually adapted to the exigencies of the times, with the growth of financing and manufacturing, an increasing urban population, and a more global scenario. At this stage, the working class began to be part of the political landscape through local and national struggles, by organizing in unions and parties and by claiming a bigger role in the national affairs. In the first part of the twentieth century, socialist ideas arrived in the country and began to influence the worker's organization and ideology.

The Conservatives' drive to recover the power lost since the early thirties created a growing instability in the political scene. One man in particular, Conservative Laureano Gómez, began to agitate for change, accusing the Liberals of corruption and malfeasance, thus creating the climate that made possible the surge of a growing sectarian violence. It also stimulated the growth of populism represented by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a charismatic leader and orator who won the hearts and wills of workers, peasants and popular sectors. Gaitán took control of the Liberal party and was its presidential candidate for the 1950 elections. If elected, he would have been

the first person from the ranks of the popular classes to make it to the presidency on a populist platform that bore many similarities with socialist and communist ideals.

On April 9, 1948, Gaitán was assassinated in a street in Bogotá at a time when representatives of twenty-one countries were gathered at the Ninth Inter-American Conference. The big press almost unanimously attributed the ensuing conflagration, successively known as El Bogotazo, to an international communist conspiracy. Gaitán's murder and the events that followed constituted the breaking point in Colombia's history in the twentieth century. After his death, his ideals and followers were persecuted in a systematic genocide carried out by militants professing allegiance to the leaders of both parties in a vicious circle of punishment, vengeance and land grabbing known as La Violencia (The Violence), which claimed somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 lives in little more than half a decade. Although the killings diminished after 1954, they continued in a more selective way throughout the rest of the country's history, up until the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Gaitán's legacy, embedded in the memory of the people, survived in the guerrilla movements that later adopted the socialist-Marxist ideology, and in numerous cadres who claimed to carry on his ideals of popular participation in the political power.

In 1953, after a power vacuum created by the inability of Conservatives and Liberals on how to run the country, the "oligarchy" allowed General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to seize power. He immediately declared an amnesty, which turned out to be a campaign of selective murders, with as many as 16,000 people killed by the army, the police and other government forces, in a deliberate and systematic drive to eliminate

political opponents in the countryside. Regarding that amnesty, Manuel Marulanda Vélez, the historic leader of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC, (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), said later: “What was a fair request, the amnesty, was used as a trap to brake the guerrilla struggle and defeat the peasant war...the popular armed struggle was defeated, not in the military field but in the political arena” (Marulanda 11).

Rojas Pinilla made the two main political parties uncomfortable by showing his own populist streak and his intention to remain in power through what he conceived as an army-people alliance.

The ruling class saw the military government as a transitory period, but Rojas Pinilla had other plans. He began to build up his own base of support among the military, public sector-workers, labor and other urban poor. In 1954, he set up his own political movement, the Movement of National Action (MAN). He envisaged an army/people alliance, but in trying to create it, pushed the traditional parties into closer unity against him. In fact, he never succeeded in gaining the support needed to generate a third political force (Pearce 1990, p. 60).

On May 10, 1957, Rojas Pinilla was deposed by a military junta, in a coup orchestrated by the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties. He was tried, found guilty, stripped of his civil rights, and forced into exile.

The National Front

Following the dictatorship, the leaders of both parties, Liberal Alberto Lleras and Conservative Laureano Gómez, made a pact in 1958 known as the National Front, whereby they agreed to share the government, its jobs and budget, and alternate the

presidency every four years for a total of 16 years. That pact ended in 1974, when *Alternativa* was born.

While administrating the country for the sole benefit of the two parties in power, the National Front leaders contributed to the creation of a belligerent, armed left. They bestowed the same intolerance that both parties showed for one another in the past on working classes' sectors such as manufacturing laborers, students and peasants, through exceptional legislation called the State of Siege, enforced by the army and the police. They also employed irregular paramilitary squads financed by businesspeople and landowners to terrorize the enemies of the government.

No expression of any social conflict was permitted outside the control of the two traditional parties. The state could play no role in the mediation of such conflicts and, indeed, had no independent role of its own to look after the interests of society as a whole. Reformist impulses generated from time to time by more enlightened members of the ruling elite were blocked. And, if the state had been unable to deal with the country's changing social profile before *La Violencia*, it was even more woefully inadequate in the face of the rapid urbanization, rural modernization and industrialization of the ensuing decades and their social consequences. (Pearce 65)

The National Front was incapable of stopping the seeds of rebellion from growing in several regions of the country, due in part to a promise of an agrarian reform that never came through, and to a new weapon that armed peasants added to their arsenal: the socialist ideology.

With the creation of the National Front, the war in the countryside was no longer a sectarian struggle between the two main parties, but an offensive to reorganize the property of the land and fortify the big landowners, dominant since the time of the civil wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to

Sánchez, “when the dictatorship fell, the violence whose dominant cause was the Liberal-Conservative sectarian struggle imposed vertically to the people, took a decisive economic turn. The violence was exercised as a business in order to produce changes in land property” (p. 27). Some 200.000 properties changed hands during the time of La Violencia.

On January 1, 1959, the armies of Fidel Castro’s entered La Habana, installing the first socialist regime in Latin America. Out of the Cuban revolution came the role models that would inspire an entire generation of Latin American youth, including Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who became one of the greatest myths of the socialist movement worldwide after his death in the Bolivian jungles in 1967 (Debray 1967). The Cuban Revolution was the catalyst for rebel groups created in the 1950s to morph into full-fledged armed political movements and into the same guerrilla groups that today, at the start of the twenty-first century, are still waging war against the political class in Colombia.

After the Cuban Revolution, the United States matriculated Latin America, with the exception of Mexico and Canada, in a front against Cuba using the Organization of American States, OAS, for that purpose. To avoid new events such as another Cuban revolution, the United States developed a strategy derived from the National Security doctrine of 1947, which extrapolated from the defense of the hemisphere to internal security inside the countries, with so-called civic-military operations, the other face of John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress. In Colombia, the armed forces were used in projects useful for the population while at the same time they combated the rebel-armed struggle in the countryside. By the year of 1962,

200 Colombian military personnel had already received training in the United States. The total number of those trained from 1950 to 1963 was 2,516. The National Security Doctrine was used to assume absolute and dictatorial powers by the armed forces in internal wars against any type of opposition from the left in the South Cone regimes: Paraguay (1954), Brazil (1966), Bolivia (1971), Uruguay (1973), Chile (1973), Argentina (1976), in which the a brutal repression was unleashed against people's movements and armed groups, especially throughout the 1970s.

In Colombia, the United States had the enthusiastic help of Colombia's political class, whose champion Alberto Lleras Camargo, former OAS secretary general and the country's president from 1958 to 1962, adopted the habit of calling communist and subversive any opposition force independent from the government. Liberal and Conservative parties controlled the two main workers' unions with the governments of the National Front and the political class always on the side of the bosses and landowners, who through the years kept taking away the land of peasants and tenant farmers.

To keep the opposition under control, the National Front governments used the State of Siege, a constitutional figure akin to a declaration of internal commotion perfectly suited for the strategy of national security, in effect during 126 out of the 192 months in which the National Front governed. Under the State of Siege, the government governed without the approval of Congress, issuing decrees to control unrest in the civilian population, especially peasants, students, and unionized workers, and to combat an overblown subversion. The armed forces had a free hand to act on the national territory as judge and party, through the so-called Verbal War Tribunals,

a form of court martial for civilians, notorious for their restrictions of due judicial process. The State of Siege gave legal status to the culture of violence, turning the armed forces into an instrument of social control, in what amounted to a declaration of war by the political class against the poorest among its own people.

A typical decree under the State of Siege (1128, June 19, 1970) forbade the publication or diffusion of news, commentaries or propaganda by any written or broadcast method or loudspeaker “in as much as they are susceptible of creating alarm, and affect the public tranquility” to spread news about the situation, destiny or mobilization of the public forces. The decree allowed for the retention of persons due to “perturbation or public order” through speeches, expositions or debates about such issues, even those that had taken place in public corporations and manifests or communiqués of the same type. People under suspicion of being part of subversive activities or stimulating them, were placed under police vigilance and could not travel without the secret police knowledge or that of the town’s major. Almost all meetings of more than three people, including public, religious, student or workers gatherings, civic ceremonies and public shows were forbidden. The States of Siege would become a fundamental tool of the government and the political class to control the mass media, specially radio, and television through prior censorship. Information was censored and regulated and the authorities, specially the military and the police, hindered access of journalists to information sources and manipulated the contents to hide the truth. As for media favorable to the National Front, they did not show a strong intention to portray a different aspect of the country’s reality.

In the early 1960s, Conservative politician Alvaro Gómez Hurtado coined the term “Independent Republics” to refer to the regions controlled by armed groups, which contested the government’s authority. His words instigated actions such as Operation Marquetalia in 1962, against organized peasants of the south of Tolima. In July of the same year, the government set a price for the head of Manuel Marulanda Vélez. The offensive included a “military-civic operation,” the economic and military blockade of the territory, the creation of concentration camps, torture and executions of prisoners by firing squads, bombardments with the use of napalm and possibly a bacteriological war denounced by peasants who fell sick with black smallpox and another unidentified diseases. Petitions to the United Nations, the Red Cross, President Valencia, the Cardinal, and Congress were useless. Even French intellectuals headed by Jean Paul Sartre signed a manifest in April of 1965 denouncing the Vietnamization of Colombia, about the same time the American marines were invading the Dominican Republic during Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. The offensive against a few dozen peasants armed defensively (42 according to Marulanda) cost 372 million pesos, more than half the entire defense budget for the year 1964. In 1965, *La Nueva Prensa*, an independent newspaper in the capital, counted 21,367 Colombians murdered during the seven years of the National Front.

This brutal offensive, considered an enormous historical mistake by the political class, drove the armed bands of peasants to organize into guerrilla movement. In the next two years the ELN (National Liberation Army), the EPL (Popular Liberation Army) and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) were founded. On January of 1965, Camilo Torres, the guerrilla priest,

launched the “Platform of the Colombian United Front” addressed “To all Colombians, popular sectors, the community organizations, unions, cooperatives, peasant leagues, indigenous communities and workers organizations, to all non-conformists, to all those not aligned with the traditional parties” (Gerasi 1971).

The death of Camilo Torres, during his first combat experience in February 1966 with ELN, was a hard blow to the legal struggle of the left. Camilo, who as the left’s brightest leader of the 1960s had created a people’s mass movement with ideals for an authentic change proposal for the lower classes, intensified the discussion on whether armed fronts in the countryside could lead to an insurgency strong enough for a revolution according to the model proposed by “Che” Guevara.

Another populist movement in the fringes of the Liberal Party, was the Liberal Revolutionary Movement (MRL) founded by Alfonso López Michelsen, a scion of the former president. The MRL was a pseudo-rebellion created inside the ranks of the Liberal Party protesting the mechanics of the National Front, which prevented it from competing for power. Several groups, including the Communist Party, then illegal, were ultimately used by the cunning López Michelsen to push his own agenda. In August 1967, he accepted the governorship of the newly created Department of Cesar, which made official his return to the bipartisan fold. Once inside the Liberal Party, as governor and minister of foreign relations, and especially during his tenure as president, from 1974 to 1978, he became a loyal representative of the political class he used, as he did with the left, to escalate up the steps of power.

After an accelerated process of urbanization, with all the social and cultural changes that came with it, the city dwellers began to see a horizon of modernity

represented by cultural currents that were circulating simultaneously in many parts of the world. A generation produced by the exodus from the countryside to the cities provided a fertile recruiting ground for the nascent Colombian left. As Pearce said,

Migration to the cities was already producing strain. Between 1951 and 1964, the urban population more than doubled as people fled *La Violencia*; by 1964, half of the total population, just over nine million people, lived in urban areas. Only a little more than one quarter of a million people had jobs in manufacturing. The informal sector became the economy for the majority of the urban poor, and criminal the means of survival in the city. Growing urban discontent in search of a political expression was apparent by the early 1990s (1990, p. 66).

Among the new inhabitants of the urban centers were hundreds of thousands of students who entered with their hopes and enthusiasm the ranks of numerous leftist groups, which took shape in schools and universities. They headed the popular protests against the National Front regimes and received the hardest blows during their repression.

New ideological seeds began to grow and new ideas to circulate among a radicalized youth based at universities and colleges, leftists intellectuals and activists, and armed bands of peasants. This was when the modern Colombian left was born. Then dialectic and historical materialism, Marxist political economy, the thoughts of Mao Tse Tung, Lenin, Stalin, Rosa Luxembourg, Gramsci, Mariátegui, Trotsky, “Che” Guevara and Fidel Castro, began to circulate widely in university classrooms around the country. There was also an avalanche of works by European thinkers such as Saussure, Freud, Marcuse, Sartre, Lucaks, Erich From, Fannon, Hossbaum, Bachelard, Levy Strauss, Althusser, Barthes and Foucault, among others (López de la

Roche 1994), which contributed to a stimulating intellectual climate for discussions about society and the questioning of old stereotypes and paradigms.

These groups were joined, sometimes as founders, other times as combatants and some times as political movements, by members of the Colombian clergy who began to question the traditional role of the church on the side of the privileged classes. They appropriated the words of Camilo Torres who said that “the duty of every Christian was to be a revolutionary and the duty of every revolutionary was to make the revolution” (Gerasi 1971). The role of progressive priests inside the church, with its mixture of Marxism and Christianity, weakened the traditional Catholic Church’s power over Colombians’ beliefs. The Second Latin American Episcopate Conference (CELAM) gathered in Medellín in 1968 started Liberation Theology in the continent. In Colombia, 50 priests gathered in the hacienda Golconda, which gave its name to the movement, in December of the same year launched a manifest calling for radical change in the economic and social structures of the country.

By then the utopian hopes for the possible revolution were in full swing, fed by the events in the Soviet Union, China and Cuba. Little by little, those who filled the ranks of numerous leftists groups were convinced that the change was not only possible but also imminent. The problem was that each group had its own model, in most cases imported from other countries and known through propaganda apparatuses.

The insurrectional ferment in France was essential for the formulation of a theoretical debate around the building of socialism in the country, aired years later through the pages of *Alternativa*. The main founders of the magazine, Bernardo

García, Enrique Santos Calderón, Orlando Fals Borda and Gabriel García Marquez, were all in Europe at the time.

Carlos Lleras Restrepo, the most lucid of the National Front presidents, elected in 1966 made a good effort to modernize the public administration under the same game rules, which allowed the private capital to consolidate in the 1960s. He knew that the growing migration from the country to the city could create a social crisis of great proportions and doubted the capacity of the State to create employment and satisfy the needs of the growing urban population. He had helped to develop an interventionist policy in the countryside, which gained him the ill will of the big landowners and agribusiness, by creating an organization of landless peasants in areas where traditionally there had been big estates, through associations watched by the government without partisan control. The *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos*, ANUC (National Association of Peasant Users) was established in 1967. Soon it began to show independence from the government and state control and to claim the right to the land through marches and invasions. At the beginning of the 1970s, thousands of peasants were mobilizing to stop the expansion of cattle ranchers and agribusiness, and to preserve the peasant's economy.

In 1970, ANUC released a program known as the First Peasant Mandate, proclaiming its growing independence from the government and initiating a series of recovery actions, which at one point involved some 30,000 people and affected 2,374 land properties in the country. In that same year, the government again declared a State of Siege. Throughout the 1970s, ANUC, created by Lleras with the intention of establishing a Liberal base in the country, became a field of struggle for different

sectors of the political left for its control. The agrarian policy would be one of the main issues of discussion and the cause of much of the division and fragmentation of the left.

Meanwhile, a new wave of student agitation, a product both of the government policies and the leftist influence in the classrooms, began in earnest in 1969, forcing the Lleras government to respond to generalized mobilizations all over the country by closing universities and sending the police to fight demonstrators. The most important conflict took place at Bogotá's Universidad Nacional, the country's flagship university, which was closed in February 24 by the government after a series of incidents.

Part of the student's movement focused on opposing the influence of the United States in Colombia's higher education, which according to the students was included in a strategy called the Basic Plan and sought the privatization of the Latin American universities through a closer relationship with the private sector and corporations.

In April 19 1970, the oligarchy struck against, this time by denying through fraud the triumph of the old General Rojas Pinilla and his ANAPO movement in the presidential elections. Rojas Pinilla campaigned on a program called "The Decalogue", which despite all its populist rhetoric which talked about foreign debt, the loss of value of the currency, the rise in the cost of living and the exaggerated growth of the bureaucracy, could not even be considered a leftist program. On election night, when the first results showed the general winning, the government seized control of the information and the next day, his rival Misael Pastrana, the

Conservative candidate, woke up as the winner by just 63,000 votes. Therefore, on that April 19, the same parties that had monopolized power again frustrated the rise to power of a popular leader. As it turned out, a fraud orchestrated by the National Registrar and condoned by President Lleras Restrepo, declared the Conservative candidate the winner (López de la Roche 1994).

In the task of showing the National Front pact as a providential event in the history of the country, the political class always had the unconditional support of the biggest newspapers. The censorship applied by Rojas Pinilla during his government which led to the closing of big papers such as the dailies *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, turned into a self-censorship that eliminated from the pages of the newspapers everything perceived as inconvenient for the powers that be. Even López Michelsen was a victim of the information discrimination during the first years of MRL, that left out information on his movement or published it in a distorted way. According to López de la Roche

The malicious exercise and ill will of political journalism, Manichaeism in the presentation of current events by some editorialists in the big dailies was in the 60s much stronger and less refined than today. This attitude, in a medium such as ours, was marked by attitudes and historical practices of intolerance which did not contribute to building consensus and, on the contrary, reinforced the political and ideological polarization between the left and the right and the exclusion logic in the appreciation of the political adversary (62).

Then again, a period of agitation, demonstrations and confrontations began in universities across the country, including private institutions. Pécaut wrote

From then on, the government decides to carry out an in-depth reform and takes the decision to close all the big universities one by one. On April 23,

11 universities were closed, several of them occupied by the army, such as the National University in Bogotá and Medellín, and the Industrial University of Santander. Soon others were closed as well, such as Nariño and Cartagena. Out of 110,000 students, some 60,000 are affected by the closings (2006, p. 148).

In March, the students presented a minimum program, which, besides freeing jailed students, proposed a series of measures leading to a “co-government” system that permitted them to participate in the administration of the universities, including the appointment of its directors. The program also called for the limitation of foreign influence, especially that of the United States, and the suppression of political jobs not related to the universities in the Superior University Councils. The government with its young Minister of Education, Luis Carlos Galán, tried to conciliate, half accepting some of the tenets of co-government and widening the participation of students and teachers. However, the National government reconsidered and by 1972, co-government was mortally wounded.

The student problem was just one of many Pastrana inherited from the Lleras administration, including the peasant movement, the guerrilla actions, the pressure of economic groups and a high inflation rate that had a strong affect on the cost of living. This last aspect was the spark that led the labor movement to propose a general strike on March 8, 1971, with the participation of the government-leaning unions, CTC and UTC, as well as the communist controlled CSTC. However, inflation did not stop: in 1973, it reached 35 percent while in the first six months of 1974 it reached 14.8 percent.

The strike was not successful but the unhappiness with the Pastrana government continued. The government faced contradictory pressures. It was

endlessly reminded by the political class of the need for deep changes to conjure the Chilean specter of a leftist elected government. The great agrarian, urban and educational reforms of the government, as well as its international strategy, were frozen in Congress, which presented a dismal legislative balance. Former president Lleras and his ally López Michelsen became critics of the administration.

In regards to the agrarian policy, in January 1972, the government called the agrarian entrepreneurs and owners to a meeting in which congressional representatives were also present but in which the peasants representatives of ANUC were not. Then, in a pact called the Chicoral Agreement, the political class and the big landowners ended any hope of an agrarian reform, choosing the easier path for themselves, and in the process frustrated the aspirations of hundreds of thousands of impoverished and landless peasants, many of whom had been displaced and robbed in the previous decades.

In 1972's legislative elections, ANAPO went from the 1,371,037 votes it received in 1970 to 553,955, a punishment for its conciliatory attitude two years before. The left was also unable to capitalize the popular discontent, especially due to the ambiguities of groups such as MOIR, which went from an abstention strategy to an electoral one, getting just 1.8 percent of the votes. The traditional parties did not do much better, judging by the fact that almost seven out of every ten potential voters did not go to the polls.

The Pastrana government's strategy was based in the Plan Currie or Four Strategies, which included channeling savings toward employment creation; exports

growth; the elevation of agricultural productivity; and the improvement of the fiscal system with the reevaluation of subsidies and exemptions.

The year 1974 found the Liberal and Conservative parties involved in an electoral campaign. In the Liberal primaries, the alliance López-Turbay defeated the presidential candidacy of Carlos Lleras, who wanted to finish what he had started in 1966. Álvaro Gómez Hurtado, imposed his name as the Conservative candidate despite the revulsion that it and that of his father, Laureano Gómez, caused in the people as instigators of La Violencia genocide. Candidate Maria Eugenia Rojas, the old General Rojas' daughter and Hernando Echeverry, the candidate of the left's coalition, completed the main electoral picture. The first two candidates, both sons of former presidents, campaigned on only small differences between themselves. General Rojas' movement, however, hit hard by the frustration of its voters since 1972, refused to make alliances with the Communist Party and with Maoist MOIR.

These two groups and the much smaller *Movimiento Amplio Colombiano*, MAC (Wide Colombian Movement) decided to participate together in the elections and created the *Unión Nacional de Oposición*, UNO (National Opposition Union). UNO's minimum program, published in 1973, was a compromise between several leftist organizations. It appealed to a 'return of democratic freedoms' and to a mobilization of all sectors against the oligarchic and neocolonial regime. It promised to satisfy the petitions of ANUC and to carry out a radical urban reform. Actually, the mutual distrust never stopped between the Communists and the Maoists. The former was forced to explain its alliance with its rival; and the latter insisted on the purely

tactical aspect of it. Both pretended to create an organization able to receive those voters running from ANAPO.

While the traditional parties and the left were involved in electoral debates, repression continued unabated, especially in the countryside where peasants were murdered, jailed, tortured and forced to leave their plots of land. In the cities, strikes and protests were violently repressed under the State of Siege. Justice was dispensed in military garrisons through the Verbal War Councils, which were summary trials in which very often those suspected of subversive activities such as painting walls with political slogans or participating in demonstrations were condemned. Pastrana's government chose violence as a primary form of answering social protest. That confirmed that the war that the political class had chosen as the way to defend itself from its own people continued unabated.

It was in this crisis climate of general deception, people's protests and repression, in the last few months of the Pastrana administration and in the middle of the first electoral campaign not ruled by the National Front, that *Alternativa* was born. All the ingredients—the people, the situation, the need to know and the need to fight—were there.

Chapter 4: Genesis and conception

The idea of creating a magazine in Colombia named *Alternativa* came out of the confluence, in 1973, of three groups of people working, from a leftist's perspective, in academic research, sociology and journalism, each with a previous experience in media and each with its own idea of what the magazine should be. Each of the three groups of people contributed in their own way to plan, organize, fund and run the magazine in its first stage.

The head of the first group was Bernardo García, an European-educated economist, who, while studying in Belgium, became acquainted with *Le Nouvelle Observateur*, a successful mass-circulation magazine created in the realm of French socialism, geared toward a general public. It was modern analytical journalism, with complex problems treated in an accessible language from a socialist point of view. Without being a party medium, *Le Nouvelle Observateur* managed to energize the socialist movement and become an important source of information for a sizeable segment of the French public. García had already experimented with a small publication called *Alternative* which circulated among Latin American students in Belgium, and was very impressed by the way *Le Observateur* explained complex issues in a quite well-written, almost literary language.

García was the one who came up with the magazine's slogan "Daring to Think is Beginning to Fight", meaning that the real strength was in the force of reason more than in confrontation, and that as long as the problems were understood the social force would find ways to propose achievable tasks.

In 1971, García and a group of teachers and students were expelled from Universidad del Valle, after his candidacy for the deanship of the School of Economics proposed by the students was rejected by the university authorities. García had already attempted to create a magazine in Cali, along with a Trotskyite group of students who later went on to create the Socialist Block, a party identified with the Trotskyite Fourth International Socialist. García left when he refused to engage in party-line journalism. He went to Bogotá to work as editor of the Statistics Bulletin and director of the Socioeconomic Analysis Division for the *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*, DANE (National Statistics Bureau). There he teamed up with a young group of leftist economists, including Salomón Kalmanovitz and Jorge Villegas, who began to handle detailed statistics, the raw material of their research, and to publish them in the *Boletín de Estadísticas* (Statistics Bulletin), which García edited. That publication, one of the predecessors of *Alternativa*, became quite popular among intellectuals, reaching an unheard-of-circulation for a specialized magazine of 8,000 to 10,000.

The social researcher and academic, Orlando Fals Borda, and his colleagues represented the second current, the sociologists. Fals had founded, along with the Catholic priest Camilo Torres Restrepo, the School of Sociology at Universidad Nacional, and was its dean from 1959 to 1967. He had also been in Europe in the heated months of May 1968, when he was director of research for United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, UNRISD, in Geneva. Besides, he had published several books, including *Campesinos de los Andes*, (1961), *Subversion and social change* (1969) *Revoluciones inconclusas en América Latina* (1971) and *El*

hombre y la tierra en Boyacá: bases sociológicas e históricas para una reforma agraria (1957), which bore witness to his enormous knowledge about the Colombian situation. .

Fals Borda was, and still is, an international expert on participatory action research, a reinterpretation of field research methods and the orientation of scientific knowledge. According to him, research had to stop being a scholarly curiosity. Participatory action research presupposed a direct intervention of the researcher in the problems of those communities he was researching, with the goal of changing their living conditions. Fals' Rosca Foundation for Social Research had extensive experience in fieldwork with peasant and Indian communities in several regions of the country, especially along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. The intention, according to participatory action research principles, was not only to research but also to act, organize people and induce them to change even at the cost of confronting the system. Part of that work was journalistic and educational as well, using formats such as comic books to bring the history of popular struggles to their own protagonists in a simple, direct narrative.

In a report-statement sent to the Mission of the Church of Sweden, which helped funding the activities of Rosca foundation, Fals Borda narrated the genesis of the organization.

In this juncture, there seems to be a tendency to believe that the reactionary character of functionalist sociology could be transformed through a different type of professional compromise and action. This different treatment necessarily required different theoretical frameworks. It was as if sociology had been until then, the instrument of domination by the bourgeoisie, and could be transformed to service the exploited class of society. This was the opinion taken by the founding members of Rosca, and

out of that came a new school of thought called ACTION RESEARCH. (Caps in the original)²

The third current that participated in the creation of *Alternativa* was that of journalists like Enrique Santos Calderón and a close group of artist friends belonging to the Fundación Pro Artes Gráficas (Pro Graphic Arts Foundation). Santos was the heir to the family that owned *El Tiempo*, the country's paper of reference, and the firstborn of the younger generation of the most powerful media family in the country, which waged an enormous influence over Colombia politics throughout the twentieth century. The paper was the journalistic house of several presidents, and many important characters in the social, cultural and political life of the nation went through its newsroom.

Because of that, Santos was born with a great responsibility on his shoulders. He had great curiosity about reality, a journalistic instinct acquired by living close to the rotary press, newspapers and journalists, and an understanding of the nature of Colombia's politics. At the of 30, he was already writing a weekly column in *El Tiempo* called *Contraescape* and had specific responsibilities in the newsroom as deputy managing editor. When *Alternativa* was conceived, Santos' group of painters, filmmakers and journalists was working with the southeastern communities of Bogotá against the plan by the municipal administration to build a big avenue, considered at the time too expensive and damaging to the poor inhabitants of the sector. His job and that of his friends was to support the community through a communications media project that included mural papers and posters.

² Orlando Fals Borda, Letter to Carl. F. Hallencreuts, Church of Sweden, August 2, 1976. Personal file.

In February 1973, Santos and his friends founded the Pro Graphic Arts Foundation, with the goal of creating consciousness and raising the educational and cultural level among the marginalized sectors of society, especially Indian communities, peasants and marginalized urban dwellers. “So that, by knowing their situation and their rights, they can—through their own efforts—create a more democratic society.”³ Fourteen months later, the Foundation participated as one of the founding partners of *Editorial Alternativa*, based in Bogotá, whose objective, according to its statutes was the preparation, editing and commercialization of magazines, texts, brochures and other scientific, cultural, political and news product. According to Santos,

We all had different conceptions, Bernardo’s group thought a lot about those things, about a magazine like *Le Nouvelle Observateur*. Fals’ group thought about a more popular magazine, with a simpler language. And I was always in the middle, trying to combine things, not to fall into something totally popular, ordinary, but neither doing something for leftist French intellectuals either. But we all wanted to do a different type of journalism, directly related to the people. And in the middle of 1973 we began to integrate, knowing each other’s experiences and at one point we just said why don’t we make a good leftist magazine, let’s join efforts and create a national circulation publication with a different language. Besides we were all coming from a very critical diagnostic of leftist journalism in the country at the time, things like mimeographed pamphlets in stapled single sheets. The only paper worth its name was *Voz Proletaria*, which carried the Communist party line. (E. Santos, personal interview, September 6, 2005)

The Sociedad *Alternativa* Ltda. that started the magazine had a paid capital of \$150,000 divided in six shares, one of them owned by Gabriel García Márquez (called Gabo among his friends), who went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982. García Marquez’s contribution, besides the money to start the Solidarity

³ Constitution act of the Foundation Pro Graphic Arts, Eight Notary of Bogotá, February 15, 1973. Personal file.

Committee with Political Prisoners, and his investment in Editorial *Alternativa*, was his fame and enormous national and international prestige. The publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1968, had catapulted him to a definitive fame and to a place among the best writers of the twentieth century. When the book came out, his jump to fame was almost immediate, even though he already had a trajectory of more than twenty years writing journalism and fiction, and had published several books.

We had the idea to bring García Márquez in and I had to do it. Gabo owed me one because just recently we had created the Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners using an award of \$10,000 dollars he had received in Oklahoma, which happened after he gave the money of a previous award to Venezuela's MAS. They were protests from the left here in Colombia: "how is it possible, what happens with the Colombian left, aren't there any problems here?" Then he called me and said, "I won \$10,000 dollars and I want to give them to a Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners in Colombia." I said, "We don't have such a Committee here" and he said "Well, create one, *no joda*." So we did. With USO, ANUC, FECODE we founded the Committee which began to act and was an indirect impulse to *Alternativa* later. With that, I called Gabo and told him: "We are going to create a leftist magazine with these people." The first reaction from Gabo was premonitory and skeptic: "Those things always fail". I said, "This is different, it is a very wide thing, not sectarian or partisan." I convinced him, he came here and we sat down. We already were very advanced in the discussion as to how that magazine should be, what sections should it have, etc. Now with Gabo in we said let's start. Besides, Gabo had promised an exclusive article on the bombardment of The Moneda Palace in Chile where Allende had fallen, also with a theory that it had been gringo pilots who did it, which turned out to be bogus. (Santos 2005)

According to Santos, despite his reticence and initial skepticism, Gabo ended up more involved in *Alternativa* and began a new phase in his life as an engaged journalist. "All Gabo's articles at the time he wrote for *Alternativa* were part of a militant journalism stage that he had not developed before: articles on Angola,

Vietnam, Cuba, about the blockade. During his time in *Alternativa* he developed a whole new stage as an engaged journalist.” (Santos 2005)

Alternativa's articles of incorporation tried to reconcile all positions in four basic points, in which there was a preoccupation with journalistic rigor.

ARTICLE I – The magazine has as its objective (underlined in the original) to produce and divulge useful materials for the education teams of diverse groups of peasants, workers, teachers, etc, a) in the information field, b) in the analysis of national and eventually international problems, c) in the field of the expressions of the groups.

ARTICLE II - In the information field, the idea is to make a synthesis of monthly news, highlighting as a balance the most important ones and presenting the most possible objective reports, of those events in which it is necessary to offer data, references and reconstructions, with the aim of allowing the readers to make more detailed analysis of the national as well as the international situation. Thus, opinions and personal interpretations of a partisan line are excluded from this area.

ARTICLE III – In the area of special reports the idea is to prepare detailed studies on the fundamental national problems, that could become pedagogical or collectible material, written in a journalistic language.

ARTICLE IV – In the section that gathers the voice from the base, the idea is to publish articles, manifests, declarations, complaints, and features, taking care to verify the accuracy and precision of those expressions and to avoid excessive vocabulary and extension. The idea is also to provide a voice to organizations and popular spokespeople unknown to the public opinion.⁴

As the first crises of the magazine a few months later proved, this document was notorious more for what it said than for what it didn't. There was no mention whatsoever of any political allegiance or intention to make a publication for political purposes or to help in achieving the unity or goals of the left. If anything, the articles of incorporation were more journalistically neutral than other declarations of

⁴ Articles of Incorporation of the magazine *Alternativa*. Typewritten. November 28, 1973. Personal file.

principles published in the future, highlighting concepts such as information, analysis, accuracy and precision while seeking to avoid “opinions and personal interpretations of a partisan line,” as well as excessive vocabulary and extension.

Once the magazine came out, these articles of incorporation coalesced in a publication completely committed to the political persuasion of the left, an opinion publication espousing ideals and goals that were a far cry from “the most possible objective reports.”

To finance the magazine, its creators decided on a scheme to solicit monetary contributions from a list they compiled among themselves, thus creating a base of sympathizers who were supposed to be partners in the venture, albeit more symbolic than anything else. The letter sent to potential subscribers and partners was later reproduced with few variations as the first of the magazine’s editorials, which from the first issue on would be called “Letter to the Reader.”

The letter emphasized the lack of an independent and critical national publication, thus resulting in an accommodation by the mainstream media, with those who held political and economic power governing the national events. The creation of *Alternativa* offered the critical reinterpretation of the national reality through political, economic and social analysis, a necessity for professional and popular organizations “involved with change,” meaning specifically Colombia’s left. For this purpose, the letter asked for monetary contributions in order to survive under economic conditions that favored big media. The Founding Committee signed the letter: Gabriel García Márquez, Orlando Fals Borda, Bernardo García and Jorge Villegas Arango.

The shadow of M-19

Meanwhile, in the background, other discussion was going on about the magazine between Santos Calderón and Jaime Bateman Cayón, the leader of the urban guerrilla movement M-19, which was also in a formation process by a group of former militants of the Communist Party, ANAPO and other people linked previously with the armed guerrilla struggle. The relationship between *Alternativa* and M-19 went through several stages. After Santos and Bateman met for the first time, sometime at the end of 1972 and the beginning of 1973,

He began to tell me right away what they were doing, with a lot of confidence, that he knew about the magazine and believed in the unity of the left. He began to talk to me exactly about the same reflections we were having, of being tired of the Sino-Soviet fight, about the ideological cannibalism from the left, looking for a wide way to address the real country, how to overcome the sects in which the left was divided. From then on, a relationship began, he told me what they were doing, I told him how the magazine *Alternativa* was coming along, we began to see each other quite regularly. At that moment, they were publishing *Comuneros*, which was their first publication, and he proposed that I write an article about why there was not armed struggle in the cities, which I did under the name Baltazar de la Hoz.⁵

According to Santos, M-19 and Bateman were so interested in that initiative that they got in touch with several members of the incipient editorial team.

Later we found out they had also contacted the Fals group and other sectors and tendencies within the magazine. Therefore, when *Alternativa* started there was already a kind of sympathy, there were previous contacts, parallel projects that were inspired in a wide left conception, non-sectarian, with no international alignments. However, in the course of the development of the magazine M-19 began to gather strength from inside, they tried to orient

⁵ (E. Santos, personal interview, September 27, 2006)

the magazine and influence decisions, gave political direction, contradicting very much the initial spirit of openness and tolerance. (2005)

Santos told Villamizar that his encounter with Bateman became an “intense and long relationship” (Villamizar 1999) that lasted until 1982, when they met for the last time. One year later, Bateman died in an airplane accident when on his way to Panamá.

A magazine is born.

The first editorial was not a political declaration, nor a manifesto, but the affirmation by a group of people that they intended to show the readers the true reality of the country and that the independent journalistic nature and mission of *Alternativa* prevailed against any commitment with political organizations on the left. This goal remained as a guiding principle through the successive crises of the magazine.

This declaration implied that the political class dominated the people through the control of the information media, which shaped the news to accommodate the reality as that political class wanted the people to know it. That was the case with the portrayal of the National Front pact as a providential event in the history of the country, unconditionally supported by the big newspapers as opinion shapers and the tightly controlled and incipient broadcast media. The censorship applied by Rojas Pinilla during his government, which led to the closing of partisan media such as *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* turned into self-censorship which eliminated from the pages of the newspapers everything perceived as inconvenient for the powers that be.

Contrasting with the view from the big press, on October 25 1973, the announcement of the birth of the Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners highlighted the dramatic situation in the country regarding the systemic violation of human rights by the state apparatus. During 20 of the last 25 years, Colombia had lived under a State of Siege, an exceptional constitutional figure used to repress and control political opposition to the government, which also allowed the military to trial civilians in Verbal War Councils. The Committee announced at least eight such military judicial procedures, most of them directed against protesting workers, peasants, students and intellectuals, the occupation of at least 13 universities and the arrest of 200 students.

The Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners stated among its objectives to vouch for the integrity and freedom of political prisoners; to have those cases already tried revised; and to investigate and denounce before public opinion the political repression at all levels. The Committee did not represent any political organization, but vowed to speak for all organizations and associations suffering persecution because of the offence of giving an opinion and acting in defense of their democratic rights.

The presence in the Solidarity Committee of several founders of *Alternativa* also facilitated their understanding and created a common political ground, for all shared the objectives outlined above, particularly the situation regarding the gross violations of human rights in many instances and places at the time, which nevertheless were alien to many citizens of Colombia and unknown to most. So, point three of the announcement, investigating and denouncing before public opinion the

political repression, became a rallying cry for the groups of people who began to conceive of the new magazine. By any standard, those violations should have been treated as news. Not only were they not, but the big press made no attempt to do analytical, interpretive or investigative journalism, nor does it to this day.

By informing about the struggles of peasants, workers and students, and by providing a tribune for parties, groups, factions or sects, as well as providing contextual information, national and international, among other things, the makers of the magazine believed they could help in building the path to a historical revolutionary change. In this sense, they understood the role of the magazine as a vehicle of empowerment for those who read it, as a guide to action.

However, while the three currents of backers that made the magazine had a specific idea of what they wanted to do, there was no identification with the Leninist view of the press as an organizer, a doctrine that went as far back as the Bolshevik revolution and which had been extensively treated by theorists and politicians. The concepts of party or revolutionary press were mentioned occasionally in the foundation of the magazine, but no attempt was made to apply them, even though there was a prominent school of media theoreticians in Latin America that dealt with the topic from a Marxist perspective, led by the Belgian scholar Armand Mattelart. The lack of specific press theory, however, was compensated for by an abundance of Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the Colombian situation in terms of class struggle, the role of the proletarians, the intellectuals, the peasants and the ways and means to achieve an authentic socialist revolution. As it turned out, however, the need of a revolution was about the only thing all the parties and groups in the left agreed on. In

that sense, *Alternativa* was an alternative publication all right, but it was also a politically independent magazine, which very soon began to feel the pressures created by its success. Santos says,

Alternativa appears in 1974, a completely unusual magazine, very aggressive, with an article denouncing the counter-guerrilla, full of information about popular struggles, totally anti-system and pro-left. The first issue sold out in less than a week. And there were even attempts to confiscate it in some downtown newsstands, which also helped to sell it. It was overwhelming. And that success in my opinion planted the seed of the first crisis. It unleashed appetites and amplified internal tensions as to how to assimilate it, what to do with the magazine (Santos 2006)

According to Enrique Santos Calderón, the debates about the magazine's contents began from the first issue and continued unabated throughout.

After all the debates and all, we set the date of February 15, 1974 to put out a biweekly called *Alternativa*. Everything was a deep discussion, the name, the motto "Daring to think is beginning to fight," and we came out with a cover article called "The counter guerrilla in action," which I wrote, and a banner about an exclusive article by Gabo. We had thought, as a big thing, to print 3,000 issues but with the article by Gabo we said let us throw ourselves into the well and print 10,000 issues. (2005).

The lack of technical and design resources was evident in the first issue of *Alternativa*, which cost \$10 Colombian pesos. Other than the cover, the magazine was printed on unpretentious newsprint. The photography was poor, badly reproduced, sometimes blurred. From the point of view of graphic design, the first cover of the magazine was a disaster. It featured a green montage on a red background—part photography, part illustration, part drawing, part collage—of some soldiers stepping out of a helicopter and running through a field in which there were some peasants working. The headline was almost lost. In the lower part, some

silhouettes, presumably of guerrillas, carried things that could have been rifles but also whips or working tools. The slogan “Daring to Think is Beginning to Fight” that should have appeared under the name was not printed until the second issue. Lost in the left hand corner was a green banner that announced the article by García Márquez about Chile, which, from the point of view of the impact the first edition was supposed to create, should have been the cover theme.

The back cover, the last page, was a red blot with what was supposed to be the silhouette of Camilo Torres and a montage in the lower part, in the same color. One has to look carefully to read “Camilo Torres, present, February 15.” The intention to associate the date of the birth of *Alternativa* with the anniversary of the death of Camilo Torres eight years before, was lost in a badly done and confused back cover. The presentation, graphic design, placement of articles, headlines, showed that it was a magazine made with few financial and technical means. Carlos Duplat, a designer and filmmaker, was in charge of the artistic direction of the magazine, and wrote some articles. The production of the magazine was completely improvised, with very little orientation, and brief discussions on the concept, the editorial design or the role of caricatures.

However, the cover and the back cover signaled the magazine’s intention to enter with a bang by proclaiming its sympathy for the armed struggle, an issue always treated in the big press from the point of view of the government, usually through military sources. A photomontage of former president Alberto Lleras on the back of the front cover, was irreverent and mordacious, an *Alternativa* hallmark treatment of the mainstream political characters, with an acid humor that made a constant mockery

of the pretensions of respectability and truthfulness of the politicians and representatives of the dominant classes.

