

## “VIVIR MEJOR”: *Radio Education in Rural Colombia (1960–80)*

ABSTRACT: Founded in 1947 by a Catholic priest, Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO) was a pioneer in radio education. Offering a radio station (Radio Sutatenza), study manuals, and a newspaper, ACPO provided basic education and encouraged campesinos to seek personal development and to “*vivir mejor*”—to live better. From 1947 to 1994, it attracted over four million subscribers and became a model in 13 Latin American countries. In this article I show how ACPO’s approach to rural development and communication style evolved between 1960 and 1980. As a consequence of technological, economic, and cultural developments, Radio Sutatenza, a station with a more or less captive audience of illiterate peasants, changed as it was forced to respond to rural Colombians’ shifting aspirations and competition from commercial radio. While the organization’s founding principles remained constant throughout this period, its articulation of what it meant to “live better” changed over time, reflecting the struggles of a religious organization to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. While ACPO saw itself as the bearer of modernity, it was often confronted by independent processes of change already occurring in rural communities.

KEYWORDS: radio education, Colombia, Catholic Church, Cold War, rural

Rural populations’ participation in modernization was a key issue in both political and scholarly debates in mid twentieth-century Colombia. After more than a decade of widespread violence, particularly acute in rural areas, and the dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–57), Colombia entered the 1960s with significant optimism and determination to build a cohesive modern nation. This sentiment was clearly expressed in two flagship policies introduced by Alberto Lleras Camargo’s government (1958–62): the 1961 Agrarian Reform (Law 135) and Law 19 of 1958, which instituted a national system of community action councils, the Juntas de Acción Comunal. As Robert Karl has argued, both policies were “premised on incrementalism, the remaking of Colombia one village and county at a time.”<sup>1</sup> While the unequal distribution of land was recognized across Latin America as a source of

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1. Robert A. Karl, *Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 128.

rural discontent and violence, Lleras's reformist government believed the solution lay not only in the redistribution of resources but also in the construction of a new civic identity, through which campesinos would emerge from their state of backwardness and "redeem" themselves.<sup>2</sup> With its emphasis on self-betterment, social harmony, and the dignity of the campesino, ACPO's discourse and methodology fit well with this incrementalist vision of social change, and the organization developed a strong partnership with the Lleras Camargo government.

Most studies of ACPO have concentrated on the organization's early years and emphasized its articulation with hegemonic narratives of modernization that were prevalent across Latin America during the 1950s and 60s.<sup>3</sup> However, the foundation survived long after the Lleras Camargo era, ending its radio broadcasts in 1989 and finally closing all of its operations in 1994.<sup>4</sup> There has thus been little recognition of how ACPO adapted over time, nor the dynamic relationship it maintained with both rural audiences and the campesino leaders who gained an increasing presence within the organization. By extending the analysis across the 1960s and 1970s, this article sheds light on both ACPO's historical trajectory, and on what that trajectory reveals about the period as a time of transition between two markedly different paradigms of modernity. In the early 1960s, ACPO leaders spoke unselfconsciously of the need for peasants to be "saved from ignorance" through external guidance and expertise, but by the late 1970s these very peasants had asserted themselves in the public sphere to a much greater extent, and were both demanding and inspiring new forms of participatory social change.

I begin by situating radio education and ACPO's particular development approach within the field called "communication for development," which focused on radio's potential as a tool of social change. In a second section, I analyze changes in ACPO's communication style, development vision, and

2. Karl, *Forgotten Peace*, 126.

3. See for example Mary Roldán, "Communication for Change": Radio Sutatenza/Acción Cultural Popular, the Catholic Church and Rural Development in Colombia during the Cold War," in *Itineraries of Expertise: Science, Technology, and the Environment in Latin America's Long Cold War*, Andra Chastain and Timothy Lorek, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 114–134; Mary Roldán, "Popular Cultural Action, Catholic Transnationalism, and Development in Colombia before Vatican II," in *Local Church, Global Church: Catholic Activism in Latin America from Rerum Novarum to Vatican II*, Stephen J. C. Andes and Julia G. Young, eds. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 245–274; Jorge Rojas Álvarez, "Campesinos y radios: aspectos sociales de la tecnología en las escuelas radiofónicas de Radio Sutatenza (1950–1970)" (Master's diss.: Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, 2014); and María José Acevedo Ruiz and Soraya Maite Yie Garzón, "We Owe Ourselves to the Land": *El Campesino* and the Creation of a Voice for the Fields, 1958–1962," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 43:1 (2016): 165–201.

4. ACPO was reactivated as a charitable foundation in 2012, when it began providing "campesino digital schools," a contemporary equivalent to the radio schools that focused on increasing computer literacy in rural areas. <https://www.fundacionacpo.org>

use of religious content between 1960 and 1980. The final section looks at what the case of ACPO can tell us about the value of using radio archives to study rural modernity. In constant communication with state and civil society organizations, radio stations were also deeply embedded in listeners' everyday lives. In areas where the penetration of state institutions and major corporations was limited, listeners used the radio as a mediator and source of information about external agencies, and vice versa. I argue that as a consequence of this coordinating, communicative function, radio archives bring to light connections and trends that are difficult to access through more traditional institutional archives.

## COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Communication for development emerged as a field of government policy and sociological inquiry very soon after the end of World War II. Its proponents argued that media technology had a key role to play in national development and beyond, since it could help overcome geographical barriers and inadequate public education. It was also believed that the mass media could stimulate a “psychic shift” that would in turn bring about wider processes of social change. In a seminal book published in 1958, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, Daniel Lerner argued that exposure to the mass media expanded knowledge of alternative “lifeways” and enabled people to imagine other ways of doing things. This spread of empathy encouraged people to break with tradition and embrace change:

For empathy, in the several aspects illustrated throughout this book, is the basic communication skill required of modern men. Empathy endows a person with the capacity to imagine himself as proprietor of a bigger grocery store in a city, to wear nice clothes and live in a nice house, to be interested in “what is going on in the world” and to “get out of his hole.” With the spread of curiosity and imagination among a previously quietistic population come the human skills needed for social growth and economic development.<sup>5</sup>

Lerner's work was later criticized by dependency theorists, who argued that structural disadvantages in the trade relationships between rich and poor countries, rather than the mentality of the individual, were to blame for underdevelopment. Postcolonial scholars also criticized the teleological nature of Lerner's argument, which held out the Western experience as the course that would inevitably be followed by developing countries. Yet, as anthropologist Brian Larkin notes, beyond his particular argument about development, Lerner's conceptualization of the mass media as an engine of social change at

5. Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 412, paperback edition. First published in 1958.

the level of the imagination has been influential in both media theory and government circles.<sup>6</sup> For example, Lerner's perspective on the cultural impact of mass communication was shared by British colonial officials in Nigeria from the 1930s through the 1950s, spurred by those who "believed that development could only come about by breaking open the parochialism of Northern elites and 'exposing them to ideas from elsewhere.'"<sup>7</sup>

US commentators and social scientists in the postwar period similarly saw the new global reach of mass communication as a key ingredient of social change. As Nicole Sackley observes, this perspective was strongly informed by Americans' own increased exposure to other parts of the world: "It was precisely wartime newsreels, reports, and the travel of hundreds of thousands of soldiers abroad that brought Americans to new awareness of global conditions. Seeing villagers for the first time, Americans imagined villagers suddenly seeing them."<sup>8</sup>

The proponents of radio education in Latin America, including ACPO, shared the conviction that mass communication could stimulate development by producing a change in mentality. In 1960, ACPO published a book by two sociologists, François Houtart and Gustavo Pérez, which summarized the organization's ideological principles and methodology.<sup>9</sup> Popularly known as the *Libro azul* (Blue Book), it was designed to be used as a guide by individuals at all levels of the organization, and among those who collaborated with it. The text bears a striking resemblance to Lerner's argument on the link between cultural change and development: "The state of economic underdevelopment of the Latin American rural world is in large part a cultural fact. We do not take away the importance of the lack of infrastructure and resources. However, it is a fact that hunger, low productivity, and the social consequences of all of that could be reduced substantially with a change of values in the mentality of the campesinos."<sup>10</sup> Radio represented a key "element of action" within the organization's efforts to achieve this change in values, since it "multiplies the teacher, provides information and recreation, makes itself present everywhere, permanently, whatever the distance, the topography, the circumstances."<sup>11</sup>

6. Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2008), 117–118.

7. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 117–118.

8. Nicole Sackley, "The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development, and the History of Rural Reconstruction," *Journal of Global History* 6:3 (November 2011): 491.

9. François Houtart and Gustavo Pérez, *Acción Cultural Popular: sus principios y medios de acción. Consideraciones teológicas y sociológicas* (Bogotá: Editorial Andes, 1960).

10. Houtart and Pérez, *Acción Cultural Popular: sus principios*, 37.

11. Houtart and Pérez, *Acción Cultural Popular: sus principios*, 57.

In the international development community, enthusiasm for communication for development grew throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with particular emphasis on radio. In 1978, the World Bank published a synthesis of findings on radio's potential in education and development communication that began by noting: “We have just celebrated the first century of the telephone with a series of reflections on the economic and social consequences of this invention, and television pervades the lives of citizens in high-income countries. But on a worldwide scale it is the medium of radio that has been man's most potent communication innovation since the development of writing.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the study, radio education was particularly important for low-income countries, since it had been shown to reduce the costs of providing mass education and would improve school access for rural or urban disadvantaged groups. The authors further stated that contrary to expectations, radio education was achieving roughly equal educational outcomes to traditional classroom teaching. In fact, they anticipated that the outcomes of radio education would improve further as an increasing number of projects began to “explore fully the potential of radio.” That is, radio—because of its qualities as a communication medium—would begin to deliver education more effectively than a traditional instructor in a classroom setting.<sup>13</sup>

ACPO was particularly adept at exploiting the educational potential of radio. The initial offering centered on basic numeracy and literacy classes, but by the early 1960s this base had expanded considerably to include other elements of what was called “basic education,” such as agricultural techniques, as well as a number of entertainment programs. Radio programs were complemented by printed materials, beginning with large posters that illustrated particular words or concepts. These were distributed to parish priests, who in turn encouraged peasants to hang them on the wall of what was referred to as a “radiophonic school,” in reality any home or community building in which listeners got together to listen to Radio Sutatenza's educational programs. In 1955, ACPO began publishing a series of accessible books called the Biblioteca del Campesino (Campesino Library). The books covered a wide range of topics, and students were encouraged to acquire them to practice reading and develop their own reference library.

In addition, from 1958 onward ACPO published its own newspaper, *El Campesino*, which became Colombia's second largest newspaper by size of

12. Dean T. Jamison and Emile G. McAnany, *Radio for Education and Development* (London: Sage, 1978), 9.

13. Jamison and McAnany, *Radio for Education and Development*, 9–17.

circulation, with a print run of 118,042 per week in 1962.<sup>14</sup> In that year, ACPO began publishing text books or “readers” to accompany its radio education broadcasts. As part of the organization’s mission to provide “integrated fundamental education” that benefitted the “whole person,” these readers covered what they identified as five basic notions: health, spirituality, numbers, alphabet, and work and economy. These materials were incorporated into activities during the radio classes. For example, the presenters instructed students to turn to a particular page of the reader and reflect on the image or text found there.

In addition to recognizing the practice of combining different media—a strategy that was widely celebrated and commented upon at the time—it is important to consider the organizational structures that ACPO developed to embed radio education in rural communities. For example, priests played a key role in helping their parishioners to acquire a radio and set up a radio school in their home or local community. Of equal importance was the “immediate auxiliary,” a voluntary position that could be taken up by any literate individual within the radio school group. Immediate auxiliaries kept a record of attendance, assisted with comprehension difficulties that arose during the class, and corresponded with ACPO to request materials. Following the inauguration of two campesino institutes in 1954 (for men) and 1956 (for women), auxiliaries were invited to attend four-month-long residential training courses in agricultural techniques and leadership skills. Many participants went on to work for ACPO as “campesino leaders,” tasked with encouraging rural communities to establish a radio school and adopt the ideas and practices advocated by ACPO.

From 1960 onward, the ACPO central office in Bogotá included a correspondence department dedicated to replying to the hundreds of letters that Radio Sutatenza received from listeners on a weekly basis. Correspondence between Radio Sutatenza and listeners formed an important part of ACPO’s organizational dynamic and informed the direction taken in both educational and entertainment programming.<sup>15</sup> It was also a crucial way of encouraging loyalty to Radio Sutatenza and reinforcing ACPO’s ideas. As historian Jorge Rojas notes, ACPO correspondents and immediate auxiliaries helped to inscribe the radio with particular social values, as a device that helped educate the campesino, was connected to the Church, and was a source of company.<sup>16</sup>

14. José Arturo Rojas M., “El Campesino: ‘Un semanario al servicio y en defensa de los campesinos de Colombia,’” *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico del Banco de la República* 82 (2012): 145.

15. Aura Hurtado, “Cartas, rádios e impressos: cultura escrita camponesa na Colômbia, 1953–1974” (Master’s diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil, 2016).

16. Jorge Rojas Álvarez, “Campesinos y radios: aspectos sociales de la tecnología en las escuelas radiofónicas de Radio Sutatenza (1950–1970)” (Master’s diss.: Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, 2014), 86.

Surviving Radio Sutatenza scripts and audio recordings show how the content of radio programming itself reinforced the social structures used to deliver radio education. For example, the presenters addressed the immediate auxiliaries directly during programs, both to guide their behavior and to strengthen their status within the classroom, as in this program on agricultural pesticides broadcast in 1963:

I ask the immediate auxiliaries, if they would be so kind as to write the names of these products, write them in your exercise book, to take them into account and remind the pupils of them later. And on that point, I want to ask the immediate auxiliaries as a special favor, that the exercise book that belongs to them, the little exercise book that they should take notes in, should be the best. Because that exercise book the immediate auxiliaries keep is where the pupils of every radiophonic school will be able to get information.<sup>17</sup>

The polite nature of the request and the importance attached to the auxiliary's notes give a clear indication of the respect that the other pupils were expected to show to the auxiliary. These sorts of instructions indicate that ACPO approached radio education not as the broadcasting of a pre-recorded class, but as a particular form of communication in which the teacher would coordinate virtually the classroom dynamic in hundreds of radiophonic schools across the country.

To fund a cultural program on this scale, ACPOs founder Monsignor José Joaquín Salcedo spent much of his time developing relationships with donor organizations in the United States and Western Europe. As Mary Roldán has shown, Salcedo was a prolific networker who used his contacts in the Colombian government and its embassies abroad to gain access to a diverse range of private companies and international organizations. For example, in 1949, with the support of the Ospina Pérez government, Salcedo traveled to New York, where he presented his project at the United Nations and gained the ear of General Electric, a company that would not only supply ACPO with 700 radios and a one-kilowatt radio transmitter but also launch a publicity campaign on ACPO's behalf.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Salcedo was also effective at drumming up support from international religious organizations such as the Catholic Misereor and Adveniat in West Germany and Secours Catholique in Belgium, Cebemo in Holland, and Catholic Relief Services in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

17. Carlos Vargas Vanegas, *Cursos campesinos para principiantes* (program script), August 8, 1963, ACPO Archive, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogotá [hereafter ACPO], 2.