Alternativa's first masthead included as members of the Editorial Committee Gabriel García Márquez, Orlando Fals Borda, Jorge Villegas Arango and Bernardo García as Director. The Managing Editor was Víctor Manuel Bonilla and José Vicente Katarain was General Manager. The editorial staff was made up of Eligio García Márquez, Sebastián Arias, Carlos Vidales and Cristina de la Torre; the artistic coordinator was Diego Arango and design and assembly coordinators were Carlos Duplat and Susana Rodríguez; photographers were Carlos Sánchez and Consuelo Izquierdo. The production was in the hands of Jacobo Neirdorf and Amanda Ojeda and María Emilse Puentes did documentation services. Conspicuously absent from the masthead was Enrique Santos Calderón, who remained unnamed for reasons related to his work at *El Tiempo*, where he kept his weekly column *Contraescape*. He was going to appear in the masthead for the first time in issue 22.

Alternativa's success was unquestionable and surprised everybody, including some stunned policemen who confiscated several copies. Nobody thought about doing another printing, which probably would have sold out as well. The magazine became the day's conversation, commented about almost immediately in the corridors of power, in popular organizations, among the intellectuals, at universities' classrooms and hallways and it rapidly became news in mainstream press. Suddenly, the creators of *Alternativa* found themselves with a true mass magazine, with national circulation and a leftist one to boot. In addition, they discovered that the magazine filled the need in the Colombian market of informing readers what was actually

happening in other parts of the country. The paper *El Periódico* wrote, under the banner “Freedom of the press” an article headlined “‘*Alternativa*’ confiscated,” in which, despite the police denials, it reported that many of the magazines had been seized.

According to Enrique Santos, there was a double distribution system. One was a network of sympathizers, with the groups that Rosca, Fals foundation, had in the north coast, leftist bookstores, friendly unions; the other was a commercial distribution with El Dorado. “We wanted to break with the traditional leftist patterns that only distributed their publications to their people through militants. We wanted to reach the general public through commercial networks, combine channels, friends, sympathizers, with the normal distribution, the same channels that distributed *Cromos* (a consumer magazine).” (2005).

From its first number *Alternativa* put the spotlight on mainstream press, identified with the National Front. Every day the big papers walked a very thin line between information and propaganda, serving as a sort of amplifying loudspeaker for the government, the politicians and the armed forces, legitimizing the acts of government, which were very seldom criticized. *Alternativa*’s vision was so different from that of the dailies that it had to produce a shock in readers who were ignorant as to how the country was governed, of what was going on in the countryside or even in other places in the continent.

Never before in the history of the country had a publication presented to the reading public an analysis from the left on so many things at the same time. The National Front media rarely confronted the official accounts, not to mention doing

original journalistic investigations in a country where corruption was so rampant as to be part of the system of government. Who could have ever imagined that in the United States there was training in anti subversive tactics for Colombian policemen and soldiers? How could people know what union leaders thought on the issue of salaries? Or the infamous history of the Berástagui Hacienda, behind which there was a *cacique* affiliated with ANAPO, or read the M-19 communiqué which no other publication dared to print?

Now the Colombian left was speaking with its own voice to the people, albeit a small number of them. The magazine began to uncover what side the big media was on, showing in the process the real make up of Colombia's ruling class. It showed why the violence in Colombia had never ended and pictured the silent current of people who struggled to survive in the middle of a dysfunctional democracy. One death here, another one there did not make any difference. However, when the massacres, the displacements, the summary executions, and the murders added up, as shown in *Alternativa*, a pattern of behavior of the State against the civilian population began to emerge.

Chapter 5: The first crisis and a new direction

Once the magazine took off in such auspicious fashion, the continuous reflection upon its own nature usually was carried out in the first page editorial “Letter to the Reader.” The balance of the first issue experience, based on the speed with which the magazine sold out, confirmed the need for a publication that challenged the State of Siege and the monopoly of information by the mainstream media. The editorial noted the overwhelming support received through numerous letters and a long list of supporting subscribers, which included noted progressive intellectuals. The main list of some 800 names had been gathered by borrowing names from friends’ notebooks.

The magazine was printed in coarse newsprint paper, in an odd 13” by 9.5” (33 cm by 24.5 cm) size. The only color inside was red in some headlines and shaded background for some articles. Graphic design was poor. There were different size typefaces, with a small ten-point the most common, and type did not exclude a minimum nine-point. From its start, the magazine included plenty of caricatures, all of them highly irreverent at the time, which amply compensated for the poor quality of the pictures. Most of the editorial material seemed jam-packed into the pages that looked disorderly and improvised at first, but the publication evolved in each issue, gaining in coherence, giving the reader plenty to explore in this surprisingly bold journalistic experiment.

Gradually, the editorial content became more organized and the sections better defined. Although there was a lack of rigor in the use of punctuation and capital

letters in headlining, there were no grammar or spelling mistakes. On the making of the cover, Santos remembers:

We dedicated a lot of time to discuss it, the way to present it, its colors. The cover in issue two was discussed a lot. It represents two fat gentlemen who must be bankers, and at the other side of a rifle's visor there is a woman with her child dying of hunger on top of a number of products. Artistically, it was well conceived, but as a cover, it was a disaster. You do not see it. It has too many elements. (1998)

The magazine's creators suddenly found themselves with a mass medium that increased its circulation by 10,000 copies with each number, starting with a first print run of 10,000. The list of organizations supporting the magazine grew by the week and the mails published in the "Letters from the Readers" carried support messages by major unions and political and intellectual figures.

Despite the good intentions about good journalistic writing style and reliance on factual information, the text in the first issues was heavily loaded with references to the class struggle, the wickedness of the oligarchy, the need to organize and fight for a revolution. The political nature of the magazine was paramount over its journalistic mission, which interpreted and analyzed the national reality from a leftist political point of view that assumed the truth was always on its side.

With the magazine still in the process of positioning itself, its makers began to take positions on pressing issues for the left, reflecting the contradictions that were beginning to take shape inside it. The question of the participation in the upcoming presidential and legislative elections, with the country immersed in an electoral campaign, was part of an old argument among leftist leaders on whether it was

worth to vote or not, in a country where the majority of the population did not cast ballots.

This time, however, the Communist Party (pro-Soviet) and the *Movimiento Obrero Independiente Revolucionario*, MOIR (Independent Revolutionary Workers Movement) (pro-Chinese) had formed the *Unión Nacional de Oposición*, UNO, (National Opposition Union) coalition. The former had always participated in elections, in open or concealed ways, while the latter predicated abstention until 1972, when it participated for the first time in legislative elections. While the left agreed that the objective was to take power through a revolution, the Communists contemplated using elections as a tool, as the Popular Unity coalition did in Chile. The Maoists believed in an armed revolution led by peasants, but agreed to use elections as a tactical tool to spread their message.

However, the fact that both forces decided to participate together was considered an advancement toward unity, in the midst of a crowded landscape of leftist parties, groups, tendencies and sects, some legal and some clandestine. These were also the first elections after the end of the National Front pact, following the 1970 presidential contest when the parties that held a total monopoly in the political arena stole the victory from ANAPO and the Rojas Pinilla. It confirmed what Camilo Torres, the guerilla priest once said: those who count (the votes) elect the winners. Rather than take sides, and despite its sympathies toward armed struggle and groups such as M-19 and ELN, the magazine fulfilled its role of acting as a neutral tribune for the left and said so in its third editorial:

Perhaps the biggest challenge is the frequent request for us to define ‘the line’ to follow, elections or abstention. But *Alternativa* does not trace lines, because it is not a political group, nor it pretends to be. Nevertheless, the magazine does not seek to avoid the challenge that it represents to face— informatively and politically—the situation of the Colombian left in the current electoral debate. We reaffirm the principle of opening these pages to the vanguard forces in the country, and starting with the next issue, *Alternativa* will begin a debate over “elections or abstention”, with the participation of the main leaders of Colombia’s left.⁶

“To define the line” was a veiled reference to the old Leninist doctrine of the party press, which defined the paper as an agglutinant, education and organizing element within revolutionary organizations as had happened to the Bolshevik Party with *Pravda* and in every other socialist regime, including Cuba with the paper *Granma*. The price those societies paid for the rigid control of information and its manipulation for propaganda purposes was to isolate their citizens from the rest of the world. Evidently, the idea of the journalists and economists in the founder’s team was to do a magazine not to define the line but to explain problems and offer solutions. However, that idea was completely overrun by the political conception of a pre-revolutionary situation, with all the formulas coming from Moscow or Beijing. In this instance, the formula “daring to think is beginning to fight” had no space and the magazine turned into a combative, denouncement publication, without the depth García had envisioned.

Those ideas were not shared by Fals Borda. According to García, he even brought a group of Indians and urban leaders to discuss how the magazine should be a mass publication, using the same language that deprived people used, giving them journalism courses so they could talk the same language as the masses.

⁶ Alt. 3, 3/18/74, p. 1

Other than the communication media allied with the National Front, there was a crop of printed publications representing parties and groups in the left. They included *Voz Proletaria*, the Communist Party paper, *Tribuna Roja*, *El Bolchevique*, *Revolución Socialista*, *El Manifiesto*, *Mayorías*, *Coyuntura*, *Ideología y Sociedad*, *Teoría y Práctica*, and other smaller regional publications. Compared to *Alternativa* however, these publications were doctrinaire, made “to define the line,” geared more toward the inside of the parties than outside, with a dogmatic language and short on information content, with no intention of becoming mass publications by reaching the general public.

As a gesture coincidental with its principles, and to maintain its independence, the magazine decided not to carry commercial advertising. Nevertheless, from issue one, it found advertisers among leftist publishing houses, which before *Alternativa* could have hardly be known by the general public. These makeshift publishing operations did their business without much regard for copyrights, royalties or other legal issues. Many of them also piggybacked on the magazine to circulate in the rest of the country. *Alternativa* ended up creating a network of libraries called El Zancudo (The Mosquito) and a publishing house, Editorial Oveja Negra (Black Sheep), which published the works of García Márquez in Colombia, to handle the circulation of leftist publications.

As Santos recognized, the pressure inside the magazine began almost from the moment it became successful from the sociologists of Rosca, who expected to apply in the magazine their participatory action research theory.

In April 1974, four issues were already out and the editors felt compelled to restate their criteria as to the objectives of the magazine. Its role was, according to García and Santos, to counter inform and foster public opinion around issues the big press ignored. It sought to rely to organizations on the left studies, analysis, and investigations of the national reality, indispensable for the correct leadership of social, political, and economic struggles. There was also a place for workers, peasants, students, teachers, and other popular groups to show their struggles and present their denunciations and opinions. Finally, they said:

Alternativa does not promote ‘political sectarianism’ of the left, but it does not preach an idyllic unity either. The magazine pretends to contribute to the critical consolidation of the vanguard forces, meaning to build on a sane and open debate, in the analysis of the national reality and in the permanent confrontation with the popular struggles. The debate starting in this edition on elections and abstention is a sample of this intention.⁷

As a reflection for the drive to control the now valuable opinion medium, each group controlled pages and sections in the magazine. Santos and García did most of the analysis and interpretation of the political scene, the investigative reports of the economy, the international information and the “Letter to the Reader.” Fals and Rosca did “The Voice from the Base” and “Briefs from the Base” sections, both political charged segments dealing with popular struggles in the urban centers and in the countryside. The Rosca group also monopolized the agrarian issue with coverage of the peasants’ struggles, especially ANUC’s.

Underlying this division was the presence in the background of the M-19 movement, who used *Alternativa* through its cadres inside the magazine, represented

⁷ Alt. 4, 4/1/74, p. 1

by the Fals group in individuals such as Carlos Duplat and Sebastián Arias. Jaime Bateman Cayón, the leader of M-19 who died in a plane accident in 1983, was referred to in a book (Villamizar, 2002), telling how he became acquainted with Santos Calderón when neither *Alternativa* nor M-19 existed on paper, and of Bateman's promises to support the magazine "in any way." In Villamizar's book, Duplat is quoted as saying:

Since I entered *Alternativa* I come again in contact with El Flaco (Bateman). I put together the first issue of *Alternativa* in January 1974. Bateman got close to *Alternativa*, he saw a great opportunity there. We met periodically, he brought me material, we discussed, joked, teased, and we put into the magazine all the information we could. When we got close, he was already M-19 and he identified himself as such with me; there was no doubt about anything, he personally gave me the materials. (2002. p. 284)

In issue 1, *Alternativa* had the scoop of the first M-19 communiqué and the picture of one of its militants with Bolívar's sword, which M-19 had stolen. It was known later that the picture and the communiqué that came with it was made especially for *Alternativa*, the only publication capable and willing to print it. Later, it published a summary of the letter with which M-19 challenged María Eugenia Rojas.

The 19 of April movement, M-19, armed arm of the Anapist people, wants you as the undisputable boss of our party to take an unequivocal position regarding the revolutionary process in Colombia and commit yourself unambiguously—in theory and in practice—with that process of national and popular emancipation, which today shakes the anachronistic socioeconomic structures of Latin America and engages, in an all out struggle, the revolutionary energies of the oppressed peoples in all the continent.⁸

⁸ Alt. 13, 10/6/74, p. 10.

The document ended with a call to use all forms of struggle to defeat the bourgeois regime, a slogan used by the left since the 1960s to justify both its armed and electoral struggle.

In issue 11, the heavy and confusing covers made with photographic montages gave way to monothematic illustrated themes, with one dominant element, much more attractive and above all irreverent to the point of scandalizing. The covers of issues 11, 12, and 13 were illustrated by Chinche. Number 11, circulating on July 8, 1974, showed the smiling face of Misael Pastrana Borrero, who in a few weeks would be transferring power to his successor López Michelsen. The headline was a provocation: “What are you laughing about?” Issue 12 cover showed the drawing of a hand giving the finger, with a thick ring in the little finger and a handcuff with the pesos sign (\$) on it. The headline this time was “Congress, the voice of the people?”

Once the elections ended and the voting controversy passed, tensions inside the magazine increased. The “Letter to the Reader” in issue 7 emphasized García and his group’s position, supported by Santos, restating the principles of counter informing, presenting studies and investigations on the nation’s reality, publishing the voices and struggles of popular organizations, and critically promoting the growing unity of the left.

This last objective also supposes a debate on the hot issues that leftist organizations sometimes avoid discussing with the necessary openness. The past elections gave reasons to bring to the surface several things. We can say that the reasons and explanations expressed by several of those interviewed around the issue of “elections or abstention,” produced positive results, despite the fact that some susceptibilities may have been hurt.⁹

⁹ Alt. 7, 13/5/74, p. 1

Those “hurt susceptibilities” were located inside the magazine. The newsroom meetings were becoming political debates in which each article was impugned or supported by both forces. However, while Garcia’s position was explicated in the editorials and reflected in the contents of the magazine, Rosca foundation remained a behind-the-scenes political project intended on taking control of the magazine to accommodate to the philosophy of action research on one side and to the M-19 strategy on the other.

The magazine’s inner rivalry between those who wanted a medium of investigation and analysis and those who wanted a propaganda medium, discarding the neutrality toward the left and its the readers, was expressed in the treatment of the agrarian question. Articles on ANUC in particular conceived the organization as an instrument to forge the revolutionary insurrection alongside the cities’ workers, in order to establish socialism in Colombia in the near future. In issue sixteen, Fals Borda wrote an in-depth article with a headline that seemed out of context, “An agrarian party will be absurd,” expressing his position from the Marxist point of view. Perhaps to avoid a by-line, a privilege reserved for García Márquez, the article had the form of an interview where the questions were tailor-made for the answers. Nevertheless, just in case the interview could be considered as the political view of the whole staff, it had an introduction that qualified the views espoused there:

Continuing the practice of *Alternativa* of opening its pages to diverse points of view, analysis and experiences, we go into this issue with Orlando Fals Borda, who has developed research works in the field about the agrarian situation since 1950 and in the last years has committed himself to a shared analysis with the peasant communities in the departments of the Atlantic coast. In next editions, we will offer other reasoned and fundamental positions

to extend or contradict these preliminary opinions of one of the members of the Editorial Board of the magazine.¹⁰

One typical comment, “The peasant reflects different stages and realities in the Colombian regions in relation to the revolutionary struggle.”¹¹ To the question of whether the peasantry is a revolutionary force, Fals answers: “Yes, and very important. In the Colombian case as in most Third World countries, the peasants are the main force of revolution. But even in cases like this, the proletariat is called upon to play a leading role in the revolutionary process.”¹² This conception surely conflicted with that of García and his group, influenced by Trotsky, which was adamant in that the proletarians had to be the vanguard of the revolution. “Besides, I don’t see why socialism can’t begin to be build now, based on real conditions that will not vary very much due to cultural inertia, and because the class struggle continues under other forms, even after the revolution,” said Fals.¹³ To the question about “the fractioning inside the left that has been causing havoc,” Fals answered

This stage is certainly going to be overcome. It is a problem of political maturity that the struggle will be solved for the benefit of the working classes. I believe that a little bit more honesty and correct working methods could accelerate this process, without the empty agitation that has characterized us. It is important that the revolutionary organizations consolidate themselves and get stronger so they can overcome correctly the anarchic-unionism situation that seems to threaten them.¹⁴

As the magazine kept publishing, tensions kept growing. Santos remembers:

There was an attempt to take over the magazine, to carry a putsch against Bernardo Garcia’s group, accusing them of being manipulating

¹⁰ Alt. 16, 16/9/74, p. 9

¹¹ Ibid. P. 16

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 10

Trotskyites. They tried to recruit me to assume the editorship and endorse that kind of coup d'état against García and Co. I refused, because I thought it was terrible to fall into the same cannibalism we were trying to avoid in the left. Besides, in the discussions I felt more identified with Bernardo's conception than with the others, I shared the orientation, the journalistic criteria we were applying with Bernardo, I worked very well with him.¹⁵

One of the criticisms that Santos and García directed against Fals Borda was the improvised way in which his followers elaborated the sections that was given to them from the beginning, "The voice of the base." In fact, quite often the section was written in a dogmatic style, with little factual information, except when the communications came from the workers or peasants directly. Presently, well-researched notes on several conflicts in the country filled the section, making a real difference with the old style before the breakup. In the section "The Forbidden History," another Fals section located at the end of the magazine, the editors published the second part of an article written by the Belgian scholar Daniel Pécaut, one of the most insightful foreign researchers of the history of the country.

On October 10, 1974, a group of employers addressed a letter to "The Editorial Committee and the Partners"¹⁶ Board, mentioning previous letters and protesting against possible sanctions by the Editorial Committee against two employees, Carlos Vidales and Sebastián Arias, both *Rosca* members accused of promoting conflicts inside the magazine. The letter, signed by nine people, threatened to "adopt legitimate forms of organization and union work" and go to the "revolutionary press" should the firings take place, accusing those in charge of using "employers" methods.

¹⁵E. Santos, personal interview, September 27, 2006

¹⁶ Letter to Editorial Committee and Partner's Board, typewritten. Bogotá, 10/10/74. Personal file.

The letter, and the conflict it revealed, precipitated the final decision that split the magazine and its workers in two opposite and hostile camps. The next day, October 11, during an early and hasty morning meeting, two of the three partners of Sociedad *Alternativa* Ltda. (Society *Alternativa* Ltd.) decided to separate Rosca from the magazine. The proposal introduced by Santos was approved by Alfredo Iriarte, García Márquez' representative, authorized via telegram from London.

They were bent on taking over the magazine at any cost, that García and his team had to go. So we decided to precipitate the crisis, call for a partner's meeting and expel Fals and *La Rosca*. Everybody lobbied Gabo. They had the magazine's infrastructure, the financing with the money they received from foreign foundations for their research. Everything, the desks, the typewriters, the house where we worked was theirs. But we could not continue. We had a tense meeting. Alfredo Iriarte went as García Márquez' representative and by a majority decision we expelled *La Rosca* Foundation from *Alternativa*.¹⁷

The next day, Saturday, as issue 18 of the magazine was ready to go to press with a circulation date of October 14, García and Santos inserted an editorial, unbeknownst to most workers that amazed many in the left and gave satisfaction to others in the right. Under the heading "A necessary information," the editorial announced the separation of Fals and Rosca. It repeated the principles that had inspired *Alternativa* so far, including fostering the unity of the left, which the current crises was undermining.

Another postulate that inspired the creation of *Alternativa*—to critically promote the unity of the left—has demonstrated to be, for obvious reasons, a slower and more complex task. We reiterate, however, the openness of the magazine to the parties and organizations in the left and the intention—

¹⁷ La Junta de Socios de la sociedad "Editorial *Alternativa* Ltda.", Considerando:... Typewritten letter, October 11, 1974. Personal file.

which now will be even more definitive—to contribute with the critical consolidation of the forward forces. That is to say, build on the analysis of the national reality, in an open and sincere discussion of the problems facing the Colombian Revolution and the permanent confrontation of the people’s struggles.

We want to reaffirm in this occasion the belief that *Alternativa* cannot pretend to substitute political revolutionary movements, nor their own organs of expression, and much less to become itself a political groups, which would constitute a clumsy lack of vision in the current situation of the Colombian left.¹⁸

The behind-the-scene struggle involved Bateman and Santos. “Bateman took sides on the debate. And it wasn’t on the side of his friend. When the crises was looming, they met several times, talked about it, analyzed the situation and tried to find a solution.” Santos continued:

Those discussions started from the first issue of *Alternativa* due to the influence and specific weight that M-19 had there. It was there where M-19 and El Flaco made a grave mistake, which was to pressure too much, try to cope and take over the magazine. It was when the first crises developed and I did not go along with that. It was my first fight with Bateman, the breakup, and I said: ‘Flaco, you are contradicting and betraying everything you said about being open.’ The attitude was to get Bernardo García out, which was the most critical on that. At a given moment, El Flaco showed his hegemonic side, M-19 wanted to consolidate more its control of the magazine, and I said no.¹⁹ (2005)

Even though it was not certain that an organic relationship between M-19 and *La Rosca* existed, the magazine fitted perfectly in both organizations’ political schemes. If the political and legal battle had been won by Rosca, most probably *Alternativa* would have ended with M-19 dictating “the line to follow.” The pressure was felt from inside. García remembers Bateman coming around to talk to the staff,

¹⁸ Alt. 18, 14/10/74, p. 1

¹⁹ E. Santos, personal interview, September 27, 2006

joking about that being his paper. Fals acknowledged his relationship with Bateman but only as a friend and a supporter.

However, in the accounts of the inner fight presented in the magazine or in the documents exchanged by both sides, there was no mention of the role of M-19. Later, a document of response to interpretations that began circulating immediately among the staff about the breakup, titled “*Alternativa* cleans itself,”²⁰ stated how Fals tried to take over the magazine and use it to set in motion a new political group. Because the Fals group administered the money and the magazine, the petitions by the group of workers asking for salary adjustment, the complaint of not being paid enough and working too much sounded hollow.

The blow resonated throughout the political spectrum, as the following weeks showed, marking a crushing event for a magazine that had among its objectives to propitiate the union of the fragmented political left.

Then all hell broke loose. Scandal. The people that were with them took over the magazine. We had to leave and start doing the magazine in my apartment, in Bernardo’s apartment, to work with the fingernails, and not to lose our rhythm. It was a scandal and everybody took advantage of that. I remember an editorial in *El Tiempo*, which said something like “God makes them and they divide among themselves. (Santos 2005)

The breakup was widely talked about in the following issues of the magazine. There were two issues 19 with the name *Alternativa*, one made by Rosca under the motto “Daring to fight is beginning to think” and the one made by García and Santos, “Daring to think is beginning to fight.” In the latter Orlando Fals Borda, Carlos Vidales, Sebastián Arias and Vera Castro had disappeared from the masthead. Those remaining were García, Cristina de la Torre, Jorge Restrepo, Héctor Melo, María

²⁰ “*Alternativa*” *se depura*. Typewritten document. Bogotá, October 18, 1974. Personal file.

Teresa de Santos, Jorge Mora and José Vicente Katarraín. Curiously, it was in the *Alternativa* published by Rosca where Santos' name appeared for the first time in the masthead of the magazine as a member of the Editorial Board, with Vidales and Arias as editorial coordinator and managing editor respectively. Both García Márquez and Santos bitterly accused Rosca of using their names without authorization in the magazine.

Issue 19 presented an illustrated cover with President López Michelsen measuring the boobs of a beauty queen against the old walls of Cartagena in the background, and a green banner on a red background in the top right corner that said: “*Alternativa* cleans itself.” Despite having prevailed in the fight to keep the magazine, those who wrote the article realized there had been a disaster.

The publication of *Alternativa* through nine months and the breakup that has taken place are valuable experiences that we should keep analyzing without stopping to carry out the project that gave them birth.

In the development of this whole process, we are the first to recognize the faults and vacillations and the lack of foresight, which we have incurred. But *Alternativa* had to defend itself from a concealed maneuver that seeks to transform a publication at the service of the whole left into an unacceptable organ of a particular group's interests. We believe that criticism and discussion within the left can turn it into a publication that fulfils its role even better.

Beyond the magazine, the breakup also offers an opportunity to analyze certain phenomena that affect the left periodically, always weaken it. We will not exhaust the theme in this issue, but we will begin to touch upon it and we hope to go deeper into it in future editions.²¹

On the other hand, Rosca's *Alternativa*, whose cover was an illustration of a priest with his fist in front, espoused the idea of subordinating journalistic function to a political aim, that of creating “an authentic proletarian publication, at the service of

²¹ Alt. 19, 28/10/74, p. 8

the working classes.” Fals accused the group of not understanding “that journalism, if it doesn’t educate, give directions and organize, is not revolutionary journalism.”²²

Fals’s final analysis considered the situation inside the magazine another instance of class struggle, defining Santos and García as capitalists infatuated with the magazine’s success, while members of Rosca were the true revolutionaries and keepers of the orthodoxy. He complained that the idea of incorporating professional journalists into the magazine was formed inside the bourgeois press, with all the deformations and deviations it entailed, including improving the appearance of the magazine, and using traditional means of distribution. He also made a distinction between the concepts of leftist press, with a dual role as ideological and political-organizational media, and revolutionary press, which came into being once the goal of taking political power, had been achieved.

In the ideological field, it is expected that a magazine assumes the role of facing the dominant ideology and collaborates in its destruction. It must, therefore, denounce it and show the domination mechanisms. In the same field, it gathers the proletariat ideology and the socialist’s ideals to put them in touch with the exploited classes and, specially, workers and peasants. The magazine helps, then to clarify the Colombian process and awakes and develops class consciousness... On the political terrain, we accept the Leninist thesis that the press ‘must serve as a culture and cohesion organ of the actually vanguard classes.’ The magazine will collaborate in the development of popular and revolutionary organizations, putting them in touch with each other, their struggles, and plans with those organized and non-organized that read the magazine.”²³

This analysis left no doubt as to where both sides stood: on one, Fals Borda and his group, effectively wanted to control the magazine to dedicate it to the goals of the revolutionary struggle, among other things, because he and his people most

²² *Alternativa* 19 (Rosca), October 1974. p. 1.

²³ En *Alternativa*. El Desarrollo de la crisis. Typewritten. Bogotá, October 30, 1974. Personal file.

probably considered the current state of Colombian affairs as a “pre-revolutionary situation.” Fals ideas coincided wholly with those of Mattelart, Latin America’s foremost expert of the Leninist theory of the press.

In a revolutionary process, the issue is to make the mass communication media an instrument to which the social practices of the dominated converge. The messages are not imposed from above, but the people itself are the generators and actors of the messages destined to them. The mass communication media thus losses its epiphenomena or transcendental character, by taking away from the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist pole their status as generators and arbiters of culture (1973, p. 97).

On the other side were Santos, García and García Márquez, defending the journalistic aspect of the magazine and refusing to make it into the organ of any political party or movement. In any case, the behind the scenes role of M-19 and Jaime Bateman and his polemic with Santos were never made explicit during this time.

In issue 20, the “Letter to the Reader” was the telegram sent by García Márquez that signaled the final defeat of the Rosca group:

UNWARRANTED LABOR LAWSUIT JOYOUSLY DIVULGED
INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES, CONSTITUTES PERVERSE
MANOUVER TO CONFUSE LATIN AMERICAN LEFT, GIVING
ARGUMENTS FASCIST DICTATORSHIPS AGAINST WHICH I WORK.
THIS PURPOSE WAS MADE EVIDENT WHEN “ROSCA” GROUP
WHOSE SUCULENT FINANCING SEEMS SUSPECT TO ME,
ATTEMPTED INTERNAL MANOUVERS TO IMPOSE IN
“ALTERNATIVA” A DIRECTION GEARED TO PROMOTE DIVISIONS IN
THE LEFT DISORIENT WORKING CLASS, WHICH IS WHY THE
MAJORITY OF PARTNERS DECIDED THEIR RETIREMENT.
NOW “ROSCA” IS GOING TO PUBLISH ANOTHER
DIVISIONIST “ALTERNATIVA” USING MY NAME, WHICH I HASTEN

TO DENY CONVINCED OF THE NECESSARY UNITY OF
COLOMBIA'S LEFT. (All in capital letters in the original)²⁴

The dispute took the form of the “unwarranted labor suit,” García Márquez mentioned, once the internal struggle over the control of the magazine blew open and became a public fight. The telegram was a response to a letter sent to García Márquez—who at the time was working in London with the Russell Tribunal, a public body organized by British philosopher Bertrand Russell to investigate the American intervention in Vietnam—by Rosca’s lawyer, who notified him of a labor lawsuit “with the aim of obtaining the employers acknowledgment of the minimal rights consecrated in the Labor’s Code for the retribution of personal services.”²⁵

It was true that the working conditions inside the magazine had a complete lack of formalities such as no affiliation to the social security system; working up to twelve hours a day, and on weekends, sometimes for only a part-time salary, with no raises and no defined responsibilities. Although the letter mentions the Rosca group as sympathetic to their aspirations, Rosca was the employer the letter was complaining about. Although the letter attributes the irregular labor climate to the ill will of Santos and García Márquez, the latter acting through his representative Alfredo Iriarte, it also explained those circumstances by stating the fact that the employers did so because they had been called nine months before to work for a “revolutionary cause.” The letter from the lawyer came with a communiqué issued by workers and collaborators, underlying causes of the “labor” dispute by accusing the owners and directors of having a capitalist mentality and turning a profit, which the

²⁴ Alt. 20, 11/11/74, p. 1

²⁵ Press release. The workers of *Alternativa* sue their employers. Bogotá, October 21. Typewritten. Personal file.

magazine never did. Had it done so, most probably it would have been up to Rosca to reap the profits.

The message underscored yet another problem of creating a mass publication from the left: financing it. One of the main challenges of the magazine was to become self-sustaining, using, if necessary, cheap labor under the guise of working for a “revolutionary cause.” The story of the magazine, all the way to the end, in fact proved that such a venture was not feasible if it depended on single copies sales and subscriptions alone.

Most of the criticism coming from the Rosca side was answered in issue 20, which closed the polemic with the clearest and most concise statement about the magazine’s role to date. The statement dealt point by point with Fals’ criticism, and in the process configured a primer on the journalistic conception it espoused. The issue was the relationship between the press and the political organizations that worked within it.

It is not about displaying rolls of ideology, nor about applying mechanically to the Colombian stage quotes by Marx, Lenin or Mao on the issue of the press. It is not just about placing this magazine within a definite national and Latin American political juncture, about fixing its role and limitations within the press and the revolutionary process; it is about trying to apply Marxism in a creative way to a specific practice; that of journalists committed to the cause of the exploited.²⁶

In answering potential questions, the magazine framed the polemic into three parts, which went to the heart of the matter: whether only the party press was able to help the working classes; whether journalism done in a professional and specialized way precluded an identification with popular struggles; and whether the leftist press

²⁶ Alt. 20, 11/11/74, p. 5

should avoid commercial channels of distribution and administrative and financial standards. All the questions were answered in the negative.

As for the issue of professionalism, the answer was clear-cut and to the point.

Facing a well-armed dominant class, which monopolizes the mass communication media, cannot be done operating with happy groups which have achieved a 'primitive communism' at its interior. If Orlando Fals insisted that *Alternativa* was an 'experiment and an ideological and political adventure,' the magazine team thought that it had a responsibility already acquired and a commitment too big and unexpected to play with idyllic experiments and tries.²⁷

As for the publishing techniques, *Alternativa* responded that the bourgeoisie did not have a monopoly on them and to think otherwise was just plain "bourgeois populism."²⁸ The last statement made a clear distinction between the whole doctrine of the party press from Lenin on, contradicting some Latin American Marxist theoreticians on the issue (Mattelart 1973, Taufic 1972). The magazine would remain independent—independent from conflicting groups, not from the cause, as García Márquez said later—was going to be done in a professional way by professional journalists and was going to work within the system, with the system's tools, even if its stated goal was to beat that system itself.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the "bourgeois" press did not waste time reporting the troubled state of the magazine. *El Siglo*, the main Conservative paper, called attention in an editorial note to the fact that Santos was a shareholder of *El Tiempo* where he was a "Marxist columnist," and called him a "Chicó guerrilla," Chicó being the wealthiest city neighborhood at the time. The story itself was

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

headlined “*Alternativa* accused of exploiting workers,” with a no-less insidious subhead in the affirmative: “The Extremist Magazine does not Comply with Labor Laws.”²⁹ Other papers such as *El Tiempo* emphasized the labor dispute and the lawsuit against Santos and his group, publishing the complete letter sent by the *La Rosca*’s lawyer, Adalberto Carvajal, to García Márquez in London.³⁰ The daily *El Espectador* published verbatim García Márquez’ cable from London as well as photographs of the covers of Issue nineteen of the two *Alternativas*.³¹

Santos recounted details of the climate at the time:

What was terrible about that first crisis was its effect on the magazine’s image and on its circulation and above all on the preaching of unity that we had been promoting. There was a legal battle to keep the name. We kept the name, they came out with *Alternativa del Pueblo*, the same format but another language, another journalistic concept, they inverted the slogan to show that they were radicals, that they were with the people, and that theirs was the *Alternativa* of the bases, and that we were the bourgeois *Alternativa*. The division generated a trauma inside the left. Many organizations began to speak, some unions in favor, some against. All the PC-ML came in our favor in the accusations against Fals Borda. It was a hard blow for him, because the whole ML in the countryside in the north coast, where the Rosca did their field work, denounced him as an agent of the CIA and of the German and Dutch imperialism.

It was a very bitter experience in that it affected the magazine, which never recovered its circulation. That hurt a lot the credibility among the whole non-militant left. It was terrible for us to give that spectacle, but we had to do it and two *Alternativas* began to appear. I don’t remember how many issues *Alternativa del Pueblo* lasted. Until they gave up. (2005)³²

From issue 20, the tone of the magazine began to change gradually toward a more informative, journalistic content and started to break new ground in some hot topics. The following issues were thick with information and, whether by design or

²⁹ Acusada “*Alternativa*” por Explotar a Trabajadores. *El Siglo*, October 22, 1974. P. 1

³⁰ Crisis en la revista *Alternativa*. *El Tiempo*, October 22, 1974. P. 1

³¹ García Márquez habla sobre las dos “*Alternativas*”. *El Espectador*, October 25, 1974. P. 1

³² *Alternativa del Pueblo* published its last issue, number 38, in August, 1975.

the sheer need to accommodate more material, in many instances the typeface size was reduced. Occasionally the magazine published letters of support from organizations or attacks against Rosca, but gradually the polemic subsided.

García's group took a prominent role as analysts, from a leftist perspective, of the political scene. In issue 22, a feature interpreted the state of the left and its perspectives. In the introduction to the article "Where is the left going?,"³³ the editors promised to open the pages of the magazine to political and union organizations regarding the issue, now that it was clear that the López government wasn't going to deliver for the masses that supported him in the previous election. The article began by acknowledging that the country was not in a pre-revolutionary situation but in a stage in which the current administration was wearing out, just as it had happened at the start of the National Front, in 1958, hence the popular protests and agitation. This momentous acknowledgement contributed to lower the tone of the dogmatic rhetoric implicit in the articles written before the breakup.

Part of the criticism that Santos and García directed against Fals and his group was aimed at the improvised way in which they elaborated the "The voice of the base" and the "Briefs from the base" sections, which were designed to divulge the popular struggles around the country. That improvisation was because most of the information published in the sections came from what they called "correspondents," usually members of the groups involved in the struggles or protests. In fact, quite often the section was written in a dogmatic more than a journalistic style, with little factual information, and full of admonitions of good intentions and principled declarations against capitalist exploitation.

³³ Alt. 22, 9/12/74, p. 12

Gabriel García Márquez in *Alternativa*

The crisis with *La Rosca* precipitated a discussion inside the magazine that led to a change of format to a more conventional 22 cm by 29.5 (11” by 8.5”) size and from a biweekly to a weekly publication a few months later.

The most important change after the breakup was more prominent participation by García Márquez as part of the staff, who contributed to the restatement of the purposes and goals of the magazine for the months ahead. García Márquez had previously promised to become more involved in journalism. Alongside the second installment of the article on Chile in issue two, there was a small note taken from the French paper *Le Nouvelle Observateur* which flatly stated that “Gabriel García Márquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, considered the most important contemporary Latin American writer is, however, about to break with literature.”³⁴ The author, who had become a member of the Russell Tribunal alongside Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Bouvoir, was quoted as saying “Now that I enjoy moral prestige I have to use it. I am not a political man but in Latin America everybody has to be political.” From then on, the article said, the writer’s contact with words would be through journalistic reportages, which was true to a point, for the writer never abandoned his fiction and published several new books in the future.

García Márquez himself presented the reflections that followed the breakup with *La Rosca* in the first full-length interview published in the magazine in issue 29. It followed his decision to make a pause in his fiction writing and announced that he was going to work at least six months of the year on the magazine. The interview was

³⁴ Alt. 2, 1/3/74, p. 19

an occasion for him to tell of his early years, from his childhood in his native Aracataca, to his arrival in Bogotá amid a “lugubrious, sod smelling and non-stop drizzle and the men dressed in black with black hats walking stumblingly in the streets, hanging from the electric tramways’, speaking bullshit in the cafes.”³⁵ His opinions on the landscape of Colombia’s left were not optimistic.

In the face of Lopez’ failure, the answer should be from the left, but it is not. The different groups are stuck in a deaf dialog, separated by a swamp of sectarianism. I believe, according to what we have discussed here, that one of the functions of *Alternativa* could be to oxygenate that swamp to facilitate the agreement between different groups. I believe that we are doing that.³⁶

His points of view on the course the magazine was taking confirmed the idea that by becoming a weekly and changing his format beginning with issue 32, it had completed its first stage. Along with his incorporation on the staff, the change meant from now on a somewhat refined changed strategy from the one it had started with.

I think we agree that we have burned a stage where the magazine was some kind of populist amalgam, a disorderly reflection of all the left. We have burned it because as national press we were very much alone; but now the left press has flourished, the void is being filled amply and now we are not needed with that focus or in that field. I don’t exclude the circulation or printing services we had talked so much about: we agree that the public we have to address from now on are not just in the left, or unionized, but also all the potential left. We have to conquer a new public for socialist ideas.³⁷

There he was, the old patriarch setting the course for the magazine and putting himself on the line, recognizing that the old idea of an homogeneous and revolutionary public had to give way to a more general and flexible characterization

³⁵ Alt. 29, 3/31/75, p. 2

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

of the publication's readers. He also took the opportunity to get himself out of the electoral fray.

I don't have any type of personal political aspirations and if anytime the circumstances try to force me to go over the simple limits of my job as a journalist and writer, I will get off that ship with all honesty and much naturally. I don't have vocation, nor formation, nor decision to go beyond that. I know that there are rumors circulating; but in the field of politics, nobody shall expect nor fear from me anything different or more important, or more heroic, than my work in this magazine.³⁸

Arguably, the most important Latin American writer alive, he had just published his book *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, which definitely cemented his prestige throughout the world after the universal success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Thus, his contributions to the magazine were especially important, in several forms, all of them related to international affairs and issues. Nevertheless, only one of them, the interview with American spy Philip Agee, was completely original material for *Alternativa*.

He had been a founder of the magazine and an active force throughout its existence, always weighing in on account of his enormous standing as a public figure and as a famous writer, and deciding which side would be victorious in the magazine's successive crises. His political views were all implicit in his articles, such as the first one, heralded as an "exclusive in Colombia for *Alternativa*," previously published in *Harper's*. It was an account of the death of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. The story "Chile, the coup and the gringos,"³⁹ was vintage

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Alt. 1, 2/15/74, P. 4

García Márquez, written in the same prose style that made him famous in the literary world.

The story begins with a dinner between three Pentagon generals and four Chilean military in Washington. The article revealed facts unknown to most about Chile's economy, geography and history. As the first socialist republic of the continent, which attempted to nationalize copper and coal it only lasted 13 days, in 1973. The United States already knew that Allende was going to win the elections in 1973, thanks to Plan Camelot, a countrywide survey "to establish in a scientific way the Chilean's degree of political development and social tendencies."⁴⁰

Despite the situation, the *Unidad Popular* achieved an unexpectedly good percentage of votes in the March 1973 elections. Such a menace triggered the final sequence of events that led to September 11 and the death of Salvador Allende at the hands of Chile's armed forces. The last paragraph of the article is a moving homage paid to this man doomed by his principles.

His greatest virtue was the consequence, but destiny gave him the rare and tragic greatness of dying defending at gunpoint the anachronistic puppet of the bourgeois law, defending a Supreme Court of Justice that repudiated him and would legitimate his assassins, defending a miserly Congress that declared him illegitimate but which was to succumb complacently before the will of the usurpers, defending the freedom of the opposition parties that sold their soul to fascism, defending all the mothballed paraphernalia of a shitty system he had proposed to annihilate without firing a shot. The drama took place in Chile, for the Chileans' misfortune, but it will pass into history as something that happened without escape to all men of that time and will remain in our lives forever.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Alt. 2, 1/3/74, p. 27

The most explicit of García Márquez' political views was in a lengthy interview, also reproduced from a foreign publication, Italy's *Il Manifesto*, where he spoke about Latin American and its improbable revolution. Among the merits of the interview were the lucid and sober appreciations of the relationship between literature, politics and journalism.