18. Mary Jeane Roldán, “ACPO, Estado, educación y desarrollo rural en Colombia, 1947–1974,” in *Radio Sutatenza: una revolución en el campo colombiano (1947–1994)*, Zuly Zabala León et al., eds. (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2017), 39.

19. Hernando Bernal Alarcón, “Radio Sutatenza: un modelo colombiano de industria cultural y educativa,” *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico del Banco de la República* 82 (2012): 16.

This dependence on external donations defined the organization's mode of operation and public discourse in important ways. First, in keeping with the polarized political climate of the era, ACPO appealed to potential donors in the United States and Western Europe by emphasizing its anticommunist credentials. For example, a promotional film produced in English in the early 1960s described the radio schools as a "vaccine" against the threat of communism. Interestingly, this anticommunist rhetoric was always more pronounced in publicity campaigns than in ACPO radio program content, which suggests that it was used primarily to satisfy donors rather than to shape listeners' politics.

Second, ACPO engaged in extensive data collection about the impact of its work to satisfy present and potential donors. As discussed in more detail below, during the 1960s in particular, ACPO ran a series of campaigns for the adoption of particular technological or domestic practices among campesino families. In much the same way as present-day NGOs, the ability to report back on the number of families that had responded to these campaigns provided a metric that ACPO could use to attract and maintain financial support. Consequently, there was a strong tendency to conceptualize social progress in quantitative terms that could be easily relayed back to donor organizations.

## CHANGE IN ACPO, 1960-80

The period between 1960 and 1980 was a turbulent time in Colombia's history. The Frente Nacional government (National Front; 1958-74), a power-sharing arrangement between warring liberal and conservative factions that were responsible for extreme violence during the 1950s, was so keen to avoid rocking the boat that it could not respond to structural problems. Arguably as a result, the Fuerzas Armadas de la Revolución Colombiana (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC) was founded in 1964 and began its campaign to overthrow the moribund state.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, the Cold War superpowers intervened in Latin America to enforce their ideologies. Increased activity in rural Colombia by the state, armed groups, and foreign powers was accompanied by a proliferation of NGOs (themselves sometimes agents of the aforementioned groups) with very different perspectives on the best path to modernization. Finally, new agricultural techniques and labor patterns were emerging with the arrival of Green Revolution technologies such as agricultural machinery and chemical fertilizers, as well as the backlash against them toward the end of the period.

20. Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa, *Historia crítica del Frente Nacional* (Bogotá: Ediciones Foro Nacional por Colombia, 1992).



The period also saw significant changes in radio listening habits. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s ACPO enjoyed a captive audience. The radios distributed by ACPO were fixed to receive Radio Sutatenza only, a move justified by the organization’s founder Monsignor Salcedo as a way of saving campesinos from wasting precious battery life on non-educational content. In reality, this was a common practice among radio education initiatives at the time, often driven by the concern that campesinos might otherwise become exposed to “subversive” (that is, communist or left-wing) political content. Yet, even for listeners who might use a commercially produced radio to access Radio Sutatenza, the range of stations that reached rural areas was extremely limited for much of the 1960s.

A letter written in 1965 by Rosa Ortega de Meza, a housewife in Gamarra (Magdalena) describes her discovery of ACPO by chance when a bar of soap she had purchased came wrapped in the pages of *El Campesino*, “where it said that a Radio Sutatenza brought culture, education and happiness.”<sup>21</sup> She waited eleven months until she was able to purchase a radio and found her own radio school.<sup>22</sup> Such letters indicate the difficulty of accessing radio in rural areas and the novelty that Radio Sutatenza represented at the time. By the late 1960s, however, the number of stations broadcasting to rural areas had grown substantially. Radio Sutatenza found itself competing with commercial radio stations whose content included popular music, *radionovelas*, and interactive programs such as musical request shows. Also, the portability and increasing affordability of the transistor radio meant that people were not necessarily listening in a group setting. Nor were they listening with the same intensity: whereas in the 1950s the clock formed an essential element of the radio school and the auxiliaries were instructed to signal the start of classes by sounding a bell, by the late 1960s listeners commented that Radio Sutatenza was a constant presence in their homes that “accompanies me in my working hours.”<sup>23</sup>

In the following section I outline three important ways in which ACPO responded to this changing communications environment. I also show how, in a context of polarization and political mobilization, shifting ideas about what it meant to “vivir mejor” were reflected in the content and orientation of Radio Sutatenza programs.

21. Rosa Ortega de Meza to ACPO, February 22, 1965, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 110, no. 875.

22. Ortega de Meza to ACPO, February 22, 1965.

23. Ana Beatriz R. de Morales to ACPO, August 26, 1969, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 243, s/n.

### *Communication Style*

Scripts of the literacy program broadcast by Radio Sutatenza in the early 1960s reveal a strikingly paternalist, at times patronizing, tone on the part of the presenter. For example, students were instructed on how to turn the pages of their reader: “Attention students . . . since you have the reader open on page 11 . . . you are going to turn the page . . . no . . . not with saliva . . . that is unhygienic. . . . It is frowned upon . . . it is dirty . . . and it damages the reader.”<sup>24</sup> During its first two decades, ACPO emphasized that the campesino without education was ignorant and destined to remain trapped in poverty. This idea was repeated in listeners’ letters, which frequently referred to their previous state of ignorance and thanked Radio Sutatenza for “saving” them through radio education.

By the 1970s, however, Radio Sutatenza had adopted a more informal tone and increasingly used listener input to shape program content, with programs such as *Ustedes hacen el programa* (You Make the Program) and *El correo de Radio Sutatenza* (Radio Sutatenza Mail), in which listeners’ letters were read aloud. In this latter period, many listeners began their letters to ACPO by requesting that they be read on the radio or published in *El Campesino*. For example, sisters María Elsa and Agniria Casas Ocampo from San Fernando in Magdalena wrote in 1971: “Following our cordial greeting we are going to ask you the important favor of publishing us in the newspaper *El Campesino*. . . . Now we know how to use a typewriter and we are going to make ourselves Journalists and Poets of the Campesinos.”<sup>25</sup> In both ACPO’s newspaper and its radio programs, campesinos were recognized as individuals who could contribute knowledge and ideas rather than simply receiving education and cultural instruction.

By the late 1970s, Radio Sutatenza was also making a concerted effort to incorporate listener feedback into the production process, shaping the language, structure, and sound effects used. The program scripts for *Disfrutemos la naturaleza* (Let’s Enjoy Nature), broadcast in 1980, include a two-page survey that asked listeners to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as “The sounds used during the class such as water, birdsong, wind and others, help you to see or understand better what the teacher is teaching” and “The vocabulary . . . the words used by the teacher during the

24. Enrique Lozano, *Noción de alfabeto-principiantes* (program script), February 10, 1964, ACPO. Ellipses in the original.

25. María Elsa and Agniria Casas Ocampo to Eurípides Triana, ACPO, May 10, 1971, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 114, s/n.

class, are comprehensible for the campesino.”<sup>26</sup> While understanding the “social reality” of the campesino had always been at the center of ACPO’s approach to radio education, as reflected in the language used, points of reference, and other elements, this understanding was generally based on external observation and the collection of sociological data. By the 1970s, there was greater focus on asking campesinos directly for their opinion and adapting program content accordingly.

This emphasis on taking campesinos’ perspectives more fully into account was shared by a range of organizations, officials, and intellectuals at the time, in response to political mobilization among peasants (both in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America) and an international tendency to question the positivist assumptions that had underpinned modernization theory in the 1950s and 60s. In 1967 the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia (National Peasant Association of Colombia, ANUC) was created by the Liberal president Carlos Lleras Restrepo as a way of representing the peasantry within state agencies and helping to push forward agrarian reform, which had stagnated since the passage of Law 135 in 1961, due to the entrenched opposition and lobbying power of large landowners. As sociologist León Zamosc writes, “It was an invitation for pressure, and the peasants responded.”<sup>27</sup>

By the time of its first national congress in 1970, ANUC had almost one million registered members. While it began life as part of a reformist alliance to resist more radical guerrilla activism in rural areas and enable land reform that would facilitate the expansion of industry, ANUC took a radical turn in the 1970s, when local and departmental affiliate associations organized land occupations and adopted tactics of civil disobedience to demand land redistribution and the recognition of labor rights.<sup>28</sup> Influenced by this turn of events, intellectuals such as Orlando Fals Borda developed new ways to study and work with peasant populations, which became known collectively as participatory action research. This approach included participating in peasant struggles by assisting in the production of newspapers and comics to be distributed among the membership, and training peasants to produce their own campaign materials.<sup>29</sup>

ACPO distanced itself from such political activities and remained deeply skeptical regarding what it viewed as a revolutionary path to social change. In his 1972

26. Alicia Zambrano, *Disfrutemos la naturaleza* (program script), 1980, ACPO, Mss 3796.

27. León Zamosc, “Peasant Struggles of the 1970s in Colombia,” in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, Susan Eckstein, ed. (University of California Press, 2001), 113.

28. Zamosc, “Peasant Struggles,” 102–131.

29. Jafte Dilean Robles Lomeli and Joanne Rappaport, “Imagining Latin American Social Science from the Global South: Orlando Fals Borda and Participatory Action Research,” *Latin American Research Review* 53:3 (2018): 597–612.

annual address, Monsignor Salcedo spoke of his conviction that “a revolutionary attitude of that kind will only lead to the ‘manipulation’ of the great popular masses, with the exclusive objective of changing the rulers, without truly bringing about a change of structures.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, by the mid 1970s the organization acknowledged that it was operating within a changed social and political environment in which previous assumptions about the isolated or passive nature of the peasantry had been shown to be misplaced, and that a new and less didactic style of communication was necessary.

A related change occurred in the organization’s attitude toward regional diversity. In the literacy programs of the early 1960s, ACPO presented regional accents, systems of measurement, and social customs as something to be overcome through education and enlightenment. In the literacy course for beginners broadcast in 1965, the presenter Enrique Lozano led a series of exercises focused on the letter “L” (pronounced ‘e-ye’ in peninsular Spanish), commenting, “All of these words it seems are designed to teach us to pronounce the ‘L.’ They appear especially for the *antioqueños* and for the *costeños* . . . and for the *tolimenses*, and for the inhabitants of Valle . . . where they have implanted the tradition or custom of dispensing with this letter so elegant and resonant of our language.”<sup>31</sup> In this extract, the presenter seems comfortable with the idea that the pronunciation, techniques, and practices being promoted by ACPO are the correct ones, and that regional variations in such matters should be modified through education.

In 1977, by contrast, the program *Buenos días, Alfabeto* presented regional dialects as a natural part of language that should be respected alongside the official language:

Dialects coexist with official languages, and as we have already seen, they are forms that have the same origin as the official language, but they are distinguished from it by their particularities of vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar. In addition, dialects, by definition, have not achieved the political force, tradition, nor literature sufficient to overcome the preeminence of the national language, nor even to maintain their own unity.<sup>32</sup>

Dialects are here introduced as language variations that might have become dominant under different historical and political circumstances. This strikes a very different tone from the 1965 program, which attacked regional accents as an ugly deviation of “our language.” While ACPO continued to teach language

30. ACPO, Mensaje de la Dirección General a los colaboradores de la Institución (Bogotá, 1972).

31. Enrique Lozano, *De alfabeto para principiantes* (program script), February 9, 1965, ACPO.

32. *Buenos días - Alfabeto* (program script, author unknown), May 31, 1977, ACPO, Mss3404.

norms and rules associated with what was considered the official language, the latter was not characterized as inherently superior to regional dialects.

The need for ACPO to respond to regional diversity and ongoing change in rural areas was highlighted by German sociologist Stefan Musto in a study published in 1971. While celebrating the organization’s achievements to date, Musto asserted that “the conception of ACPO has not changed during the past twenty years” and that the organization had become “an end in itself.”<sup>33</sup> According to Hernando Bernal, director of ACPO’s department of sociological research throughout the 1960s, the organization initially reacted defensively to Musto’s critique, in part because it criticized ACPO’s charismatic founder.<sup>34</sup> However, it seems that over the course of the 1970s ACPO did become more responsive to regional diversity in both its program content and organizational structures.

From another direction, listeners’ letters also created a demand for greater regional representation. For example, an auxiliary in San Pedro, Sucre, wrote to ACPO in July 1969 requesting that her letter be published in *El Campesino*, “since there are no publications about the progress of the radiophonic schools of the coast.”<sup>35</sup> The sisters María Elena and Agniria Casas (cited above) similarly requested that their letter of July 1971 be published: “There is a lot of propaganda in *El Campesino*, but on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta there is never anything [published]; nobody knows about our way of life.”<sup>36</sup>

ACPO staff in the department of correspondence began to include requests for information on particular regions, as in this letter to a listener in Chocó:

I hope you will tell me something about the department, for example the routes of communication, the condition in which they are found. Also touristic sites and in general a description that lets one learn about your department. I would like you to send us *coplas* [popular poems in four-line verse], ideally in the native language, possibly it will help you to talk with some Indians and later translate for us what they mean.<sup>37</sup>

33. Stefan Musto et al., *Los medios de comunicación social al servicio del desarrollo rural. Análisis de la eficiencia de Acción Cultural Popular, Radio Sutatenza (Colombia)* (Bogotá: Editorial Andes, 1971), cited in Hernando Bernal Alarcón, *ACPO - Radio Sutatenza. De la realidad a la utopía* (Bogotá: Fundación Cultural Javeriana, 2005), 83.

34. Bernal Alarcon, *ACPO - Radio Sutatenza. De la realidad a la utopía*, 82.

35. Ilce Amira Correa, letter to the program *Correo de Radio Sutatenza*, July 21, 1969, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 113, no. 9885.

36. María Elena and Agniria Casas to Diego Duque Trujillo (ACPO), July 15, 1971, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 114, s/n.

37. María Cristina Hernández Ortiz (ACPO) to Norbey Antonio Zapata in San José del Palmar (Chocó), April 27, 1973, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 18, s/n.

Such information was in turn disseminated to campesino leaders and used to facilitate their work in particular regions. This was particularly important in regions such as Chocó, where ACPO's presence and the number of radiophonic schools remained small throughout the period.

In addition to demanding greater regional representation, listeners flagged the fact that the agricultural advice dispensed by Radio Sutatenza did not apply in all regions. For example, several listeners wrote to inform ACPO that the modified seeds that had been recommended by Radio Sutatenza had failed in their region, while others described modifications they had made in response to local conditions. Writing in March 1965, Víctor Manuel González Rojas, from Venecia de Trujillo in Valle del Cauca, informed ACPO:

On the allotment I tell you the following: I have been [trying] to get hold of the seeds but it is a lot of work because we are a long way from the villages and you can't get them around here. I would really like to do the allotment but the land [available] is very small because [nearly] all of the plot is cultivated with coffee. We created a chicken coop but not how they teach us on the radiophonic classes [because] the plague is very widespread in the farmyard birds.<sup>38</sup>

Through such letters, ACPO became aware of the need to adapt centrally produced content in the light of local conditions. In the early 1960s, the figure of the campesino leader had been conceived principally as an apostle or messenger, carrying ACPO's ideas to different areas of the country. However, correspondence between head office personnel and campesino leaders suggests that by the mid 1970s campesino leaders were expected to play a much more dynamic role in rural development and propose their own solutions to the problems they encountered. Writing in February 1975, the coordinator of Zone Three (comprising the departments of Atlántico, Bolívar, César, Córdoba, Guajira, Magdalena, and Sucre) wrote to a campesino leader based in Tierralta (Córdoba):

It seems to me very important the great spirit of "investigator" that you have, since the main thing in this work, is to know when, with whom, and why we are going to carry out a determined activity. As we discussed [at the campesino institute] in Suta [Sutatenza], regarding the indicators that we are going to use to initiate the work in a region that we do not know, knowledge of the region and the general conditions of the community are very important, in order to carry out concrete and beneficial work.<sup>39</sup>

38. Víctor Manuel González Rojas to ACPO, March 7, 1965, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 3, no. 5564.