The truth seems to be that literature, journalism and politics are complimentary, as long as all of them remain at an equal distance from real life. With the advantage, in favor of literature, that it allows us the natural expression of vital sentiments such as compassion and nostalgia, for example, and helps us to better solve the dose of skepticism that comes with life, which feeds from it, and to which pure politicians who are afraid of their hearts don't resign to.⁴²

One Hundred Years of Solitude was a story of despair. It was a cyclical novel, which, despite the rebellious spirit of its protagonists with their own lives and their country's, led at the end to the same place where it started. Even though the novel showed the futility of change, it had a universal acceptance in Europe. Asked about it, García Márquez threw the first jab at Latin American revolutionaries.

Fortunately, I believe that the deepest sense of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not the distrust in change, but the realist exposition that change will not be as immediate, or as easy, or as lyrical as some mystics of the revolution, who don't even know where they are standing on, preach without believing it, and sometimes believing it.⁴³

The fact was that, except for Cuba, there had not been a successful revolution in Latin America. Asked whether there was a need to make an evaluation of the

⁴² Alt. 7, 13/5/74, p. 10

⁴³ Ibid.

armed struggle, García Márquez began an exposition of its political thoughts on the problems plaguing the continent left.

I believe that the most important reflection we have to do now is to recognize that the path to the revolution is blocked and it will remain so for as long as it takes the left to admit it. The most important factor in the blockade, it seems, is that there is a revolutionary way of being formed in some theoretical molds that not always have the same size or the same form as the reality of our countries.⁴⁴

García Márquez recognized his militancy in Movimiento Al Socialismo, MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), to which he had contributed \$10,000 dollars, a substantial amount of money at the time, from a literary price. In his own opinion, MAS was trying to find a popular, wide appeal for the revolutionary movement, rather than just a worker's or worker-peasant's rationale.

No form of struggle can substitute the political base that has to support it. In that sense, and to finish this indigestible speech in which I have been bottled, I believe that the immediate urgency is the development of the revolutionary organizations. The problem of the forms of struggle must be subordinated to the possibility of policies and conduct that stimulate effectively the natural contradictions of our society.⁴⁵

Alternativa's publication of Gabo's interview generated an acute polemic that not even García Márquez expected. The readers, especially leftist militants who did not agree with the writer, reacted by writing to the magazine questioning in one way or another the thoughts of the writer against the reigning dogmatism that characterized the Colombian left at the time. And all of them, in one way or another, proved García Márquez' points.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 12

⁴⁵ Ibid.

5.1 The four principles

It took the magazine 14 months and 31 issues to evolve from a biweekly to a weekly publication and a hard and painful crisis to decant the formula for its next phase. It did so by reaffirming its determination to reach a general public, directly challenging the monopoly that the mainstream media had in the representation of the country's reality, and the need to remain independent and neutral toward the left, as a way to fulfill the goal of contributing to create the conditions for a change in the country.

A careful and detailed analysis of the magazine in its first phase provides a picture as to how the objectives of counter informing; doing investigation, interpretation and analysis; divulging popular struggles; and calling upon the left to talk about its positions as a way to foster an elusive unity, necessarily touched and intersected each other in the contents of the magazine.

Counter informing

Cristina de la Torre, Bernardo Garcia's wife, who was deeply involved in the magazine's creation and development, provided an analysis of the role it played in its David against Goliath struggle with the mainstream-institutional press, at a *Universidad de Antioquia* meeting called to discuss the issue of alternative press, at the end of 1976.

Alternativa is born precisely with that first point on its program, the one that defines the editorial policy of the magazine. It is born counter informing. The first issue of the publication dedicates its cover to the guerrilla. At the time there was a huge campaign going on to repress the peasant masses in Anorí. The headline of that cover is "The counter guerrilla in action." I say that this is a good example of counter information. Remember the volleys of the (mainstream) press and the information it carried on Operation Anorí. It

talked about bandits, about the crimes of the ELN. Therefore, it happened that our research told what was going on. The army turned the zone into a concentration camp. All the peasant population in the region was affected by a brutal anti subversive operation. (1976, p. 69)

De la Torre mentioned the complete monopoly of the mass media by the ruling classes, translated in “control and manipulation” and a “monopoly over people’s consciousness.” (p. 69) This was accomplished by some half a million daily newspapers sold every day, plus dozens of radio stations licensed by the state and the two television networks that were owned and controlled by the government.

There is a great deal of popular struggle in the country, silenced or misrepresented systematically by the big press. It is very rare when the big press has informed even in a twisted or false way what is going on... The silencing of the press is yet another circumstance, which historically forced us to think about the urgency of creating a way out, to express, spread the struggles that alone can guarantee a decent future for the people of this country. (1976)

By definition, *Alternativa* counter informed on topics monopolized by the news operations sympathetic to the government and firmly embedded in the National Front’s power structure. The magazine analyzed and interpreted the press’ coverage of areas such as the political activities of the ruling class, the human rights situation and the cultural landscape from a leftist perspective, in order to offer the readers new ways of looking at the information. In addition, because of the political connections of the staff, particularly those of Enrique Santos and *El Tiempo*, and those of the sympathizers with the magazine, it had access to many sources inside the different power center of government.

The political analysis centered in the upcoming legislative and presidential elections, the first after the 16-year old National Front pact. The first article dedicated to the electoral campaign, in which the three main presidential contenders were children of former presidents, had a memorable lead, borrowed from a European publication (not cited).

In 1945, the father of Álvaro (Gómez) managed to force the resignation of the president of the Republic, who was the father of Alfonso (López). In 1953, the father of Alfonso and the father of María Eugenia (Rojas) deposed the father of Álvaro. In 1957, the father of Álvaro and the father of Alfonso got together to oust the father of María Eugenia. Now Alfonso, Álvaro and María Eugenia are contending to be the next president of Colombia.⁴⁶

The presidential elections were won by López Michelsen, who had been a Liberal dissident and founder of *Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal*, MRL (Liberal Revolutionary Movement), in the early sixties. With close to 3 million votes cast for him, well above the 2 million plus the magazine predicted, he claimed, and made it his slogan, to have a “clear mandate” to govern the country in the next four years. However, despite his prestige and popularity with wide sectors of the country due to his ‘leftist’ past, the López’ period would be one of the most contentious in terms of the growth of popular protests and the repression exercised against them, and *Alternativa* would be an exceptional witness to those four years. Pécaut later analyzed his victory:

The election of Alfonso López Michelsen had a triumphal air. Wide fractions of the middle and popular classes gave their vote to the old MRL boss, with the hope of social and political reforms. Four years later, the disappointment was clear. The Colombian institutions are going through a

⁴⁶ Alt. 4, 1/4 /74, p 10

deep crises and the responsible politicians do not hesitate to talk about moral 'decomposing.' (Pécaut 1976)

The victory of Alfonso López was also the expected defeat of Conservative candidate Álvaro Gómez, and the electoral burial of ANAPO, which after winning the presidential elections four years before, reduced its electoral force by almost 1.000.000 votes. The magazine reminded its readers of a sentence pronounced by López: "I am going to govern with the Constitution in one hand and with the armed hand of the army to have it respected."⁴⁷ From issue two, *Alternativa* began confronting the armed forces, as no other medium had done in the past, with articles were profoundly provocative in content. This was an all-powerful institution, entrusted by the political class with the dirty job of fighting the insurgency and the popular protests through the State of Siege. The military owned the Ministry of Defense and its enormous budget without any control from civilians. The political parties were in no position, not were they willing, to make the military accountable.

Out of 311 seats in both chambers of Congress, Liberals now controlled 179 against 103 for the Conservatives and 29 for the opposition, including 22 for ANAPO. Of those, 25 congressmen controlled media, including radio and television stations and newspapers, 54 were big landowners and cattle ranchers, 25 industrialists, 27 builders and urban landlords, 23 tradesmen, 33 advisors, 20 political caciques and 99 professional politicians. Each of them spent an average \$2,000,000 pesos to get elected to a job that paid \$15,000 pesos a month. Once the president took the oath of office, some people believed López would exercise a new populist approach within the framework of what he called the "clear mandate." The illusion

⁴⁷ Alt. 4, 1/5/74, p. 6

began to disappeared when his choice of ministers, six Liberals, five Conservatives and the minister of defense, was known. In “Cabinet of hope: shock in the henhouse,” the magazine said: “Lopez’s cabinet can only disappoint those who created illusions and did not understand that when he talked about ‘hope’ he meant that of his friends, industry men, big landowners, bankers, big political bosses, etc. He dealt with them and with them he has to share the profits.”⁴⁸

On September 16, López declared an Economic Emergency using Article 122 of the Constitution. This allowed him to govern by decree, bypassing Congress, despite having a comfortable majority on both chambers. He announced that his economic measures would benefit the poorest 50 percent of the population, but his first decree eliminated the subsidy to wheat, automatically increasing the price of bread, an essential foodstuff in poor people’s tables.⁴⁹

His economic policies were intent on reducing inflation by limiting the amount of bills and money in circulation, elevating interest rates, and tightening the supply of credit. They gave more freedom to big insurance companies to invest in other areas of the economy, adding fuel to the rampant speculative frenzy that so many headaches had caused, and would cause the country and the government in the future. Finally, he implemented a tax reform intended to forestall somehow the huge tax evasion of the rich and to redistribute some of the income.

The balance of the 100 days of the government, “100 days of what?” was one of unfulfilled expectations. “The 100 days have expired and three million innocent voters are still waiting. Where, they ask themselves, perplexed, are the great structural

⁴⁸ Alt. 14, 20/8/74, p. 3

⁴⁹ Alt. 17, 30/9/74, p. 2

transformations, where the deep social reforms that the Liberal president was supposed to put in place during this period?”⁵⁰

The evaluation of the 100 days ended with a political admonition to the left.

The stage that began with the López Michelsen government presents favorable junctures for the advancement of the forces of the left in the country. To know how to take advantage of them in the appropriate moments, understanding the limits and dangers in the legal framework the system offers, is a task facing all the movements committed with Colombia’s revolutionary process. In the organized struggles of the people, in the combative unification and mobilization of the oppressed classes, is where consolidates the true alternative to all the “clear mandates” the minority embedded in power can offer.⁵¹

By year’s end, on “The new mask of the National Front,” the magazine concluded that the National Front, instead of ending on August 7, 1974, continued “but is looking for its new mask.”⁵² Under these circumstances, the magazine wondered whether the president was going to finish his term, considering that he still had 40 months to go. A wide-ranging article called “The state of subversion” mentioned popular protests in places as different as Tumaco, Barbosa, (Antioquia), the oil zone of Barrancabermeja, Popayán, Córdoba and Sucre.

The litany of strikes, stoppages, popular uprisings and the guerrilla blows don’t stop there. Those issues related to the alarm of the Minister of Government Cornelio Reyes, are complemented by the list of police commander General García Bohórquez, about mafias, kidnappings, murders, robberies and assaults that ravage the four biggest cities and the maritime ports.⁵³

⁵⁰ Alt. 20, 11/11/74, p. 2

⁵¹ Alt. 20, 11/11/74, 4

⁵² Alt. 23-24, 12/23/74, 11

⁵³ Alt. 30, 4/14/74, 2

The popular protest had a direct consequence on the human rights situation, of paramount importance for the creators of *Alternativa*, founding members of the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. The concept of human rights, violated throughout most of this particularly violent country's history, was relatively new in Colombia's press.

Santos himself wrote the cover article, "The contra guerilla, actions and repercussions,"⁵⁴ a special report based on information accumulated by members of *Alternativa* and the Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners. That information later appeared in *El libro negro de la repression* (1974), (The Black Book of Repression) the most complete digest of the violations of human rights carried out the state and the army. This report signaled the tone of the magazine, its intention to carry information on the guerrilla struggle, from a sympathetic angle, but also on its consequences for the civilian population. Government prohibitions in the war zones included the circulation of any kind of literature, gatherings, and union sessions and even typical dance songs with messages deemed dangerous. In addition, the magazine pointed out, there was a price limit on groceries' purchase, without consideration to the size of families and the existence of helpers. The army also has an absolute control over the distribution of drugs and medicines such as serum against snakebites, distributed exclusively from military posts. Many colonists bitten by snakes died as a result.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Alt. 1, 15/2/74, 12

⁵⁵ Ibid.

On the same vein, under the headline “Yes, there are tortures in Colombia,”⁵⁶ the magazine published an official document from the office of the Attorney General, dated September 6, 1972, which flatly stated that the military tortured prisoners and even give the name of the officer in charge.

Eduardo Umaña Luna, a prominent lawyer and human rights activist, actually knew something few people in the country did. He was at a debate, back in 1966, when Congress passed Decree-Law 3398, with the understanding that this “monstrosity” was only temporary. Nevertheless, the Decree-Law became permanent on December 16, 1968. According to Umaña, it sanctioned the militarization of the country. “Here, at any time, the dominant classes, without using the State of Siege, have the tools to compete with Pinochet.”⁵⁷ Law 48, which applied in cases of mobilization for the national defense, international war or internal commotion, was, according to Umaña, supra national. It allowed the government to declare anybody a deserter even if he was not enlisted, as well as to take over or occupy all property of any citizen, under penalty of 6 months to 5 years of prison for resisting.

The review of human rights during the Pastrana administration, “Four years of Repression. What are you laughing about?,” described how the outgoing president governed 39 of his 48 months under the State of Siege, permanent martial law and the suspension of fundamental democratic liberties. The article ends with a detailed year-by-year chronology of the main events related to the violation of human rights in the country from 1970 to 1974, compiled by the Committee for the Protection of Political Prisoners. It details a total of 85 instances including massacres and murders of Indians

⁵⁶ Ibid. 8

⁵⁷ Alt. 2, 1/3/74, 2

and popular leaders, land evictions, prohibitions for popular mobilizations, closings and invasions of universities and murder of students by the army, tortures and disappearances, war tribunals, and even a prohibition to sing for a popular Argentinean songwriter's (Piero) in Bogotá. According to *Alternativa*, during this period the "crime of opinion" was established in June, 1971.⁵⁸

During the López administration, instructions given by the minister of government to local provincial and local authorities all over the country to strictly apply the law "without waiting for judicial proceedings"⁵⁹ to land invaders, meaning mostly peasants and Indians, resulted in a renewed wave of repression was unleashed in many places. Dozens of peasants were jailed, beaten or murdered by paramilitary mercenaries, the police and the army, according to detailed information sent to *Alternativa* by "correspondents" in the field.

The murder of Indians in Colombia, at the hands of big landowners bent on taking their land, or by colonizers trying to encroach in their territories, was a violent constant in the history of the country. Political boss and big landowner Víctor Mosquera Chauz, a Liberal politician who controlled many votes in the Cauca department, was known as the main instigator of the violence against Indians. This man, who later became President Designate and ambassador to Washington, had been stealing Indian reservation lands since 1944. Mosquera Chauz did get the army to intervene in 1974 to root out his adversaries whom he denounced as subversive and communists. Two thousand soldiers cordoned off the Indian reservation but withdrew when they found nothing. Then the murders began. Two leaders of the CRIC, the

⁵⁸ Alt. 11, 8/7/74, p. 17

⁵⁹ Alt. 17, 30/9/74, p. 14

organization opposing the Liberal boss, were assassinated. Meanwhile, from the capital, the president and his party sent messages supporting the man who more than anybody else was responsible for generating the climate leading to the protests and resistance from the Indian tribes.

The culture was represented in the country by nationwide events that supposedly captured the identity and idiosyncrasy of national character as reported by the mainstream press, included sports like the National Soccer Championship, the National Cycling Tour, competition boxing, the National Beauty Pageant, as well as media expressions such as the conspicuously mediocre television programming. In all these cases, irreverent *Alternativa* did its best to show the true nature of the events by showing the commercial business behind the myths and by getting the protagonists such as the players, the cyclists, the queens, to talk about their experiences.

A good example was The Colombia Bicycle Tour, an almost mythical race that captured the attention of the country because it was broadcast live from the road by the competing radio networks. Besides being a competition, the race was also a two to three-week sound geographical tour, narrated with passion and flair by some of the best voices the country ever had. Cyclists representing departments and regions ran day after day through winding, sometimes unpaved, roads, going up steep mountains and down again. The tour grew from its beginnings in 1950 to become a fundamental part of popular consciousness. Most riders were humble people, but also excellent sportsmen and some were the few authentic heroes of the popular classes.

At the risk of spoiling the party, *Alternativa* revealed another facet of the competition involving big sponsors who treated their “aces” to good hotels, with

specialized medical personnel, custom made bicycles, first-rate implements, technical advisors and first rate companions. “These teams were made of the best riders and were protected by the secret activity of the entrepreneurs who bribed, conspired, and bought consciences so their ‘product’ could get first to the finish line.”⁶⁰ In the early 1970s, the Tour became a sponsors’ event, and rather than representing departments (states) as had happened before, contestant teams were now named after brands. As an example of the situation involving cycling, *Alternativa* mentioned several racers, among them one called Siabato.

A mediocre rider. He managed to pass the tests and obtained sponsorships by agreements with the entrepreneurs. But he really did not compete. When a stage started, Siabato went ahead in full and through several kilometers, he remained ahead forcing the broadcasters to mention his name and that of his sponsor. As the stage advanced, this leading racer was overtaken by other racers and he invariably ended in the last places. The history was the same, every day, in each stage. No. Siabato did not compete. He just won some pesos by announcing some products.⁶¹

On issue 18, precisely when the crises inside the magazine blew open, the magazine came out with a cover in which, over a blue background and looking out from inside a drawn television screen, well-known actor Pepe Sánchez uttered a memorable sentence: “TV is the system’s most dangerous weapon.”⁶²

Besides Sánchez, other artists interviewed included Julio César Luna, an Argentinean leading man living in Colombia, Rebeca López and Franky Linero. That such well-known and famous icons dared to speak against the pervasive influence of

⁶⁰ Alt. 7, 13/5/74, p. 19

⁶¹ Alt. 8, 27/5/74, 3

⁶² Alt. 18, 14/10/74.

television, in a clear and unambiguous terms and from a progressive, if not leftist perspective, was sort of scandalous. The magazine said:

The TV is an alienation vehicle for the people. It drives them away from reality. It distorts the mentality of the poor classes by creating false problems that had nothing to do with everyday difficulties: hunger, sickness, unemployment. TV's fictitious realities condition the behavior and the way the people think to the soap opera's heroes. It is the most dangerous and unfortunate weapon a system can have: it distracts people from its reality. The TV fulfils that mission.⁶³

Studies and investigations on the nation's reality

Investigative journalism was practically unknown in Colombia when *Alternativa* came out. Either by design or by sheer incompetence, the mainstream press very rarely dared to show the economic ties of the political class, the tight background of companies' networks and connections, and the rampant corruption that plagued the country, now fueled by drug trafficking, an activity treated in a systematic way for the first time in the pages of the magazine. The only investigative analysis and interpretation came in specialized publications of academic or governmental nature, such as the one García had edited at Dane. Otherwise the general public never had access to an inside view of how the State was controlled by an oligarchic class which held all the strings of power.

Investigative reports on the economy became a hallmark of *Alternativa*, based on the in-depth knowledge that García and his team brought with them to the magazine. They let the readers into a situation otherwise not known through the mainstream press, with the added pedagogical objective of giving popular

⁶³ Alt. 18, 14/10/74, P.7

organizations and activists enough elements to judge the country's state of affairs and act accordingly.

The studies and investigations on the nation's reality were concentrated on the country's economy, which was going through a period of runaway inflation that ate the workers' salaries, putting a lot of pressure on the government. There were also special reports on the capitalists, their interests and connections, revealing a network of conglomerates and monopolies, from agribusiness and cattle ranchers to industrialists, financiers and bankers. Another important issues were the examination of the country's national resources and the rampant corruption in many spheres of the economy.

"The high cost of living, a people besieged,"⁶⁴ analyzed the economic situation of the country, explaining the 30 percent-plus inflation and the consequences of the rise in the cost of living for the population. "In the stores and supermarkets in our country you feel the same anguish. People ask themselves timidly for the value of things and return them to the shelves. Sometimes, there are loud protests; but more frequently, there is resignation."⁶⁵ The magazine showed how the considerable resources of the central bank, the Bank of the Republic, were spread generously among the different actors in the economy, agribusiness, banking industry and finances, represented in the boards that determined how the money was lent.⁶⁶ At the other end, the costs of such largesse fall upon the working people affected by the runaway inflation fueled by the monetary expansion, as noted by several critics of the government, including noted economist and advisor Lauchlin Currie.

⁶⁴ Alt. 2, 3/1/74, p. 4

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Alt. 3, 16/3/74, p. 10

According to the magazine's interpretation, the government provoked inflation in order to keep salaries low and channel the profits to the rich through the new economic stabilization policy. Using official figures, the article "A two-stage bomb"⁶⁷ outlined the loss of the buying capacity of the peso in percentages from 1954 to 1973. In 1973 alone, salaries lost a record 25 percent of their power to buy goods. According to the magazine's analysis, the two sides of the scissors the government was using were recession with unemployment to contain inflation and the cost of living; and inflation to stimulate production with better prices.

To wit, these are the system's two most solicited and scientific remedies: if the cost of living of the working classes is not punished so to 'stimulate' the capital, then it resorts to recession and unemployment to contain the inflationary 'excess.' In occasions such as this, it can resort to both.⁶⁸

It was now clear for everybody that the government measures had not reduced the cost of living and working people was going to see another 30 percent inflation rate. The end of year (1974) analysis of the country's economic situation determined that the economic miracles promised by the López administration had become mirages⁶⁹ with the working classes still suffering from the rise in prices of essential goods, the largest in recent history, resulting in the fall of the real acquisition power of salaries, all in a situation of high unemployment.

By March, almost one year after López's ascension to power, the economic situation was confusing at best. While the president affirmed that there was no crisis, his minister of labor talked about the alarming rate of unemployment and the

⁶⁷ Alt. 15, 2/9/74, p. 9

⁶⁸ Alt. 21, 25/11/74, p.5

⁶⁹ Alt. 23-24, 23/12/74, p. 28

spokesperson for the retail traders talked about the fall in sales due to the lack of purchasing power. It was true that there was recession in textiles, automobiles and construction; in the latter case, the recent boom had elevated the costs of land and constructions materials, making it almost impossible for a middle class worker to buy a house. The inflation, according to *Alternativa*'s interpretation, was created by the State in order to finance UPAC, the indexing credit mechanism by which people could buy housing. In addition, while there was an "excessive" capital accumulation, the money remained safely locked in the bank vaults, waiting for better times for investors.⁷⁰

Most articles on the country's economy as well as the reports on businesspeople and groups were coupled with stories on popular organizations or the people's struggles, like those opposed to the exploitation of natural resources centered in the towns of Barrancabermeja and Condoto and the region of Catatumbo, among others. Other stories dealt with strikes and mobilizations in companies and banks, owned by those capitalists chronicled in the magazine

Respectable industry and company men, some of whom were also professional politicians, kept showing up regularly on the magazine's pages, associated with the properties they controlled.

The close interbreeding between politicians and powerful economic interests in the country was exemplified by the powerful Santodomingo group, which controlled the beer industry, with close links to the Michelsen and López families, going back three generations. It was a marriage between the financial oligarchy and political power. In a sidebar, an info graphic showed a detailed genealogical and

⁷⁰ Alt. 29, 24/3/75, p.21

financial family tree, showing the enormous ramifications of its activities in the Colombian economy.⁷¹ “How does López’s cousin handle his millions,”⁷² presented an impressive picture of the group, with detailed figures as to how the shares of the holdings company Colinsa, S.A. were distributed among which members of the family, and the number and value of shares of the holding in 40 other companies. They included the country’s main airline, the main beer companies, one of the biggest banks as well as investments in cement, tobacco, finances and insurance, media, fertilizers and petrochemicals, among others. The cozy relationship between the group and the government was revealed in “Bavaria: interlinings of a raise,”⁷³ showing how the government’s permission to rise price of beer gave the conglomerate an extra income of three times its capital.

Sugar magnate Alvaro H. Caicedo and his family also deserved special attention in the pages of *Alternativa*. In “The millionaire’s freedom of the press,” the magazine reproduced the instructions given by Caicedo to journalists working at his paper *Occidente*. The list 29 points, which *Alternativa* made clear was not a joke, was a telling example of how some of the owners of the media understood freedom of the press in the country.

1. Not to talk against the Catholic Church, Apostolic and Roman.
2. Not to talk against his Holiness the Pope.
3. Not to talk against Religious Institutions.
4. Not to talk against Religious Communities, male or female.
5. Not to talk against charity institutions.
6. Not to talk against armed Institutions.
7. Not to talk against the Judicial Power.
8. Not to talk against the presidential Institution.

⁷¹ Alt. 16, 16/9/74, p. 16.

⁷² Alt. 17, 30/9/74, p. 10

⁷³ Alt. 30, 14/4/74, p. 5

9. Not to talk against the Rightful State.
10. Not to talk against the Legislative Power.
11. Not to talk against Pious Institutions.
12. Not to talk against Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, and Prelates of the Catholic Church.
13. Not to talk against the Legitimately Constituted Authority.
14. Not to talk against the Constitutional Government.
15. Not to talk against the repressive forces of the State that defends the society.
16. Not to defend mafias or burglars or kidnappers or extortionists.
17. Not to talk against the good willing institutions of public service.
18. Not to defend bad-smelling and unemployed hippies.
19. Not to defend drug addicts.
20. Not to defend troublesome students.
21. Not to defend subversive or guerrilla elements.
22. Not to defend the urban networks that support the guerilla.
23. Not to defend false priests, such as apostates or guerrilla priests.
24. Not to defend saloon guerrillas, or perfumed revolutionaries.
25. Not to defend homosexuals, sexual perverts or pimps.
26. Not to defend prostitution companies and vice.
27. Not to defend professional pornographers.
28. Not to talk against private property or free enterprise.
29. And, in one word, to defend the good and sane Christian customs against anarchy and chaos, that so many seek to preach in order to destroy the judicial institutions and the moral bases of the western civilization.⁷⁴

As it happened with most Colombian governments in the past, Lopez's was overly generous when it came to negotiating the country's natural resources, as with the new laws that applied to natural gas in Guajira department. The topic of oil was well-known to García, who along with Jorge Villegas, an early founder of the magazine, had researched and written books and articles on it. They included allowing foreign companies to repatriate all the profits resulting from the exploitation of the natural gas in the department, a modification demanded by the multinational corporations. The Lopez administration policy consisted mainly in changing the name from concessions to association contracts, without any fundamental changes.

⁷⁴ Alt. 6, 1/5/74, p. 11

The absurd concessions by this regime give foreign corporations part of the national territory to explore and exploit the oil, with no state participation and within periods of no less than 30 years. These concessions have lent themselves to the most obscure manipulations by international consortia. Currently, there are 109 of those contracts in force that cover a total of five million hectares of the national territory. Other 550 proposed concessions will become association contracts, according to government plans.⁷⁵

The issue of oil was a tricky one. Any rise in the price of gasoline hit the working people hard in the form of increased transportation costs and fueling inflation and the high cost of living. For years foreign corporations had benefited from a price scale whereby they sold to the government the oil extracted from Colombian fields destined for internal refining and consumption at prices higher than those of the international markets. The new international situation led to rethinking the price scale. The oil companies then began to argue about the scarcity of oil to pressure for the renegotiation of prices with the government. Those companies held under control enormous extensions of land under concession, which they were allowed to keep by perforating one or two wells a year.

In this way, behind the announced modification to the prices of oil, clearly the interests of foreign companies will be the great beneficiaries. The government has not even announced, after those price modifications, tax measures to collect part of the results of the activities, which will remain at the hands of foreign exploiters indefinitely. The government has limited itself to repeat the same arguments that the companies have introduced to justify the rises. Nor has the government been clear in announcing if the rises will be accompanied by any modification of the chaotic system of subsidies to automotive transportation, which privileges mainly private transportation.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Alt. 20, 11/11/74, p. 8

⁷⁶ Alt. 28, 3/10/75, p. 17

As for corruption, in “The Empire of the seesaw” *Alternativa* quoted former president Alberto Lleras, a stalwart of the system about “our present condition of a country corrupt to the bone.”⁷⁷ The picture was not pretty.

In Colombia, administrative corruption today encompasses a total action field. From the small ‘tip’ in police roadblocks and transit offices, to the multimillion contracts in big companies; from the poorest commissary, to the luxurious offices of the ministries of de-centralized institutes. In the construction of public works, in awarding bidding contracts, in official contracts, there is always the unmentioned percentage: ‘so much for you, so much for me.’ Monuments to the seesaw are everywhere in every corner of the country, in broken bridges, unfinished roads, half made buildings...⁷⁸

Drug trafficking in Colombia was already in full swing. The magazine gave a first rundown of several cases: a Colombian Vice-consul was caught with 25 kilos of cocaine in New York, jumped bail and lived comfortably in Cali, Colombia, where the president refused to extradite him despite a favorable ruling by the Supreme Court; a police lieutenant and several patrolmen were linked to cocaine trafficking in Barranquilla; the disappearance of confiscated illegal drugs throughout 1971, valued in 600 million pesos; the head of DAS, akin to the FBI in the United States, caught with 19 kilos of cocaine in Leticia (Amazonas territory); the F-2 (police intelligence) and DAS agents accusing each other of covering several drug trafficking cases; the 48 secret agents fired in Antioquia for drug trafficking and the director of DAS in that department implicated in a contraband case worth millions of pesos.

The list was a brief sample of some cases of corruption published by the press (*El Tiempo, El Espectador, El Periódico*). It represented a minimal portion of those

⁷⁷ Alt. 12, 22/7/74, p. 2

⁷⁸ Ibid.

reported which, in turn, was an insignificant percentage of all the corrupt deals taking place every day and never brought to light.

The unstoppable and rampant corruption in the country created a de facto parallel economy. An open letter from Medellín Chamber of Commerce to the government, said “immorality has invaded all the sectors of Colombia’s economy.”⁷⁹ Other members of the business class complained about the great influx of the so-called “black dollars,” as a result of illicit activities such as drug trafficking and contraband of illegally importing goods and exporting foodstuffs to nearby countries, among many other things.

In “Crime and mafia in Colombia, a system within the system,” *Alternativa* presented the most comprehensive picture of the metastasis of the corruption cancer invading the political and economic system.

The growing consumption of cocaine in United States, along with the surge of South America as the new international route to introduce heroic drugs of diverse types into that country, are elements that have contributed to make Colombia an important point of refining and processing cocaine to the North American market. This besides ‘natural’ advantages such as an adequate weather for cultivation, hundreds of clandestine landing strips, facilities to install laboratories, a high unemployment index, administrative corruption, etc. And, of course, a factor of prime importance, the multimillionaire dimensions of the business and the powerful padrinos that sustain it from above.⁸⁰

Besides drugs there were many other activities reported such as contraband, a business in which many congressmen, especially from the Caribbean coast, had direct knowledge and participation.

⁷⁹ Alt. 27, 24/2/74, p. 2

⁸⁰ Alt. 27, 24/2/74, p. 2

The voice of the people's struggles

Until the apparition of *Alternativa*, the struggles of the poor people of Colombia had been ignored or presented as a challenge to the government and the State, often as cases of public disturbance, and always from the point of view of the authorities and the companies' owners. There was no news about the struggle of the peasants in the countryside to regain their land or not to have it taken from them or about the mistreatment of Indians at the hands of landowners. Occasionally, the protest of urban dwellers in cases such as the fight against the construction of a highway in southeastern Bogotá made it into the news, mostly because it broke the routine and sometimes the protesters confronted the police. Perhaps the most conspicuous were the students, whose protests often turned violent, but without a real explanation as to why they were confronting the government. Papers such as *El Tiempo*, had a virtual veto on news about workers' strikes, or anything that looked like organized opposition to the Liberal government for that matter, especially coming from the left.

By informing on the people's movements across the country, from factories to neighborhoods, from the countryside to the university campuses, *Alternativa* showed for the first time the true nature of Colombia's class society. Where there had been isolated fights with little or no consequence, now there were movements that showed patterns of what Marxists called class-consciousness, previously unknown to most. So even without pretending to be an organizer for any particular political group on the left, *Alternativa* was in fact an organizer for the whole of the working class, the peasants and the students, inasmuch as it revealed the existence of a common ground for their protests.

Although by necessity and context, the struggles had a political tinge, they were mostly vindictive in nature for workers, peasants, Colombian Indians and students. From the beginning, the voices of popular struggles were concentrated in two sections: “Briefs of the Base,” and “The Voice of the Base,” both handled by Rosca, which had done field work for years in the countryside and among popular organizations. There was a tacit agreement among the partners of *Alternativa* to leave these sections to Fals and his group, and in general, the coverage of the peasants’ movement in the country such as ANUC.

Event though unionized Colombian workers were in a minority, most of the time it was up to the unions to lead the worker’s struggles. However, the divided union movement, in the context of the political situation in the country, was in crisis. During the four-year presidency of Pastrana, it suffered the rigors of a repressive state policy that went beyond the curtailment of the rights of collective negotiation, union organization and stability for state employees established during the Lleras administration. Pastrana picked up those innovations and made them wider, exhausting the most varied forms of repression against the working class.⁸¹

While about 80 percent of the workers did not belong to unions, an immense army of the unemployed contributed to reduce the negotiating capacity of the working class, and the government knew that, as shown by a confidential memo by the government’s National Planning Institute. The government’s policy was to negotiate through a tri-party commission (employers, employees, and State), aiming to avoid unwanted social explosions and insurrection.

⁸¹ Alt. 12, 22/7/74, p. 18

In the negotiation with the unions on the theme of salaries, the government unilaterally decided to revise the minimum wage in an effort to control the growing unrest caused by the accelerated inflation and the loss of purchasing power of the worker's paychecks. At a time when close to 600 unions affiliated with the labor federations were about to begin negotiations with their employers, not to mention many independent unions, *Alternativa* asked six union leaders their opinions on whether the legal minimum wage adjustment did justice to the Colombian worker, how many of their affiliates were close to negotiating and whether there was any difference between a Liberal boss and a Conservative. This was the first time the unions, through their authorized spokespersons, had the opportunity to answer questions in a mass circulation publication. It was an unprecedented opening.

By far the hardest issue for the unions, besides their fight against the government and the bosses, was how to face these obstacles united. Another paramount question was how to define the relationship between unionism and politics. Both pro-government unions declared their independence from the parties but reserved themselves the right to work with them, while the CSTC recognized openly its allegiance to the Communist Party. The social democrat union spokesperson summarized the matter when he said:

It is an error to divorce politics from unionism. Unionism and politics are two intimately united aspects of the working class' action. However, partisanship does not have anything to do with unionism. The union movement generates its own political dynamics.⁸²

⁸² Alt. 2, 1/3/74, p. 16

In Colombia's leftist lore, one of the accusations that militants hurled at each other was that of "anarchic-unionism," meaning the misleading idea that unions could turn themselves into political parties.

At a plenary meeting in February, 1974, 432 delegates from 155 unions of government workers analyzed the laws that affected them as part of the government offensive to weaken their legitimate rights through the previous years, when under the power of the State of Siege, issued decree after decree weakening their rights. The right to strike was suppressed for teachers and bank and telecommunications employees working for the government, among others. Others had it limited to 40 days, after which mandatory arbitration tribunals decided on the workers' petitions, with no appeal afterwards. Under the economic emergency, any movement deemed to take place at a strategic sector for the country's economy was declared illegal.⁸³ The distinction between "official workers" and "public employees," was a capricious difference used at their employee's discretion, stripping the latter of most of their union rights as it had happened with more than 60 unions. The union gathering called for a week of protests in March, ending with a big demonstration on March 22, in preparation for a national strike sometime in the following months.

The people's protest often times took the form of civic strikes, a generalized protest encompassing either a town, a whole department, and in some instances as in 1977, the whole country. Mostly unions and civic organizations with the occasional participation of left-wing parties and groups usually coordinated civic strikes. It was during the administrations of López and his successor, Turbay, that civic strikes

⁸³ Alt. 3, 16/3/74, p. 27

became the most important tool of the so-called popular forces against decidedly unpopular governments.

The article “The great struggles are forthcoming,” made a thorough analysis of the agitation in the country due to increasing popular protests, and what they meant for the political left.

Framed or not by an organization, led or not by political groups, different ‘popular movements’ have shaken the Colombian society in 1974. A quick look puts in evidence how they have been determined by the pre-electoral juncture and the change of government. What it says is that the ‘hope’ of the Liberal solution, the system capacity to use demagogic or populist methods, and the availability of wide non-organized sectors to mobilize around immediate interests, still constitutes a challenge for the Colombian left.⁸⁴

The real tragedy for the left was that in a situation of widespread agitation and mobilization, the political organizations were unable to channel and organize the unrest in a movement really threatening the status quo and representing a step ahead in the direction of their ultimate goal, a socialist revolution. The magazine said:

The general landscape delineated here shows how the popular movements lacking a proletarian political direction are depending on the political path drawn by the interest of those in power. That is how we understand the political debate that is taking place in the owners’ guilds and in the left’s political groups.

But at the end of the year, this landscape has cleared. The expectations of an agrarian reform, massive salaries adjustments, the three-party commission, union strengthening, etc., have vanished. There is no room for vacillations anymore. The rise in the cost of living has burned all the worker’s conquests, the consolidation of the big landowners and countryside capitalists is on the march, and with the foreign loan of one billion dollars (\$30,000 million pesos) that Congress just authorized, López will try to contain the popular struggles by putting in march his SET (Spanish initials for Health, Education, Shelter) policies. The positions are set for the battle of 75.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Alt. 23-24, 23/12/74, p. 20

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 22

The panorama for the peasants' movement, the agrarian question, and ANUC was also agitated. Agrarian reform, an aspiration in the minds of hundreds of thousands of peasants hard hit by the land grabbing of La Violencia, was all but dead. It was killed in a pact between big landowners, agribusiness and the Pastrana government. The best lands of the country were already in the hands of agribusiness companies and cattle ranchers, used to cultivate crops for export and for cattle farming, the latter an activity whose contribution to the economy in terms of labor creation was insignificant.

The candidates from the main parties, Liberal's López and Conservative's Gómez, according to *Alternativa*, "committed themselves to the big landowners interests, 'distanced' themselves, which only hid their inability to propose solutions to a social and political phenomena that completely escapes their control."⁸⁶ By then, just a few weeks before his departure, Pastrana had made a mockery of the promise made four years ago of an integral agrarian reform. In fact, the Pastrana government not only undid what his predecessor Carlos Lleras had done, but any pretense of an agrarian reform was reduced to politicians and government's demagogic rhetoric.

These new policies, which favored the concentration of the best lands in fewer hands, explained the explosive situation in the countryside. With each passing day, there were fewer proprietors and more salaried pawns, about a million, out of a population of 14 million people. For them, the alternatives were to go to the cities to provide cheap labor for the booming construction industry, or to go to fringe lands closer to the jungle to colonize, or to submit to the conditions set by the big

⁸⁶ Alt. 3, 3/16/31, p. 6

landowners and the government under close vigilance by the police and the armed forces.

ANUC's First Peasant Mandate, "a political-ideological and action instrument for the Colombian peasantry," issued on August 22, 1971, outlined the policies of the organized peasant class. ANUC began to express in an increasingly direct way the objective interests of the peasantry and to give a new dynamic to the class struggle in the countryside, pitting a minority of 14,000 big landowners, which controlled some 11 million hectares, against 1.5 million peasant families, tenants and small plot owners.

Along with the peasant's growing organization and combativeness, came the official repression of the movement manifested in the cancellation of the legal status of departmental associations and attempts to divide the movement by offering incentives. The police and the armed forces responded against the peasant's actions alongside bands of hired guns employed by big landowners against unarmed laborers. ANUC denounced a systematic campaign of murders of peasant leaders, massive lockups, and tortures of peasants in at least 10 departments. Finally, the government set up a parallel organization in an attempt to find a friendly and willing interlocutor.

In issue one, the "Voice of the Base" section, "The peasant in the struggle path," summarized the results of ANUC's Tenth National Board Meeting, a gathering of 3,000 peasants in the city of Popayán, held from January 19-26.⁸⁷ In seven points the meeting characterized the "class character of the state's agrarian policy," with a government accused of fortifying the big landed states and of "trying to establish again a system of exploitation that had been abolished centuries ago by the Spanish

⁸⁷ Alt. 1, 2/15/74, p. 20

Crown”; of channeling credit toward the big landowners and toward mechanized agriculture; of leaving the marketing of agricultural products to big capital; of being responsible for the rise in the costs of production in the countryside; of the ineffectiveness of INCORA, the state entity in charge of agrarian reform; of giving the exploitation of natural resources to foreign interests; and of increasing the repression against the peasants.

It was an optimistic moment for the movement, a new peak for independent peasant organizations, with the gradual recovery of regional directorates’ control, the growing struggles to recover land, the repercussions of the great mobilizations of the previous months, and the educational work through courses and training.

At the time, ANUC defined itself as “a wide and mass organization that groups indiscriminately in its fold all day laborers, unskilled laborers, farm hands, tenant farmers, small and medium owners and Indians.”⁸⁸ This definition left out the political aspect of the organization in favor of its vindicative character.