39. Fabiola Osorio Forero (ACPO) to Gulfran Avilez, leader of campesino education in Tierralta, Córdoba, February 17, 1975, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 122, s/n.

In response to external criticisms of ACPO’s development strategy and feedback obtained from listeners’ letters, the organization gradually abandoned its paternalist, homogenizing approach in favor of a communication style that respected regional differences and was more locally responsive.

### *Development Vision*

Another important change came in the type of development solutions that ACPO promoted. In the 1950s and 1960s there was great hope across the world that modern technology would revolutionize agricultural methods, resulting in greater productivity and a better quality of life for millions of campesinos. ACPO shared this faith and was particularly keen for the Church to have an active role in promoting the use of technology in rural areas. In 1963, ACPO commissioned a monument, “San Isidro Agricultor,” which was unveiled in the town of Sutatenza in 1967 (see [Figure 1](#)). Depicting scenes of traditional farming alongside two figures representing the latest developments in mechanized agriculture (a young man driving a tractor and another operating a pesticide distributor), the monument encapsulates ACPO’s optimistic view of the potential for campesinos to adopt modern agricultural practices and live better as a result.

Inherent in this vision was the idea that modernity would come from outside and would take the homogenizing form of Western industrialized agriculture. Thus, in the 1963 radio course dedicated to the *dirigentes seglares*, the campesino leaders who were tasked with promoting radiophonic schools in their local area, Carlos Vargas Vanegas dedicated a program to discussing the ways in which traditional agricultural methods and systems of measurement were destined to disappear:

In that way, many abilities and skills, many jobs, many small peasant industries, which had their day and were useful and applicable in other times, are becoming unusable, are being pushed aside in the face of the changes, because that is the reality. The reality is that things have changed and we have to realize that things have changed, to accommodate our ideas to those changes.<sup>40</sup>

The first edition of ACPO’s agricultural reader, which was produced around the same time as this program, included detailed instructions on using fertilizers, pesticides, scientifically improved seeds, and methods to avoid soil erosion. The brand names of these products were included in the illustrations, and in the accompanying radio broadcasts listeners were encouraged to practice saying them aloud.

40. Carlos Vargas Vanegas, *Dirigentes seglares* (program script), April 23, 1963, ACPO, Mss3427.

FIGURE 1  
 “San Isidro Agricultor” Monument, Sutatenza, 1967



Source: Photograph by the author, 2017.

Undoubtedly such information was of practical value to many campesinos, but it is important to note the value judgements that were being attached to particular forms of agricultural practice, irrespective of what the local farming conditions might be. Modern farming used machinery, was rational, and made use of the referencing skills taught by Radio Sutatenza. Thus, in a letter to a listener in Nariño in 1970, ACPO staff member Tulia Hernández wrote: “Your profession of agriculturalist requires you to be up to date with the new discoveries and techniques to obtain ever better harvests. Agriculture is a profession like that of the doctor, lawyer, or engineer.”<sup>41</sup> This vision of the professional agriculturalist was premised on leaving behind what were considered traditional farming methods and embracing the ideas and techniques that came from the “developed world.”

As Abel Ricardo López-Pedrerros has astutely observed, this emphasis on professionalism and technical expertise was part of a wider effort throughout the late 1950s and 1960s to strengthen the Colombian middle class, as part of

41. Tulia Hernández (ACPO) to Marcial F. Ocampo Q. in San José, Tumaco, Nariño, February 23, 1970, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 15, s/n.



a new US imperial project to “make the Third World a society of governors—that is, to make them capable of governing themselves.”<sup>42</sup> By investing in the promotion of the middle class, the US would encourage Third World countries to govern themselves in the image of the United States, and by extension in accord with US interests. This middle class was thus a value-laden social construct that was compatible with US imperialism, rather than a socioeconomic group objectively identified as having the requisite technical skills to lead national development. While López-Pedrerros concentrates on Bogotá’s urban middle class, a similar tendency to promote what were considered middle-class habits and ideas is evident in contemporary approaches to rural development and the promotion of the “modern campesino.”

One way in which ACPO sought to promote the modern campesino was through campaigns that encouraged campesinos to “realize a series of activities of living better, that create in him new habits, customs and uses.”<sup>43</sup> For example, listeners were encouraged to construct a toilet, create an allotment, build a compost system, and create their own farming enterprise, such as a chicken coop or rabbit farm. Through radio broadcasts, articles in *El Campesino*, and detailed descriptions and diagrams provided in its readers, ACPO instructed campesinos to adopt as many of the campaigns as they could, as part of their duty to progress every day. ACPO’s response to a listener in Turminá (Cauca) in 1965 illustrates how the organization measured progress through the achievement of its campaigns, rather than by other external development markers:

You do not know how happy it made us to learn through your letter that thanks to the teachings of Radio Sutatenza you have now managed to connect your house to a water supply, construct a chicken coop, have four fertilizer pits, have the raised stove; sincere congratulations for these important works that you have carried out; they represent great well-being for you and your family.<sup>44</sup>

Letters from listeners suggest that some accepted wholeheartedly that Colombia needed a more technical form of agriculture, and that this would enable individual campesinos and the country as a whole to progress. Others highlighted the fact that without owning their own land or possessing a minimum level of income, they could not contemplate introducing the changes advocated by ACPO. For example, a letter from a housewife in Valle del Cauca in 1963 expressed great enthusiasm for the work of ACPO but lamented that her family was unable to

42. Abel Ricardo López-Pedrerros, “Conscripts of Democracy: The Formation of a Professional Middle Class in Bogotá during the 1950s and early 1960s,” in *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*, A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 170.

43. Houtart and Pérez, *Acción Cultural Popular: sus principios*, 53.

44. ACPO (author name unknown) to Elsa Inés Rojas C. in Furminá (Cauca), May 26, 1965, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 3, no. 5737.

carry out the campaigns promoted by the organization because of a lack of resources, noting that “if we could participate in the parcelizations [of the agrarian reform] we could do everything that you teach us on the radio, and in the newspaper, but in isolation we lack even the most indispensable to live, we have no greater hope than that God will not abandon us.”<sup>45</sup>

By the mid 1970s there was widespread disillusion with the Green Revolution technologies that had been celebrated in the early 1960s. In Colombia and across the world, the use of improved seeds, agricultural machinery, and chemical fertilizers had been shown to place prohibitive costs on small farmers and have low returns in stimulating agricultural production.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the conviction that modernity would miraculously be achieved through the adoption of middle-class reformism and technical expertise had been challenged by increasing peasant mobilization that rejected paternalist models of development and called for structural change, especially land reform. At the same time, the Colombian middle class had itself come to question the values of the National Front era and begun rethinking the institutions and practices of democracy.<sup>47</sup>

This shift in perspective regarding what constituted the correct path to modernization is echoed by changes to ACPO’s discourse on development. ACPO had entered the 1960s with great optimism about the capacity for new technology to improve the lives of Colombian campesinos, and the possibility of self-improvement in the context of forthcoming agrarian reform and infrastructural development. By the latter half of the 1970s, however, the organization gave more modest suggestions designed to orient campesinos within a capitalist system that showed little prospects for change. For example, the program *Mercadeo agropecuario* (Agricultural Marketing), broadcast in 1980, gave practical advice to farmers on how to position themselves within the market and manage issues such as price fluctuations: “What can agriculturalists do to maintain prices? Above all, and as producers, they should organize themselves so as not to fill the market at the same time with the same crops, with the same articles. This measure helps to create stability in the type of products that appear weekly in the market.”<sup>48</sup> Such advice offered a more modest way to “vivir mejor” than the promises of transformation of the whole person issued in the early 1960s.

45. Julia B. de T. C. to ACPO, November 2, 1963, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 1, no. 114.

46. Rosemary Galli, “Rural Development as Social Control: International Agencies and Class Struggle in the Colombian Countryside.” *Latin American Perspectives* 5:4 (October 1978): 71–89.

47. López-Pederos, “Conscripts of Democracy,” 188.

48. *Mercadeo agropecuario* (program script, author unknown), October 13, 1980, ACPO, Mss3817.

Whereas the early ACPO campaigns focused principally on the adoption of new technology and the modern techniques associated with the Green Revolution, the campaigns of the 1970s broached deeper social issues such as the poverty associated with having large numbers of children. In 1972, ACPO launched the Procreación Responsable (Responsible Procreation) campaign. The campaign did not provide birth control nor recommend its use, but did argue that the decision to have children, and how many, should be discussed and mutually agreed to by a couple. This in itself was highly controversial, as it went against official Church doctrine. While the campaign was rejected by some listeners on that basis, many others wrote to ACPO enthusiastically to request more information. For example, in September 1974 Juan Mosquera Cossia from Chocó wrote to Radio Sutatenza to request a copy of *Sexo y matrimonio*, a reader published earlier that year:

I request the book of family orientation because the situation in the department of Chocó is very hard for the poor man, because there is no industry nor a factory for a man to earn a living, and . . . I am the father of five children . . . for that reason I ask you to do me the favor of sending me that book that is talked about so much, because in accordance with my situation I do not want to have more than five children.<sup>49</sup>

In a context where the majority of campesinos did not own their land and had little capital available to invest in new technology, it was perhaps social interventions such as the Procreación Responsable campaign that could have the greatest impact on rural living conditions.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the years of the National Front (1958-74), ACPO had benefitted from state support and presented itself as a close partner of the government, often taking on contracts for the delivery of education in rural areas. With the end of the power sharing agreement in 1974, President Alfonso López Michelsen withdrew financial support for ACPO. The organization's 1977 annual message struck a somber tone, acknowledging that in addition to the problems of accelerated inflation, economic recession, and growing violence affecting the whole country, ACPO had suffered from “the suppression of aid and exemptions received for more than 20 years, and a delicate legal and structural situation.”<sup>51</sup>

Added to this was an international trend toward NGO-led development projects in place of state-led reformism. By 1979, ACPO looked and sounded more like an

49. Juan Mosquera Cossia (Restrepo, Chocó) to ACPO, September 14, 1974, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 121, s/n.

50. Mary Roldán, “Acción Cultural Popular, Responsible Procreation, and the Roots of Social Activism in Rural Colombia,” *Latin American Research Review* 49(S) (2014): 27–44.

51. ACPO, Mensaje de la Dirección General a los colaboradores de la Institución (Bogotá, 1977), 3–4.

international NGO than the parish-based movement it was when it began. The plans outlined in its 1979 annual message included the conclusion of a project funded by USAID, the adoption of computerization for administrative purposes, and the creation of MEDCON (Media & Contents, Inc.), an organization with offices in New York, Caracas, and Panama dedicated to “the promotion, at the continental level and in coordination with international agencies and banks, of ACPO’s ideas and systems.”<sup>52</sup>

### *Religion*

In the early 1960s, ACPO’s discourse was characterized by a marked religiosity. The first edition of ACPO’s agricultural reader opened with the statement: “The land is a gift from God; its beauty, its fertility, its riches, are like the mute Voice of the Earth that tells us: ‘I am a work of God.’”<sup>53</sup> Campesinos were encouraged to improve their productivity and agricultural methods as a way of glorifying God and the nation. This focus on religion was an important draw for many listeners, amid a period of uncertainty and cultural change. A listener from Paillitas (Santander) wrote in February 1965: “I congratulate you on the programs [which are] so good and useful. We like very much to hear the Rosary and the explanations of the Christian doctrine. We are fervent Catholics and we like everything that comes from the Catholic religion.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, ACPO’s association with Catholicism provided an important source of legitimacy among rural populations, encouraging them to heed its advice.

Fast-forward to 1980 and the program *Mercadeo agropecuario* made no mention of religion, focusing instead on the value of learning about agricultural markets in order to overcome structural disadvantage: “[O]bjective of the course: every listener after finishing the programs, will be able to contribute concepts, develop skills, and collaborate effectively in the process of marketing . . . we want you to learn to classify your products, to pack them well, to store them correctly, and be able to defend yourself in the business environment.”<sup>55</sup>

Although Radio Sutatenza continued to broadcast programs with a religious theme, Catholic doctrine was not referenced to the same extent. We can see this as part of the compartmentalization of religion that was happening in Colombian society more generally. Throughout the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth, the Church had been the principal agency to provide

52. ACPO, Mensaje de la Dirección General a los colaboradores de la Institución (Bogotá, 1979), 21–22.

53. ACPO, *Cartilla agrícola* (Bogotá: Editorial Pio X Ltda., 1962), 2.

54. Daniel Antonio Trillos (Paillitas, Santander) to ACPO, February 25, 1965, ACPO Correspondencia, vol. 110, no. 998, Mss3351-998.

55. *Mercadeo Agropecuario*, October 13, 1980, ACPO, Mss3817.

education and social services, especially in remote rural areas. This began to change only in the 1950s, when the state transferred formal responsibility for educational provision from the dioceses to the departmental authorities.<sup>56</sup> The 1960s and 1970s also saw a proliferation of state bodies operating in the countryside. Consequently, religious organizations were no longer the dominant voice in rural development.

The increasingly secular tone of Radio Sutatenza programming also reflects changes in ACPO's organizational structure. When Monsignor Salcedo founded ACPO in 1947, parish priests were his principal allies in extending the program nationally. By the mid 1960s, however, the organization began reaping the rewards of the training it had provided to hundreds of campesinos at its residential institutes in Sutatenza (Boyacá) and later in Caldas (Antioquia), as well. The students of these residential courses went out into the countryside to work as campesino leaders, taking on much of the local organization work that had previously been carried out by priests.

At the same time, campesino leaders began to ascend the ranks of the organization and to take up positions of authority that might otherwise have been occupied by the clergy. It is therefore unsurprising that many campesino leaders reported opposition from local priests in carrying out their work. For example, a campesino leader in the parish of Ituango in Antioquia complained in April 1968 that “in addition, the new priest that arrived at this parish of Ituango is an enemy of the radio schools, and one day he threw me out of the parish house while I was distributing material to a radio school.”<sup>57</sup>

The potential for such power struggles had been identified years earlier by the sociologist Gustavo Jiménez Cadena, in his study of priests as agents of social change in Colombia. The conclusion to his book observed somewhat presciently: “As economic development is produced, and as a greater division of labor and a greater specialization of functions is produced, the priest will be displaced from his direct leadership in economic matters. . . . The priest who is not prepared to begin delegating his traditional leadership as laypeople emerge able to take it on, will obstruct the development process and will most probably become a source of conflict.”<sup>58</sup> What is interesting about this comment is that it describes a structural tension between laypeople and clergy

56. Jane Rausch, “Promoción de la alfabetización en la frontera de los Llanos: la influencia de Radio Sutatenza y Acción Cultural Popular en el departamento del Meta, 1950 a 1990,” *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico del Banco de la República* 82 (2012): 92–127.