Peasants’ struggles in several parts of the country were hardly known to anybody. It was like another world in which actions by government forces allied with the big landowners attacked directly a struggling and overwhelmingly poor section of the population. In the Cesar department, three peasants and two policemen on the landowner’s payroll died as a results of actions against peasants who had invaded lands. In the Sucre department, tired of waiting for the government to give them the land promised years before, peasants had occupied 28 haciendas. The magazine chronicled presumably a small percentage of instances in which peasants invaded or were expelled from the lands and sometimes even jailed or killed.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 21

By the time the López government took over, ANUC was preparing its Third National Congress, which some 15,000 people were expected to attend, to be held on August 31. The peasant movement expected to set its policies and priorities against a president invested with a “Clear Mandate” and with a populist reputation. In an interview with the Executive Committee of ANUC in *Alternativa*, the leaders laid out their class struggle conceptions and ideas in what was possibly the clearest article on the agrarian question published in the magazine thus far. They explained how this situation responded to inner and outer circumstances that, among other things, prevented the country from being self-sufficient in many crops and criticized the government’s plans to set up agro-industrial enterprises as a way “to legalize archaic and cave like relationships like servitude.”⁸⁹

The agenda for the Third Congress, published in issue 14 of *Alternativa*, was an all-encompassing and ambitious review of the agrarian question and its context, divided in three great themes: 1. The agrarian problem; 2. Analysis of the peasant movement; 3. Analysis of the worker’s movement and other popular segments. ANUC’s intention went beyond just seeking benefits for its members. From a political standpoint they saw themselves as the peasant’s wing of the often glorified workers-peasants union in the quest for a revolution. The themes of point one, for example, included land ownership; credit, mortgages, interests, evictions, indebtedness and its causes; marketing problems for crops and price speculation in the countryside; technical assistance and costs of raw materials; national and foreign monopolies in the tobacco trade; settlers’ problems and the situation in the borders

⁸⁹ Alt. 14, 20/8/74, p. 16

with neighboring countries; national resources, logging, hunting, fishing, parks, mining, floods, erosion; community and cooperative enterprises dependent on the State; poor artisans, intermediaries and lack of resources.⁹⁰

The Congress produced a document “From the peasants to the president,” a petition list with their grievances. They asked for land to be given to landless peasants and timely credit through the Association’s organisms. On the marketing question, it asked IDEMA to buy the products of small and medium farmers. It stated that INDERENA, another government entity in charge of technical assistance, was acting as a police organization to repress peasants, colonists and Indians all through the country; that the National Parks were created to evict thousands of peasants, colonists and Indians. As for the legal framework, members expressed their disagreement with what was left of the agrarian reform legislation and with a new law proposed in Congress regulating the relationship between farm tenants and the owner of the land. As for the repression, they denounced the murders, tortures and jailing through the agents of the state such as the police, the army and other entities, which were supposed to protect the life, honor and property of Colombian citizens. “We strongly reject the versions by landowners and reactionaries, capitalists, politicians and the yellow press who say that peasants do not need land nor should it be given to us because we are not able to produce and develop Colombia’s countryside.”⁹¹

The president talked to the peasants after the Congress about their petitions. “According to the news, the president was cordial with the peasants and after promising them a speedy and effective solution to their problems, he dared to confess

⁹⁰ Alt. 14, 20/8/74, p. 26

⁹¹ Ibid.

his surprise at the wide knowledge that the peasant leaders had of the national reality and of the problems in the countryside.”⁹² As expected, none of the problems were solved or the petitions answered, as coverage by the magazine of the peasant movement showed in the years ahead. Meanwhile, the minister of government gave strict instructions to governors, mayors, intendants and commissioners to strictly enforce the law as they saw fit with the used of police and the military.

An article in *Alternativa*'s issue 26 synthesized the counterpart to the peasant's movement, the *Sociedad Colombiana de Agricultores* SAC (Colombian Agricultural Society, “a social club, created to talk about their world of privileges, fashioning national policy the same way they managed their haciendas.”⁹³ Growers of coffee, the country's main crop and export product; sugar-cane growers of Valle del Cauca; rice and cotton growers; and most importantly, cattle ranchers, fell under the SAC umbrella comprising agribusiness and countryside capitalists, who dictated the country's agricultural policy from their high places in government. This policy invariable put at their disposition the resources of the State, including credit, price control and manipulation, marketing and export agreements, not to mention the police and the army to control the peasant's unrest. What really united the agricultural guilds was their fight against agrarian reform.

⁹² Alt. 17, 9/17/74, p. 14

⁹³ Alt. 26, 2/10/75, p. 24

The students' movement was quite strong in the cities, fed by millions of immigrants from the countryside, and heavily influenced by the political left, which controlled it and used it as its main recruiting ground.

A brief note in "The Voice of the Base" section on issue five summarized how Alfonso López, who had just won the elections, found the universities peaceful under a straight jacket. The fighting program of the country's students was the so-called Minimum Program of Colombian Students, which sought participation in academic and administrative decisions. The students also sought to end foreign intervention and financing, especially from American foundations, which tended to dictate academic and research priorities. The answer from the government, after a massive mobilizations at 33 universities, dozens of students dead, and hundreds jailed, was to reinforce the vertical command and militarization, total or partial closings of schools, cafeterias, residencies and the expulsion of more than 3,000 students and 600 teachers.⁹⁴ Other than some brief notes and an article on the murder of two students by the police, the first comprehensive analysis of the university and student movement and the state of higher education in the country appeared in *Alternativa's* issue 9, a cover article with the headline "Social Front: the university destroyed."⁹⁵

The Minimum Program was the closest the students ever got to a common platform. It proposed "co-government," a concept whereby the university was jointly run and administered by its members—students and teachers—and the government. The formula was tried and abandoned in the two most important universities in the

⁹⁴ Alt. (5, 16/4/74, 23

⁹⁵ (9, 10/6/74).

country, but remained as the best alternative to wrestle, or at least share control of higher education institutions.

President López had appointed Luis Carlos Pérez, an intellectual with a Marxist reputation, as the new president of Universidad Nacional, creating expectations among teachers and students in the country. Very soon, the new president at Universidad Nacional got into a tight situation. Despite his reputation as a Marxist, it soon became clear that he was named to do the government's bidding. Several right-wing political sectors were already speaking of the excessive expenses created by the public universities. In his own university, Pérez found himself with a veiled boycott of his administration and a "coordinated plan directed by the Opus Dei and other rightists organizations against Universidad Nacional,"⁹⁶ including attempts to fill positions with right wing characters and religious zealots.

The situation blew open, literally, when a tear gas bomb exploded just before a recital by famous cellist Mstislav Rostropovich at the Commander Camilo Torres auditorium, and the Papal Nuncio was roughed up and his Mercedes Benz car set on fire, supposedly by students on another occasion. The reaction from the far right was forceful and immediate, presenting the actions as "an attempt against culture" and as "an attack on the beliefs of the Colombian people," all as a logical consequence of having named as president of the university an avowed Marxist, *Alternativa* reported.

The editorials of *El Siglo* and the commentaries of the television gorillas warn almost joyously that all of that was predictable, evoking the peace of the coffins of Duque Gómez' (the previous president) period. It is rather obvious, then, the desire by the most reactionary faction of the dominant class to again put a gag on the University. And, in this sense, it is

⁹⁶ Alt. 9, 9/12/74, p. 6

working actively to create a more favorable and propitious atmosphere in its wish to repress the democratizing experiment at Universidad Nacional.⁹⁷

A version according to which both incidents were the work of right-wing provocateurs began to circulate, based on the characteristics of the attacks. On the other hand, many students also condemned the anarchists within the student movement, who acted with the sole motive of disrupting and creating unrest in order to promote an environment ripe for further confrontation.

The unity of the left

Out of the four objectives the magazine adopted from the beginning, that of fostering the unity of the left was perhaps the hardest to achieve, as the founding members found soon enough. Such a variety of groups from the left, in the cities and the countryside, in the universities and at the polls, had never been publicized before in Colombia. This gave the impression that an army of militants, however divided, was willing to make a revolution for which each group had its own formula to combine in different proportions the ingredients they had been taken from Marxist-Leninist-Maoist-Trotskyist-Stalinist-Camilist-Anapist-Albanian-Guevarist doctrines.

While counter informing, doing investigative reports, and divulging the struggles of the popular classes were basic journalistic endeavors, to propitiate the unity of the left implied assuming an active political role. As we have seen, the makers of *Alternativa* reached the conclusion, after the crisis the led to Fals and his group's ouster, that the necessary condition to achieve this goal was to be neutral and

⁹⁷ Alt. 31, 28/4/74, p. 6

independent from any particular persuasion in the left, while remaining staunchly committed and loyal to the Marxist principles that informed its creation.

The makers of *Alternativa* truly believed that by opening the pages to all expressions of the Marxist opposition they were contributing to the unity of the revolutionary movement. The decision was thus to let the leaders of the left speak for themselves, sacrificing in the process any opinion of their doctrines or policies. It was only in later stages that the magazine began to take a critical position, mostly toward the international alignments of the main parties, which proved time and again to be one of the main obstacles to the unity of action against the common enemy.

Generally, the magazine proposed the issues to discuss and asked for opinions, which it published unedited, sometimes in the form of interviews with leaders to whom *Alternativa*'s journalists asked questions. No one in the staff claimed exclusive control over these issues, or gave opinions for that matter.

Occasionally the magazine published verbatim statements and communiqués, from leftist's guerrilla and armed movements, which found in its pages a friendly and warm welcome. This attitude showed from the very first issue, when it printed the opening declaration of the armed guerrilla movement M-19. Contrary to other groups on the left, M-19 proved to be media savvy from the very beginning. It adopted the tactic of staging spectacular symbolic acts that were impossible to ignore even by the big press.

The communiqué was the first political public statement of the philosophy behind M-19, a movement that proposed a Colombian-style socialism, distinguishing

itself from others groups of the left which professed allegiance to foreign doctrines. It invoked the figure of Bolívar and reclaimed his heritage.⁹⁸

M-19's first communiqué was published with a caveat: "*Alternativa* does not judge a political phenomenon about which there are not enough elements of judgment. We publish then, only in a merely informative basis, the last communiqué by M-19 which, along with the picture of Bolivar's sword, was sent to all information media, but which none divulged."⁹⁹ The sword was that of national hero Simón Bolivar, taken from a museum where it was exhibited. Actually the picture went only to *Alternativa*.

Darío Villamizar, Jaime Bateman's biographer, noted the coincidences and links between the guerrilla group and the magazine.

M-19 and *Alternativa* came out almost at the same time, the former in January 17, 1974 and *Alternativa* in February 15. In the first issue *Alternativa* publishes the first known picture of the sword, where there is a guerrilla with a machine gun over a map of South America. That picture was sent only to *Alternativa* and did not have major repercussions. I spoke to the person who posed for the picture and he told me how they had decided to take the picture with the sword, which was then held downtown, and send it to the magazine. *Alternativa* was a point of reference for M-19, ELN, EPI, PLA. All communiqués were first sent to *Alternativa*.¹⁰⁰

Letting the left give its opinion about pivotal issues seemed very much in accordance with the principles of providing an outlet to vent controversies. In this sense, the tricky issue of voting or abstaining was as good as any to test the publication's commitment to provide a window for debate, although, on the editorial

⁹⁸ Alt. 1, 2/15/74, p. 24

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Darío Vilamizar, personal interview, September 9, 2006.

committee and the staff of the magazine, there was an unmistakable trend for not voting.

Once the dust settled, after the dismal showing of the left and of ANAPO in the elections, the magazine highlighted in an editorial the importance of debating the issue “which produced positive results, even if some susceptibilities were hurt.”¹⁰¹ Certainly, the magazine had not made any effort to convince voters to cast their ballots for the candidates of the left, whoever they might have been. The polemic receded until issue 12 when the magazine flatly declared that the option between “bourgeois legality and tyranny” was false.

In fact, the ‘democratic dictatorship’ of the dominant class is shown when, under the heat of ‘popular elections’, hundreds of big landowners, proprietors of factories and enterprises, bankers and big businessmen that make—and not by chance—the overwhelming majority in Congress, are elected. The central problem of this ‘democratic dictatorship’ is to find how much does a seat cost. Everything else is just ideology.¹⁰²

Because of the importance that ANAPO had in the country’s history, especially in the most recent past, *Alternativa* carried more articles on that organization than any other. The magazine chronicled ANAPO’s demise, from a powerful populist party that managed to win the 1970’s elections, with victory stolen from them by the ruling parties, to an irrelevant force that had squandered all the past gains.

The history of leftist ideas in Colombia went as far back as the middle of nineteenth century, as told in “The Forbidden History” section of *Alternativa*, when

¹⁰¹ Alt. 7, 5/13/74, p. 1

¹⁰² Alt. 12, 22/7/74, p. 1

El Alacrán, a provocative socialist-inspired newspaper, saw the light on January 28, 1848, at the same time Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto was published in Europe. The paper promised to publish "the naked truth about the society's situation" and considered the oligarchs of the time as evildoers. The stir the paper created in the capital promptly led to efforts to repress it. Its founders, two youths linked to the same oligarchy they denounced, were tried and sent to jail, only to be released after an amnesty declared by a newly elected president who rose to power with the help of socialist, communist inspired artisans cells in the 1850s.

At the time of the birth of *Alternativa*, about the only thing the left agreed was on the need to carry out a socialist revolution based on Marxist-Leninist principles. Otherwise, each of the different organizations, parties, sects or groups followed directions associated with foreign orientations. The Communist Party was a declared follower of Stalinist Soviet Union. The MOIR was Maoist. The Camilist Commandoes (PC-ML) followed a more pro-Cuban stance. There were also several Trotskyite parties, each with its own shade of agreement with the Fourth Socialist International. There was even a party that professed links to socialist Albania and its leader Enver Hoxa. As for the guerrilla movements, FARC was very close to the Communist Party, while the EPL was decidedly pro-Cuban. The ERP was a spin-off of the PC-ML, also pro-Cuban, while, as seen before, the M-19, a relative newcomer to the scene, fought for a Colombian-style socialism and declared itself the heir of Bolívar ideals and populist principles associated with ANAPO. Also, several anarchist organizations managed to express and act themselves on occasion. The influence of the left extended to organizations representing workers, students and

peasants, such as unions, student councils or ANUC, either by controlling them outright or by influencing their policies. Both the PC and the MOIR had their own youth organizations (JUCO and JUPA respectively) anchored in universities throughout the country.

In issue 19, the magazine summoned the leaders of the left to talk about López' government, 100 days after it took power. As expected, the balance was overwhelmingly negative. Ricardo Samper, one of the few House Representatives of the left, representing MOIR, described perfectly the maneuvers of the López government during its first 100 days.

López has made a skilful political maneuver. First, he awakened the illusion of many people in the public arena, while in private he kept conversations with the economic groups. He filled his speeches with promises and offered to lower the cost of living. At the start of the 100 days, however, he had to resort to the easy resource of the economic emergency. He had people believe that the country was suffering bad crises and therefore he could not carry out his promises. Immediately afterwards, he began to hit brutally the ruined budget of the working classes. Even Lopistas are perplexed. The celebrated government of "hope" ended up being yet another chapter of the oligarchic domination.¹⁰³

The declarations of the leaders of the left, full of formality and misguided optimism in the unorganized and uninformed masses, showed their differences to be minor. All of them, however, believed they had the truth and the correct path even though they never got close to the much-desired revolution or to the unity of the left for that matter. By arguing endlessly over the small print of the Marxist classics, sometimes they forgot their main objectives, a case of the trees preventing them to see the forest, as Lenin used to say.

¹⁰³ Alt. 19, 28/10/74, p. 16

In “Where is the left going?”¹⁰⁴ the magazine for the first time adopted a critical position. After providing some historical background on the left in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and comparing it with the current situation, the magazine postulated that the left did not seem to find a way to channel popular unrest into a coherent and united strategy against the government and the political class due to divergences on the political lines.

The background of the left’s predicament was dramatic. Everyday some type of popular protest or event took place: the reduction of public transportation fares in Cali as a result of popular protests; a “war situation” in this and two other cities (Palmira and Pasto) when the army invaded the street after student protests; more than 5,000 peasants sent to the penal justice system by the Conservative governor of the Atlantic department for invading land; the invasion by the army of a state high school building attended by 4,000 pupils; the blockade by the people of Condoto, a mining town in the department of Chocó, of heavy machinery brought by the company; a road blockade by neighbors in several southeastern localities in Bogotá; the occupation by the army of irrigation districts taken over by striking employees of INCORA, a government institution; riots and sacking in downtown Bogotá by protesters against high prices and gasoline speculation; the *Universidad del Cauca* being closed after student protests, affecting 5,000.

The magazine’s sympathies with the armed struggle in the country and abroad were undeniable. Since no other media informed the public about both issues to the extent that *Alternativa* did, from an anti-government perspective, the magazine became the publication of record regarding these issues. Because of this, *Alternativa*

¹⁰⁴ Alt. 22, 9/12/75, 12

was also an actor in the background, an intermediary among the diverse armed groups in their quest for unity.

From the point of view of the armed struggle regarding political prisoners, torture and confession were treated from issue 2. Two political prisoners, Ricardo Lara Parada, a member of the ELP, and Jaime Arenas, had both confessed when interrogated, presumably under torture or threat of it. The article had a memorable quote, attributed to the lawyer who was the subject of the article-interview: “Before teaching a man to handle his rifle, he has to be taught how to handle his tongue. If the revolutionary does not know how to handle its weapon he can die alone; but if he does not know how to handle his tongue, he can liquidate a whole organization.”¹⁰⁵

The tenth anniversary of the first shot fired by the ELN as a guerrilla movement, when it took the town of Simacota in Santander, was commemorated with an interview with its leader Fabio Vásquez Castaño, in which *Alternativa*'s readers learned first hand about the radical group's position regarding the armed struggle in the road to the revolution. “We live in an unjust society, divided in two antagonistic classes: the exploiters and the exploited. They have opposed and irreconcilable interests. And, even though the dominant class is willing to satisfy some immediate spontaneous aspirations of the working class that does not solve the situation.”¹⁰⁶ Some immediate struggles not political in nature were considered “harmful and reactionary,”¹⁰⁷ such as unionism which instead of serving the class's struggle, was seen as a vehicle for the penetration of the bourgeois ideology in the proletarian class.

¹⁰⁵ Alt. 2, 1/3/74, p. 25

¹⁰⁶ Alt. 26, 10/2/74, 16

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

In the future, *Alternativa* would play an essential and irreplaceable role in trying to bridge the gap between the armed organizations of the left, or at least in getting them to communicate in public about their views of the country. This was no small task considering that they worked clandestinely, holed up in the mountains with their weapons and their ideology, firmly believing that the revolution had to go through them.

The international front

Alternativa's international information highlighted the struggles of the peoples of the world, their revolutions, uprisings and colonial liberation wars and the fight against "North American imperialism," especially the final part of the Vietnam War. This coverage was unique and unequalled in the country, different from radio and television, inasmuch as the information in mainstream journalism was monopolized by major international press agencies.¹⁰⁸ The high quality of *Alternativa's* coverage was due to its sources, which included highly regarded international publications mostly from Europe as well as dispatches from alternative press agencies such as *Prensa Latina*, *Tanjung* and *Inter Press Service*.

During its first stage, however, the magazine's information emphasis was in Latin America, and especially the military dictatorships of the so-called South Cone. More than news brought by press agencies, however, the magazine relied on a network of

¹⁰⁸ At the time, the so-called Third World, represented by the non-aligned movement, and the United States and Europe were waging a struggle around the issue of the north-south flow of information. The main scenario of the battle was UNESCO and it led to the withdrawal of the United States from that organization, during the Reagan administration. (MacBride, 1984)

contacts and *de facto* correspondents belonging to leftist parties, most of them struggling under brutal right wing military dictatorships. Except for Peru, with a military, left-oriented regime, and Ecuador, with a stabilizing military government considered politically neutral, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil were outright right-wing dictatorships, while Argentina and Uruguay were slowly drifting toward them.

The presence of the United States in Latin America was ubiquitous and overwhelming. The big power in the north had overseen its neighbors to the south throughout all their history, imposing its political and economical will whenever it deemed it necessary for its own good. The United States, harbinger of imperialism, was unanimously considered by the left as the main enemy of the continent's peoples and as such was portrayed through the pages of the magazine.

"Latin America today: promises and results,"¹⁰⁹ presented a complete picture of the political regimes of 20 countries, accompanied by an info graphic.

Only in four of those 20 countries, we can speak of relatively 'clean' elections: Argentina, Costa Rica, México and Venezuela. As for the others, there is one in which a popular revolution was produced (Cuba), twelve with governments born out of *coups d'état*, 'constitutionally' imposed or empowered through outright electoral frauds and three whose regimes rose thanks to more 'discreet' frauds. All forms of populism have failed as political leadership methods.¹¹⁰

The liberal-bourgeois axis, "this world of oligarchic liberalism in which democratic formulas are sustained more because of the fear of unchecked violence than for their own internal vitality,"¹¹¹ included México with its agrarian revolution and nationalizations, Venezuela with its formal democratization, Colombia, and

¹⁰⁹ Alt. 5, 4/16/74, p. 18

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Honduras. As for the “nationalistic military regimes” such as Panamá and Perú, they were avowed anti-imperialist, it continued.

And there was Cuba.

Of all this apparently chaotic reality (capitalist development, entrepreneurial liberalism, populist redistribution, nationalism without clear definitions and with precarious achievements, aristocratic-*caudillista* dictatorships, plain fascism), only one nation can exhibit the complete cycle of a social revolution, and authentic national independence and a true economic development. It is Cuba. There the ‘democratic’ institutionalization was broken, not to be timidly recomposed at the expense of the working masses, but to tear to pieces the links of the national subjection with the only force capable of doing it: the exploited people.¹¹²

Alternativa’s side of the story in the continent’s events presented a crude and often brutal reality of which Argentina was a good example. The crises of *Justicialismo*, the movement of president Juan Domingo Perón, provided historical context for understanding the workers resistance to successive unpopular governments going back to 1968 when there were twelve insurrectional armed organizations with clandestine structure.¹¹³ In March, 1966, the city of Córdoba was taken by thousands of combatants who kept the army in check, an event known as *El Cordobazo*. There were many other strikes against the government and the military by groups such as Montoneros, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, FAR (Revolutionary armed forces) and the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas*, FAP (Peronist Armes Forces).

When the de facto president General Agustín Lanusse proposed a pact in the form of a “great encounter of Argentines,” Perón readily accepted, despite the

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Alt. 3, 16/4/74, p. 20

opposition of the party's left and its armed organizations. The acting president Campora resigned to give way to new elections in which Peron and his wife were candidates. The police, an organization with a well-deserved reputation for torture, acted swiftly. The chief of police of Cordoba fired the governor, accusing him of giving weapons to the Marxists rebels. Then a 'carefully planned' massacre took place in the Ezeiza airport, against several dozen leftists youths chanting '*Peron, Evita, la patria socialista.*' The chain of events led, as *Alternativa* told it afterwards, to the demise of the civilian government after the death of Peron, who was immersed in a profound cesspool of corruption, and to the military coup that gave way to a succession of some the most brutal military dictatorships in the world.

Juan Domingo Peron died on July 1, 1974. As *Alternativa* said, there was nobody to replace the *Caudillo*, the driving force in the country's politics since the 1940s. For the first time in Latin American history power felt in the hands of a woman, Vice president Mara Estela Martnez de Peron. But the past haunted the lady president, who had been a cabaret dancer; Jos Lopez Rega, Peron's Secretary and leader of the far right, had been a police sergeant without any militant past. By September 1975, the Social Pact, which kept the country together, was broken, turning the situation into a non-declared war between the right and the left within the Peronist party and within the country at large. Then came a raging armed conflict, with frequent and grave clashes between guerrilla groups and the country's police and armed forces. Given the government's offensive led by Jos Lopez Rega against the

Peronist left and all the left in the country, the armed groups prepare for the illegality, to become clandestine and for a long protracted war.¹¹⁴

The Cuban revolution that culminated in January 1, 1959, actually began July 26, 1953, with the attack on the Moncada Garrison by a group of rebels led by a young lawyer called Fidel Castro. Twenty-one years later, *Alternativa* commemorated the event with a two-page article celebrating the success of the revolution against imperialism and its cronies. At the time of the revolution, the North American monopolies had \$700 million dollars invested in the island and La Habana was a giant bordello for tourists. The phone, electricity, gas, oil, nickel mines, raw materials and intermediate goods, textiles, soap, transportation and big commerce companies were in the hands of Americans. There were more than 600,000 unemployed. More than 400,000 agricultural laborers were unemployed eight months of the year. Cuba had one million illiterates. Ninety percent of the children in the countryside were being devoured by parasites.¹¹⁵

Against this background, the magazine said, the revolution did things unthinkable in any other country in the continent. It included the total socialization of the economy with the expropriation of factories and the collectivization of the land. Education and health became universal and free. Many diseases and malnutrition were eradicated. Everybody had an assured retirement. The production of electricity tripled. The professional army was abolished and the popular army created. Misery, begging, and unemployment disappeared. To commemorate the Twenty First Anniversary of the attack on the Moncada garrison, Fidel Castro gave a speech in

¹¹⁴ Alt. 12, 22/7/74, p. 16

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

which he called the Organization of American States “a cadaver.”¹¹⁶ That organization had expelled Cuba after the revolution and, under the leadership of the United States, orchestrated an economic embargo that affected greatly the livelihood of all Cuban people.

One of the few brightest spots for the left in Latin América was Perú, where General Juan Velasco Alvarado took over in October 3, 1968 and began one of Latin America’s novel experiments of a nationalist nature, with the support of some sectors of the left and the opposition of others, along with the reactionary oligarchy.

At the head of the government was Velazco Alvarado, the only active general in Latin America who reached his grade after being a private soldier. He defined his government as a “humanitarian and humanist revolution.” The military put in motion important transformations in the economic structure.¹¹⁷ In issue 13, *Alternativa* informed readers of the expropriation of Peru’s dailies, an event that shook the continent.

Nobody dared to face the great dailies. The Revolution has done it without fear and it will defeat them’ said General Velasco in front of a multitude of workers who applauded the expropriation. So far, Velasco said, the big press had ‘defended foreign interests, while the popular cause and the interests of Peru almost never worried them.’¹¹⁸

Conservative government, from Chile to Miami, denounced the measure and the Inter American Press Society held an emergency meeting in the latter city. On the other hand, many workers, particularly journalists, praised the measure, from Venezuela to Ecuador and Argentina.

¹¹⁶ Alt. 13, 8/5/74, p. 21

¹¹⁷ Alt. 6, 1/5/74, p. 20

¹¹⁸ Alt. 13, 5/8/74, p. 21

After the decision to expropriate the newspapers and give them to the workers to publish and administer, President Velasco Alvarado informed the public this was part of the Plan Inca, elaborated by the Military Junta since 1968, which stated the difference between freedom of the press and freedom of industry. The existence of the Inca Plan, like the decision to expropriate the newspapers, took everybody by surprise mostly because of its ambitious scope.¹¹⁹ *Alternativa* published Alvarado's comments: "From the very first moment we proclaimed that the objective of this revolution was to liquidate underdevelopment and dependency; that is to say, misery, ignorance, exploitation, inequalities, social injustice and the subordination of our country to the foreign power."¹²⁰

It is not possible to understand Latin America without analyzing the role of the United States as the dominant power in the continent, characterized unanimously by all parties from the left, in Colombia and the rest of the countries, as imperialistic. This was a universally agreed category encompassing all efforts by the United States to impose its will over the rest of the continent, with the full cooperation of the local political elites, which saw in North America a natural ally against the left. The money flew from the north in the form of aid channeled through organizations like the Agency for International Development, the Inter American Development Bank and others. Quite often, the funds ended up in the pockets of politicians, a sort of corruption subsidy for the acquiescence to the policies of the United States, which also provided military aid and training, geared mostly toward combating insurgency. The aim was to counteract the influence of Cuba and the spread of socialism and

¹¹⁹ Alt. 14, 20/8/74, p. 9

¹²⁰ Ibid.

communism, in the context of the Cold War between the western powers, the Soviet Union and China. The third aspect of the United States presence in Latin America was through foreign investment in key sectors of the economy such as manufacturing of consumer goods, agribusiness, mining and cultural products like movies, music and television. The United States was the most important trade partner.

The presentation in Colombia of *State of Siege*, a film by the Greek director Costa Gavras, was the point of entry for “Police terrorism in Latin América,”¹²¹ an article, previously published by the North American Council on Latin America, NACLA, based on a document sent to a United States Senator by an officer of the Agency for International Development, AID. It confirmed the existence in Los Fresnos, Texas, of a counterterrorist base, where Latin American policemen were trained in the art of making bombs and other incendiary devices. The course, which according to the document had been taken by no less than 164 policemen since 1969, cost US\$1,750 per student, all paid by the United States government. Statistics and a separate note accompanied the story on the training of Colombian officers abroad, quoting official documents.¹²²

The unprecedented expropriation of Peru’s dailies as well as the Watergate events merited a careful examination of the situation of the press on the American continent, from the point of view of the Inter American Press Association, a membership guild grouping the more powerful news organizations in the continent. Its beginning was mostly an unknown story, until its history was published in *Alternativa*.

¹²¹ Alt. 1, 2/15/74, p. 16

¹²² Ibid. 19

The first attempts to organize the press operations in the continent took place at two conferences held in 1946 in Bogotá and in 1949 in Quito. They “had strongly condemned the Yankee intervention in the continent, had noted the misleading character of the big North American press agencies, and had proposed the unity of the workers of Latin American press against the bosses interests.”¹²³ Under those circumstances, a confidential document called “Background of Previous Inter American Press Meetings,” written by State Department agents, was used as a guide to offset the idea of a workers’ oriented organization. The plan was

to suppress the international character of the existing organization and impose the absolute North American supremacy and to do this it was necessary to eliminate from the Conference the leftist journalists; displace the Cuban delegation; replace the delegations by countries with delegations by companies; reduce to a minority the press workers; and obtain an overwhelming majority for the owners of the consortia.¹²⁴

The next conference took place in New York, under the auspices of five of the most powerful press organizations of the United States. The Department of State gave instructions to its consular offices to deny visas to journalists deemed to be from the left. Those who managed to reach New York were detained at the airport and held under surveillance, including Cuba’s Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, the organization’s treasurer. Those who managed to get through to the conference were not admitted or recognized. Only the owners of the biggest newspapers and those close to the North American press were allowed to participate. Thus, the organization’s statutes were never discussed publicly and all protests were erased from the record. Those owners included, besides some of the biggest names behind North American news

¹²³ Alt 14, 20/8/74, p. 6

¹²⁴ Ibid.

organizations, a list of who was who in the Latin American printed news business, all of them allied in one way or another with the circles of power. The article came with a sidebar offering profiles of five consortia that by then controlled the Inter American Press Association: Trust McCormack-Patterson, Scripps-Howard consortium, Hearst Corporation, Knight Newspapers and Time-Life Inc.

United States' policy toward Latin America was channeled in part through the Organization of American States, OAS. The common policy of Latin America and the United States toward Cuba was in diplomatic instruments such as the Rio Pact, a mutual defense treaty that the United States used it to justify acts such as the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. As the magazine said,

The clumsy and coarse maneuver by the United States—geared toward making a unilateral aggression into a 'collective intervention' and the United States troops into an 'Inter-American military force' under the pretext of reestablishing the constitutional government in the Dominican Republic, constituted a serious threat to the hemispheric security—it was thought that OAS and TIAR could hardly be resuscitated. It was extremely impossible to reconstitute the strength of the frustrated principle of the self-determination of the peoples because of the aggression against Santo Domingo.¹²⁵

The activities of the United States against Latin America were mainly coordinated by the CIA through open and covert operations, which included financing, training and coordination with police and army units in each country, among other things. The most comprehensive report on the CIA, its nature and activities around the world, was published in issue 18, after the revelations made by CIA Director William Colby in the United States Congress, on the activities of the organization and the government under the guidance of Henry Kissinger, to oppose

¹²⁵ Alt. 21, 11/25/74, p. 8

and sabotage the government of Salvador Allende in Chile. The magazine said the United States spent \$8 million dollars between 1970 and 1973 supporting Allende's foes, bribing Chilean congress members, and in 'destabilizing' activities such as strikes, boycotts and terrorism.¹²⁶ The plan against Chile was elaborated by the so-called '40's Committee,' headed by Henry Kissinger, who also directed personally all operations of economic and credit blockade against Allende.

In Colombia, the CIA was named as having carried out operations on April 9, 1948, when the popular leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was murdered. Also, Gabriel García Márquez interviewed Phillip Agee, the former CIA agent who published *Inside the company-The diary of the CIA*. The book had a list of names and organizations, which acted as "employees, agents or collaborators," in México, Uruguay, Ecuador and Argentina. The list included two former presidents and the current president of México, the president of Costa Rica, a former president of Uruguay and Cuban exiles, among many others as well as organizations such as union federations, banks, publications and publishing houses, associations, police corps, movements, etc.¹²⁷

The book also implicated *Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal*, MRL, (Liberal Revolutionary Movement), founded by President Alfonso López Michelsen, which received money from the CIA. The article announced in a cover banner: "The M.R.L. Received Money from the CIA!"¹²⁸ was an interview between García Márquez and Agee with an introduction that somehow exonerated President López.

¹²⁶ Alt. 18, 14/10/74, p. 14

¹²⁷ Alt. 22, 9/12, 74, p. 3

¹²⁸ Alt. 23-24, 12/9/74, p. 3

Philip Agee tells me that he doesn't know if Alfonso López Michelsen knew it, that it is possible and probable that he didn't know, but instead he knows for sure that the Liberal Revolutionary Movement was secretly financed by the CIA, and that it promoted and paid for a political tour of López Michelsen to Ecuador. I have told him, and I believe it without reservation, that such fact does not justify the inclusion of the president's name in a list of CIA collaborators, but Agee has answered me that his list does not pretend to be condemnatory but revelatory, and that he has put without regret anybody who, knowingly or not, has lend his services to the CIA.¹²⁹

García Márquez' article revealed the extent of CIA's operations in Latin America, with the main purpose of undermining the influence and relations of every other country in the continent with Cuba. For ten years, Agee had been a CIA agent stationed in Quito, Montevideo and Mexico, so he had first-hand knowledge of the agency's operations in Latin America.

According to García Márquez, the overriding interest of the United States was to neutralize the influence of Cuba, an objective for which they it was willing to go to great lengths. "To achieve it they promoted coups, public disorders, paid strikes and bloody repression of popular and student protests. They enriched the parties on the right and at last they installed the empire of the gorillas."¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 6: The second stage

In its second stage, which began with issue 32 in May 1975, the magazine became an 11” by 8 ½” weekly. The change in periodicity and format, announced in issue 31, was motivated both by the financial strain faced by the magazine and the need to be more up to date with the country’s events.

True to the new orientation of *Alternativa*, we are obliged to get more updated by becoming a weekly. We attempt to maintain a journalistic effort we understand as a political challenge, trusting our network of collaborators and correspondents that from now one will sleep with one eye open, more in touch with the present.¹³¹

The masthead had changed in issue 29, which included the name of Enrique Santos Calderón for the first time. The new orientation, which had been outlined in García Márquez’ interview in issue 29, was a result of the internal debate which followed the crises.

There are always risks to be taken; but those are less if we are more independent from the groups, knowing however that we are together in this revolutionary process. The independence of *Alternativa* is in relation to the different groups, not in relation to the process. These distances sometimes are more fictitious than real, even though from now on we will find ourselves embarked in debates in which we have to demonstrate, facing new situations, that there can be different and necessary positions inside traditional ones. Besides, this is the price of a more professional journalism, more tied to current events, because there is where you crash head on against the reality, which is more stubborn than all theories taken together.¹³²

The editorial routines changed, with two meetings held every week, on Monday and Friday, both of them dedicated to journalistic content rather than

¹³¹ Alt. 31, 28/4/75, p.1

¹³² Alt. 29, 25/3/75, p. 1.

conciliations of politically sensitive issues. The cover improved substantially, using photomontages and sometimes caricatures and graphics for a more direct impact on the reader. The typeface remained mostly at small nine and ten point size, making it somewhat hard to read. Graphically, the format was easier to design, more appealing. In addition, new more clearly defined sections appeared along old ones. “El Zancudo” and “Qué hay de Nuevo en Macondo” remained.

“El Zancudo” (The Mosquito) was inspired by the words of Colombian writer José María Vargas Vila, who once said that was “The only one against which the gringo couldn’t do anything,” when the Panama Canal was being built.¹³³ “El Zancudo” was the anti-imperialist corner of the magazine. The first installment featured an imaginary scenario whereby the Foreign Minister of Colombia, chosen as the spokesperson by his Latin American counterparts, met with Henry Kissinger and presented him the following petitions:

Hemispheric defense; protection against blackmail, extortion and coercion from the big powers; to reform the OAS so it can serve 250 million Latin Americans; to give back the Panama zone to Panamanians and present apologies to us; to forbid foreign corporations to put, withdraw, rise, lower, elect, molest, praise, kill or suicide presidents, constitutional or not; worldwide monetary and commercial restructuring; donate technology to Latin America to be able to compete as equals; to do a general revision of the relations between the United States and Latin America from 1810 til today; participation of Latin America in all important decisions on commerce, customs, markets and other important issues.¹³⁴

¹³³Alt. 13, 5/9/74, p. 20. “If I were able to worship something on the surface of the earth it would be the implacable and tenacious mosquito which has in its sting the death for the soft man that crushes with its boots the skull of deprived and defeated peoples. I love it. More than the tropic, it is the avenger, the alert sentry, the flying squadron, the only one that defends our coasts; the dignity of Panama has taken refuge in it; it is the only one that has remained hostile toward the Yankee. There, insects are bigger than men.” (Vargas Vila 1906)

¹³⁴ Alt. 1, 15/2/74, p. 26

At the end, Kissinger receives a call from Nixon, in which he tells him there is an “exciting session of tropical optimism,” whereby he orders Kissinger to China.

“¿Qué hay de Nuevo en Macondo?” (What’s new in Macondo), took its name from García Márquez’ *One Hundred years of Solitude* mythical town, and presented satirical pieces about Colombia. In issue one it featured a fictitious dialog between two young executives about selling products that bear names linked to the two main political candidates. As a piece of writing, it was confusing and ineffective, but the section kept appearing in future issues for the benefit of those seeking humor and irony in the magazine.

Editorially, the magazine gained in coherence. The empty leftist rhetoric, the admonitions and proclamations were mostly gone. Instead, the articles were edited more carefully with the evident intention to make the writing clearer and briefer and to use the space more efficiently. The weekly frequency also allowed the magazine to follow up on the news of the week with analysis and interpretation.

The first editorial “Letter to the Reader” was a 300-word analysis contrasting the demonstrations by the left on May 1, with those under President López and former President Lleras Restrepo. At the moment the government was under pressure from the working class hit by high unemployment and inflation and a series of measures in Congress regarding labor stability, the right to strike, cost of living adjustments, among others.¹³⁵

The magazine opened with a two-page article on one of the biggest news stories of the decade: the final liberation of Vietnam and the unification of the

¹³⁵ Alt. 32, 5/5/75, p. 1

country, after 30 years of armed struggle, with the obligatory picture of the American ambassador leaving Saigon with the folded American flag under his arm.¹³⁶ It was followed by a new section, “Actualidad” (Current events), a one-page analysis of the weekly political landscape with an abbreviated analysis of the situation on the left in the opposite page. The topics were popular unity, the quest for a unified union federation, the workers-peasants alliance, and the international Sino-Soviet conflict, plus an interview with two leftist personalities on the new labor measures proposed by the government.¹³⁷ A note on *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, the new book by García Márquez, followed.¹³⁸ The book, which followed the universal success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was awaited with great expectations, to the advantage of the magazine which now had the writer in its permanent staff. There was also information on the students’ struggle at two universities, one of them a private institution closed by directives in the face of generalized student’s protests, and the other at Universidad Nacional, with a debate on whether how to hold elections for the student’s representatives to its governing body.¹³⁹

In an interview, a peasant narrated how the army once again took an opportunity to help big landowners trying to take away peasant families’ land, under the pretext of looking for guerrillas.¹⁴⁰ The magazine also carried an interview with a group of progressive priests, critical of the Catholic Church, at a time when the Papal

¹³⁶ Ibid. 2

¹³⁷ Ibid. 5,6

¹³⁸ Ibid. 7.

¹³⁹ Ibid 13.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Nuncio in Colombia was receiving expressions of support after being roughed up at Universidad Nacional by a students' mob.¹⁴¹

There was abundant information on the international front. Besides the spread on Vietnam on page three, there was news on the workings of the Russell Tribunal, to which Márquez belonged,¹⁴² on the Baader-Meinhof commando in Germany; on the election of Socialist Mario Soares in Portugal; on elections in Argentina; on the tenth anniversary of United States' invasion of the Dominican Republic; plus briefs on Guatemala, Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico. Finally, the magazine continued with "The Forbidden History" section with the first of a two-part series on the political power of the Vatican.

Alternativa and the armed forces

In the second stage, *Alternativa's* struggled to survive while challenging the State mired in economic and political crises that affected many people, with heightened popular unrest confronted by the government through an emergency legislation that allowed it to repress all kinds of protests in the cities and in the countryside.

The magazine's intention was to maintain the thrust of its coverage based on the four axes of counter-informing, doing investigative reports, letting people know about popular struggles and keep working toward the unity of the left, hoping to take advantage of the lessons learned in the first stage. This time, however, there was more flexibility and variety in editorial content and more space for journalism.

The circulation, which had reached close to 40,000 copies at its peak, had taken a beating after the breakup with Fals and Rosca falling to the 20,000 level and

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 10

¹⁴² Ibid. 24

the financial difficulties persisted, although there was supposed to be a plan for the future and an infusion of capital.

No other issue highlighted more the role of *Alternativa* and its effort to stick to its objectives than its permanent coverage of the armed forces. The magazine confronted them as sources of information, which the mainstream press very rarely did. It investigated them also for the first time, for acts of corruption that began to surface as soon as *Alternativa* dared to go inside an institution that up to its publication had been virtually untouchable. It highlighted their repression of the people's protest through the emergency legislation issued under the State of Siege, using methods that included, according to testimonies, torture and extrajudicial executions. And it defended itself, as part of the opposition to the government, against the military's repeated attempts to curtail the freedom of expression and the press that was part of the democratic façade the regiment projected internally and externally.