57. Carlos Aníbal Zapata to Eurípides Triana L. (ACPO), April 27, 1968, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 70, s/n.

58. Gustavo Jiménez Cadena, *Sacerdote y cambio social. Estudio sociológico en los Andes colombianos* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1967), 288–289.

within ACPO that has more frequently been expressed in ideological terms, particularly in relation to the controversy caused by the Responsible Procreation campaign, launched in 1972.<sup>59</sup> Changes in program content and the experiences described by campesino leaders in their letters to ACPO suggest a more gradual separation between lay and clerical visions of development, and a steady shift in their relative importance within ACPO.

Participation in the mass media market also contributed to the secularization of Radio Sutatenza content. As Juan Pablo Angarita Bernal has shown, popular Colombian music assumed an increasingly strong presence on Radio Sutatenza as the station responded to competition from commercial stations and listener requests. To attract and retain a loyal listenership, Radio Sutatenza began (from the mid 1960s onward) to respond positively to requests for emerging musical genres such as *cumbia* and *porro*, and to distance itself from earlier Church doctrine on the immorality of dance music.<sup>60</sup>

In a similar way, the increasingly secular tone of Radio Sutatenza's educational and entertainment programs also sought to widen the station's appeal in the context of a rapidly expanding commercial radio market. Information obtained by ACPO's department of sociological research in 1970 was particularly critical in that respect. Through a written survey of 781 adult listeners and 130 leaders, as well as analysis of listeners' correspondence, ACPO discovered that the most popular types of Radio Sutatenza programs were, in order of preference, music, news, radio education classes, radionovelas, and radio dramas. As Angarita Bernal observes, this discovery prompted Radio Sutatenza to place much greater emphasis on its entertainment appeal, and to incorporate program formats borrowed from commercial radio.<sup>61</sup>

## RURAL MODERNITY AND RADIO

The ACPO archive contains some 300,000 letters exchanged between Radio Sutatenza listeners and ACPO between 1954 and 1977. ACPO encouraged listeners to write in about which programs were their favorites, their impressions of particular programs, and their progress in carrying out the various ACPO campaigns. Given the asymmetric power dynamic, these letters were frequently formulaic and dominated by what listeners imagined the

59. Alejandro Lopera, "Paternidad o procreación responsable: Iglesia Católica, Acción Cultural Popular y control de la natalidad en Colombia (1964–1978)," *Historia y Sociedad*, 31 (2016): 235–267.

60. Juan Pablo Angarita Bernal, "La música en el programa educativo de Acción Cultural Popular: Radio Sutatenza y sus usuarios, 1955–70" (Master's diss.: Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 2016), 29–60.

61. Angarita Bernal, "La música," 29–60.

organization wished to hear. Yet many letters also included a good deal of personal information and reflections that had few other outlets at the time. As such, they contain important insights on the role of radio in stimulating new reflections on modernization among rural Colombians. While the size of the archive limits any claim to representativeness, the following examples are indicative.

The perception of accelerated social change could generate religious anxiety among traditional Catholic rural communities. In a letter of December 1963, José Marcelino (surname unknown), a listener in the southwest of the country, reflected, “For my part, I can say that in [these] modern times everything is changing [and] there is a lot of betrayal of the truth that God confirmed with his law.”<sup>62</sup> He went on to seek specific explanations to correct his neighbor’s claims about matrimonial life and the “Law of God”: was it true that the Church was now advocating marriage between *compadre* and *comadre* and between uncle and niece? His own reading of *El Campesino* newspaper and a religious guide published by the Claretian missionaries led him to doubt this assertion.<sup>63</sup> He had replied to his neighbor that “if all this is changing today then we could compare ourselves to irrational [animals]” that no longer fear God.<sup>64</sup>

The letter reveals how debates that had recently erupted within the global Catholic Church were filtering down to rural communities. The Second Vatican Council, opened in October 1962, brought key changes in religious practice and theology, such as the use of the vernacular mass and a new emphasis on making Church doctrine relevant to contemporary human experience. Awareness of these debates was often gleaned from partial and conflicting accounts (José Marcelino’s neighbor had reportedly got his information on the new rules of marriage from a text that had come from a school “not far from the city of Pasto”), but it was sufficient to destabilize traditional reliance on the words of the local priest and prompt fears of moral decline. The letter also provides a glimpse of how the radio—and Radio Sutatenza in particular—was being brought into everyday discussions of morality and religion.

Another facet of rural modernity to emerge in listeners’ correspondence with ACPO is the marked perception of a generational divide, with young people often unable to convince their parents to participate in ACPO’s programs or adopt new ideas. Writing in 1970, Juan Evangelista Torres Sosa of Puente

62. José Marcelino (surname and address unknown) to ACPO, December 31, 1963, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 1, no. 185, mss3351-185.

63. The Claretians are a community of Roman Catholic priests and brothers, founded in 1849 by Anthony Mary Claret.

64. José Marcelino to ACPO, December 31, 1963.

Nacional (Santander) complained, “The difficulty is for my mother to let me study because she says that with that she is not going to put food on the table [*hacer mercado*] and she is accustomed to saying harsh words against the [radio] teachers, it annoys her when one turns on the radio.”<sup>65</sup> Torres Sosa went on to describe his desperation at his mother and sisters’ constant criticism of his efforts to wear shoes or plant new crops, and their refusal to participate in his project of self-improvement: “Because I read *El Campesino* and the books of the Biblioteca Campesino I ask them to kindly pay attention to what I am reading [but] I have never had the pleasure of seeing them pay attention; they get furious, they start talking about other things and they don’t pay attention.”<sup>66</sup> Reading the letter, one is given a palpable sense of Torres Sosa’s feelings of alienation from his family, and his desire to live the idealized rural life that he has begun to visualize through reading *El Campesino* and listening to Radio Sutatenza.

ACPO’s reply partly endorsed this feeling of being different from one’s tradition-bound family; an idea that helped reinforce the organization’s self-image as the bearer of modernity and progress. While urging good manners and a conciliatory approach, the ACPO correspondent replied: “I want you to understand very well that your mother is an elderly person and it is difficult to make her understand *our way of thinking*.”<sup>67</sup> If Torres Sosa’s family did not support his endeavors, she added, he should look for work elsewhere, since “the world is large and fortunately we can seek out a life [for ourselves] however we can.”<sup>68</sup> While the perception of a generational divide is common to numerous processes of modernization throughout history, such epistolary exchanges provide a rare glimpse of how radio’s arrival, and the vision of modernity it projected, disrupted everyday life and prompted polarization within rural families.

Campesinos’ letters also provide a window on their efforts to navigate the complex political environment that characterized the National Front era. The National Front is often portrayed in somewhat two-dimensional terms as an elite manipulation and “the end of politics.” This neglects the widespread appetite for a more conciliatory style of politics in the aftermath of over a decade of intense violence, much of it concentrated in rural areas. Writing in 1969, an *El Campesino* reader from Risaralda (Pereira) wrote: “Regarding what

65. Juan Evangelista Torres Sosa to ACPO, no date (but catalogued with letters of 1970), ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 168.

66. Torres Sosa to ACPO (n/d).

67. Lucelida Torre Echeverri (ACPO central office) to Juan Evangelista Torres Sosa, April 22, 1970, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 168. Emphasis added.

68. Torre Echeverri to Juan Evangelista Torres Sosa. Emphasis added.



I read in the newspaper edition No. 576 under the title “*El Campesino* y los debates públicos” [*El Campesino* and public debates] I am going to put on record that in my opinion, those gentlemen who want to have a political platform in *El Campesino* are enemies of the progress of the peasants, because he who talks politics builds nothing but hatred and rancor.”<sup>69</sup>

A key tenet of the National Front’s alternative to divisive partisan politics was the community action council (introduced by the Lleras Camargo government), and numerous listeners reported in letters to ACPO on their participation in the local community action council and its plans for road-building and other infrastructure projects. According to the National Front’s discourse, national growth and modernization were contingent on abandoning the personal animosities and communal rivalries of the past; failure to advance toward a more modern way of life (judged principally through the degree of infrastructure and agricultural development) could thus be seen as a moral failing. This perspective was shared by a listener in Jerusalén (Cundinamarca), who wrote, “Here there is no peace not even with the Devil; there is no unity . . . nothing forms but a group of egoists, including my dad . . . I am unable to do what I have to do and what I have challenged myself to do to help others.”<sup>70</sup>

Others offered a more critical perspective, complaining that they were unable to implement the measures being advocated by ACPO without having their own land. They repeatedly called for the implementation of genuine agrarian reform. Although the Agrarian Reform Law had been passed in 1961 and a specialist agency, the Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria (Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform, INCORA), was established in 1963 to implement it, the outcomes for peasants were often disappointing.<sup>71</sup> “In the newspaper *El Campesino*,” wrote a reader from Tolima in 1967, “we have read with great attention those decrees of the government, but when it comes down to it we can never obtain the benefit for the poor, because it [comes] with conditions that the poor cannot [meet].”<sup>72</sup> This reader had been assured by an INCORA employee that he could be awarded agricultural credit, but only if he could provide a deposit. Such conditions undermined the government’s rhetoric of agricultural development, since “there will be no increase in production as the government wishes, because those of us who work are the poor or the sharecroppers, and not the owners.”<sup>73</sup>

69. Carlos Arturo Henao to ACPO, September 21, 1969, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 320.

70. Adelmina Qually to ACPO, May 28, 1971, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 244.

71. Zamosc, “Peasant Struggles,” 102–131.

72. César J. Buriticá to *El Campesino*, May 28, 1967, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 311.

73. César J. Buriticá to *El Campesino*, May 28, 1967.

In addition to highlighting the frustrations felt among campesinos at the time, the letter reveals the important role played by ACPO in publicizing government policies such as the agrarian reform, and articulating a wider vision of state-led modernization. ACPO's decision to take on this role was partly the result of a personal affinity between Monsignor Salcedo and the first president of the National Front, and partly a strategic move to secure financial support from the state.<sup>74</sup> ACPO's mediation on behalf of state organizations often succeeded in changing popular perceptions. For example, in a letter written in November 1969, campesino leader Julio Abel Díaz Torres from Arjona (Bolívar), wrote, "The reality is that previously I looked at the Caja [Agraria] as any other store and money lender but I have realized that it is a service entity for us, the campesinos. Personally, I didn't know that there was an Institute of Natural Resources and now I am informed through Radio Sutatenza."<sup>75</sup>

By the same token, ACPO was also the recipient of complaints about state entities from listeners who saw Radio Sutatenza as an organization that could make their voice heard. For example, a listener in the coastal department of Bolívar wrote to ACPO to denounce the inadequate response to flooding in his region:

I also permit myself to tell you that we live in a very inhumane manner as a consequence of the problem of the flood, which leaves us lacking all the elements necessary for subsistence; we live running around trying to get food, and our dear father government with its entities like the Red Cross is not attending to our needs as they should, they come here distributing very little.<sup>76</sup>

As a result of its promotion of state programs for rural development, Radio Sutatenza was seen as an organization that would hold the government to account and challenge its response to regional crises.

On the other hand, ACPO also served as an advocate for private companies. An important aspect of ACPO's advertising strategy was to allow companies to sponsor individual programs. As such, Radio Sutatenza became an important vehicle through which rural inhabitants discovered new products and their uses. For example, in a letter written in 1969, listener Juvenal Sambonis from Argelia, Valle del Cauca, wrote:

I have listened every day on Radio Sutatenza to Eternoticias [sic], as such I find out about all the good products that there are in Eternit. As proof of that here in

74. Roldán, "ACPO, Estado, educación y desarrollo rural en Colombia, 1947–1974."

75. Julio Abel Díaz Torres to Radio Sutatenza, November 1969, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 114, s/n.

76. Primitivo Rodríguez Carpio to Radio Sutatenza, December 10, 1975, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 132, s/n.

Argelia in Cauca there are some houses built with a roof of that good product that you put at the disposition of all Colombians. One thing is hearing and another is seeing with your own eyes the good products, for that reason I have tasked myself with disseminating what Eternit is.<sup>77</sup>

The letter shows how companies such as the building supplies merchant Eternit used Radio Sutatenza to reach new markets, taking advantage of both Radio Sutatenza's ability to reach rural areas and its modernization discourse, which helped situate the company as an ally in the modernization of the countryside.

## CONCLUSION

In charting the changes to ACPO's communication style and approach to rural development between 1960 and 1980, this article has gone beyond accounts that emphasize its origins in mid-century reformism and the imposition of a US-inspired vision of the “modern campesino.” Over the course of the period studied here, the organization adopted a more participatory approach, embraced regional diversity, altered its development model, and underwent a gradual process of secularization. Responding to listeners' letters, global cultural trends, and shifts in the political climate, ACPO sought new ways to maintain its position as the voice of modernity and progress.

As well as providing a more complete picture of an institution that had a significant cultural impact in Colombia (and across Latin America), the changes discussed here provide illuminating insights on processes of modernization in rural areas, and the different ways in which modernization, modernity, and “living better” were understood by different historical actors. For the reformist political leaders of the National Front, modernization meant increasing agricultural production to facilitate industrial growth and breaking out of the partisan conflict that had consumed the country during La Violencia. In keeping with ideas propagated by the United States and the Alliance for Progress, they emphasized the role of a reformist middle class in disseminating new habits and ideas among a backward peasantry. As the 1960s progressed, this reformist vision came under attack from disillusioned rural communities, equally disillusioned middle-class reformists, and radical left-wing organizations and peasant movements that demanded an overhaul of the country's economic system, particularly with regard to the distribution of land and power.

In this context, the fate of rural communities held particular significance, whether as the emblem of *convivencia* (peaceful coexistence) promoted during the

77. Juvenal Sambonis to ACPO, November 14, 1969, ACPO, Correspondencia, vol. 12, s/n.

optimistic early 1960s, or as the specter of left-wing insurgency invoked during the political instability of the late 1970s. While consistently more closely aligned to the reformist vision of the early 1960s, ACPO adjusted its discourse in important ways in response to the global questioning of Green Revolution ideas, the collapse of the National Front, the emergence of peasant mobilization, and the spiraling of rural violence. This article has demonstrated that radio played a particularly important role in articulating different visions of modernity, whether implicitly through the dissemination of new forms of music and entertainment, or explicitly through recommendations on agricultural practice. Moreover, it has shown that radio's role changed substantially over the 1960s and 70s. Whereas in the early 1960s radio was celebrated for its potential to transmit new ideas to isolated communities and incorporate them into the modern world, by the 1970s radio was in fact ubiquitous in rural areas, and could be taken in directions not imagined at the start of our period.

Beyond the particular experience of radio education and development in rural Colombia, the ACPO archive also tells us about the importance of radio archives as a means to study rural history. This article highlighted the coordinating function played by Radio Sutatenza in Colombian society. This function was not exclusive to ACPO but was rather characteristic of the role played by radio across the Andes, particularly in remote rural communities. Even stations that had a relatively small broadcast area—unlike Radio Sutatenza—often maintained correspondence with a surprisingly wide network of radio aficionados, state officials, nongovernmental organizations, and private companies. In a wider sense, from the mid twentieth century onward, radio stations served as the vehicle through which rural inhabitants made contact with different social networks and imagined their position in modern society. As such, radio archives can help overcome the limitations of the microhistory by rendering visible the networks that rural people were part of, and through which they both learned about and participated in processes of historical change.

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