While the discussions created by the breakup with slowly receded, the magazine kept waging its permanent and unending fight against the system's press. The first crisis inside the magazine somehow muffled the impact of García Márquez' interview with rogue agent Philip Agee in London about the involvement of the president's old political movement, the MRL, with the CIA. The institutional press was unanimous in rejecting the accusations against the sitting head of the government, confirming the fact that the magazine had become a player in the journalistic and political scene, waging attacks such as the one reported in the magazine in issue 30.

The 'anti-subversive' terrorism campaign unleashed by the regime is well orchestrated by the big press. To encourage this repressive climate, the agitation campaigns come not only from the organs of the Conservative camp (*El Siglo*, *El Colombiano*, etc.), but also from the very 'liberal' *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*.

The dailies are not happy simply with giving maximum display to any declaration by the military, the ministers and governors on the threats to public order—the words State of Siege reappear suggestively in all the headlines—but they have taken this a step farther. In fact, if the López regime seeks to attribute every day the explosive social situation in the country to 'subversive plans,' the system's press has also wanted to point to the left publications as directly responsible.

El Tiempo's editorial on April 3 is explicit enough about it. It claims that the state of 'fiery passion' that the country lives in, can be attributed to the 'wave of extremist propaganda which, protected by the freedom of expression, swamps the country with its 'political fanaticism' and its subversion calls.' The editorial invites readers to 'walk by the newsstands and count the amount of extremist publications offered to the gullible reader.' *El Tiempo* calls for the defense of the democracy to conclude, naturally, with the need to 'take the floor from under those publications.' And the next day, April 4, *El Espectador* echoes those arguments with an editorial titled 'The hour of social defense.'¹⁴³

While the mainstream press played a propaganda role by quoting official sources without confronting them, the majority of leftist alternative media serviced the proselytizing and organizing needs of whatever group published them. Ironically, it was *Alternativa*'s goal of reaching the general public and avoiding preaching to the converted, which proved to be one of the magazine's greatest strength and protection against the mainstream media, the government, and the armed forces.

The magazine answered to the accusations of promoting 'subversion' by denouncing the role that the intelligence agencies of the armed forces played inside the big newspapers, with their approval. It was the first blow in the long, simmering quarrel with the military and another punch at the system's press.

¹⁴³ Alt. 30, 14/4/75, p. 1

Any reader with a two-finger forehead knows that the information related to 'public order' problems is where the tergiversation of the official press reaches its most shameful expression. Behind every news item about guerrilla attacks, land recovery, strikes or popular protests, there is a refined disinformation apparatus, based in the close coordination between the journalist and its sources: the State's security services.¹⁴⁴

These grave accusations were *vox populi* among the working journalists. Santos himself had been privy to the manipulation his magazine now denounced while working at *El Tiempo*. The article talked about how journalists were groomed and trained in military installations, received secret and confidential information, which they never bothered to question and published without the benefit of a named source. Furthermore, the security services especially those working in the afternoon tabloids, employed and paid some journalists.

In this sense, the sensationalism imprinted in every information on guerrillas, 'subversive threats,' 'terrorist plans,' etc., is not just a drive to fill up printed columns. Behind it, there is a very concrete political interest in creating a calculated confusion in relation to the political forces confronting, at different levels, the current social order. This information manipulation seeks to create—in a systematic way—an atmosphere to justify the application of ever more rigid measures of police control over the population. The idea is to 'give atmosphere' to the progressive militarization of the country, the repressive norms, the 'tricolor operations.'¹⁴⁵

An example at hand was the purported plots to disrupt the public peace on May Day. Another was the incomplete and doctored information on the army's combat casualties with the guerrillas, their intention to explode bombs in the cities and even the reports on annihilation of guerrilla forces or the killing of important guerrilla commanders, which often proved false or exaggerated.

¹⁴⁴ Alt. 33, 12/5/75, p. 14

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

To drive the point further, a commercial promoting *Alternativa* on television was censored. “The magazine can say that it is leftist, what it cannot say are things attacking the government or offending it,”¹⁴⁶ was the quote from the head of INRAVISIÓN, the official broadcast entity of the government. From then on, the magazine was not allowed to be promoted on television as part of the unspoken boycott, which included main advertisers, applied against it until it folded in April, 1980.

The week after *Alternativa* reported in a brief note the row between General Valencia Tovar, the army commander, and President López,¹⁴⁷ the in-depth cover article on the armed forces “One step from a coup?,”¹⁴⁸ created controversy again. It did a thorough analysis of the different scenarios created by the firing of five generals and the dismissals of three colonels, all commanders of military divisions in Bogotá. The moves stirred coup rumors, which the minister of government quickly dismissed. Apparently, it all came down to a skilful maneuver by the President to get rid of an uncomfortable group of capable generals. “The Coup was by López,” was the telling headline on the story, with the President clearly favoring the hawks over the doves.

The long shadow of corruption

Seizing upon declarations given to *El Tiempo* by General Gabriel Puyana, who was bypassed for promotion and placed in military limbo by the president, *Alternativa* published a revealing exposé of the cozy relationship between some army officials and contraband dealers in the country, all linked to the political class in a complex

¹⁴⁶ Alt. 35, 26/5/75, p. 32

¹⁴⁷ Alt. 33, 12/5/75, p. 20

¹⁴⁸ Alt. 34, 19/5/75, p. 2

web of corruption.¹⁴⁹ The magazine went further, suggesting that the recent changes in the officer's corps reflected the interest of the minister of defense and his clan, and the politicians headed by the president himself, to keep company with people and institutions involved in profitable illegal activities.

On June 9, the Minister of Defense, General Varón Valencia, fired back. In a letter sent to *Alternativa*, he announced a judicial action against the magazine with the aim to “clarify the calumnious content of the publication and for the anonymous informants to have the civil courage to present themselves before justice to take responsibility for their acts”¹⁵⁰ Besides asking the magazine to reveal its sources, the General denied all the accusations leveled against him in the article. Again, the magazine had managed to generate a reaction that placed it as a real counterweight to the mainstream press.

In the answer to the minister, published in a “Letter to the Reader,” the magazine stated the conception of the freedom of the press that guided its work, contrasting it with that of official publications which served as an unconditional conduit for the establishment's institutions such as the armed forces to spread their message as part of the government's strategy to quash dissent and impose its policies upon the struggling people. The magazine forcefully vindicated its mission to inform and counter-inform, rather than just spread political messages, by placing itself on the side of the truth. In a way, this editorial and the confrontation with the military meant a new break with *Alternativa's* past and was a reaffirmation of the journalistic principles that lay at the base of the magazine's mission.

¹⁴⁹ Alt. 37, 9/7/75, p. 8

¹⁵⁰ Alt. 38, 16/6/75, p. 3.

Because we do it—meaning to inform—a capital daily accuses this magazine of having ‘the mischievous intention to demoralize,’ in the same way that those who limit themselves to show what is going on behind Colombian’s backs are accused of inciting subversion. What happens is that the reality of the country, the system’s reality, demoralizes and incites to subversion whoever gets to know it closely. And this magazine, without ‘mischievous intention’ of any kind, has the purpose among other things to show it as it is. That is to say, to inform.¹⁵¹

Alternativa went farther than denying flatly the request to reveal its sources. It published new accusations against the general, revealing other aspects of the network of favors and privileges build around the Clan Valencia, which included the minister, two of his brothers who were also commanding officers in the army, and several aides and politicians. “This bittersweet discovery (rearranging the army’s pieces) leaves a bitter flavor, and gives way to a mercenary and unconditional militarism, where a cast of Prussian types dwell in customs offices.”¹⁵² said the magazine in the follow-up article.

The impact caused by the controversy generated a profusion of messages sent to the “Letters from the Readers” section. One of them, from an anonymous ‘Group of Army Officers’ dared to ask ten questions to General Varón on his behavior before, during and after the shakeup, as well as questions about his close subordinates.¹⁵³ Another letter denounced the handling of the money deducted from officer’s paychecks and supposedly destined to build a vacation facility in Melgar, Tolima. There were also letters by people mentioned in the articles, justifying

¹⁵¹ Alt. 38, 16/6/75, 1

¹⁵² Ibid. 6

¹⁵³ Alt. 39, 6/23/75, p. 10.

themselves or denying charges leveled against them.¹⁵⁴ Other articles followed, including a questionnaire contradicting General Varón Valencia and Colonel García Gil's declarations on television, with sixteen pointed and precise questions that nobody expected them to answer.¹⁵⁵

Even President López made explicit threats in his Congress installation speech on July 20,¹⁵⁶ where he referred to the magazine without naming it. It was the most important speech of the year and it proved that the publication had touched a nerve in the establishment. Blaming the press, according to the magazine, for the death of a president at the beginning of the twentieth century,

he launched a warning to 'columnists, caricaturists, humorists and all kinds of quills' who, undoubtedly, not being able to sign decrees, 'court collective passions.' Again, he portrayed the independent press as the sacrificial lamb of the forms and tensions of a society sick with injustice: the only one exercising its freedom to question this social order and the regime that sustains it.¹⁵⁷

What really made the top generals nervous and motivated them to ask the politicians to curtail the independent press (*Alternativa's*) was the widespread corruption that permeated the military. Undoubtedly, this was one of their weakest flanks. A series of three articles on contraband, a lucrative illegal business, linked the mafia, the political class, the armed forces and customs agents, who reaped huge profits out of the fees contrabandists paid to the officers in charge, much of which made its way to the top brass.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 20-21

¹⁵⁵ Alt. 39, 6/23/75, p. 10

¹⁵⁶ Alt. 44, 28/7/75, p. 1

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Alt. 37, 9/6/75, p. 8

The State of Siege was renovated with a new decree on August 6, just one year after President Lopez's ascent to power. In its "Letter to the Reader" in issue 49, *Alternativa* reproduced an editorial written and signed by López in 1963, when he was the leader of the MRL, regarding the State of Siege.

When citizens begin to be detained not for crimes but for suspicions, we are living in a state of emergency for individual liberties even more grave than the State of Siege itself. **The dilemma is clear: either we live under a regime of prevention of liberties, which is fascism, or we live under a regime that represses violations to liberties on the part of delinquents, which is democracy. In this sense, Colombia does not live under a law abiding regime but a police regime.** (In bold face in the original).¹⁵⁹

Now, this same president produced a decree, which according to the magazine, "violates the national constitution in almost all its articles."¹⁶⁰ It trampled with the principle of double jeopardy, judicial accumulation, the right to strike and the freedom of conscience and opinion.

This decree was requested by the armed forces, in charge of preserving national security in the country's territory, which produced a communiqué at the end of September amply criticized in the magazine. It was written by the commanders of the three branches (army, navy, air force) plus the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, in solidarity with the defense minister, after the accusations against him leveled by the *Alternativa*. The answer from the magazine clearly stated the position regarding the implicit petition to apply authoritarian standards to it and even to close it in the name of a press "free but responsible." The editorial pledged not to reveal its sources and noted that there were already laws in place such as the rights of

¹⁵⁹ Alt. 49, 1/9/74, p. 1

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

rectification and appeal to the Republic's tribunals. It also issued a stinging rebuke to the system's press.

All of this, however, results less strange in view of the wave of support that the generals' communiqué has produced among editorial writers of the big press editorial and among the traditional parties' parliamentary fauna. It is a hysterical chorus of voices by those who have the pan by the panhandle and the country where it is now: immersed in the muck of moral corruption and social dissolution created by their own insatiable rapacity. It is significant that those voices are the ones that want to hide the reality: remove witnesses, destroy proofs, forbid analysis, and replace the legal investigation procedures with arbitrary and expedited methods of hiding. To cover up, and cover up with total tranquility, due to the fear of decomposition caused by their own hands, but which today overwhelms them; fear of the daily, ever more violent protests, and the ever more intense struggle of a people fed up with unending exploitation.¹⁶¹

At closing time, the magazine received and published a response by the defense minister to his colleagues, thanking them in the name of the homeland and making ominous predictions. As the introduction to the general's letter noted, he never filed the lawsuit he promised. Instead of using the regular channels to vent his complaints, the highest military authority in the country asked for legislation to silence critics under the State of Siege umbrella. A coalition of journalists' organizations and a group of press writers made a similar point when, in a communiqué and a "Letter to Public Opinion," they expressed their concern about the military's pressures to impose censorship upon the leftist press, namely *Alternativa*. The latter reminded the generals that there were legal channels already in place and it was up to the judges of the Republic to issue sentences.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Alt. 53, 29/9/75, p. 1

¹⁶² Ibid. 4

The politicians and the big press, unaccustomed to the challenging boldness of *Alternativa*, echoed the threats posed by the military through pronouncements and editorials. However, a drive-by shooting at the offices of *Voz Proletaria*, the Communist Party newspaper, and bomb explosions in front of the Soviet Embassy and in a downtown playhouse where a festival of Cuban cinema was taking place, increased the tension between the establishment and the left.

The first bomb

On November 11, a bomb of regular explosive power went off in the offices of *Alternativa*, opening a big hole in the wall and causing considerable damage. Fortunately, the employees had already left and nobody was injured. Unlike the pronouncements by the military protesting against the magazine and the letters to the president asking for measures to curb its freedom to publish, echoed by politicians and the big press, this was an unambiguous direct hit on the publication. The government immediately announced an “exhaustive investigation,” a euphemism for measures that usually led nowhere. The bomb against *Alternativa* was followed five days later by another one against the installations of *El Bogotano*, an afternoon daily where *Alternativa* was printed, also critical of the government.

The magazine took the attack in stride as a further challenge to its work, as expressed in the issue 60's angry editorial, which circulated from November 17 to 24.

To threats from the Minister of Government, the pressure by the generals to censor or close us, the permanent incitation of the big press, the missing ingredient has been added: the bombs. The chain of facts is clear.

That is why we are not surprised by the terrorist attempt against *Alternativa*.¹⁶³

As a member of the Editorial Committee, García Márquez used his well-polished style to attribute the attack squarely to the state. Under the heading “Official terrorism,” he wrote:

Our only enemy is the reaction, and that lives very well inside the system, and especially inside the high command of the armed forces, whose Supreme Commander, according to the Constitution, is the President of the Republic.

This leads to thinking that the attempt against *Alternativa* is the work of professional dynamite handlers, whose mentality was revealed by the commanders of the three corps when they asked in a public and solemn document for the closing of this magazine, and whose doctrine was exposed by General Camacho Leyva in the gorilla witches Sabbath of Montevideo [a meeting of the continent’s top generals].

Only such specialists in the repressive science have the technical mastery, the political imbecility to honor us with a bomb of such high consecrating power. We know, of course, that inside the armed forces, there are other different tendencies, although devoid of hierarchic representation and of channels of public expression, and that only when they achieve their right to take initiatives and internal decision will it be possible to expect some relief in this climate of military barbarism.

Meanwhile, our duty is to warn the public opinion in the sense that this attempt will not be the last, that there will be others against us and against our leftist organs and popular organizations, and that those attempts must be considered as simply acts of official terrorism.¹⁶⁴

The magazine also printed several foreign messages, including one by then Secretary General of the French Socialist Party Francois Mitterand to President López:

Mr. President. We just heard that the offices of the Colombian magazine *Alternativa*, whose director is Gabriel García Márquez, universally

¹⁶³ (60, 17/11/75, p. 1)

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 3

admired author of “One Hundred Years of Solitude” has just been attacked with a bomb by an extreme right commando. Worried by the development of terrorism and violence, willing for the permanence of the basic rights of expression and cultural creation anywhere in the world, we call upon you with the hope that you wish to intervene to protect the existence of democratic freedoms and save the international prestige of your country.¹⁶⁵

Mitterand and other foreign personalities’ letters signaled Gabriel García Márquez’ prestige and his presence on the magazine’s Editorial Board, as factors protecting its existence, although these could not stop terrorists from carrying out carefully planned bomb attacks destined to intimidate the staff. The article on page two hypothesized on who could have done such an act, and the conclusion was that the most probable culprits were paramilitary units, whose existence had been denied a few weeks before by General Jose Joaquín Matallana, the rising star of the military hierarchy. The magazine remarked that if “There are no right-wing armed paramilitary commandos, elements able to execute such acts are only found within the State’s own secret services”.¹⁶⁶

This was the first time *Alternativa* mentioned paramilitaries, the scourge that plagued the country for the following decades. These paramilitary armies, which had always existed in one way or another at the service of right wing politicians, were the creation of drug dealers, landowners, cattle ranchers, politicians and the state’s secret services, and reached their maximum peak in the 1990s and in the first five years of the twenty-first century. In a premonitory paragraph, the magazine detailed the logic behind their creation in the Latin American context.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 5

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 3

It is possible, as General Matallana affirms, that there are no right wing paramilitary groups in the country. How is it possible then that they are coming out now, or even acting in the shadows, without vindicating publicly their acts of fascist violence? In any of these eventualities, it is clear that this type of intimidating terrorism represents a call from the right to constitute action groups against the advancement of socialist thought and influence. And the growing, tragic Latin American experience in this regard (Argentinean “Triple A,” Guatemalan “White Hand,” Brazilian “Death Squads”) demonstrate to the utmost that these paramilitary or para-police commandoes operate in direct coordination with the official secret services.¹⁶⁷

The following issue further elaborated on the role of the state’s secret services, in an insightful article analyzing their accountability to no one. The story called “Bombs and attempts. ¿Who controls the secret services?”¹⁶⁸ did an inventory of the several secret bodies attached to the armed forces, the police and the government’s secret Service known as DAS. The article mentioned a rough communiqué printed by mimeograph, issued by *Acción Antocomunista Colombiana* (Colombian Anticommunist Action), which the magazine did not hesitate to call a “smoke screen that seeks to divert attention from the real authors of these attacks, and those responsible must be sought inside the State’s secret services”.¹⁶⁹ By far the most secretive and powerful of those organizations was the *Brigada de Inteligencia y Contrainteligencia*, BINCI (Intelligence and Counterintelligence Brigade), attached to the army.

The description of those secret organizations appeared in booklets given to journalists who were trained as “military correspondents by the armed forces.”¹⁷⁰ The members of these units, unknown even to their fellow service members, trained for

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 4

¹⁶⁸ Alt. 61, 24/11/75, p. 2

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

years overseas, usually in the United States or in its bases in Panama. They were “hated and feared,” for one of their missions was to watch over their own people. They infiltrated organizations and could lay dormant for years before they became active. Because of their clandestine nature, they acted as loose canons, accountable to no authority and out of control. They watched not only those in the left but also politicians, who, from the President on down, had learned to be very careful when speaking on the phone. As to how sinister the role they played, “Hardly a week goes by when in any corner of the country a popular leader falls, a peasant is eliminated or detained under suspicion of being a ‘subversive liaison,’ an activist worker or a student leader falls.”¹⁷¹

Military justice: the Rincón Quiñones case.

While covert terrorist acts were taking place, the military was undergoing a transition, with the Minister of Defense and his entourage up for retirement. Rumors were flying as to how and when the change of guard was going to take place for a new batch of hawks.¹⁷²) Army commander General Camacho Leyva, was campaigning for the job of Minister of Defense, which he eventually got.¹⁷³

The responsibility entrusted on the armed forces by the politicians to enforce the laws and decrees issued under the State of Siege not only included combating insurgents in the field but also arresting and trying them in a court martial called Verbal War Councils. At any given time, during the López government, several of

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 4

¹⁷² Alt. 60, 17/11/75, p. 10

¹⁷³ Alt. 61, 11/24/75, p. 4

those were under way, always presided over by the military under their peculiar ideal of justice.

An egregious example among many, of this particular role, was the investigation and trial for the murder of General Ramón Arturo Rincon Quiñones on September 8, carried out by the ELN, a fact not known at the time and only revealed several years later. The military, in its quest for the culprits of the murder, arrested and accused three people who turned out to be innocent. One was a dentist, Germán Villamil García, of whom General Landazábal Reyes, the commander of the Military Institutes Brigade was said to have called “widely recognized as one of the four men who carried out the attempt against General Rincón...We have evidence about his participation.”¹⁷⁴ As it turned out, however, at the time of the murder, Villamil had been under treatment at a psychiatric clinic, a fact corroborated by the physicians who attended him and the clinic personnel, 42 people, whose testimony the military tribunal judge refused to hear. Besides, there was physical evidence that the accused had been tortured while being interrogated in the military barracks and that the people in charge of trying him were obstructing some procedures.¹⁷⁵

The military kept producing new suspects and adorning the process with new facts and theories. One of those theories was that the authors of the murder were common criminals hired by the ELN for \$10,000 pesos each to execute the general. This theory was ridiculed in the magazine. “On the other hand, is hard to imagine that common criminals, who already have enough problems with DAS and F-2, are going

¹⁷⁴ Alt. 54, 6/12/75, p. 8

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

to kill a general of the Republic for the amount of \$10,000. This is perfectly ludicrous.”¹⁷⁶

The trial of those accused of the murder of General Rincón Quiñones became a showcase of how the armed forces administered justice under the State of Siege. “Actual authors that become conspirators, arrested people who confess, recant and confess again, suicide attempts that become escape attempts, bribes to witnesses, are some of the numerous irregularities that have characterized this singular process”.¹⁷⁷

In this stage of the process, the magazine predicted that the suit against the men would be dismissed. But the magazine was wrong. In a verdict pronounced on January 23, 1976, four of the accused were found guilty. This was shocking for the defense of the accused simply had demolished the accusers and their witnesses in the stands.

Presuming that ordinary justice will be in charge of amending the unbelievable aberrations of this process, the Olympic disregard by the military penal justice of the most elementary norms of the law, seems both significant and illustrative. Its capacity to condemn coolly, deliberately and consciously, people who have nothing to do with the crimes they are accused of. People who could be common delinquents, con artists or gamblers—as some of the condemned seem to be—but who according to the objective development of the process had no relation whatsoever with the attempt against General Rincón Quiñones. Those against whom the most fantastic spider web of accusations was fabricated were just sacrificial lambs with the only purpose of justifying the arbitrariness of an investigation and of a trial that never should have taken place.¹⁷⁸

The remarkable aspect of the whole situation, after the detailed description of witnesses and the accused, the enormous gaps in the testimonies and the baseless

¹⁷⁶ Alt. 57, 27/10/75, p. 10

¹⁷⁷ Alt. 61, 24/11/75, p. 6

¹⁷⁸ Alt. 67, 26/1/76, 2

accusations, was to hold up military justice at its worst in broad daylight for everybody to see. After the attempt against the magazine, the changes taking place in the armed forces and pressures to censure *Alternativa*, the account of the trial placed the magazine not only on the side of the truth, but of justice as well.

Three of the accused were sentenced to 24 years in prison and one of them to 28 years, to be served in the notoriously harsh penitentiary of La Gorgona, a small island located several hundred miles off Colombia's Pacific coast. One month later, the ELN, through a communiqué published in *Alternativa*, acknowledged that it had executed the General for past war crimes committed against the people, and declared that all those condemned by the crime were innocent.

In the final chapter in the case, one year after the murder of the General, a prosecutor in a Circuit Court in Bogotá demolished the case in a 61-page argument. He recommended that the sentences be revoked considering that none of them were adjusted to reality of the process, due to the way in which the testimonies were manipulated and the most elementary norms of penal procedures were violated. Other trials held under military authorities were annulled, including the so-called "Century War Council" where more than 200 people accused of belonging to ELN were tried and convicted in a legislative charade similar to the one that tried those accused of the murder of General Quiñones.

While the spectacle of the military tribunals under the State of Siege was underway, another scandal hit the armed forces. In its "Letter to the Reader" the magazine reminded its readers of the context of the information that it carried in its pages, for which it was accused of defamation and slander.

The commanders in chief of the three branches went with martial step to demand from the President the closing of this magazine. The President did not do it but since then he does not stop repeating in a complaining tone that honor tribunals for journalists be invented so those things do not happen again. Then bombs began to explode at our doorstep. General Rincón Quiñones, exercising its role as Inspector General, started an investigation of the rotten things that existed among some members of the armed forces. He died. The papers in his files disappeared like an act of magic. The Verbal Council that sent four innocents to La Gorgona for one hundred years in total, began. And to those who denounced the inequity in that process, the commander in chief of the army answered that the institution did not need to resort to novelistic or comedy methods to eliminate its enemies.¹⁷⁹

An investigation revealed in the United States Congress showed some \$22 million dollars in bribes had been spread by the multinational Lockheed Corporation in many countries, including Colombia. The issue went back to 1968 when the Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, FAC (Colombian Air Force) bought several Hercules planes. According to documents published in the Mexican daily *Excelsior* and in *The New York Times*, the equipment bought under special “needs of internal security,” bypassed the regulation for such purchases with only a quick technical study. The magazine quoted a letter sent by representatives of Lockheed in Colombia. “(A general) has decided to reach an agreement with us for this year for his own benefit. To this end, he asked a Colonel to revise the study so (the Colonel) can add some points to prove the need to buy more products.”¹⁸⁰ The general in question was then Commander of FAC, Major General Armando Urrego Bernal, whose name figured in the documents revealed in the U.S. Congress. As expected, he denied any misconduct, arguing that his conversations and deals were strictly “technical” in nature.

¹⁷⁹ Alt. 70, 2/16/76, p. 1

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 2

The next commander in the FAC, General José Ramón Calderón Molano, also appeared in the correspondence between Washington and Bogotá regarding the Lockheed business, as well as the Defense Minister in the Pastrana administration, General Hernando Currea Cubides. *Alternativa* quoted *The New York Times*: “A letter partly coded from the Lockheed agents in Colombia, Impex Ltda., shows what the members of the subcommittee feared. That is, that in some cases military from other countries bought North American equipment even though it wasn’t needed in their countries in order to pocket the commission.”¹⁸¹

As usual, the President ordered an “exhaustive investigation on the issue,” not without defending the honor of the armed forces first. *Alternativa*, however, did not let go and was able to report in future issues on the impunity which the scandal enjoyed in Colombia, while in other countries it toppled governments and led to prosecutions. Similar situations were presumed to have happened with juicy acquisitions such as the purchase of eight French Mirage planes, German submarines and G-3 rifles, “all negotiations surrounded by tons of ‘sugar’ (a name used by the Lockheed agents to mean bribes).”¹⁸²

A further analysis noted how the issue had been handled very carefully given the less than flattering image the armed forces was projecting at the time. “Even though just one sector is implicated, it has been presented as if ‘civilians’ have conspired to demerit the armed institution, causing it ‘to close ranks’ against the

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 4

¹⁸² Ibid.

external attacks and diluting in solidarity of corps, the needed investigations and depurations to which the revealed irregularities should lead.”¹⁸³

In this crises management endeavor, the system’s press collaborated by relegating the issues to the inner pages and, as *Alternativa* said, “their information about the issue contains more absolutory articles than real journalistic investigations.”¹⁸⁴ It seemed that in this case, whatever actions were taken happened because of the pressure exerted from abroad, particularly from the United States Congress, bent on investigating the issues and seeing action in the corresponding countries. On the same token, most of the information on the issues was generated in foreign media, particularly in *The New York Times* and in *Time*, which reported on a similar case about the purchase of defective German rifles.

In July, six months after the scandal broke out, the magazine went back to Lockheed, if only to remind its readers that nothing had happened, despite overwhelming indications of wrongdoing and the President’s promise of an exhaustive investigation. It also pointed out that the current commander of the Air Force, General Federico Rincón Puentes, was mentioned in the original documents sent from the United States and filtered to the journalists of *El Espectador*, which revealed it. Other details of the scandal began to trickle down, thanks mainly to publications in the international press. It seems that the irregularities went back as far as 1964, when other technical and scientific equipment was acquired. In any case,

¹⁸³ Alt. 71, 23/2/76, p. 7

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

whatever the crimes committed, any legal action was no longer possible according to the law, by the time of the revelations.¹⁸⁵

The final installment on the corruption inside the Air Force came in issue 110. The report noted how the armed forces had become “a loose canon” inside the government, doing what they pleased without much interference from the head of the executive power and the nominal commander. The lack of progress in the Lockheed investigation, fully nine months after the scandal broke out, was the confirmation of *Alternativa*’s pessimism on the outcome. The clearest indication that nothing would happen was the appointment of General Alfonso Rodríguez Rubiano, as the new commander of the Air Force. As it turned out, *Alternativa* published in the same issue a letter sent by the lawyers of the defendants in the Rincón Quiñones case to a magistrate reviewing the case, which reached the president’s desk. In the letter, the lawyers made grave accusations against Rodríguez Rubiano, serious enough to order yet another “exhaustive investigation” on the issue, exactly on the same day the president signed the decree promoting the alleged culprit to the top job at the Air Force. He had ignored serious charges that went from taking a cut in the purchase of Mirage and Hercules planes, to setting up a phantom firm for the overhaul of the said Hercules planes, with \$1.000,000 dollars “lost” in the transaction, and the purchase of four AVRO planes and a presidential plane, which ended up costing much more than expected, among other irregularities.¹⁸⁶ It was General Rodríguez Rubiano who entered the office of General Rincón after he was murdered and withdrew documents

¹⁸⁵ Alt. 90, 19/7/76, p. 6

¹⁸⁶ Alt. 110, 6/12/76, p. 2

and papers related to the officer's investigations, including shady deals of the Air Force through its procurement office in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

As for an explanation of the President's lenient behavior, the magazine advanced the hypotheses that he too knew what was going on but didn't care to press the issue under the pretext of the tradition that let the military "suggest" their own course of affairs. Instead of being questioned for the issues such as human rights abuses or the corruption in their midst, it said, the armed forces kept receiving the support of the government. This in a way fueled again rumors of a coup, given the boldness of the military to act by themselves, hardly bothering to consult the President in issues such as the invasion of Universidad Nacional, an order given by General Camacho Leyva, apparently without the president's knowledge.

The truth is that the coup has been staged little by little from a few months ago. The military began by taking over the administration of justice, with the pretext to pursue the mafias. From there they jumped into the terrain of labor conflicts, which today are solved by verbal War Councils. They invaded then the field of education by occupying the university and proposing, magnanimously, the creation of another to replace it, military of course, giving access to those students evicted from their own schools by force of arms. They occupied the Public Ministry by burying the investigations on the Lockheed bribes, in which (according to the gringo Senate) some of our generals are implicated. For a moment, they even had in their hands the Civil Aeronautics, which they let go by the carelessness of General Matallana. But that was just an unimportant glitch in a triumphal campaign.¹⁸⁷

The second crises

Unlike the first crises in *Alternativa*, which blew open and became a public affair for everyone to see, the second one, by design of its own participants, remained strictly in house. The first salvo of the crisis in the magazine appeared as a clarification note,

¹⁸⁷ Alt. 78, 12/4/75, p. 2

which surprised more than one, in issue 78. It was called “About an introduction”¹⁸⁸ in the lower page of an in-house ad announcing the publication of the third in the series *Cuadernos de Alternativa* (*Alternativa* Notebooks), written by Cristina de la Torre, Bernardo García’s companion and a member of the Editorial Board. The note said:

The undersigners, members of *Alternativa*’s Editorial Committee, manifest not to be in agreement with the content of the introduction to Notebook No. 3 of *Alternativa* (“In the Liberal Conservative Crises: Colombia in the path to socialism”) which just appeared.

We particularly disagree with calling the *Union Revolucionaria Socialista*, URS (Socialist Revolutionary Union) one of the “three main forces” in the revolutionary camp and the classification made of this group as “the most ideologically solid organization facing national problems and the one with the greatest political initiative within the new Colombian left.”

These affirmations must be understood as the personal opinion of the person who wrote and signed such an introduction to the Notebook, the comrade Bernardo García, but in no case as the position of this magazine, nor that of the majority of the Editorial Committee.¹⁸⁹

The note was signed by Caballero, Katarain, Melo, Restrepo, M. T. de Santos, Santos Calderón and Segura, that is, all the members of the Editorial Committee except García and de la Torre, and García Márquez who was out of the country.

Both the note and the clarification illustrated differences within the magazine since the bitter times of the rupture with La Rosca. It showed a prominent member of the Editorial Committee adopting an openly partisan political position and using one publication printed under the magazine’s name to espouse it. This was an open break with the traditional independency and neutrality of the magazine toward the left, and

¹⁸⁸ Alt. 78, 12/4/76, p. 23

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

with the principles invoked against La Rosca and the attempt to co-opt the magazine for a particular political movement.

The writers expressed disagreement with the political premises that the introduction to the Notebook presented. Even though the Notebook carried articles from some the main exponents of the left (voices of Socialist Block, Proletarian Line, MOIR, Communist Party, Tendencia ML and Union R.S.) the introduction openly sided with the latter, a small Trotskyite party which, according to García, represented nothing less than the vanguard of the so-called New Left in Colombia.

While at the time all the members of the Editorial Committee, with the noted exceptions, signed the note, eventually two distinct and irreconcilable camps began to form. On one side were those who wanted the magazine to be more open in expressing divergent points of view within the Editorial Committee. They included, besides García, Katarain, Segura and de la Torre. In the other camp were those who wanted the magazine to remain neutral and independent, conserving one unified position for the readers and the rest of the left. They were headed by Santos Calderón and included his wife María Teresa, Caballero and Restrepo. Héctor Melo withdrew from the magazine and the Editorial Committee. The big unknown, and the one partner and member of the Editorial Committee who could not be sidelined, however distant, was García Márquez, who at the time was traveling abroad. At the end, as in the first crises, both sides ended up appealing to him to decide the issue.

In the following issue, under the same clarification note that appeared in the previous one, García explained his thoughts on the new realities of the country in a

signed note called “The New Left.”¹⁹⁰ After arguing his points, he endorsed the three political strategies of the Socialist Revolutionary Union: 1. A unitary union federation; 2. Creation of a party nucleus by calling upon several organizations of the left to meet and discuss their policies; 3. A call for a unity of action to confront the regime’s repression. The note ended with a defense of his point of view regarding the magazine.

The practical conclusion is that obviously, what was signed in the magazine—such as this commentary—does not have to commit its whole editorial team. But it also is evident, that what many of our readers call “lurches” or “incongruence” by *Alternativa* are nothing more than the true reflection of the discrepancies (without responsible signature) which have existed forever within us. Our will to lend a positive service to the revolutionary cause, based on the four programmatic points with which the magazine was born, discarded beforehand the possibility to create a political group. But *Alternativa* keeps being an example of unity of action.¹⁹¹

This was the first time a member of the Editorial Committee, other than García Márquez, had explained his position on a political issue regarding the magazine, supported by his own signature. It was also the official inauguration of the opinion section in the magazine, thus far only expressed through the monolithic “Letter to the Reader.” Eventually, the opinion space led to contributions by noted leftist intellectuals with their own signed columns in the third part of the magazine’s history. At the heart of García’s position was what he believed to be the need for the magazine to open up its pages to individual opinions, including his own and those of the Editorial Committee members.

¹⁹⁰ Alt. 79, 20/4/76, p. 19

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

On the following issue, García drove the point further, writing again under his own name an article analyzing how the political left identified with foreign parties had its hands tied by following doctrines and dogmas that had little to do with the reality of the country. “Neither in the terrain of abstention, nor in the elections, nor in the grouping of union organizations, nor in the cohesion of an intellectual front and much less in the articulation of revolutionary forces, can the Colombian left deceive itself.”¹⁹²

His sympathy for the Colombian way to socialism was well known by everybody, since the polemic aired in the magazine about García Márquez’ militancy in Venezuela’s MAS. What the other group did not agree with was turning the magazine into the advocate of such an interpretation, thus renouncing the bigger role of propitiating the unity of the left. Nor did they agree with the idea of having the members of the Editorial Committee using the magazine to promote their own ideas and those of the political groups they identified with.

By pressing the issue and writing two opinion pieces in a row, under his own name, García forced a confrontation that would inevitably lead to yet another breakup in the magazine’s team. While both the note by the Editorial Committee and García’s opinion pieces offered the readers a rare glimpse of the argument in the pages of the magazine, the real confrontation was taking place internally, in the partners’ meetings and in the newsroom.

The minutes of those meetings tell how the acrid confrontation inside the group concerned the same issue discussed during the first weeks of the magazine, when Fals Borda’s team was still on board, on the question of left’s participation in

¹⁹² Alt. 80, 1/1/76, p. 29

the elections and whether to vote or not to vote. While the discussion by itself did not lead to the breakup, it helped to define the two camps into which the magazine would divide itself in the near future.

On the position of the magazine regarding the participation in the upcoming mid-term elections to be held in April, 1976, all the members of the Editorial Committee expressed their opinions. The issue of the bylines in the articles was brought forth for the first time at the October 20, 1975 meeting. To sign or not to sign would be the main point of contention in the discussions held in April and May of the next year. According to the minutes,

After a lengthy discussion, the policy of not signing articles is reaffirmed. In special cases, the possibility to sign and to disagree will be discussed. If the majority of the committee agrees with the analysis of the article, it is not necessary to sign it. After this point, García left the meeting.¹⁹³

During the meeting held on January 17, 1976 the election's issue was treated again *in extenso*. New clarifications were made as to the magazine's position regarding the upcoming elections. Those in attendance agreed that certain themes in the magazine would be carefully discussed and evaluated before publication. They included the hot topics of the military and the mafia, as well as the issues of ANUC and ANAPO. Regarding the editorial policy, the discussion, as related in the minutes, was poignant for it showed that the disagreement existing inside the Committee had a deep political undertone. Finally, it agreed to publish both positions regarding the elections, one for participating (García's group) and the other for abstaining (Santos'

¹⁹³ Seventh Minute. Partner's Board Meeting. October 20, 1975. Handwritten. Personal file.

group) in a “Letter to the Reader” containing three elements: points of agreement, points of disagreement, and a statement on the information policy of the magazine.¹⁹⁴

The crises blew open on May 4, 1976. After proposing a closer relationship between Daniel Samper and Juan Fernando Cobo Borda with the magazine, and turning the economy section into snippets, García formally introduced his proposal, after publishing the two signed articles mentioned above, plus the introduction to the Notebooks that merited the disclaimer by the majority of the Editorial Board. The minutes of the board said:

Bernardo García proposes to discuss the editorial policy of the magazine with groups from the left in Monday’s newsroom council and to air their points of view in signed opinion columns. He is willing to open the pages of the magazine to progressive Liberalism sectors and even Conservatives (revise point 4 of the magazine’s statute).¹⁹⁵

There was a difference between discussing current issues with personalities from the left for journalistic purposes, which the magazine did from the beginning, and inviting people, including progressive Liberals and Conservatives, to talk about the magazine itself, thus opening its editorial policy to more or less anybody who cared, and was in a position, to express an opinion. To call upon representatives of the bourgeois parties to come into the magazine was especially problematic given the discussions held before on the participation in elections, which showed the deep distrust in the system’s parties. The minutes continued:

In general the proposal (García’s) will be the following:

- a) To open the pages of the magazine to Liberal and Conservative sectors to help with the unity of the left.

¹⁹⁴ Ninth minute. Partner’s Board Meeting. January 17, 1976. Handwritten. Personal file.

¹⁹⁵ Fifteenth Minute. Partner’s Board Meeting. May 4, 1976. Handwritten. Personal file.

- b) Open opinion columns for both the members of the Editorial Committee and for people from outside the magazine.¹⁹⁶

It was then up to Santos, the seasoned journalist in the group, to lead the opposition to García's proposals. He did not agree on opening columns for members of the Editorial Committee, nor to progressive Liberals and Conservatives who already had the big press' support.

At the end, as with the issue of the magazine's position toward voting or not, there was no agreement on columns for Editorial Committee members, although columns for contributors from the left were not out of the question. Finally, Caballero proposed to freeze the issue pending a discussion with García Márquez and to consult the readers through a questionnaire.

Once García made his proposals at the Editorial Committee, which that particular day met for six hours, all the cards were on the table. The next round of discussions was on May 17, when the members of the editorial committee finally agreed on having a "civilized breakup" of the magazine, while at the same time consulting the absent García Márquez on the issue. After considering Héctor Melo's request for a leave of absence, the group moved to read the letters sent by each group to the other, detailing their positions on the issue.

The first letter addressed to Caballero, Restrepo, Santos, was sent by García, de la Torre, Kataraín and Segura on May 6, after the consideration of any decision had been postponed. It basically repeated their arguments and again explained in detail the group's position.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Letter from García et. al. to Santos et. al. Typewritten. May 6, 1976. Bogotá. Personal file.

Several conclusions could be drawn from this letter. B. García and his partners knew that there were political discrepancies among those working on the magazine although it was not apparent from his letter or from the pronouncements of the other members of the Editorial Committee what those differences with the other group were. The only recorded discrepancies had to do with the discussions on the issue of voting or abstaining, but it wasn't clear from them which people sided with one group or the other. He was obviously concerned that those political differences would be expressed in the choice of editorial content in the magazine and biased its point of view. His idea was that in such a case it was better if the magazine became an all-out opinion publication, perhaps giving up the pretense of informing and counter informing as it had been doing with such effectiveness about the armed forces and right-wing politicians who at the time were calling for laws to control the publication or close it. The idea that it was possible to inform more objectively when there was the chance to express personal opinions, was certainly a novel one, which not only contradicted the whole ideal of objective journalism, but also proposed a new threshold for analysis and interpretation, which the magazine had been doing from the beginning from a leftist perspective. Finally, the group genuinely believed, based on their interpretation of the current reality, that the magazine was being called on to play a more important role in the dynamic generated by the URS in terms of the consolidation of a party nucleus to lead a revolutionary movement based on an indigenous-based socialist ideal by connecting the magazine more closely with the left and energizing the political debate.

The undated answer, in the form of a letter directed to the signers of the previous communication, left little room for compromise. The Santos' group letter,¹⁹⁸ written by Santos himself, demolished all the arguments on the other side, and unmasked the true motive behind the rebellion: to espouse a particular point of view from the left, and one that had no widespread acceptance to boot. It also attacked two of the main points of the other side's position: to write individual opinion columns and to open the magazine pages to progressive Liberals and Conservatives, a posture that was anathema in many leftist political circles. In this regard, Santos' position was based on the same principles with which the magazine had forced the *La Rosca* group out: to maintain the neutrality and independence toward the left, while pounding at the right and the establishment without remorse or mercy.

This was the journalistic posture dictated by the need to survive at a time when the magazine was in the midst of a bitter struggle with the military and the establishment and was just recovering from two bomb attempts, one against the magazine itself and another one placed at Santos' house. A slackening on its principles would only weaken it at the time when it needed to be stronger.

Both letters were read at the Partner's Board Meeting, which, for all practical purposes, was the Editorial Committee, and it was decided to publish them as part of the consultation mechanism with the readers. The argument continued, with García accusing the other side of Mccarthyism. Finally, after a long debate, Kataráin offered a final diagnostic to the effect that the problems were too deep to resolve and that it was time to begin preparing the breakup. "He affirms that he, as the legal representative of the Foundation, will advise a civilized breakup and an amicable

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Santos et. al. o García et. al. Typewritten. May 13, 1976. Bogotá. Personal file.

liquidation and in case of a public fight he will not take sides for any of the groups.”¹⁹⁹

Two things everybody agreed on was not to repeat the bitter, public fighting experience with La Rosa, which had its defining moment exactly one year and six months before to the day; and that the breakup was inevitable. Katarain also suggested several ways to solve the problem including some impractical solutions such as to divide each issue in two 16-page parts, for each side to publish its own articles or to alternate magazines every week.

Two more board meetings were held afterwards (there are no more minutes) without mentioning the issue of the breakup again nor was it mentioned in the pages of the magazine. And in the issue 103, exactly two years after the breakup with La Rosa and Fals Borda, the names of the researchers and intellectuals who had made up one of the three currents that founded the magazine, disappeared from the masthead. The parting agreement left García, Katarain and his group with El Zancudo distributor and Editorial Oveja Negra, the book publisher. To sweeten the deal, García Márquez threw in the exclusive rights to Oveja Negra for the publication of his works in Colombia, a juicy contribution since his works sold by the hundreds of thousands and even more when he was awarded the Nobel Price in 1982.

In a six-page letter to García Márquez, dated May 23, 1976, Enrique Santos explained to the final arbiter his own interpretation of the matter. The letter was by itself a primer of Santos’ thoughts on the nature of the type of journalism *Alternativa* was doing and its envisioned role in Colombia’s society. According to him, the *leit*

¹⁹⁹ Sixteenth Minute. Partner’s Board Meeting. May 4, 1976. Handwritten. Personal file.

motiv of the dispute was the pretended imposition by García of opinion columns, which in his mind would change “the whole spirit of *Alternativa*.”²⁰⁰

We (Antonio, Jorge, Melo, María Teresa and I) know that in the current conditions of internal tension and face-offs it is tough to continue working together, but we oppose emphatically any attempt to liquidate *Alternativa*. They want control and imposition of their points of view, or liquidation. We oppose any dissolution of the magazine and any ‘tyranny of the minority.’²⁰¹

Santos believed that the original ideas the inspired *Alternativa* were still in full force, especially in the political context of the country. He told García Márquez how, behind the idea of opening up the magazine to personal opinions, was the promotion of the particular point of view of the URS.

It is about giving an opinion and impulse in a progressive and determined political line. They, especially Cristina and Bernardo, are clearly inside a specific political project, which they call the “new left” and which is nothing less than URS. It is not necessarily a matter of militancy, or having or not having an ID card. The issue is the political identification with that group—which is perfectly respectable—whose line and analysis of the nation’s reality they seek to impose at all costs in the magazine, which is perfectly unacceptable.²⁰²

At the end, Santos argued anew against the liquidation of the magazine, outlining his view of the role it was playing in Colombia’s political landscape at the time. Finally, Santos acknowledged García Márquez’ determining role in the crises junctures of the magazine.

You seem destined to preside on the high moments of the successive crises of *Alternativa*. We know, however, that this one will have a different

²⁰⁰ Santos, E. Letter to García Márquez. May 23, 1976. Bogotá. Typewritten. Personal file

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid. 4

development and outcome. In any case, we don't have to see it only in the perspective that all that divides is bad, but that it also reflects a process of inevitable qualification and differentiation in work groups which, for diverse circumstances, do not see fit to continue together.²⁰³

A pause to reflect

In December, 1976, the makers of the magazine, now without García and his group, decided that a new period of reflection and reorganization was at hand. The last 14 months, with a run of 79 weekly issues, had been journalistically, politically and financially trying. The reasons for the pause were given in a "Letter to the Reader" in issue 111, the last of the second stage.²⁰⁴

These political, journalistic and economic issues formed the triad of circumstances that forced the magazine to stop publishing for four long months, until April of 1977, when it reappeared with a new and younger journalistic team. The magazine did not go out without a bang, however. The last issue of 1976 was a 40-page publication, an unheard of number of pages. It was a review issue of the country's political landscape in which the magazine had played a substantial role and made a sizeable impact on its readers and in the country as a whole, judging by the agitated confrontations with the government and the armed forces narrated here. It also provided the context to understand the circumstances of the pause.

The magazine spoke out against the López administration that had unleashed repression against the popular struggles, expressed in two successive declarations of the State of Siege, the country's equivalent of martial law. All of this came while the country was immersed in an unstoppable orgy of corruption, with the hands of the

²⁰³ Ibid. 6

²⁰⁴ Alt. 111, 12/76, 1

political class and the military tied to those of the nascent mafias of the cocaine and marijuana traffic, and the old ones of contraband and the sacking of the public treasure, among others. Particularly glaring were the scandals surrounding the armed forces and the police, with the Lockheed bribes taking center stage. No less important, was the dance of millions at the Coffee Federation, which *Alternativa* treated extensively in a series of reports that showed, as never before, how that political class allied with exporters and financiers used the government as a cash machine. Corruption touched practically everybody in power, including the Catholic Church and Congress, while the big press did little to uncover the events in what *Alternativa* called “A stinking year.”²⁰⁵

The State of Siege marked the popular struggle through decrees issued by the government to repress the popular movements and by legislation created to favor big capital. The workers mobilized for better salaries, to force the companies to fulfill their obligations and commitments and to support other movements. The continued rise in the cost of living forced many unions to fight just to keep up with inflation. The peak of the worker’s movement took place before April midterm elections but decreased afterwards. In some strikes such as those of Riopaila, Vanytex and the bank clerks, they were defeated, not just by the government, by also by improvisation and mistakes made by their leaders and the appalling lack of solidarity from the left, whose political organizations seem to have been too busy talking about the unity of the working class to take action. Also noticeable was the reduction in the activities of the peasants and their organizations, showing the effectiveness of the harsh repression

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 5

orchestrated by the minister of government with the help of the military and the police.²⁰⁶

Such was the panorama when *Alternativa* let the scene at the end of 1976.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 16

Chapter 7: The left and the third stage

My personal experience with *Alternativa* began while working at El Zancudo, part of the chain of bookstores that *Alternativa* had created in order to distribute leftist books and publications. El Zancudo and Editorial Oveja Negra had the exclusive rights to distribute and publish García Márquez books in Colombia. I was also taking communication and journalism classes as part of my undergraduate studies at Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano.

My first contact in the magazine was with Antonio Caballero, who asked me to write “something,” to be able to assess my reporting and writing abilities. I did a research paper on Chingaza, a big water project built to bring drinking water to Bogotá, which was a city of three million people at the time. As was the case with most government infrastructure projects, this one was rife with delays, corruption and irregularities. Upon returning the paper, Caballero told me I had good writing abilities and asked me to write another one, this time on an international subject. When I returned to *Alternativa* with the second paper, Caballero was out and I was received by Jorge Restrepo, third in command, who dismissed me with the customary “we will call you.” As I was leaving I met Hernando Corral, a former union leader at Banco Popular when I had worked there, and with whom I had participated actively in the strike at the end of 1974 (which we won, by the way). Corral introduced me to Enrique Santos, who right there and then invited me to come to the next “writers’ council” as the newsroom’s planning meetings were called. Only later, I realized I

had been hired, albeit on a trial basis, to work for the hottest magazine in the country, to write under the editorship of Antonio Caballero of the international section.

Caballero, who was born in Bogotá in 1945, had lived in Spain, England, Italy, Greece and France where he had studied Political Sciences. He came into the magazine at the end of 1979, after the breakup with Fals and *La Rosca*. One of Caballero's greatest talents was his work as a caricaturist, and many of his cartoons made their way into the magazine, including those featuring *El Señor Agente* (Mr. policeman) character, a comic strip which appeared regularly in the pages of the magazine during the second and first stages.

Like Caballero, Corral had arrived at the magazine "by sheer chance," as he put it, after the breakup with Fals and Rosca. He had been an ELN sympathizer, part of the urban network of people close to the guerrilla movement, and had already spent six months in jail for his political activities in 1970. Corral met Santos for the first time when he went as the union representative to the Solidarity Committee with Political Prisoners in 1973, and had no idea he was to become a journalist, much less a staff member of *Alternativa*. Corral was fired from the bank in 1976, after a failed strike, and when he came to *Alternativa*, Santos proposed that he write for the magazine covering working unions, peasants and Indian's issues. Corral's only experience at the time had been writing for the union paper *La Verdad* (The truth).

The version we had of the breakup with La Rosca was that M-19 wanted to take over the magazine. One day we met Enrique Santos, who at the time was cooperating with an ELN network as a sympathizer, and he told us how one day, after he was leaving the magazine, his car was intercepted by a jeep with armed people inside who threatened him because he had not accepted M-19 pretensions. One of our comrades at ELN, a network coordinator, spoke to M-19 about it and told them Santos was our friend and

not to mess with him and the threats stopped. I came to *Alternativa*, more than a journalist, which I wasn't, as an ELN quota at the time. I understood my job there as a political one.²⁰⁷

In this, the last chapter of its life, the magazine adopted an openly critical position toward the left while remaining committed to a leftist interpretation of reality and to its journalistic identity. Gradually the publication pressed the issue of the unity against the State, abandoning for all practical purposes its past abstention position and identifying with a particular formula for achieving lasting change in the country. This included the creation of a wide movement bent on achieving power at least in the electoral field where the left had suffered so many defeats, based on Colombian-style socialism with definite nationalistic undertones. And when the pressure to have one single candidate from the left to face the candidates from the main political parties did not bear fruit, due to the stubborn position of the main groups which professed allegiance with foreign doctrines, the magazine definitely abandoned its neutrality and independence and created its own political movement. In this way, the magazine remained committed to the unity of the left, but now from its own political standpoint, rather than by just opening the pages of the publication to the opinions of the opposition leaders.

Thus, the magazine abandoned the formula that had brought it to this point. Furthermore, during the third stage, Santos' group and a reorganized staff excelled in counter informing, doing investigation, analysis and interpretation, and divulging the struggles of the left. It was in fact, the golden age of *Alternativa's* journalism, with a definite style and a profusion of themes treated by a dedicated and unified journalistic

²⁰⁷ Hernando Corral, personal interview, taped, Bogotá, February 9, 2006.

staff. Only, after its own movement was born, the presence of the rest of leftist ideas in the pages of the magazine became marginal and kept to a minimum, referred to only when they had to do with the strategies and objectives of *Alternativa*'s political creation.

What follows is an account of the final relationship of the magazine with the left, legal and armed, which eventually led to the publication's demise.

The criticism of the left

When *Alternativa* appeared again in May 2 1976, its tone was different. The upbeat assessments on the imminence of a general uprising in Colombia, the war-like declarations over the socialist revolution based on a proletarian party, the dogmatic appeals to the great thinkers such as Marx, Lenin, Mao and Ché Guevara, were gone. Now the tone regarding the left was more pessimistic, reflecting the assessment made by the staff during the four months it stopped publishing. In its first "Letter to the Reader," the magazine expressed its preoccupation over the impotence of the left to take advantage of the explosive situation of the country, which implicitly acknowledged its own failure to carry out one of its stated goals, and one of the four reasons given for its existence.

This apparent incapacity of the left to take advantage of junctures such as the current one—that usually take it by surprise—to win space and political credibility, overcoming incomprehensible discrepancies for the big conglomerate of Colombians, is an issue that must provoke a deep uneasiness and which *Alternativa* intends to address in a permanent way in this new stage.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Alt. 112, 2/5/77, 1

This new critical posture toward the left, and the promise to keep it up in the magazine, would be the key to its development, both as a journalistic enterprise and as a political actor in the country, throughout its last stage. Just as in the first two crises, the position toward the left was the determining factor that led the magazine to evolve and change.

In an inside article, the leadership of the magazine went over the route already traveled, affirming its principles but also vindicating the furnishing of information as its main contribution to the process of social change in Colombia. It implicitly reaffirmed confidence in the power of the truth to instill in the political left the wherewithal needed to carry out social change. This was the magazine's clearest mission and goal statement after critical and self-critical assessments following the breakup with Rosca. On balance, it gave itself credit for raising the political consciousness of a segment of the population through information on the regime and its handling of the country; by helping the left assume positions on concrete problems of the immediate political struggle; and by contributing to the debate among the left while avoiding traditional dogmatism and sectarianism.²⁰⁹ Finally, while demonstrating that a truly alternative, leftist and mass-oriented press was possible, it recognized the true goal, revolutionary power, was still far away, mainly due to the incapacity of the left to overcome its dispersion.

The operating word, however, was "critical," the term the magazine decided to emphasize in its new stage by adopting a tougher posture toward the left, most probably influenced by its experience with the two groups of partners who left after

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 12

attempting to impose or propose their own brand of revolutionary truth. To be sure, the magazine restated its principles by condensing them in two objectives.

Within this perspective, the first objective of *Alternativa* is **to inform** (in bold in the original) based on more realistic and rigorous sources and documents and with the indispensable journalistic criteria to reach the largest possible number of people. To win ever more readers for this magazine is a vital need. Our main contribution is the detailed information, the juncture's analysis, showing the purposes of the different parties, denouncing the maneuvers of the oligarchic groups, unveiling the diverse forms of imperialism penetration and trying to explain how the economic tendencies affect the living conditions of popular masses. Here we join the diffusion of its struggles with the analysis and investigations in the country and the world's economy and politics.²¹⁰

The pledge “to inform,” as the main goal of the magazine, using journalistic criteria based on a more rigorous treatment of documents and sources and the commitment to what it thought to be objective analysis of the country, was an improvement over the almost casual way the magazine had handled its content. By uniting the investigative, interpretive and analytical aspects, the magazine recognized that it no longer was enough if the participants were workers or leftist militants, still there had to be a measure of facts involved in the information, more important than the political content or message of the struggle itself.

The second objective signaled that despite becoming more journalistic, the magazine did not give up its place and role inside the left, nor its political ideology and allegiances.

The information—so treated—links us to our second goal, which has been shown to be infinitely more complex, to contribute to **the unity of the left** (in bold in the original) around proposals answering to the real needs of the Colombian people. This presupposes, among other things, to reject

²¹⁰ Ibid. 12

traditional dogmatism by contributing an objective analysis of the country, as well as to oppose sectarianism the open debate as referred to the national reality, the country as it is. In this way, *Alternativa* aspires to contribute to channel the debate on the left around concrete problems in each juncture, as well as strategic needs such as a unitary liberation front; to differentiate positions with all individual and anarchized groups; and to spread Marxist theory and socialism, contributing criteria and information to popular leaders.²¹¹

From now on, the magazine would use its own criteria in informing about the left, instead of relying exclusively on interviews and articles where representatives of groups and unions stated their positions without being criticized about them. This reaffirmed the magazine's independence and its commitment to its objectives rather than to the protagonists of the debate. The article ended with a pledge about the general direction the magazine was taking. "Finally, we intend to do all of this by using a simple and clear language, accessible to everybody, without the need to be a specialist. In short, journalistic."²¹²

If anybody knew about journalistic language in the magazine, it was García Márquez himself, who, as in the first crises, was throwing the full weight of his prestige, his money and his writing, behind the renovated *Alternativa*. He stated his position in a signed column, the first one written exclusively for the magazine, with his byline, his picture and his own signature at the bottom. He was, along with other prominent intellectuals, one of the new columnists the magazine decided to feature, following the disagreement with the García group. At the time, one of the points agreed on was to open the pages of the magazine to a more solid opinion field, in order to express the diversity on the left and to provide a platform for people and

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

ideas of value, which had no other outlet to reach the public. This was as far as Santos, the new head of the magazine, was willing to go in terms of signed columns.

Until then, García Márquez had been the only member of the Editorial Board to have his own column in recognition of his worldwide prestige but also as a delicately crafted, intelligent and high quality prose gift to the readers. The first of his columns was titled “My two reasons against this magazine.”

So here is *Alternativa* again. It comes back after a recess of almost four months, which of course helped us to work less, to lose less money and perhaps to be less mistaken, but also to reflect, as the priests did in other times, on the destiny of our souls. However, we come out again as a weekly, this time worth \$20. Which means that the spiritual retreat helped us to solve many problems except two, which in my way of seeing are the disgrace of this magazine: frequency and price.

Those of us who wanted *Alternativa* to be a daily still believe that to be right. So do those who maintained a contrary opinion. They win, for the heavy weight reason that neither of us, nor we all together, have the money needed to make a daily. That is to say, there are no bells. It was there, of course, where we should have started.

Magazines have been an unfortunate genre in Colombia. All of them, no matter what kind, have had the destiny of the summer loves and education ministers: intense and fleeting. The only one that had endured for more than sixty years through barbershop hazards and the mortal strokes of the change of owners, seems more like God’s warning against the naïve and reckless. Perhaps we Colombians do not know how to make magazines. Perhaps it is because we don’t know how to read. But perhaps it is because an eight-day interval is a huge challenge for the historic memory of Colombians: when Saturday comes the readers have already forgotten what was their favorite magazine the previous Saturday, so each week it has to captivate a new clientele which does not even remember to have been the same furtive clientele of the previous week. It is sad but true: each week we buy a different magazine with the same ephemeral and unrepeatable illusion with which every four years we elect a President of the Republic. Thus, it is very difficult to implant a weekly, and to retain the interest of a numerous and understanding public, and also be sensitive to a different political proposal, while it is not possible to compete every day and in similar conditions with opinion organs which have in their hands all the strings of power. Saturday’s fights—we drunkards know it well—are only but cantina quarrels.

The other essential problem is price. Without big advertisement—which we don’t want and, besides, nobody will give us—without a political

party to sustain us, nor a world power center to support us, nor a central intelligence agency to subsidize us so it can say so later, this magazine orphan from mother and father can not be sold for a lesser price and the bitter truth, no matter whom it hurts, is that the readers with the possibility of spending \$20 in a magazine are not the ones we are more interested in. So we want to reach one public and truly we reach another. We make a magazine for the poor, which many poor cannot buy. We try to create a popular consciousness, but our more accessible clientele is less interested in social justice than in vacations in Miami.

Despite this, with the professional and political temerity that distinguishes us from other happier mortals, here is *Alternativa* again. I continue being in it as always since that casual September, now remote, of its foundation, because I believe that despite its two major problems, it is an indispensable organ in the current conditions on the country and of the leftist press. The only new thing is that I not always will be in all the magazines, but every two weeks, \$20 at a time, I will be within the four walls of this personal column, to say whatever I want on my own account. Today, unfortunately, I had not much time to say it.²¹³

Besides García Márquez, new columnists included Daniel Samper; lawyer Eduardo Umaña, who had already written under his name in the magazine; human rights activist and politician Diego Montaña; writer and journalist Beatriz de Vieco; Salomon Kalamovitz, an economist and a member of the Trotskyite Socialist Bloc; philosopher Ramón Pérez Mantilla; and politician and writer Ramiro de la Espriella. Nowhere else in the country, including the dailies and other magazines, was there such a qualified opinion lineup, a factor that sustained the magazine through its flirtations with the legal and armed political left.

The political class' failures on which the left was unable to capitalize included grave accusations leveled against the President himself and his family for questionable investments in land and the use of public banks and institutions to secure loans and other privileges. Even though the proofs against the López family were more than convincing, the Accusations Commission in Congress absolved it of any

²¹³ Ibid. 13

wrongdoing. “All of this should have been capitalized by the left. However, either it does not know how, or it cannot or does not want to do it. It is of little importance if the Colombian left is right in everything it says. The truth is that it has not been able to tell it in a way that the masses believe it.”²¹⁴

The division of the left was highlighted by the May Day demonstration, a traditional show of strength in which the left took pains to march united through the streets of the country’s major cities. This time, however, there were five different acts planned, including a government-sponsored gathering, which never took place. The division showed the pervasive influence that leftist organizations, particularly the pro-Soviet Communist Party and the pro-Chinese MOIR, exerted on the workers organizations, particularly the unions grouped in confederations. The differences included electoral alignments and the parties’ allegiances to foreign directorates, which conditioned their alliances and prevented their flexibility, exactly the situation the magazine criticized in its articles, including the Letter to the Reader in issue 113. “The international themes pierce and determine, without any meaningful constructive effect, all the discussion on the political and electoral unity of the Colombian people against the evident main enemies. While in front of our noses they keep Colombia, we discuss over who should keep Zaire.”²¹⁵

The constant barrage of editorials, articles and columnists’ opinions in the first issues of the new stage set the magazine on a course that would lead it to promote a movement to force a unity candidate to run in the elections, and later, to create, with other groups, its own coalition on the left, thus immersing itself in the political fray,

²¹⁴ Ibid. 5.

²¹⁵ Alt. 113, 9/5/77, p. 1

something it had pledged not do. It ended up participating in a political front, the last attempt to unite the left before the onslaught of narco-traffic and para-militaries in the 1980s. It also led to the closer identification of the magazine with M-19, the armed guerrilla movement with populist undertones that proposed the establishment of a Colombian-style socialism.

On May 29, issue 116, *Alternativa* published for the first time, the call made by Festrac, a union federation affiliated with CSTC, for a National Civic Strike, a great challenge to the government, with the potential to unite most forces on the left represented by the unions and political parties. The demands proposed by the unions included a 50 percent rise in salaries across the board and a revision of the labor agreements to this end; a price freeze on essential articles and measures against hoarding and speculation; rejection to the tariffs on public utilities and a freeze in fees and tax increases.²¹⁶

The National Civic Strike was an opportunity to test in the field of action the possibilities of a unitary movement, using it to challenge the dire conditions of most workers because of government policies. Most unions, even those aligned with the traditional parties, as well as practically all parties on the left, were for the Civic Strike, a locally tested form of protest that had already taken place in cities and regions of the country. Besides the unions' protest, the topic of unity was framed in the dynamics of the upcoming Presidential and legislative elections, which were nine months away, without serious steps being taken by the left on that direction.²¹⁷ Then, for the first time, the magazine advanced an idea of “a third force to express mainly

²¹⁶ Alt. 116, 5/29/77, p. 1

²¹⁷ Alt. 117, 12/6/77, 1

the interests of the great majority of Colombians, whom only secondarily are affected by the conflict between the two titans of socialism.”²¹⁸ The magazine asked poignant questions as to why, if in the union field the unity was taking shape, it wasn't so in the political terrain.

At the Second Forum of the Revolutionary and Popular Opposition, MOIR, ANAPO, MAC and the Popular and Democratic Committees gathered to proclaim the Presidential candidacy of ANAPO's Jaime Piedrahita Cardona and to formulate a platform for the electoral campaign and to make official the creation of People's Unity Front.²¹⁹ The event, held in the middle of July, made official the formation of a coalition apart from the Communist Party and its allies and others sectors such as the Trotskyites.

In its editorial of July 18, issue 123, the magazine announced the existence of a letter signed by a group of “independent personalities,” calling again for the unity of the left. No names were given as to who signed the letter, but the ambitious document amounted almost to a manifest, synthesizing the main ideas that were to serve as the basis for future coalitions that attempted to bypass the poles in which the left was divided. It called for the creation of a front based on a minimal program accepted by all formations on the left, which should then establish the necessary bases for the conformation of a national liberation front and a real power strategy for the people. The condition for the creation of the front was to respect the positions of the revolutionary parties and socialist countries of the world, adopting a policy of non-alignment and international neutrality. “We need to strengthen the unitary process

²¹⁸ Alt. 117, 6/5/1977, p. 1

²¹⁹ Alt. 123, 7/18/77, p. 9

with a clear perspective of taking over power. To unify efforts in all fields, in all aspects related to the revolutionary struggle, including the electoral aspect.”²²⁰ The latter coincided with an M-19’s Bulletin 25, which made similar appeals on the need of the revolutionary unity in the context of the electoral process, calling the electoral unity “a revolutionary need.” The document by M-19 affirmed that the participation in the elections could be an advance “as long as that participation mean a step ahead in part of the process we live in our country.” According to the movement, “the participation in an electoral campaign of a revolutionary character will help to agitate the banners of socialism, of anti-imperialism and the National Liberation revolution.”²²¹ Coincidental or not, the position of the magazine, the unnamed sources that wrote the letter, M-19, and some of the columnists all coincided in the need to unite around a common program and to participate in the elections as a step in the ultimate goal of taking power.

Instead of allying themselves with any of the coalitions and running the risk of being disappointed again, the Socialist Block chose to field its own candidate, union leader Socorro Ramírez. Its proclamation coincided with the formal foundation of the Socialist Workers Party, out of the Socialist Block, affiliated with the Torskyite Fourth International headed from Europe by Ernest Mandel.

In “Elections for a Hara-Kiri,” the editorial in issue 125, the magazine again pounded strenuously on the election, noting how everybody spoke of unity but none

²²⁰ Alt. 123, 18/7/77, p.1

²²¹ Alt. 124, 25/7/77, P. 11

of them believed in it, advancing exactly in the opposite direction, something the magazine called grotesque. (125, 8/1/77, p. 1) However, despite the division and *Alternativa*'s known position at this time regarding the unity of the left, the magazine provided complete information on the parties' positions, their meetings, congresses and documents as well as interviews with the three candidates, allowing them to express their points of view in the pages of the magazine.

Parallel to the information on the self-defeating strategy of the left, the magazine began a series of articles on preparations for the national protest proposed by the union confederations, which sought to unite the workers through a concrete action against the government, looking also for a meaningful step to go united to the polls. On August 2 the unions notified the government of the demands, which were all but assured to be rejected. The demands were a synthesis of the people's grievances at the political and economic level, and could have perfectly constituted the backbone of an electoral program had the left chosen to have a unified one. The petitions sent to the President included a wages' rise of 50 percent; freezing prices of essential articles and public services; lifting the State of Siege and granting political and union freedoms; reopening and demilitarizing the universities and giving them adequate budgets to function; abolishing administrative reform norms that affected the rights of association, contracting and strike by government workers; immediate transfer to the peasants of the lands intervened in by Incora; and an eight-hour working day and basic salaries for transportation workers, plus a freeze on the transport industry's price of parts and materials.²²²

²²² Ibid. 4

Finally, UTC and CTC signed an agreement on August 20, “to commit in its preparation and to participate actively, in the assurance that, with a solid and with disciplined unity, we will fulfill successfully the mission to defend the interests of the workers and of the people of our country”²²³ They agreed to participate in the protest after a non-committal answer by the President to their demands, and to call for putting into practice a 1959 law that guaranteed a bonus, the immediate installment of the National Salaries Council and the modification of a law on the protection of children included in the demands.

On September 1, at a huge rally in Bogotá, and after a series of assemblies nationwide, the National Civic Strike was set for September 14. It was the first such protest in more than twenty years, with a potential participation of close to 2 million unionized workers. The government issued decrees punishing with 30 to 180 days in jail those arrested for participating in labor protests, and prohibiting radio and television stations from informing about the strike.

The National Civil Strike was carefully and consciously prepared. The direction of the movement was centralized in the four labor confederations, and hundreds of factory, neighborhood, and town committees were established all over the country. This was the opportunity for the establishment of a long-lasting unity of action after the strike.

According to the magazine and the organizers, the National Civic Strike was a resounding success while the government denied that anything meaningful had happened.

²²³ Alt. 129, 29/7/77, p.4

The President's long-winded speech on Wednesday night was made of lies, cynicism and insults. He denied a strike had taken place when all Colombians had just seen it with their own eyes; he thanked the workers for the multitudinous support toward his government, as if marginalized and unemployed workers along with children and housewives, had not throw themselves into the streets in an unprecedented movement in the country to manifest their aggressive rejection of the government. And he ended up showing in his shaky fist the assassin weapons of the professionals of subversion: a few roadside tacks.²²⁴

What took place across the country was almost a general uprising, with the entire population, more than the workers, as the true protagonists. *Alternativa* published the pictures of neighborhood streets littered with stones and of riot police facing the population. After the dust settled, the bodies of twenty people confirmed dead by gunshot wounds spoke for themselves. Estimates spoke of as many as 50 people killed in the country plus dozens wounded. The president declared a curfew from 8 at night to 5 in the morning to try to control the situation created by a strike that, according to him, had not taken place.

As the magazine predicted, the most important results of the protest were not the concessions, which the government never made, but the unity of the four big labor confederations in one protest, despite government actions to try to prevent it. While the government seemed taken aback by the magnitude of the protests, the mood in the union confederations was upbeat, despite the lack of interest from the government to negotiate. The unions conditioned their willingness to attend the National Salaries Council on several points: freeing all those arrested, the restitution of the jobs of fired workers and the wide discussion of all the demands made before September 14. Later, on September 20, CSTC communicated to the other members of the National

²²⁴ Alt. 132, 19/9/77, p. 1

Command its intention not to assist in the dialog with the government.²²⁵ A similar upbeat mood came from the parties on the left, which insisted, despite their electoral differences, that unity of action was the most important result of the strike, despite MOIR's filling the city with posters commemorating Chairman Mao's birthday instead of promoting the protest.

Conspicuously absent from the government's spokespersons comments was a coherent response about those killed during the protest, calculated to be 33 throughout the country, 23 of them in Bogotá alone, most of them by gunshots. In the same city, 3,800 arrests were reported, of which at least 74 people remained in custody. Many were sentenced to serve between from 60 to 80 days in jail.

A consequence of the strike was the creation of a National Union Council, with representatives of the four union confederations, which kept pressing for the demands formulated before the strike, maintaining the heat at the López administration on its way out. A silent march planned for October 28, protesting murders, detentions, and sanctions in the aftermath of September 14 protest and solidarity with the workers in conflict, was postponed until November 18 due to a government delay in issuing the necessary permits and a request by both pro-government confederations for more time to organize it.

The coming elections

Alternativa renewed its call the leaders of the left to a dialog in its pages in order to capitalize the National Strike. The implicit question was what good was it to have the unions working together if their support for fellow workers such as those in USO,

²²⁵ Alt. 133, 26/9/77, p. 4

who had to give up the fight for lack of resources and bargaining potential, did not come through.

The November 18 march was a show of force, following the September 14 movement, albeit only in Bogotá and few other cities. MOIR was barred from participating by the hegemonic Communist Party, which exerted a great deal of control over the march. The participation of the pro-government confederations also aroused the suspicions of many participants and non participants from the left; it was seen as an opportunistic tactic to use the struggle for their own particular ends.²²⁶

Meanwhile, the left's campaigns wound up for the year with tactical moves to get new allies and with manifestations and acts where the issue of unity was becoming moot before the facts created by the actions of the three candidates and coalitions. The FUR, the MOIR-headed coalition supporting the candidacy of Jaime Piedrahita, ended the year with a well-organized demonstration in Bogotá on December 2, which included a one-hour march through the streets of downtown. The UNO coalition received in its ranks Senator Jose I. Giraldo, another ANAPO stalwart who decided to abandon the official wing of the party and its leader María Eugenia Rojas. This was a bold move since the senator guaranteed a sizeable amount of votes in his zone of influence. Also UNIOS, a coalition formed to support Socorro Ramírez was announced. It included, besides the PST, the URS, Ruptura and a sector of LCR. There were persistent rumors, however, of an internal power struggle and even the announcement of the candidate's expulsion from her own party, which were denied.

Now it was up to February's legislative elections results to determine the outlook for May's presidential elections. "As things stand, the left's electoral

²²⁶ Alt. 148, 28/11/77

perspective depends on the results of the February elections. There is a possibility that after counting the forces the three groups will consider the possibility of a unique candidate.”²²⁷

In the last, double issue of the year, *Alternativa* made a thorough evaluation of a year of missing opportunities under favorable conditions such as the vertiginous loss of prestige of the López government, internal disputes within the traditional parties and the citizen’s reaction against the wave of corruption and insecurity. In these conditions, the unity of the left was precluded because of the Sino-Soviet divergence and the way it was reflected in the rivalry between the two main parties of Colombia’s left: the PC and MOIR.

To drive the point of the left’s fragmentation further, the magazine published a sidebar with a list, probably incomplete, of 35 political groups of all shades, parties, sects, tendencies and fractions. All had in common their Marxist inspiration and their belief of the need for a socialist revolution in Colombia. Otherwise, their differences and sheer numbers showed the idea of a united left as a utopian revolutionary far away dream, against only two parties in the right that monopolized the government and the state apparatus.

The guerrilla groups, meanwhile, communicated through the magazine their disposition to forge a unity of action. In a FARC year-end pronouncement through its *Resistencia* bulletin, the leader of the group Manuel Marulanda Vélez expressed the organization’s commitment to unitary action by all the guerrilla movements in their quest for a unified revolutionary army, a rare pronouncement by one who usually stayed in the sidelines and did not write a lot.

²²⁷ Alt. 144, 12/12/77, p .8

1978

Despite the left's hopes for the February's election, by the beginning of 1978 the quest for a united candidacy was going nowhere. In its first article on the issue, the magazine began to float again the idea of an encounter of forces looking for unity, after concluding that a proposal made by *ANAPO Socialista* of a great encounter to find a candidate was unrealistic.

True to its nature, *Alternativa* made a complete rundown of the left's participation one week from the coming elections.²²⁸ This time the magazine presented a brief bibliography of the three main candidates, a synopsis of the main coalitions' political and economic programs with their similarities and differences, as well as a description of their doctrinaire makeup. It was noted, for example, how the Communist Party considered that Colombia's capitalism wasn't ready for a revolution just yet and called for alliances with middle class and petit bourgeoisie sectors in order to create a front against imperialism, its main enemy. The Maoists considered the peasants the driving force behind the proposed revolution, while the Trotskyites thought that capitalism in Colombia was fully developed, which permitted the creation of a workers party to lead the revolution. These and other details, however, were overshadowed by the international alignments. The Maoists, for example, considered the Soviet Union an expansionist state, spearheaded by Cuba in Latin America. This idea of Cuba as an enemy was intolerable for the Communists, who always put as a condition the acceptance of the Castro regime.

²²⁸ Alt. 151, 13/2/78, p. 2

The non-abstention position of *Alternativa* was a 180-degree turn since the days when the magazine did not ask people to vote, or endorsed any candidate for that matter. Issue 152 had a cover with the headline “Vote for the left”²²⁹ in big white letters on a red background. Inside, the magazine qualified the issue of whether to vote or not to vote by explaining how voting had become a matter of principle for those who put the revolutionary organizations on the same level with an oligarchic party and harbored the secret hope to reach power through the electoral way. To others, participation in the elections was just a form of political struggle, depending on how the election campaigns were used, such as providing an opportunity for candidates to expose ideas before an interested audience, to attack the dominant class and denounce its methods. It was a chance for the left to be seen and heard, come out of anonymity and propose solutions to the people’s problems other than the broken promises of the representatives of the system. In this case, however, the left presented itself as divided, creating confusion by the transplantation of contradictions among revolutionaries who already had made their revolutions in their countries, but whose ideas were neither fundamental nor immediately relevant in Colombia’s.

“Nevertheless it leaves benefits. That is why in any case we have to vote for the left. For one or the other now that it is not possible to do it for all,” the magazine said.²³⁰

Those who for many reasons abstained from voting were between 65 percent to 70 percent of the total electorate, or 7 million out of 12 million potential voters. Added to this was the fact that the left parties usually opted for supporting a candidate not of their own ranks, one of whom was the current President Alfonso López who

²²⁹ Alt. 152, 2/20/78

²³⁰ Alt. 152, 2/20/78, p. 1

had once pretended to be a revolutionary, and now was the architect of the policies that caused the people so many troubles. Only two times had the left had fielded presidential candidates from their own ranks and one of them was Socorro Ramírez.

Speaking of Ramírez, the troubles in her party were finally confirmed. The paper *El Socialista* announced that she had been separated from the party, even though it still supported her candidacy. Socorro herself denied the rumors, but the damage was done. She finally ended up breaking with the PST and forming another party, although she remained the official Presidential candidate of her coalition. This was yet a further blow to the unity of the left, so badly needed and so far away.

When the votes were counted after the February elections, the defeat of the left was complete. The great winners were the liberal pre-candidate Julio César Turbay, and abstention, which surpassed 70 percent. The left did not advance at all, even adding the votes of all the groups, nor made a dent in abstention. The defeat was extensive even to *ANAPO Socialista*, a group that concentrated all its efforts in Santander. The dismal results of the three coalitions showed that the popular protests did not translate automatically into votes, that the alliances among the different groups did not work as an electoral tool, perhaps because they were mostly a matter of convenience, and that great masses disenchanted with the government preferred not to vote than vote for the left, whose message did not reach them. The elections' result reinforced the need to go united to the Presidential elections June 4.

Against all evidence, the parties of the left showed an optimistic face, still unwilling to give up their candidates, according to their declarations immediately

after the elections.²³¹ The unwarranted optimism confirmed, in the eyes of the magazine, the myopic perspective and lack of connection with the reality of the country. As expected, the magazine called upon the candidates from the left to resign unconditionally for their aspirations as a down payment for the unity and to prevent another electoral debacle.

Alternativa FIRMES and M-19

In the next issue, columnist Guillermo Fergusson, along with important independent leaders on the left, expressed his willingness to consider the idea of starting a plebiscite in order to force the existing coalitions to withdraw their candidates in favor of a unitary candidacy in June.

A true opinion plebiscite is being proposed in political and union sectors and by independent personalities, around the need of the opposition forces to go unified to the Presidential elections in June. A brief survey made by this magazine confirmed that a unique candidacy by the left is a collective wish among all those progressive forces and personalities that saw with preoccupation the weak electoral results in the last parliamentary elections.²³²

This was the first time the magazine put the idea of a plebiscite in print. In the course of the following two years, it was to take a life of its own, creating in the process one of the most promising unitary movements in Colombia's left and influencing in a decisive way the future of the magazine. From this moment on, *Alternativa* began to publish endorsements to the idea of the plebiscite from many quarters. It came from M-19, in its bulletin No. 30.

²³¹ Alt. 154, 3/13/78, p. 1

²³² Alt. 155, 20/5/78., p.15

M-19 proposes to make a stop and face the facts with an auto-critical spirit. To examine the mistakes with a generous spirit, leaving aside group interests. To see the resigning of the candidates from the left to facilitate a common discussion and new solutions. And, finally, to look, along with other forces and other currents, for another program, wide, national and popular, and a unique candidate that symbolizes that purpose.²³³

Finally, in issue 159, which began circulating on April 17, the magazine launched the proposal to collect 500,000 signatures as a plebiscite to force the left to present a united candidate for June's presidential elections. The 500,000 signature figure was calculated to show a voting potential far greater than the one achieved by the combined left in the previous parliamentary elections of February. The editorial "For a left with its own voice,"²³⁴ and the official proclamation of the plebiscite, explained that the magazine had decided to go beyond its own neutrality because of the undeniable crises of the left, which, despite the agitation in the streets, was not believed, heard or even understood by the great majority of Colombians whose indifference was a reminder of the uselessness of its dogmatisms, orthodoxies, alliances and candidates. The half a million signatures was a way to show the left that there were enough people out there looking for a true change, way beyond the scant numbers shown at the polls. From the beginning, the magazine recognized the symbolic character of the plebiscite as a way to show the will for change, clarifying they did not intend to divide in five what was already divided in four, counting those who abstain, but to create a vast opinion movement not diluted in an abstention boredom, electoral frustration of passive inconformity.²³⁵ The same points were in

²³³ (156, 5/27/78, p. 19)

²³⁴ (159, 17/4/78, p. 1)

²³⁵ Ibid.

the official proclamation of the plebiscite on page 6, over a coupon to be filled with name, signature and identification.

The movement had been proposed by “more than a hundred known intellectuals, union leaders, artists and television and sports personalities.”²³⁶ A committee was formed to promote the idea, one of whose members was *Alternativa*'s Editor Enrique Santos Calderón. Other included the ubiquitous García Márquez, Luis Carlos Pérez, Gerardo Molina, Pepe Sánchez and Daniel Samper, as well as several unions and the theater group La Mama.

At one time, the top three editors of the magazine were drawn into the movement in different capacities. One notorious consequence of that commitment was the severe reduction on information from the left related to existing coalitions' participation in the elections. From now on, the magazine's efforts to seek unity in the opposition forces to the government would be concentrated in its own movement, practically abandoning the idea of serving as an independent forum for the left on the assumption that by venting the differences unity was being fostered. The plebiscite and the incipient political movement build around it became the point of reference for all *Alternativa*'s information on the political left.

By identifying with the plebiscite the magazine put all its strength on the line. At the time, the circulation hovered around 15,000 copies, with a readership estimated at more than 50,000 in the country. By then the magazine was also the best known Colombian publication outside of the country, with an enviable subscription list of hundreds of names, mainly in Europe.

²³⁶ Ibid.

One week after the announcement, the cover was the official logo of the movement, the handwritten work *Firme!* (Sign), in bright yellow over a black background.²³⁷ One week after the idea was launched, 32,000 signatures had arrived at the magazine by several means, including those based on photocopies of the coupon or gathered at theater functions. Two weeks later, the magazine claimed to have received 100,000 signatures. *Alternativa* published the names of 28 prominent personalities, included journalists, painters, film directors and critics, sculptors, writers, and union leaders, many of whom praised the benefit of the idea to have a candidate representing the unity of the left.

While the ostensible purpose of the plebiscite was to gather signatures for a unique candidate, the aim behind the idea was to detect a sector of the population receptive to a socialist, democratic and nationalistic proposal for concrete solutions to the needs of millions of Colombians. In the editorial on issue 161, the magazine insisted in the plebiscite as a prelude to something bigger. Behind the collections of 500,000 signatures was a design to create a political movement with a popular mandate, solid enough to merit a strategy for the future. The magazine's commitment to this its purpose made it the *de facto* official organ of the movement, ending its neutrality toward the left.

In addition, it made a prediction that proved to be true in the country's next decades. "The disjunctive is simple: the decrepitude of the men, ideas and governing methods is opening a vertiginous political vacuum; if the people do not fill it in its own name, it will be filled, in the name of order, by the reaction."²³⁸ A few years

²³⁷ Alt. 160, 24/4/78

²³⁸ Alt. 161, 5/1/78, p. 1

later, a vast paramilitary apparatus created by the far right, drug traffickers, the politicians and the military, ravaged the country throughout the 1990s.

As a corollary to its call, the magazine took pains to clarify what system it was talking about in an extensive article describing its characteristics under an ominous subhead: “The ‘system’ is a whole group of economic and political forces which, if Colombians don’t unite to destroy it, will end up destroying Colombia.”²³⁹ It described most of the aspects in which the government and the political class were failing its people: health, employment, security, justices, public services, education and repression.

Unity Committees had been created in at least fourteen cities by the first day of May, with “hundreds of union leaders from all over the country,” plus many well-known personalities such as sportsmen, artists and intellectuals and at least five political movements, joining in. Right in front of *Alternativa*’s very own eyes, a whole movement was taking shape. To fulfill its goals, the magazine announced a grand manifestation on May 20, two weeks before the presidential elections, to deliver the 500,000 signatures and the drafting of an open letter to the three candidates.

On May Day, while the open letter and the presentation and delivery were being prepared, the four main labor confederations united in demonstrations throughout the country, for the first time ever in the traditional worker’s day. The celebration represented an advance in the union’s process toward unity, even though there were a few hostile acts such as the harassment by the Communist youth organization, JUCO, of some URS militants that were trying to collect signatures.

²³⁹ Ibid.

By the fourth week of the plebiscite, 300,000 signatures had been gathered all over the country, while the Unity Committees now numbered 25. The main ceremony to deliver the signatures was now set for May 25 at the Capitol's main chamber. As to whether to vote or not, knowing that none of the candidates was going to resign, the movement let people decide by themselves whether to vote or not. It was also decided to schedule another national congress, this time in July, to give continuity to the plebiscite and to launch a national movement.

In a meeting between García Márquez and Santos Calderón in Havana the writer expressed his total agreement with the movement to gather the 500,000 signatures. With his customary prudence, García Márquez warned Santos about falling into traps set up by the parties with candidates as well as to promote any other candidate. He also ratified his decision not to accept the candidacy offered to him for purely personal reasons and offered a diagnostic on the situation: "What the [present government] is losing more and more every day is credibility; there is a crisis of originality. At the bottom, it gives the impression that they are falling way behind the country, that reality is overcoming them, which presents very favorable conditions for the left."²⁴⁰

The Open Letter to the three presidential candidates clarified where things stood right before the elections, when the signatures were going to be delivered in a public meeting as a petition for the presentation of one candidate for June 4's election. Both September 14's National Civic Strike and the demonstrations of May 4 offered proof that the workers wanted unity and the 500,000 signatures were just the beginning of a new unitary political movement to defend the interests and needs of

²⁴⁰ Alt. 163, 5/16/78, p. 9

the Colombian people. The letter asked the candidates to resign and invited them to a meeting “with the purpose of establishing there and then viable criteria and concrete mechanisms to chose a unique candidate of the Colombian people against the system.”²⁴¹ A candidate epitomizing the feeling of unity that the plebiscite has garnered, would be supported by the movement. The letter suggested that the petitions presented by the united labor federations be adopted as the program. The letter was signed by Gabriel García Márquez, Gerardo Molina, Eduardo Vanegas (UNIMAR), Héctor Molina (FETRACUN), actor Pepe Sánchez, soccer player Alejandro Brand, Enrique Santos Calderón (*Alternativa*), Daniel Samper and Eddy Armando (Teatro La Mama).

This was a last ditch effort to fulfill the objective of the movement. The candidates answered each in his or her own way. Pernía, the UNO candidate, said it was too late now but he was open to working together in the future. Piedrahita, the FUP candidate, said he was not interested in a meeting because he wasn’t planning on resigning. Socorro Ramírez decided to keep going her own way and remain in the race, with the help of PST, which at the end decided to quit the *Firme!* effort to support her.

As it turned out, after the second breakup of *Alternativa*’s team and thanks to the deep personal friendships between the leaders of M-19 and *Alternativa*, the former group returned to the magazine. For some people such as García, the return took place after his group left, a fact proven by the infusion of money that changed the conditions in which the magazine had operated so far, including a new headquarters, a printing machine and a renovated, paid staff.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Santos acknowledged the renovated relationship with the urban guerrilla movement after the initial attempt to take control of the magazine.

At one point Bateman came back in a very self-critical mood. What he had was that he was very intelligent and flexible. He said ‘we blew it, you were right, we can help, we know you have economic problems, we are not going to bother you anymore.’ At one point we accepted their help. There were people inside the magazine which continued with them.²⁴²

According to Enrique Santos, the heads of M-19 and *Alternativa* conceived the creation of FIRMES on a weekend meeting at a resort in a tourist town near Bogotá.

We ended up doing something we said we were not going to do but which was the product of an inevitable evolution. After fighting so hard for the unity of the left, we arrived at that juncture in 1978, when there were three candidates of the left, something grotesque. That was the moment when M-19 came back. May be it was a coincidence, maybe not. We said *Alternativa* has to go all out if we want to be true to the goal of the critical unity of the left, we have to propose and exit, let us do something. We had this idea with Antonio to start a signatures collection campaign, to transcend the little groups and get people in the streets to sign if they agreed with having only one candidate, which was the Firme! campaign. This had a great success, we collected more than 400,000 signatures. At that moment *Alternativa* became what we never wanted to be, which was an organ or vehicle for a political movement. We invented FIRMES at an encounter in a weekend meeting between Antonio Caballero, Jorge Restrepo, myself, and (M-19 leaders Bateman and Fayad). They said ‘What are you going to do with such a successful campaign, why don’t we turn this into a political movement so it doesn’t stop there.’ We were confined for a whole weekend at an unknown resort in Tocaima. Then we agreed to turn the signatures’ campaign into a movement.²⁴³

On May 25, as promised, 400 delegates from all over the country met at the National Capitol’s Elliptic Room, in what turned out to be a multitudinous enthusiastic event, full of triumphal speeches and declarations. Throughout the six

²⁴² E. Santos, personal interview, tape recorded, September 27, 2006

²⁴³ Ibidem.

hours the meeting lasted, there was a profusion of messages, speeches, close to 30, the document was read and discussed, and even La Mama performed a political parody, right before the presentation of the 432,000 signatures. New tasks, along the lines of those proposed in the main document, were scheduled and a new date, August 26, was set for the next meeting where the process started by the collections of firms would presumably end in the proclamation of the new group.

The closing speech was given by Enrique Santos Calderón, the main architect of the movement, who synthesized the event in the name of the National Committee, and as representative of *Alternativa* as an organization. The main document announced the creation of the movement's official paper. When it came out several months later, its director was Antonio Caballero, second to Santos in the editorial staff of *Alternativa*.

In June 4 elections, the electoral balance for the left was a disaster. The performance was reviewed in the magazine, in a we-told-you-so tone.

In absolute terms, the fall at the polls had the following proportions: the UNO-ANAPO-MIL that supported Pernía felt 32 percent (from 130,000 to 88,000); the FUP with Piedrahita felt 55 percent (from 54,000 to 24,000) and Socorro Ramírez from the UNIOS coalition fell 44 percent (from 10,000 to 6,600). The left just had 2.5 percent of the votes—against 4.7 percent just three months ago—and the total of 120,000 votes achieved represent less than one in one thousand of the electoral potential in the country (calculated as 12.6 million).²⁴⁴

By contrast, the parties of the establishment draw close to 4.659,000 votes, including those of the general. This time the Liberal candidate Julio César Turbay Ayala, the epitome of the professional politician, a mediocre man by all standards,

²⁴⁴ Alt. 166, 6/5/78, p. 5

won the presidency against the Conservative candidate Belisario Betancur by just 92,000 votes. Abstention however, was of 62.4 percent, meaning the new President was elected with just fewer than 20 percent of the potential votes.

A period of darkness

Turbay's period as President signaled one of the darkest times in the history of Colombia in terms of human rights, bringing back memories of the times of *La Violencia* and evoking the South Cone dictatorships in its brutality and arbitrariness. His presidency, as it was expected from the biggest Liberal *cacique* and boss, only stimulated the new corruption orgy based on drug trafficking and other illegal activities in which the political class and the armed forces were deeply involved. *Alternativa* was the only medium to openly keep the fight during this period, going beyond its own pages and journalism to combat the regime, including its own political movement forged in a close alliance with M-19. Other publications such as the tabloid *El Bogotano* and the daily *El Espectador* had a critical posture toward the government, but they did from an institutional, non-political perspective.

The Firme! campaign and its logo was designed by Carlos Duque, a noted creative publicist. It morphed into FIRMES, a full-fledged new movement, (which can be translated into English as firm, steadfast, staunch, steadily or to stand firm). It appeared for the first time in a headline in issue 167, where the birth of the movement's paper, to be launched tentatively on June 26, was also announced.²⁴⁵ The logo, very similar to Firme! was introduced in issue 168.²⁴⁶ This new party of the left

²⁴⁵ Alt. 167, 6/19/78, p. 14

²⁴⁶ Alt. 168, 6/26/78, p. 7

from then on monopolized the information about the leftist opposition in the magazine. Other movements, now deprived of the tribune they had enjoyed up to the time of the June 4 elections, were barely mentioned afterwards.

Alternativa informed about the construction of the political movement from scratch: the formation of the 25 regional and city committees, meetings, reunions and assemblies, the participation in protests and strikes, new partners and adherents, the preparations for the August meeting, it was all FIRMES. There were working commissions on unions, students, culture, journalism, entertainment-sports and intellectuals-professional as well as permanent commissions on finances, press, propaganda and an executive committee in charge of coordinating all the tasks.

FIRMES was also the name of a bimonthly, eight-page tabloid, which began publication on July 7, a Friday. As described in the magazine, “FIRMES has information on activities and orientation of the movement and commentaries on current political issues and the popular struggles.”²⁴⁷ One of the ironies was spawning a partisan, organizing and openly proselytizing paper, which was the creation of the staff of *Alternativa*, who wrote and made the first issue. The paper, all 10,000 copies of it, as the magazine announced later, sold out its first edition in five days of circulation. *Alternativa* remained as a general interest magazine within the left, and although openly known as one of FIRMES’ creators, it maintained its identity of separate content, dedicating a small portion to informing on FIRMES activities. By creating a paper, the leaders of FIRMES and the staff of *Alternativa* maintained the magazine’s role as a publication geared toward the general population. One consequence of this decision was to leave the magazine by itself, allowing it to keep

²⁴⁷ Alt. 170, 10/7/78, p. 11

its journalistic identity to the end, maintaining the usual mix of analysis and interpretation on the political life of the country, featuring international affairs, columnists, popular struggles and culture, among other topics.

The preparations for the August 26 encounter continued at an accelerated pace, including the drafting of a document setting the basis for a full-fledged political movement. A peasant encounter of more than 150 peasant leaders from twelve departments met in Tolima to discuss the organization and policies of FIRMES. A National Peasant Commission was created, after delegates listened to reports from all over the country. The main delegate from the National Committee was Santos Calderón, in his role as a political organizer.

Two of the most recognized national leaders of MOIR, Rafael Pardo and Carlos Bula, left their movement to adhere to FIRMES and there were conversations with left-leaning Liberal personalities as well, such as Luis Villar Borda and Apolinar Días Callejas. As the information made public through the pages of *Alternativa showed*, a grand national movement was taking shape, picking up many people who saw in the new political entity a way to channel their energies and aspirations for a new country. News from people and organizations kept pouring in from different places and regions, many of them reporting about regional meetings and conventions in preparation for the big event. In the editorial on the issue that circulated the week the event was going to take place, the magazine expressed its optimism on the political venture, confident that such a political undertaking had all the conditions to succeed in the current political climate at the time, as a democratic and wide movement.

This national encounter must advance in the definition of what FIRMES means, in the concrete form of some immediate political tasks and minimum organizational criteria. But, above all, in the ratification before the country of a massive, popular and belligerent movement that represents a new alternative and which has before it a future full of possibilities.²⁴⁸

The official declaration of FIRMES to be read and discussed at the launching convention was published in draft form in the pages of the magazine.²⁴⁹ It repeated the points made previously, this time as a full declaration of the objectives and nature of the new political movement. Both documents had been written by Santos Calderón and Antonio Caballero, with some input from other members of the Central Committee, a sign of the conceptual leadership of *Alternativa* in the creation of the movement.

Few times before in the history of the magazine, and very few times in the entire history of Colombia's left, had there had been such a through analysis of the circumstances that led to the birth of a political movement. It was not only a declaration of principles, but also a grand vision of where the country should go, proposed by the same people who had espoused those principles from the pages of the magazine for more than four years. It was also a testimony to the political clarity of Santos and Caballero, and of their commitment and belief in the cause of building a Colombian-style socialism. For them, it was perhaps the last hope of realizing the dream of thousands of leftist militants for a lasting change in the face of a decadent, corrupt and inept system of government.

²⁴⁸ Alt. 176, 21/8/78, p. 1

²⁴⁹ Alt. 177, 28/8/78, p. 16.

The launching event of FIRMES was multitudinous, repeating and augmenting the May 25 act by filling up the Jorge Eliécer Gaitán theater in downtown Bogotá. The previous day, 300 delegates gathered to discuss the political orientation, the immediate task, and the organizing criteria of the new movement, as well as the political declaration read the following day. This time, *Alternativa* just published information on the event instead of the whole dossier of documents, which were left for the movement's paper to divulge. Once again, there were dozens of speakers and the reading of many messages. It was up to Enrique Santos to make a brief presentation of the political declaration, read in its entirety by theater director and actor Eddy Armando and *Alternativa*'s production manager Rubén Carvajalino, both M-19 clandestine militants, who, as several others, were part of FIRMES, unbeknownst to most of the movement's leadership. Keeping with an exigency of the movement, Humberto Molina, the leader of URS, announced his movement's dissolution into FIRMES, as did several other groups in the country, including *ANAPO Socialista* and *ANAPO Independiente*. The closing speech was given by Gerardo Molina, one of the most respected old revolutionaries in the country. The magazine reported,

The Gaitán encounter stood out because of its unitary spirit, because of the belligerence and enthusiasm of those attending and the coincidence of all orators in the rejection to sectarianism, schematics and the international struggles division that so much harm has caused the Colombian left. The public launching of FIRMES was, in synthesis, a convincing ratification before the entire country of the wide, popular and democratic character of a movement that aspires to become a new political alternative for the Colombian people.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Alt. 178, 6/11/78, p. 19

The first test for the new movement came on occasion of the first anniversary of the September 14's National Strike marked by demonstrations throughout the country. It was a hostile climate created by the recently elected government of Julio César Turbay Ayala, who issued the infamous Security Statute under the power of the State of Siege. The statute increased the penalties for bearing arms against the government (8 to 14 years) and for perturbation of public order (20 years). Occupying places to pressure decisions, distributing propaganda deemed subversive or placing offending or subversive writing, using 'unjustifiable objects such as fire arms, knives, steel rods, even stones, carried a one year non-commutable arrest.' The objective, as *Alternativa* noted, was not to fight common criminals but to attack popular protests such as strikes and demonstrations.²⁵¹

One year after the national strike, not only the petitions had not been answered, much less granted, but with the new government, the situation was even worse. FIRMES' Central Committee decided to commemorate the previous year's strike as well as participate in the activities marking the anniversaries of the coup against Salvador Allende, and the struggle for the independence of the Nicaraguan people, who at the time was in the process of ousting dictator Anastasio Somoza. It also expressed its support for the petitions by the four union confederations.

Adding to the tension in what promised to be an agitated political period for the new President Turbay was the assassination by a small group called Autodefensa Obrera (Workers Self Defense) of former Minister Rafael Pardo Buelvas on September 13. Three weeks before the group had taken over *Alternativa's* headquarters, posing with their heavy arms and painting slogans in the walls.

²⁵¹ Alt. 179, 11/9/78, p. 3.

Previously it had carried out small terrorist actions such as an attempt on the life of a bullfighter, taking over a health center and an office of Telecom and robbing a bank. According to a communiqué, the group has committed the murder to avenge the deaths of close to 30 people during the strike of 1977 at the hands of government forces. Although practically all parties on the left and even the M-19 movement condemned the murder, the damage was done. The government immediately banned the September 14 demonstrations and justified the use of the Security Statute.

From then on, other than organizing and growing, the focus of FIRMES' activities, and of *Alternativa's* coverage for that matter, was to assume an active role in opposing the Security Statute by organizing a wide front against it. Contacts began in order to organize a great act of protest and Luis Carlos Pérez began drafting a document to "orient the denunciation of the Statute before popular organizations."²⁵²

It was clear the government did not intend to treat the opposition with kid gloves, given the declarations by the new Minister of Defense, General Camacho Leyva, an ambitious man and a notorious hawk, who said clearly and loudly that terrorists would be answered with their same weapons. That is how the magazine interpreted the brutal tortures and murder of José Manuel Martínez Quiroz, committed, according to all indications, by the government's secret services.²⁵³ There were in other similar instances and places, ominous signs of the onslaught that followed: murders of an ANAPO *Socialista* militant in Bucaramanga, a student in Cali, a school teacher in Montería and another student in Riohacha; a bacteriologist kidnapped by police detectives in Barranquilla, and never found; tortures inflicted

²⁵² Alt. 183, 10/8/78, p.14

²⁵³ (184, 16/10/78, p. 6)

upon an EPL militant by F-2 agents. In all cases, investigations were stalled, or not carried out, by the office of the Attorney General, nor were there any protests from the mainstream press. *Alternativa* interpreted these cases as a deliberate decision to apply the death penalty, without trial and accompanied by torture of those who dissented politically from the social, economic and political regime existing in Colombia.

The body of José Manuel Martínez Quiroz was found in a garbage dump close to Bogotá on September 29, with evident signs of torture, which included torn fingernails, crushed face and burned feet. He had been followed closely by the security services of the government and, as the editorial says, his death was explained by confusing information. Quiroz had been a founding member of the ELN, and his murder may have been retaliation for the crime of the ex-minister. Quiroz' assassination was the beginning of the dirty war that characterized Turbay's government under the direction of his minister of defense who had implied that the government fully intended to counter the perceived left wing terrorism with its own terrorism of state. And, even though during the López government, there were some suspicions and some indications of the birth of paramilitary squads associated with the armed forces, such as the ones that bombed *Alternativa*, this time those obscure elements were acting permanently and with impunity, as shown by the complete lack of results on the "exhaustive investigations" promised by the authorities. According to the magazine, to the consternation of many in the country, the Supreme Court declared constitutional most of the Security Statute, although some measures such as those related to "the distribution of subversive propaganda and fixing writings or

drawings exhorting the citizenry to subversion,” or those punishing “printing, storing, holding or distributing subversive propaganda” were thrown out.²⁵⁴

The analysis of the Security Statute by Luis Carlos Perez went as far back as the nineteenth century to demonstrate that the measures contained in the law were unprecedented in Colombia for their disregard of justice. They not only violated Colombian’s Constitution, but international treaties as well, to which Colombia were a signatory. Perez characterized the law not as a judicial corpus but as a political instrument. He reviewed the sections declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, showing how the government pretended to include within the definition of subversion almost all human activities.

Many other criticisms can be leveled against the Security Statute. Those already exposed are the most pronouncedly destructive of the freedoms it pretends to guard. They aim at what is the most valuable in men, such as their application to their jobs without vigilance, hindrances or condemnations. Nobody feels calm anymore. Not those who aspire to a revolutionary change in Colombia, not those who seek to better life conditions in tune with evolutionary undulations. The threat is against all those who think about a better future, even under the system of private appropriation. Dignity and culture are also in danger, whatever their depth and amplitude. It is not about a transitive phenomena but something that compromised the essence of human relations.²⁵⁵

Security forces against political prisoners used torture systematically. Despite some attempts to hide the facts, press reports produced numerous testimonies of people who had been tortured in the country’s jails. The Minister of Defense’s

²⁵⁴ Alt. 187, 6/11/78, p. 4

²⁵⁵ (188, 11/13/78, p. 12)

explanation was that the accusations were “a smoke curtain out by the subversion.”²⁵⁶ However, that smoke curtain prompted pronouncements by the Senate, the House of Representatives, several journalist and editorial writers, and the Catholic Church, among others. FIRMES managed to create a wide front against the Statute, a rare occasion where most parties on the left came together. The Committee Against the Statute included the UNO coalition with the Communist Party, ANAPO and the Liberal Popular Party; FUP and MOIR, the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Socorro Ramírez, plus leftist Liberals and the Communards Movement.

This time the Committee decided to launch another plebiscite, with the goal of gathering one million signatures. The new drive had three specific goals: 1. To prevent norms of Decree 1923, 1978, or the ‘Security Statute’ from becoming law of the Republic, and to eliminate such a decree because it acted against democratic freedoms and human rights; 2. To eliminate the application of military penal justice to civilians; 3. To lift the State of Siege and affect the reestablishment of democratic freedoms in the country.²⁵⁷ The campaign was set to start at the manifestations programmed for December 5 all over the country, in celebration of the Fiftieth anniversary of the *Masacre de las Bananera* (Banana Fields Massacre).

In an editorial titled “The ‘Triple A’ in Colombia,” the magazine confirmed its principled position rejecting terrorism from the left and from the right.

Terrorism is a symptom of social pathology: it arises when a society is sick. Terrorism from the left is produced by desperation, when the normal channels—that is to say, political—are closed to express dissatisfaction and to protest and there is no other road in sight than to act upon social reality through individual violence. It lacks political efficacy but on the other hand, it

²⁵⁶ (189, 29/11/78, p. 8)

²⁵⁷ Alt. 191, 12/4/78, p. 15

can have very grave political consequences. The first one is that is a pretext and justification for right wing terrorism. Which, in a country like Colombia governed by the right, it becomes a political instrument. Furthermore, it is a way of governing.²⁵⁸

The Triple A, (American Anticommunist Alliance) had the same name of the terrorist right wing organization that in Argentina murdered hundreds of people, and was linked to the armed forces and police in that country. Lawyers such as a Supreme Court magistrate and other who spoke against the Security Statute, and defenders of political prisoners, personalities and journalists such as *Alternativa*'s director Enrique Santos Calderón, received anonymous threats against their lives. The editorial ended with a warning.

This escalation between the left's desperation and the right's intimidation, between terrorism as expression of political impotence and terrorism as expression of government's policy, closes the field to politics. Only war is left. A war among secret, clandestine apparatuses whose victims are the public heads in both camps. And such a war, all the society, except the murderers, is bound to loose.²⁵⁹

The communiqué by AAA was followed by a bomb explosion at the Communist Party headquarters in Bogotá and shots fired at the Communist Youth's house. In addition, an Indian councilman was murdered in Cauca and a student leader was killed from by a gunshot in Medellín. The AAA also painted slogans around the Santa María bullfighting ring the night before the manifestation of December 5 was going to take place, despite the heavy military presence in the area.

Such acts committed by unknown persons, were hardly investigated by the authorities, despite the growing public pressure to do so. In its end of the year issue,

²⁵⁸ Alt. 191, 4/12/78, p. 1

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

the magazine printed in chronological order a list of 35 popular, student and union leaders' assassinations during 1978, none of which was solved satisfactorily. Sixteen of those murders took place in the first four months of the Turbay government.

A national reunion held on December 8 and 9 in Bogotá established FIRMES' agenda for 1979, published in the magazine. The main points of the campaign were the fight against the Security Statute; a national political tour by the National Committee to further explain the political platform, which also included the fight against the high cost of living, the defense of worker's rights with a general salary raise, and the realization of a national convention in July.²⁶⁰ The movement also decided to explain the political platform and to start preparing a renewed program, proposed statutes, and a policy of electoral agreements and alliances.

On January 3, 1979, the country learned with stupefaction of the boldest coup of M-19 against the armed forces. On the night of New Year's eve, while people celebrated the coming of 1978, M-19 militants took between 5,000 and 7,000 weapons from an armory in *Cantón Norte*, one of the biggest military bases in Bogotá, through a tunnel dug from a house across the street. Coming at a time when the country was experiencing the rigors of the Security Statute and the onslaught of the armed forces against the popular protest and the left organizations, the spectacular coup marked the beginning of the hardest period for human rights the country had seen since the times of La Violencia in the 1950s.

When *Alternativa* reappeared after a one-month pause in January 22, the counter offensive by the armed forces had discovered several people's jails, in one of which a kidnapped executive of Texas Petroleum Company was found and killed

²⁶⁰ Alt. 193, 18/12/78, p. 19

along with his captors in the operation. The army recovered most of the weapons. Also, the government resorted to article 28 of the Constitutions, suspending in effect *habeas corpus*.²⁶¹ The reaction against such a blow by the armed forces almost crushed M-19. Many of the organization's cadres were among hundreds of people arrested under article 28 of the Constitution, which allowed the authorities to hold people for up to 10 days without charges or explanations. Many, if not most of them, were tortured at places like the infamous Cavalry School's stables.

Alternativa asked a few questions about M-19: "What kind of a movement is this? What was the purpose of stealing the weapons? How badly hit was it after the recovery of the weapons, the detentions, the discovery and location of the houses, hiding places and printing presses?"²⁶² The truth of the matter is that M-19 facilitated the job of the armed forces' secret services by making grievous mistakes such as identifying several of its militants, including one of its national leaders, former *ANAPO Socialista* leader Carlos Toledo Plata, and a man called Arteaga, who rented the house from which the tunnel that led to the armory inside the compound started. One day after the recovery of part of the arsenal, the magazine quoted *El Espectador*, which affirmed in an editorial that the army operation "was facilitated after numerous clues left" and because "those responsible, some of them owners of incredible vanity and megalomania, did not resist the desire to subscribe communiqués and send defiant photographs to the news media."²⁶³

Despite the close relationship with M-19 and its sympathies for other clandestine guerrilla groups, *Alternativa* held a principled attitude against terrorist

²⁶¹ Alt. 196, 22/1/79

²⁶² Alt. 196, 22/1/79, p. 2

²⁶³ Ibid.

acts such as the Cantón Norte arms robbery. The reason was a principled position from the beginning, sufficiently explained in the pages of the magazine, which had itself been victim of bomb attempts by right wing paramilitary squads with the possible help of the government's and the armed forces' secret services.

Another consequence of the weapons theft and the ensuing reaction by the government and the armed forces was a crippling effect on the efforts by FIRMES and the independent left against the Security Statute. The one million signatures plebiscite was immediately abandoned and leftist groups and militants now dedicated most of their energies to damage control, to staying out of jail and the torture chambers, and to trying to defend as best as they can the few freedoms left in the country as well as those political prisoners unfortunate enough to have fallen into the hands of the armed forces' security services. The detentions did not stop one single day and more than 300 people were arrested, held in total isolation, blindfolded for days at a time and subject to sophisticated interrogations.²⁶⁴

The analysis *Alternativa* made of the situation after the M-19 action was dire. Not only had the government and the armed forces, which were given free reign by the President and the political class to handle the situation, gained the upper hand, but the army came out of it more fortified by its new role. It did not seem accountable to anyone and had gradually replaced many instances previously reserved for civilians, particularly in the area of the administration of justice, control and administration of many towns, investigations and other functions previously reserved for the police. According to *Alternativa*, the military went farther than even the harsh laws of the State of Siege allowed them. They violated the penal code denying the right of

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 4

defense of the detainees, tortured them, detained family members, and even attacked defense lawyers, sometimes signaling them as accomplices. Those arrested under Article 28 had to be on a list approved by the Minister's Council, but it seemed that such list did not exist so any person was liable to held incommunicado for ten days, violating the said article 28. Public defenders were military lawyers and erected all types of barriers for regular lawyers to represent the accused. For example, they had to sign a power of attorney but could not do it because they were incommunicado, or the lawyers had limited time in the military premises where the detainees were held. Military judges did not order coroner exams to prove tortures against the detainees and gave blank authorizations for search of premises.²⁶⁵

Under these circumstances, the M-19 coup was highly counterproductive, especially for FIRMES, who lost most of the momentum gathered through the previous year, from the 500,000 signatures plebiscite to the August convention and launching of the party, to the new proposed campaign to collect one million signatures against the Security Statute. Not to mention the rest of the left and the union confederations, which now had their hands tied to organize protests such as strikes against companies and government. In fact, it is quite possible that the M-19 coup crippled the high hopes the FIRMES movement had of becoming a real power alternative in Colombia's charged political scene.

The magazine regularly printed testimonies of people who had been tortured in the military brigades. Among those detained under suspicion of belonging to M-19 were Carlos Duplat and sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, who were part of founding

²⁶⁵ Alt. 197, 2/29/79, p. 5

group of *Alternativa*. The torture against Duplat, a member of M-19 at the time and one of the conspirators in the *Cantón Norte* coup, were particularly gruesome.

Family members of theater director Carlos Duplat Sanjuán informed *Alternativa* that on the day of his detention he was conducted to a place the military called “The Sacromonte Caves,” where he was covered with a hood and submerged in water until almost drowned. Also, he was brutally beaten, especially in the legs and testicles; hung with ropes from hands and feet, causing wounds in the wrists and ankles, to the point of losing his sensibility in the hands. (198, 5/2/79, p. 6)

Daniel Samper, who now was the magazine’s most important columnist, described the situation in a column originally written for *El Tiempo* and vetoed by that paper. The ways in which human rights were systemically violated included “discreet disappearances” of people arrested with nobody knowing where they were until much later; “judicial non assistance” by denying counsel to the detainees and on occasion detaining their lawyers; “retroactive application of the law,” by suspending habeas corpus for violations committed before article 28 was invoked and applied; “groundless detentions,” for any or whatever reason by the armed forces; “the crime of being a foreigner,” mostly against refugees from the South Cone, because of their political ideas; “robberies to the detainees,” while their houses were being searched; “search of premises,” carried out by men in civilian clothes armed with machine guns without any consideration for property or the well being of the neighbors; “tortures,” such as those denounced in *Alternativa*.²⁶⁶

After a lengthy silence, the M-19 finally answered some of the questions left after its experience with the assault on *Cantón Norte* in an interview with Carlos

²⁶⁶ Alt. 200, 19/2/79, p. 8

Toledo Plata, the only national leader recognized by his own name.²⁶⁷ The former *ANAPO Socialista* militants recognized that they took more weapons they could hold or handle, overestimated their own forces and underestimated those of the enemy. Toledo Plata also acknowledged that the objectives of the assault on the military garrison had been achieved, such as showing the lack of democracy in Colombia where all power had been bestowed on the military, which prevented any initiative to better Colombians' standard of living. The interview was complemented by a communiqué by M-19, reproduced whole in *Alternativa*, about the arms operation, signed by the three members of the Superior Command.

So it came to pass that after five years and 200 issues, it was up to *Alternativa*, a 32-page weekly, to lead almost completely alone, the fight in the arena of public opinion against the reactionary forces, an effort the magazine carried out relentlessly. On that occasion, the magazine reminded its readers that it had gone through three administrations and of its successes and setbacks in a hostile environment, without the advantages of the big press.

We persist in the task of presenting the other face of reality that does not appear in the big press, in reflecting the problems, struggles, aspirations of so many layers of the population—peasants, workers, students, indians—which don't have access or place in the official-prone information media, and in contributing to the search for new political alternatives that lead to a fairer and more just homeland for all.²⁶⁸

Conspicuously absent from this evaluation was *Alternativa's* participation in the creation of FIRMES and its almost symbiotic identification with such political movement. Also absent were the references to the socialist, armed revolution and the

²⁶⁷ (200, 2/19/79, p. 5)

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 1

role the magazine was supposed to play in the unity of the left. The change of course of the magazine was evident, as the note said, in the editorial content, which gained in variety, especially in the international field, whereas the events of the South Cone had much less prominence than in previous years and the rest of the world acquired a richer dimension.

Now the defense of human rights had replaced the unity of the left as the main focus, judging by the amount of editorial space given to each issue after the creation of FIRMES, the enactment of the Security Statute and especially after the assault on the military garrison and the weapons theft by M-19. The actions of Turbay's government and the armed forces, which began to call the attention of international observers, were covered in great detail.

In this regard, a curious exchange of letters took place. According to *Alternativa*, the mainstream press published a letter sent by Minister of Defense Camacho Leyva, on February 22, to sociology Professor Paul Hochstin of Central Connecticut State College where, "in a sarcastic tone," he invited him to come to Colombia to verify the situation of human rights in the country. *Alternativa* contacted Profesor Hochstin, who confirmed that he never received the letter from the Minister of Defense and declared his surprise at the fuss. "I have nor received any letter from Colombia, much less from the Minister of Defense and I ignore completely all the fuss which, according to you, has caused my message to the President of your country."²⁶⁹ Gabriel García Márquez in turn sent a letter to President Turbay in the name of the recently constituted Habeas Foundation, asking him to extend the never delivered invitation to Professor Hochstin to three journalists, representatives from

²⁶⁹ Alt. 202, 3/5/79, p. 9

the *New York Times*, *Le Nouvelle Observateur* and *L'Observatore Romano*, in order to verify the situation of human rights in Colombia, given the official denials that gross violations, such as those printed in *Alternativa* ever existed.

A big National Forum on the state of human rights in the country was scheduled for March 30, 31 and April 1 in Bogotá with the attendance of a wide range of personalities, including Liberals and Conservatives, as well as many artists and intellectuals. The themes included “The situation of human rights in Colombia,” “Military penal proceedings in the State of Siege,” and “The reform to the Penal Proceeding Code and Human Rights.” Also planned were reports on “Tortures and bad treatment to political prisoners,” “Restriction of union’s public freedoms,” and “The crime of opinion and the censorship to the communication media.”²⁷⁰

The pressure on the magazine kept growing from the far right. In an editorial in the Conservative daily *El Siglo* on March 2, director Alvaro Gómez accused *Alternativa* of being the “unarmed arm of M-19,” after a search of a printing facility where M-19 and FIRMES’ proclamations were seized. *Alternativa* accused the army of planting the evidence against it and reminded Gómez of his past, when as a young Conservative politician and the son of former President Laureno Gómez, he had masterminded the murder of hundreds of thousands of people during *La Violencia*, the greatest genocide the country had ever seen.

However, the accusations touched a nerve. In an article in the *New York Times*, dated March 11, correspondent Juan de Onis repeated the charges without attribution or further explanation, calling FIRMES “the legal arm of M-19.” Gómez dutifully translated the whole *New York Times* article, most of it dealing with the

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

charges leveled against the armed forces and the government, which they denied despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

In issue 203, *Alternativa* published a picture of Enrique Santos, Antonio Caballero, Jorge Restrepo, Hernando Corral and General Manager Gerardo Quevedo at a meeting with President Turbay. According to the photo caption, the meeting had the ostensible purpose of Turbay receiving a questionnaire that he promised to answer after he came back from a trip to Venezuela. The reason for the meeting, however, was different. A few days before, staff member Hernando Corral, received through reliable sources the information that the Minister of Defense General Camacho Leyva, had asked the President and the Minister's Council for authorization to arrest the editorial staff of *Alternativa*, accusing them of being part of the conspiracy against the government spearheaded by M-19. According to the source, only one of the ministers, the late Gilberto Echeverry Mejía, objected to the measure and proposed that the minister of defense present proof of his assertions before the Minister's Council approved it. In the following days, through one of Corral's contacts in the Senate, a meeting between the President and the staff of *Alternativa* was hastily arranged. In the encounter, which lasted about an hour, the President, in a paternal tone, advised the members of the editorial staff to be careful with infiltrations from the extreme left, which was prone to penetrate institutions such as theirs. At the end, the President excused himself by saying he had a dinner appointment with Enrique Santos Castillo, the chief editor of *El Tiempo*, and father of Enrique Santos, the editor of *Alternativa*, who was sitting next to him in the left.

Word of the audience granted by the President filtered to Alvaro Gómez, who referred to it in his paper in a sarcastic tone, saying, “The Chief of State always concedes audiences with generosity, especially to the opposition.” The meeting diffused the situation and put Gómez on the spot after the accusations he had leveled against the magazine.

The energies of *Alternativa* and FIRMES now were focused in the first Human Rights Forum, an event that gathered an impressive array of guests, including many Liberals, some Conservatives, the top echelons of the Catholic Church represented by seven bishops, and the top brass of the union movement as well. One of the main objectives of the Forum was to unmask the government’s permanent denials that such violations were taking place against an overwhelming body of evidence. Behind the Forum, however, was also the goal of starting to fashion a wide front against the political class and to organize a wider opposition movement.

According to *Alternativa*, more than 2,000 people had solicited credentials to attend the Forum, surpassing all expectations. Many more mainstream politicians and personalities added their names to the long list of those attending or supporting the event. There were also numerous international guests representing human rights organizations.

While preparations were taking place, the government did not stop the long chain of arrests of activists and militants from the left, students and workers. In just one week, the Brigade of Military Institutes recognized that 85 people had been arrested, accused of “subversive activities.” Meanwhile, to try to counteract the effect that the Human Rights Forum could have, the government tried, with mixed success,

to elicit declarations of support for its activities and denials among the traditional parties and the big press.

As incontrovertible proof of the tortures, *Alternativa* published the results of one of the few investigations started by the office of the Attorney General. The report confirmed that at least 18 students, most of them from Universidad Nacional, presented signs of torture. The magazine published photographs taken by the office of the Coroner, which showed the marks of torture that the government and the military were denying.

Nevertheless, the verdict by the military judge who investigated the torture inflicted upon the students, supported by Attorney General Guillermo González Charry, did not find any fault in the military. An article written by Daniel Samper Pizano analyzed the verdict and the absurdity of its arguments to absolve the accused. “The Vice Admiral, advised by two majors, declared two captains innocent, based on the testimonies of five colonels, one major and six military doctors.” They proved, as the verdict say, that the testimony of the tortured was not credible because they were “suspects of partiality or personal interest in the results of a process.”²⁷¹

The Forum was an act of solidarity and denunciation that filled all the expectations of its organizers. The accusations against the government along with the documental and testimonial proofs, were repeated before an audience that filled completely the Jorge Eliécer Gaitan theater, the biggest in Bogotá. In attendance was a wide representation of the political sectors in the country, presided over by Alfredo Vasquez Carrizosa, a former Foreign Minister and the man whom, from the mainstream, became the main promoter of human rights in Colombia. The Forum

²⁷¹ Alt. 206, 2/4/79, p. 6

created a Permanent National Commission for the Defense of Human Rights, made of forty seven people from all shades of the political spectrum.

Once again, as in many other activities, *Alternativa* became the medium of record for purposes of covering the event. This time, however, the magazine was not alone and other publications such as the daily *El Espectador* and the magazines *Nueva Frontera* (New Frontier) and *Encuentro Liberal* (Liberal Encounter) carried editorials and commentaries about the Forum. Both *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* published the Central Declaration, which the audience acclaimed at the closing of the three-day event.

Hundreds of people were arrested every day, mostly all of them accused of being members of a leftist party, a union, a university. *Alternativa* printed a list of those people, as complete as possible, every week. In one case the magazine informed readers of a search of premises in Cali's Experimental Theater and the arrest of one of his members, the search of another house to arrest a woman and the detention of an artist. Four workers in the Anchicayá Dam under construction were kept incommunicado and the workers of the National Statistics Department protested the arrest of three of their workmates. In Bogotá, two students of Universidad Nacional were arrested, accused of possessing explosives on May Day. A worker of SENA in Cali was arrested and taken to an infirmary where he remained for 18 days, three of those unconscious, because of the tortures inflicted on him. (212, 5/10/79, p. 25) Even two Jesuit priests, belonging to a progressive think tank sponsored by that religious community, were put under arrest, accused of employing one of those implicated in the Pardo Buelvas case.

Among the tactics used by the military was arresting family members of people under suspicion or wanted by the police or the army. They included parents, spouses and even small children, many of whom were taken into custody, interrogated and, on occasion, held for days at a time, as in the case of lawyer and Professor Alberto Montenegro, whose wife and three children were arrested and interrogated. Or, as in the case of veterinarian Luis Ulloa and his wife, who were arrested and whose whereabouts were unknown, leaving abandoned their three children of five, three years and a three-months old baby.²⁷²

Meanwhile, military justice was getting quite busy. There were five mega-Verbal War Councils soon to be under way, four of them in Bogotá and one in Medellín, where more than 350 people would be on trial before military judges. In the later, 69 people accused of belonging to FARC were to be tried collectively. Others on trial included those accused of murdering former minister Pardo Buelvas; those accused of belonging to the Pedro León Arboleda organization; about 100 people charged with belonging to M-19; and finally about 50 people accused of belonging to the ELN.²⁷³

Lacking the unity of the Colombia's legal left, the unity of action of the guerrilla movements was for most militants a highly desirable outcome. *Alternativa* began to play a role in that goal, not just through its pages, but also through backroom channels, thus becoming an actor in the political poker at the time. By doing so, the magazine began a slow drift toward committing to specific causes, both legal and

²⁷² (214, 23/5/79, p. 11)

²⁷³ Alt. 215, 1/6/79, p. 10

armed, a decision that was to play a decisive role in its development and eventual demise.

Because of his former contacts with the left, and especially with ELN, Hernado Corral was privy to the story of *Alternativa*'s relationship with armed groups, yet another story inside the story of magazine.

Alternativa was very respected by ELN because it always gave it special treatment. In 1976, Fabio Vásquez Castaño, ELN's supreme leader, left for Cuba for medical treatment and never came back. His place was taken by Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, a.k.a. Gabino, who allowed all the criticism of inside ELN to surface, especially from urban guerrillas, professionals, students in the mountains and from many urban networks, which did not dare to bring them forward before for fear of being executed by firing squad. Many of them, very valuable people, had been executed by their own comrades, put to trial and accused of being petit bourgeois, of lacking proletarian consciousness, or because they could not carry the same weight as the peasants or walk at the same rhythm. Then Gabino came to Bogotá and he wanted to know the people of *Alternativa*. He had a very good opinion of the role the magazine was playing and of Enrique Santos, Antonio Caballero, Jorge Restrepo. We had a meeting at my house with them and other ELN militants. It was a very interesting meeting because all those who were there talked to him about the need to give a political treatment to all the criticism and to justify their validity and he was very receptive. At one point, it was recommended that he meet Jaime Bateman which he did. When he came back, he was very happy with the meeting and told us about the conversation. Bateman had told him to go easy with the people of *Replanteamiento*, to treat the issue politically. According to Gabino, Bateman proponed that should ELN abandon its rigid militaristic posture, M-19 and ELN could create one single organization and that M-19 would renounce its name if necessary. But Gabino said he had to talk to Vázquez Castaño again. They organized an encounter in Czechoslovakia through the Cubans and Gabino was "poisoned" again, came back through a different route and went into the mountains. Later we know that it was M-19 who had gotten him out of the country.²⁷⁴

Alternativa fueled the debate on the unity of the armed struggle by reproducing a communiqué by ELN in which that organization recognized, just as FARC and M-19 were doing in their own publications also reproduced in the

²⁷⁴ Hernando Corral, personal interview, tape recorded, Bogotá, 2006.

magazine, the need for unity among the armed groups fighting the government. The document called for common examinations of the causes for the distance among the movements, itself proclaiming a self-critical position. The new self-critical position of the ELN presumably included its own *Replanteamiento* nuclei, which had questioned the conduct of the organization by the old leadership that was now being bypassed by new cadres.

Information on the guerrilla movements came into the magazine through direct channels and contacts inside and outside the magazine. ELN denounced the murder of peasants and activists by the armed forces as well as its own armed actions, denying the claim made by the government and the mainstream press that the organization was all but liquidated. FARC's Fifth Front issued a statement in the mimeographed paper *Insurrección* (Insurrection) whereby the organization demanded from landowners and agribusiness a salary rise for the peasants and the fulfillment of legal commitments in the Urabá region, a strategic enclave in the northwest corner of the country and one of the guerrilla's strongholds. Finally, M-19, in its own Bulletin 23, asked for support and solidarity with the before mentioned guerrilla movements, mentioning attacks in several departments, including its own armed takeover of the town of Tello, Huila.²⁷⁵

The call for solidarity became a call for unity by M-19 in Bulletin 24 where under the headline "The people demands the guerrilla unity" the movement acknowledged that "the winds of unity are blowing among the guerrilla columns," adding that "these unitary manifestations mean a total change in the relations of the guerrilla movement, creating the conditions for the longed for and necessary

²⁷⁵ Alt. 114, 16/5/77, p. 21

revolutionary unity, even though it all begins only with an exchange of ideas.”²⁷⁶ The report of the magazine on the ideas in the bulletin was remarkable because it represented almost complete agreement with the ideas it had presented from the time it began publishing again, mostly through its “Letter to the Reader” editorials.

M-19 insists that the revolution must be one of anti imperialist national liberation, popular, with the participation of the majority of the people under the direction of the working class, and of prolonged war in which all efforts and forms of struggle should be put together. For that, the communiqué says, it is necessary that there be the conformation of a Front of political , unions, religious groups and revolutionary armed forces, and it is “there where, along with the comrades of FARC, ELN and EPL, all efforts must be directed.” Such Front must as Camilo used to say, look for the things that united us and discard those that divide us. Nobody can be discriminated against because it uses such and such form of struggle or because it supports such and such international line.²⁷⁷

News about the guerrilla unity appeared when FIRMES was being built. Bulletin 32 of M-19 reproduced in *Alternativa*, expressed some criteria, which, according to the movement, were common ground to build a unified military against the government. They included “the development of national liberation strategy, the military war as an expression of the masses’ struggle, respect for CSTC, support to the National Union Council and the defense of the Cuban Revolution.”²⁷⁸ The movement was ready to meet with FARC and ELN to start discussing a “plan of operative coordination and elements of unitary strategy and tactics.”²⁷⁹ It also floated

²⁷⁶ Alt. 119, 19/6/77, p. 9

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Alt. 170, 10/7/78, p. 7

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

the idea of a National Liberation Front, and their intentions “to get to the bottom, as long as it does not mean absorption, or hegemony or short term criteria.”²⁸⁰

The answer by FARC was that, even though they shared points in common, they were not talking about political, ideological, tactical or strategic unity, but a unity of action “in a practical immediate sense.”²⁸¹ As for other aspects of the political discussions, “there are superior political organs which have to solve questions that are not proper of a form of struggle such as FARC’s.”²⁸² These “superior organs,” presumably included the Communist Party directorate, which had shown its lack of disposition to compromise on anything that challenged their intentions to be the hegemonic force on the left.

The security statute and the political scene

One year after Julio César Turbay Ayala became President of Colombia, the political situation of the left had changed drastically. The main instrument of his policy, the Security Statute, has been applied so broadly that the whole debate in the left, whether to unite around one single candidate or not, was undermined. In the pages of the magazine, reports on the left other than FIRMES, practically disappeared. Gone were the lengthy interviews on doctrinaire and juncture issues in which leaders were asked their opinions as if they really mattered, mostly on the electoral participation and the unity of the left. The truth of the matter is that the people of *Alternativa* matriculated themselves in their own political conception of how the changes in Colombia had to be affected, through a wide front that could include leftist Liberals,

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid

some of whom were beginning to get closer to the movement. Progressively, the coverage changed toward progressive Liberal characters such as Apolinar Días Callejas, Luis Villar Borda, and even old stalwart Hernando Agudelo Villa. Their opinions now seemed to matter more than those of the leaders of the legal left, defeated and divided after February and June elections.

However, the magazine kept up its coverage of the popular struggles to the end, such as the effort by the union confederations to achieve a unity of action against the government and news of strikes and worker's mobilizations. The coverage had also become more urban, leaving the fight for land recovery by peasants to the deep background of the magazine.

For the FIRMES movement, born with the sizeable impulse of 432,000 signatures in August of 1978, and auspicious augurs in terms of organization, the picture changed drastically after that New Year's eve night, when M-19 hit the government by stealing confiscated weapons from an army depot. Then the whole energies of the left, along with those of many left-leaning Liberals and even some conservatives, were dedicated mainly to the defense of Human Rights in Colombia. In fact, the issue of Human Rights had been brought to the forefront of the debate by *Alternativa* through the relentless and audacious coverage of its violations by the agents of the State, especially the army. It should be remembered that Human Rights was the motive for the creation of the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, back in 1974, and that such committee was a point of encounter of the people who founded *Alternativa*.

Now all the opposition to the government, from the left and from progressive Liberal and Conservatives, was gathered in the first Forum for Human Rights, which achieved the notorious feat of uniting such a wide sector of people in a single cause. Whether that unity could be transformed into an authentic political force behind FIRMES was the issue that the leaders of the movement had to confront. In that sense, they kept organizing, under threat from the government and its goons, creating and installing committees, programming and carrying out reunions and meetings and speaking as much as possible on the issues of the day, using it to their advantage as an aggregate factor for their militancy and the rest of the progressive sectors in Colombia.

Alternativa also kept providing context in terms of analysis and interpretations of the political scene, both national and international. On the home front, the magazine kept the heat on the Turbay government, in all its relevant aspects, as well as on the armed forces. In that sense, the coverage of a the disastrous presidential trip was an occasion to call attention, not only to the Human Rights situation in the country, but also to the management style of a government that reneged on all the promises it had made on election time. Turbay was not only criticized, he was frankly ridiculed, along with his ministers, creating an aura of mediocrity around them for the magazine readers. At this time, the magazine's circulation had fallen to 8,000 copies

On the international front, the dominant issue was Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution, with far-reaching consequences for Latin America and a reminder to the Colombian left that revolutions by the people were still possible in the continent. With its affinity to the ideals of the revolution and its privileged access to the main

actors of the conflict, *Alternativa* became the medium of reference for information on this tectonic movement in the political front.

The magazine also grew richer in other content, thanks to its having augmented its pages to 40. The international section, which I wrote along with Antonio Caballero, touched on almost every relevant aspect of the world scene that deserved the attention of its readers. The predominance of the situation of South America's South Cone of previous years gave way to in-depth and well-informed reports on the United States, Europe, Africa, and issues such as the New International Information and Economic Order and the disarmament talks in one of the coldest moments of the Cold War. Unlike many other publications, *Alternativa* had a rich throve of international contacts and sources of information as a result of exchange agreements with publications all over the world.

With issue 219 (June 28-July 4), however, the magazine dropped back to 36 pages and issue 225 went back to 32 pages, thus ending a period that started with the first issue of 1979, when 40 pages were printed. (The last magazine of 1978 had been a double issue, with 48 pages, the biggest in its history). The reason behind the drop was undoubtedly the economic situation of the magazine, which kept getting worse. Besides, it was now obvious that "obscure forces" were affecting the distribution of the magazine in the country and overseas. The magazine stopped reaching its numerous subscribers abroad, precisely when the first denunciations of torture in military prisons began to be printed, and during President Turbay's trip abroad, "where the diffusion of this type of news could give the President's welcome a far

different characteristic than the apotheosis he expects.”²⁸³ All throughout its existence *Alternativa* had a rich list of subscribers, especially in Europe, where it was required reading for those wishing to know what was going on in Latin America and Colombia. As Santos recalled, they were close to 450 at the highest point.

In August, FIRMES formulated its agenda for the rest of the year, as it appeared in *Alternativa*. At a three-day reunion of the National Committee in July, the movement issued a call for the creation of a Democratic Front based on “the struggle for democracy and national independence, against the monopolies and the opposition to the government of Turbay Ayala.”²⁸⁴ A National Convention was announced for September, to discuss a program than proposed “the nationalization of the big national and foreign monopolies, the expropriation without compensation of the great territorial property and its transfer to peasants and concrete policies on health, education and housing.”²⁸⁵

According to *Alternativa*, the idea of a wide Democratic Front, looking into the following year elections, was taking hold. It was the last incarnation of the drive to unite the legal left against the traditional parties and the establishment. Several personalities expressed their interest in the idea, including left-wing Liberals, communists and independent personalities.²⁸⁶

Meanwhile, FIRMES continued preparing its National Convention, now set for November 9, 10 and 11, where important decisions had to be made regarding the midterm elections in February of the following year. The movement was now

²⁸³ Alt. 215, 1/6/79, p. 2

²⁸⁴ Alt. 224, 2/8/79, p. 3

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Alt. 228, 30/8/79, p. 19

working as an organized entity, with defined protocols as to the participation of delegates, the reports from regional committees and processes for deliberations. Several commissions worked on specific issues such as the creation of a National Debate Executive. At the Convention, the points set for discussion included: programmatic basis, tactics, organizational system; policies for the masses; FIRMES' position on different national problems, and election of the new national directorate. The idea of the Democratic Front was wholly supported and given a new impulse by the 50 members of FIRMES' Political Council. Communications were coming from the Liberal left, showing interest but asking to wait until the next elections where the real weight of the political forces could be known.²⁸⁷

Minister of Justice Hugo Escobar Sierra, who had become the staunchest spokesperson for the government, again made an issue of the existence of *Alternativa* by speaking of “the unarmed subversion that many exercise criticizing the authorities, censoring them, destroying the image of the legitimate authority, and in that manner contributing to the insecurity and stimulating subversive groups.”²⁸⁸ This was a new judicial concept in the opinion of the magazine, according to which criticizing the government had become a form of subversion, in which case it contended the growing chorus of critics of the government from industry and the establishment should be measured with the same stick.

While most of the attention was placed on the application of the Security Statute against militants from the left, another aspect was the permanent abuse against workers and their organizations, with sanctions and layoffs in many State entities

²⁸⁷ Alt. 229, 6/9/79, p.1

²⁸⁸ Alt. 230, 13/9/79, p.1

since the workers were not allowed to protest. Despite the government's actions to discourage the worker's protest, on September 14, the second anniversary of the Civic Strike, the union confederations held a demonstration in downtown Bogotá.

In La Picota jail, M-19 detainees threatened a hunger strike because their trial by a military tribunal had been repeatedly postponed. The War Council was set to judge 180 prisoners, plus 60 in absentia. A decision by Bogotá's Supreme Tribunal on a petition by a group of lawyers could throw away the whole proceedings because of the irregularities committed by the military, including interrogation of the prisoners without the presence of their lawyers. There was also a rumor that the trial was going to be conducted in the jail, which, if done so, would be unprecedented.²⁸⁹ Other mega-War Councils were waiting to be staged, including one against 160 people accused of belonging to FARC, while the trial against 15 supposed members of the Pedro León Arboleda group was denounced because the files of the case were denied to the defense lawyers.

To complicate the situation, the government further limited the rights of the accused to effective legal representation by issuing new decrees.²⁹⁰

Finally, at the end of October was formalized the long aspiration of *Alternativa* and its ally M-19 for the creation of a unitary movement of the left to face the February elections. The agreement where spokespersons of the main different organizations of Colombia's left manifested their purpose to unite in one single opposition front, was reached on the night of October 30 at the FIRMES headquarters. It included the basis for a joint electoral campaign and projection of a

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 13

²⁹⁰ Alt. 236, 25/10/79, p. 7

democratic opposition front in the long run. Present at the meeting were leaders of the Communist Party, MOIR, ANAPO-UNO, ANAPO-FUP, FIRMES and *Movimiento de Izquierda Liberal*, MIL (Liberal Left Movement). Opposition spokespersons delegated to FIRMES the writing of joint declaration draft, which would be revised by a commission of all movements and published the following week. The points of agreement were the defense of human rights, lifting the State of Siege and the derogation of the Security Statute; a need for salary raises and fight against the economic monopolies; decisive opposition to Turbay Ayala's government; struggle against all forms of foreign domination, and national independence and solidarity with all the peoples that fight for their liberation. Undoubtedly, one of the stimuli for a united front was the continued onslaught of the government and the armed forces against the opposition, while the government kept denying, against overwhelming evidence that abuses, mistreatment and tortures were taking place.

On the press side, Consuelo de Montejo, the editor of *El Bogotano*, an independent afternoon tabloid and *Alternativa*'s ally in many polemics with the government, was arrested and charged with illegal weapon's possession. The accusation was obviously far fetched and the punishment harsh.²⁹¹

By arresting de Montejo, the first newspaper editor jailed in the country in many years, the armed forces were putting *Alternativa* on notice they were closely following its steps. As the magazine said, this was a calculated move to intimidate the press and bring it into submission. *El Bogotano*, besides carrying the editorials of its director and information of the abuses in the armed forces, was otherwise a sensationalist tabloid not particularly strong on information. However, for the

²⁹¹ Alt. 239, 15/11/79, p. 1

government and the military, it was also a political weapon, a thorn in the side of the freewheeling armed forces.

FIRMES' National Convention, held as planned between November 9 and 11, became again the focus point of the coming electoral campaign, where some 500 delegates heard speeches, cheered and debated. The central table included 13 people representing most of the parties that agreed to be part of the coalition, plus organization such as the Human Rights Committee, the unions CSTC and CGT, and the Cauca Regional Indian Council, CRIC, among others. Many messages, including one by Gabriel García Márquez, arrived and were dutifully read. Coming just one year after its formation, the FIRMES Convention represented a huge success, for it achieved the main goal of getting the majority of the left to unite in a single front.

The cover of issue 140 was dedicated to the theme of press freedom because of the arrest and the harsh penalty of Consuelo de Montejo. The magazine was reacting against pressures on independent media and journalists, which included the suspension of the working license of the Associated Press, the asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy of two journalists from *El Bogotano*, the search of two leftist newspapers, the confiscation of an edition of *Voz Proletaria*, the Communist Party paper in the town of Puerto Berrío, and the threats against the President of the National Journalists College and three other journalists, including three from a mainstream radio station arrested on Journalist's day. Also, one journalist was killed in Cali while in custody of the army and another was killed by policemen in Cúcuta, who were cleared at a Martial Court. Already the military were on record asking for

the President to take actions against the magazine and the independent press, such as preventive detention for the crimes of injury and libel.

Everything that has been said configures an uneasy climate of persecution against the free press. That is to say, against the critical press, because as former President Echandía explained recently, the freedom is needed to criticize, not to praise. It is a climate, which at any moment can result in pure and simple censorship, if that is what the government wants, as it exists for radio and television, and which has served to suspend twice the *Todelar* newscast, under cover of the Security Statute. The President then could say that he is not doing anything else but to apply the Constitution, which says that “the press is free in times of peace.” But not in times of war. And according to General Camacho Leyva’s declarations before the House of Representatives two weeks ago (again General Camacho), in Colombia we are at war.²⁹²

To support its assessment that each day there were less freedom of the press, the magazine quoted the opinions of several noted journalists, included top editors of the most important papers and other mainstream journalists. The idea was to create a consensus for defending the freedom of the press, now that it was even more threatened than before.

Meanwhile, the seventh mega-War Council convened to try 219 people accused of belonging to M-19 was begun at a chapel located right in the center of La Picota jail. It was the largest trial and gathering of accused people ever held in the country. The military tribunal was convened despite the fact that the Supreme Court had not issued its verdict on the constitutionality of Decree 2482, which set limits to the rights of the defendants. Precisely one of the dispositions of the Decree was to avoid reading the files in which many an accused denounced torture and mistreatment.

²⁹² Alt. 240, 22/11/79, p. 5

The beginning of the trial became an emotional act of protest against the military. While waiting in the sides of the chapel, the supporters of the accused chanted revolutionary songs and once inside all of them rose and sang the National Anthem while the military remained seated. A particular poignant moment was the entrance of 19-year old Maria Etty Marín, a factory worker in Cali, who had sent a letter to *Alternativa* describing her tortures, rape and mistreatment at the hands of the same people who were now putting her on trial. She had to be helped in because one of her legs had been shattered by her captors. Screaming at the top of her lungs, she thrust one of her crutches in the air crying out that torturers were not fit to judge anybody.²⁹³

The defendants received some relief from the Supreme Court which finally declared unconstitutional Decree 2482. For the M-19 trial, which was just starting, this meant that all the voluminous files of the 216 accused were to be read in court, which could take up to one year. The government counterattacked by proposing new reforms dealing with justice and the Penal Code. One of them included the possibility of incorporating military personnel as part of the judicial police investigating teams, thus giving the armed forces law enforcement duties in the country. It also proposed to make permanent the increase in jail time established by the Security Statute, including that for injury and libel, which potentially affected journalists directly.

Now 1979 was ending and so was the end of the seventies decade. The occasion called for several reviews, the last ones the magazine printed in its six years of existence. In its year-end issue, it published a list of the ten most important news stories of the year. It was a useful reminder to the readers that the magazine, despite

²⁹³ Alt. 244-45, 20/12/79, p. 9

its forays into the political arena as part of a political movement, still kept its identity and firepower.

As reviews were called for, the magazine made a synopsis of what the year had brought in terms of repression, with the telling headline of “The Year of Torture.”

‘We are in a state of war,’ recently declared the Minister of Defense General Luis Carlos Camacho Leyva in Congress. And there is nothing better than that sentence to summarize what has happened this year in the country. The predominant note in reviewing all the events regarding the actions of the army corps and security organisms, are thousands of searches and raids, massive detentions, denunciations of tortures that could send chills to anybody, trials where the military impose their own law from beginning to end, harassment to progressive sectors of the church, dozens of deaths due to army actions in the countryside. It is all like in the war.²⁹⁴

The magazine remembered the wave of repression that came after M-19 stole more than 5,000 weapons from the military garrison in Bogotá on New Year’s eve, prompting the government to make use of Article 28 of the Constitution, suspending habeas corpus by giving the military power to detain anybody for ten days without even telling anybody about it. “Three months after the arms robbery, 936 people had been arrested, of which 616 were released (*El Siglo*, April 7) because, despite all the arbitrariness of military justice, no crime could be proven against them.”²⁹⁵ However, the government kept denying that torture existed, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, from the House of Representatives, to the Coroner’s office, to the Catholic bishops, to Bogotá’s City Council, among many others.

Despite the opposition to human rights violations, FIRMES and *Alternativa* managed to organize the Human Rights Forum, an event that achieved the important

²⁹⁴ Alt. 244-45, 20/12/79, p. 8

²⁹⁵ Alt. 244-45, 12/20/79, p. 9

feat of reuniting the fragmented left around a cause, along with many mainstream politicians from the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Forum became the starting point of the movement's convention and the creation of a Democratic Front, a goal long sought by the independent left.

As for the left, there were reasons for optimism, as the magazine put it. After the first months of the year, where the government's repression created havoc in all fronts, the left began to control its own agenda by defending democratic freedoms against human rights abuses and by working on a unitary movement to face the establishment parties, a proposal put forth by FIRMES. Unlike the past, on this occasion the unitary proposal was well received and ended up in an agreement in which most of the movements of the left, allied with some progressive Liberal groups, coincided in a Democratic Front.

In the first issue of 1980, *Alternativa* published the Declaration for Unity issued by the newly formed Democratic Front. The document repeated the five minimal points agreed by the signers:

1. To fight for the defense of Human Rights and democratic freedoms, against the peak of militarism expressed in the permanence of the State of Siege, the Security Statute and the institutionalization of torture. For the freedom of political and union prisoners.
2. Against the monopolistic concentration of wealth and the rise in the cost of living.
3. Decisive opposition to the regime currently headed by Turbay Ayala and the reactionary path that he has taken with ever increasing force, accentuating the militarization that falls upon wide sectors of the people.
4. Support for the struggle for a general salaries' raise and support for the unitary process of the union movement expressed in the National Union Council.
5. Effective solidarity with all the peoples of the world struggling for their national self-determination and independence.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Alt. 246, 10/1/80, p. 15

The document was signed by FIRMES, ANAPO, the Communist Party, the Liberal Independent Movement and the National Opposition Union. Maoist MOIR and its coalition FUP were conspicuously absent, along with the Trotskyite groups.

By the end of January, the lack of agreement in the making of electoral lists was already creating tension among the partners, especially between FIRMES and the Communist party with its policy of hegemonic control. There was even talk of postponing the Democratic Front itself for a later stage, giving the impasse.²⁹⁷ The saving formula was to present independent lists wherever an agreement was not possible for the elections to be held March 9. In Bogotá, FIRMES created its own lists for the City Council. In the second line, after the name of Gerardo Molina, the acknowledged leader of the movement was Enrique Santos Calderón, *Alternativa's* editor in chief.

For Santos, this was the first time ever he ran for office and the last as well. The magazine had just celebrated its sixth anniversary with a laconic "Letter to the Reader" where, after hailing its own survival against all odds, including the boycott of advertising, it tried to justify yet another price increase from \$40 pesos to \$50 pesos. It was a painful move, but necessary for the magazine's hypothetical survival. The note ended in an ominous tone: "It was to raise the price or die. And the new increase hurts us more than any reader because we know it is not a definitive solution

²⁹⁷ Alt. 248, 24/1/80, p. 14

either. And even though this lines are not intended as an economic SOS, they are written amid black clouds covering the road ahead.”²⁹⁸

M-19 strikes again

On Wednesday February 27, thirteen days before the midterm legislative elections, M-19 struck again. This time the urban guerrilla movement planned and executed to perfection the takeover of the Dominican Republic Embassy, where a diplomatic reception was taking place. The guerilla commandos had been playing soccer the whole morning in a lawn right in front of the embassy and their activity made them familiar to the security guards. Once inside the embassy, they took 13 ambassadors, including those from the United States, Switzerland, Austria, Israel and México and the Papal Nuncio as hostages. They demanded the liberation of 311 political prisoners, the payment of \$50 million dollars and publication of a communiqué in exchange for not bombing the building and killing every one inside.²⁹⁹ In its “Letter to the Reader,” the magazine issued a stern condemnation of the act, once again directly contradicting M-19’s terrorist actions. It was also a sign of the limits of the implicit alliance between the magazine and the urban guerrilla movement, and that *Alternativa* were not in the loop as far as decisions on military actions were concerned. The position of the magazine was very critical.

Politics is not a cowboy movie. It is not just a question of boldness—even though it is important at some moments—nor should it be reduced to audacity or spectacularity. In this sense, the fascination that the takeover of

²⁹⁸ Alt. 249, 31/1/80, p. 1

²⁹⁹ Alt. 254, 6/3/80, p.5

the Dominican Embassy has produced in many sectors of the population by M-19 should give way to a more critical reflection on this fact, accounting for the possible repercussions in Colombia's political landscape...

And it is this weakness, the still precarious consciousness, which cannot be hidden or replaced by the actions of armed vanguard, no matter how intrepid or heroic they may be. Because what these operations, such as the embassy takeover, pretend, is precisely to supplant the masses' presence and participation in the process of political struggle against the regime.³⁰⁰

Again M-19 monopolized the political and information agenda in a coup calculated to have repercussions around the world and inside the country. While common people showed ambivalent feelings toward the attack, the far right took advantage of the situation to launch a campaign headed by Álvaro Gómez against leftist opposition. *Alternativa* expressed the fear that, as it happened before with the arms robbery, the government was going to use the attack to orchestrate another widespread hit against the opposition, but not before the midterm elections of June 9.

Alternativa's coverage of the takeover was complete. It consisted of a ten-page spread with three sidebars, including an exclusive interview with commanders One and Five, from inside the compound.

The consequences of the monkey wrench thrown to the promising process of FIRMES by the arms robbery at *Cantón Norte*, was still fresh in the minds of the people of *Alternativa*, who had spent most of the previous year fighting for the survival of the political option generated by the movement. Now that the goal was close, again M-19 won the upper hand with a very calculated move, as Commander One expressed to *Alternativa* in a world-wide exclusive interview. The interviewers pressed the M-19 militants on the issue of the usefulness and correctness of their action, asking questions such as whether such an action could unleash another wave

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 1

of repression and perhaps a military coup, how could it facilitate the popular struggle, whether the M-19 fight was against the military apparatus leaving out the people, among others.

Because of M-19's coup, the coming elections almost disappeared from the information agenda. The magazine, however, called the people to vote for its candidates and those of the coalition. It gave a succinct list of people from most places in the country, one of which was its own editor, Enrique Santos Calderón, in a rare appearance in a stand-alone picture. But another article enumerated the many ways in which an election could be rigged, thus calling attention to the futility of the exercise.

The elections took place before the resolution to the impasse at the Dominican Republic Embassy. The great winner on this occasion, as in many other instances before, was abstention, which reached the record number of 73 percent of the voting potential in the country. The unquestionable message was that people, especially in the urban centers, were fed up with politics as usual. The traditional Liberal and Conservative parties and their candidates took advantage of the control of the State to gather the so-called "captive votes," especially in the countryside, to reelect themselves and kept absolute control of the government.

As for the left, the showing again was dismal, although FIRMES did not do badly at all, considering its campaign lasted just a few months. However, it was not a spectacular showing either, at least not the breakthrough many people expected from a movement so full of brilliant and dedicated candidates. The bright spot was the election of Gerardo Molina, the movement's patriarch, to Bogotá's City Council.

Santos failed the cut and that was the end of his political career for he never ran for public office again. FIRMES, according to the magazine, was the victim of electoral inexperience in many neighborhoods, where people could not find the movement's ballots and had to stand in line for long periods to get them.

The results for the rest of the left were modest with an upsurge in Bogotá, where abstention reached 86 percent, and a few other cities and losses in the rest of the country. A few bright spots were Caquetá and Santa Marta, where the left managed to collect one third of the votes each. In cities like Medellín and Cali, the results were dismal. In Barranquilla, now as then the most corrupt city in the country, the usual mechanism was the wholesale purchase of votes, a fraud not even FIRMES could stop.³⁰¹

The final analysis, after most of the results were tallied, was the stagnation of the left in all fronts, with modest gains in some places and bitter losses in others. In total, the left received 3,000 more votes in 1980 than in 1976, with a percentage of 4.5 of the votes cast, but 20,000 less votes than in 1978 for a mere 4 percent. FIRMES, however, remained cautiously optimistic, given the short life of the movement and the lack of organization that marred its efforts in many places of the country.

However, the results were disappointing for *Alternativa*, which had decided to put all the eggs in the electoral basket, going out of its way to achieve the supreme goal of the unity of the left, or at least get a foot in the State's legislative chambers. The poor showing at the polls was also a reminder, when the magazine was in its last

³⁰¹ Alt. 255, 3/13/80, p. 5

weeks, of the decreased influence it exerted in the political landscape of the country, due to the reduced circulation, which was now around 6,000 copies a week.

As for the situation at the embassy, four negotiating meetings did not bear fruit and there were even rumors of dissatisfaction among the hostages-diplomats who complained about the stalling tactics of the Colombian government using judicial arguments that had little to do with the urgency of the situation. The position of the armed forces in the sense of not negotiating was well known, with the result that the government found itself between a rock and a hard place, having to contain the growing pressure from several fronts.

The government, through its Foreign Minister Diego Uribe Vargas, promised in a televised speech, not to take over the embassy through a military assault, as long as the kidnappers did not harm the hostages, one of which, the Uruguayan ambassador, had managed to escape unharmed. The Minister again presented the usual judicial arguments against negotiating the exchange of hostages for political prisoners, while denying in the process the existence of political prisoners in the country. The diplomats, however, responded with a communiqué issued on March 13, whereby they claimed the government was trying to ignore the Vienna Convention on the rights of diplomatic personnel by invoking internal laws. The United States representative was the only one not signing the document.

Amid rumors of a preparation for an assault, the Colombian press complained bitterly of the lack of cooperation from the government and the armed forces, which had them removed from their places of observation. Also, M-19's political prisoners jailed in La Picota expressed in an interview to *Alternativa* that the main goal of the

takeover was to let the world know the real situation in the country and to promote their political ideals. That explained why the list of prisoners was reduced from 311, which included names of persons from other organizations, to just 28. At one point, the magazine reported the situation was in a stalemate, with neither side willing to concede defeat and with the government trying the only real play it had to make time.³⁰²

The end of *ALTERNATIVA*.

In issue 256, which circulated March 20, the magazine announced in its Letter to the Reader under the headline “Bad News,” that it was closing. The editorial was careful not to announce a permanent closing but a suspension “for as long as necessary,” of the publication. The argument was the chronic financial crises of the magazine, fueled by the rise in the production costs ranging from 100 percent in photographic material to 60 percent in ink and 40 percent in paper. Under these circumstances, a new rise in the price of the magazine, which had gone from costing \$10 pesos to \$50 pesos, was unthinkable. The magazine said:

This is about evaluating these six years of journalistic practice, looking ahead to restructuring of an information project that guarantees the true professional stability and journalistic resources to compete efficiently with the system’s press. On these future perspectives, on the concrete circumstances of the imminent closing and on the compensation we will offer to the people who have subscribed recently, we will inform in the next issue. Let it be enough for now with the news that we have communicated today to all our readers and friends. Which is undoubtedly one of the bitterest we have had to publish.³⁰³

³⁰² Alt. 256, 20/5/79, p. 4

³⁰³ Ibid. 1

Issue 257, which began circulating March 27, was the last *Alternativa*. As expected, it was a nostalgic number wherein the editors tried as best as they could to review what they called, in the headline of the cover drawn by cartoonist Naide, “6 years of a compromise.”³⁰⁴ The last editorial was called “To Look Forward”³⁰⁵ a history of *Alternativa* and the circumstances that had led to this farewell issue. It spoke of the commitment to remain uncompromisingly independent, thanks to the support of an understanding reading public and to the mystique, abnegation and work capacity of the writing and administrative team. The magazine claimed to have created, out of a formidable human, journalistic and political team, a current of opinion and thought destined to leave a decisive mark in the immediate future of this country. The unavoidable closing of the magazine, rather than a defeat or a failure, was seen as a temporary and passing setback, for new challenges on the national political scene were ahead, “preparing the conditions to participate actively in a new political-informative enterprise with bigger reach and significance, which will allow us to overcome past difficulties and to agglutinate the best of the new generations that believe in a better future for Colombia.”³⁰⁶

Again, the truth of the matter went beyond what transpired in the magazine. According to Corral, at one point he began to sell the idea that the magazine had to close because the risks it was taking by allying itself with M-19.

One day I found out there had been a meeting of M-19 cupola where they named a new direction, which included Bateman, Ivan Marino Ospina, Fayad and Pizarro and Jorge Restrepo as the *Alternativa* representative. Then I called Enrique and Jorge and I told them they could do whatever they wanted with their lives but they should leave me out of it. They reacted very well and

³⁰⁴ Alt, 257, 3/80

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

realized what they had gotten into. I asked Jorge to let M-19 know that it had been a mistake and that if he wanted he could be a part of M-9 leadership but not in the name of the magazine. And they agreed completely in not taking part of it, neither in the name of the magazine or personally.

It was a costly fight for me but I don't regret having done it. It was very private, very secret, I never wanted to point to anybody in public or to come out fighting. I realized the M-19 was really deep inside *Alternativa* and I had no sympathy left for anything violent, or the armed struggle. The M-19 people were coming in and out of the magazine, they even said I was a detective or something, When Bateman realized this he told them that instead of fighting with me they should try to be my friends.

That is when I began to sell the idea of closing *Alternativa*, first because it was not a business. As you remember our salaries were very low, which we did not care much about.³⁰⁷

The last straw was when the threats against the magazine came directly from the military. According to a version by García, retired General Matallana once told him that a military person had informed him the military had hard proof that the bi-color machine, huge staff and house used by the magazine were paid by M-19 and the general could save the situation by speaking with the Santos family about closing that magazine and telling Enrique to leave or be jailed, that the military were very angry and had all the strings secured.

The short story of *Alternativa*, written by Santos Calderón and signed with his own initials, was preceded by his own picture and that of García Márquez, the main protagonists of the six year journalistic adventure. But an angry and desolate article written by columnist Daniel Samper was the real epilogue for the story of *Alternativa*, a publication that gave so much to the country and revealed the true nature of its political regime.

Alternativa fought during more time than the pessimists hoped for and prolonged through six years the desperate struggle not to end. In one occasion,

³⁰⁷ H Corral, personal interview, December 16, 2006.

it even suspended its publication but reanimated by new Quixotic shots and the breaking of a few piggy banks, went back to the streets after a few weeks. However, the stubbornness of its editors could not defeat the system's impassive machine. In debt and frustrated to a point, *Alternativa* closes today for a time that could last indefinitely.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Alt, 257, 3/80

Chapter 8. Conclusions

The conclusion of this dissertation necessarily brings us to Colombia's present time. The questions that linger on are how does the story told in these pages contribute to answer the interrogations outlined in the introduction, all of them related to the objectives and mission the magazine set for itself from the start. As in any other story of this type, there are no definitive answers but some of them are clearer than others. From the beginning, *Alternativa* positioned itself as an agent of change, part of the opposition to the State and the government. Its objective was to help bring about change in the country initially by way of an insurrection by the working classes, organized by the political left, with the help of revolutionary guerrilla movements spawned in the 1960s by the intransigent governments of the National Front bent on eliminating any opposition to their rule. The methods of bringing about change in the country advocated by the magazine changed with it and at the end, *Alternativa* became an active political player in Colombia's electoral scene, helping to create a united front to try to gain at least some power in the capitalist legislative chambers, by the hand of scarce and hard-won ballots. The change the magazine advocated was to be effected through a novel journalistic model: doing opposition journalism based on a Marxist persuasion, but independent and neutral toward the forces of the left, without advocating any specific position, while trying to reach a general, mass reading public. Inasmuch as *Alternativa*, and the political left, did not bring about a socialist revolution or any meaningful change in the control of power, the journalistic model of the magazine failed. It was a historical defeat, that of the magazine and of the left, one that brought unforeseen consequences for the future of the country.

However, there were journalistic accomplishments and partial triumphs. On the objective of counter-informing, the magazine achieved the goal of showing a reality of the country that few people knew about. It unmasked the big and partial lies spread by the Establishment through a willing and accommodating media. In this sense, the magazine highlighted, for the benefit of those studying the phenomena, the role that the mainstream press plays in a society such as Colombia, in terms of the political and ideological control and manipulation. No, the truth of *Alternativa* did not set Colombians free, but it helped many of them understand the real dimensions of their lives and, in however few cases, act accordingly. It showed that it was possible to give different, and more complex, interpretations of the comings and goings of the political class, to expose the deep cancer of corruption at all levels, the connections between all the big players of the establishment and even recover portions of the country's history from officialdom. If anything, by using Marxist interpretation methods, the magazine brought about a different way of seeing things and of being political, disputing the terrain of social representation to the hegemonic view of political class.

On the objective of doing investigation, analysis and interpretation on the country's reality, the magazine inaugurated many aspects in Colombia's journalism. It brought investigative reports on the nation's economy, to a depth hardly seen in general interest publications, using information hitherto available only to experts and those in the know. It began to talk about human rights in a systematic way and it contradicted and put in the context of the class domination system most of the great cultural myths of the country, from sporting events and beauty pageants to theater,

television and cinema, and the plastic and performing arts. In this regard, from the journalistic style perspective, the magazine proposed and carried out a new way of narrating and telling about the events, a way charged with irony and satire, all of it complemented by the greatest number and quality of editorial cartoons of any publication in the country, past, present and future.

On the issue of informing about popular struggles, *Alternativa* brought to the fore hundreds of fighting fronts in the quest for equality and justice. It gave faces and voices to manufacturing workers, peasants, Indians, students, urban dwellers. It showed a situation far from the joyful picture mainstream media showed. It portrayed a population struggling to keep its head above water while being confronted by a repressive regime, which used the state to issue and enforce oppressive laws through its armed institutions.

As for the unity of the left, the failure of the magazine was to believe that by knowing each other's position and being uncritical, neutral and independent, a leftist could create a community of tactics, strategies and ideas to fight the system. The magazine, as this dissertation shows, tried very hard. It was this principled position of the predominant sector on the staff, which led to the successive crises and the eventual demise of the publication. At the end, the magazine changed course but the new direction was not enough to keep it alive, nor to maintain the illusions and aspirations that gave it birth. It starved to death, economically and politically.

How could a magazine have survived under those conditions, against a repressive, corrupt and unjust system of government, for six years? The narrative offers as an answer a combination of factors. One was the convenience of the system

to keep it alive, to pretend that it upheld the constitutional principle of freedom of the press, while constantly undermining it through different ways and mechanisms such as the economic asphyxiation and sabotage and bomb attempts and permanent anonymous threats. Also important was the prominence of its staff, especially García Márquez, who was the image of Colombia abroad and was recognized as the founder of the magazine and its most important writer; Enrique Santos Calderón, scion of the most important media family in the country, and Antonio Caballero, who belongs to a prominent family related to the president of the Republic. But most importantly, *Alternativa* survived because of the power and the immediate success and prominence it acquired by daring to confront the system and the government using as its tool a type of journalism nobody dared to do until then. For much of its life, touching *Alternativa* would have generated unforeseen consequences for the country inside and outside.

Once *Alternativa* died, M-19 monopolized the political scene and forced the successive governments to negotiate an amnesty and a general peace agreement, which was finally achieved in the late 1980s, leading to the *de*-mobilization of the movement and its incorporation to the political life. This did not happen without bloodshed. In 1985, the country saw with horror how the armed forces stormed the Palace of Justice, located in the other side of the place in which the Capitol stood, which had been taken by M-19 in one of its spectacular coups. Dozens of people died, including 11 of the 12 magistrates of the Supreme Court, all the guerrilla operatives and many innocent civilians who disappeared and were never seen again.

The defeat of M-19 on that occasion and the peace negotiations following left open the terrain for the violent eruption of organized crime, fueled by the enormous profits of the burgeoning drug trade, which forged an alliance with the political class, the military and big landowners. Out of that alliance, and under the pretext of combating the numerous guerrilla groups in the country, came the paramilitary armies that besides controlling the drug trade and other criminal activities, took millions of hectares of land by force, using naked and brutal terrorism as their main weapon. Thus, the prediction of *Alternativa* came true. The void left by the historic defeat of the legal left was filled by the extreme right, allied with organized crime that had thrived under the Lopez and Turbay administrations.

Despite an attempt to re-write the social contract in 1991, when a new constitution was negotiated between the main political sectors, the country practically drowned in violence during the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. Because of the expressions of naked terror, human rights violations, population displacement, massacres, extortion, kidnapping and the corruption and complicity of the political class, this period can be compared to that of *La Violencia*.

Today Colombia continues in a chronically critical state. An agreement between the government and numerous paramilitary bosses has led to the dismantling of many armed bands of criminals. The agreement included an exigency that the criminals that led the violence during that period confess to their crimes. Suddenly, the country has begun to watch in consternation the public airing of connections among the political class, its pacts with organized crime and the complicity of the armed forces, police and intelligence in taking over economic and political life in the

country. Suddenly, a panorama not unlike that shown by *Alternativa* during its six years of existence, has begun to emerge, showing that deep inside the country not much has changed and that Colombia seems immersed in recurring cycles of violence and despair.

Which leads us to the main points of this dissertation. One is that the main and perhaps only valid reason to study the past is to understand the present in all its complexity. In that sense, the careful reading and analysis of the life and times of *Alternativa* offers, for those who read it, an invaluable instrument to understand the harsh reality of Colombia today. In a way, it can be said that *Alternativa* foretold, with its relentless quest for the truth behind the appearances and discourse put out by the ruling class through the mainstream media, what is going on today in Colombia.

The second point has to do with journalism. Since *Alternativa* died, no other publication has occupied its place. Investigative journalism was drowned in Colombia by threats and murders. To be an investigative and committed reporter in Colombia became a truly dangerous profession, as the bodies of so many assassinated colleagues bear witness. This does not mean publications such as *Alternativa* are not needed. In fact, and this may sound as a cliché, they are needed now more than ever. And it is the wish of this researcher that this work helps to bring about a truly committed, independent and activist media in Colombia, one that helps to uncover the crude reality of our country, with the hope that sooner or later the promise of true journalism, that the truth will set us free, sooner or later can become a reality. Let this history of *Alternativa* be an example and a lesson in that direction.

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