

Bogotá

Athens of South America

BY CARLOS RINCÓN

OUR HISPANIC SISTER REPUBLICS HAVE CALLED OUR CAPITAL THE Athens of South America,” declared Monsignor María Rafael Carrasquilla, rector of Bogotá’s Our Lady of Rosario School in his opening day speech in 1895. The business about the name wasn’t true, but what mattered was the pathos of the Monsignor in his determination to attach the prestigious nickname to his provincial city. What’s in a name? With the name of “Athens of South America,” we are facing an unusually complex case of self-monumentalization that gives it a legitimating aura.

That aura has been utilized to empower the authoritarian state in Colombia and to impose a type of society that excludes the democratic expression of conflicting viewpoints and the pursuit of contradictory political and social goals. It wasn’t just a matter of misunderstanding the Athens city-state politician Pericles who compared the social forms of Athens and Sparta in his famous 5 B.C. funeral oration. The idea of Bogotá as the Athens of South America was linked to the Colombian capital’s political, military and educational culture. It never conveyed the universal promise of potential autonomy, dignity and equality of the liberal state—the idealized political community associated with the *polis* of “classical” Athens. The 1886 Colombian constitution, the *carta magna* that spelled out the good Christian political order desired for the existing city, barred entire groups of people from access to liberty and citizenship according to political affiliation, religion, race, ethnic and gender specific criteria. The nickname self-monumentalized a Hispano-Christian civilizing ideal of repression choreographed with grammarians as presidents.

Bogotá as the Athens of South America is the emblem of a hierarchical society barricaded against the experience of the political and social change of modernity. Its ideal is an organic social system, a unified complex of religion, metaphysics and politics that effectively destroys the remnants of political life. In a similar fashion, the 1887 Concordat signed between the Vatican and the Colombian government went against the tide of the waning temporal power of the Papacy triggered by Italian unity. This fantasized desire of religious-political community attempted to respond to Europe’s “immorality,” to the sacrilegious members of the Paris Commune. Catholicism has clearly been central in the development of Colombia in the final decades of the 19th century, when the church assumed the role of regulating social life, education, and the behavior of individuals, replacing state institutions throughout much of Colombia’s extensive territory.

The reversal of logic stemming from this concept of the Athens of South America—between the patriarchal estate and the ecclesiastic, perfect Catholic church consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus—could be described with the metaphor of a Manichean New Jerusalem. The active investment in power and its anxious projection manifested themselves in the celebration of the Athens of South America during half a century, as did the dynamics of promise of the

Christian community and other-worldly salvation. The imposition of this Manichean New Jerusalem led to the civil War of the Thousand Days, beginning in 1898, a long and bloody war leading to Panama’s secession. The collapse of national sovereignty caused disenchantment with the century-long dream of national destiny, tied up with the idea of the integration of national territory and the ambitious task of uniting the two separated oceans through the Panama Canal. But it is not only that. The culture of the Athens of South America, I would argue, while constituting the matrix for modern Colombia’s formation, offers a different but necessary route to respond to the present crisis. It gives us insights into the fissures permeating the social realm of the actual city of capitalist private property and modern legal status since the end of the 20th century. To make a long story short, my analyses involve the relationships between the present Colombian crisis and the world of phantasmagoria in which Bogotá appears as the Athens of South America.

REMAPPING THE CRISIS

Social science and humanities researchers generally agree on two salient points about the present Colombian crisis. First, they point out the dynamics of disintegration in both the social and political realms. Second, they emphasize the discussion of the issue of “modernity” in reference to the relationship between the 20th and the 21st centuries. The two strands of analysis are closely linked. In the political arena, they coincide in stressing that the Colombian State, up until now, has been incapable of imposing any authority over civil society. Comparatively speaking, still in the process of formation, the State has had, throughout its history, an extremely limited capacity to integrate its national territory, to maintain its presence there, to redistribute resources, to regulate social relations and to achieve an institutionalization of conflicts. Because of this, a prominent aspect of the systematic examination of the present crisis has meant coming to terms with the perpetuation and recreation of particular hierarchical social relationships, marked by patterns of domi-

The idea of Bogotá as the Athens of South America was linked to the Colombian capital’s political, military and educational culture.

nation that reinforce subalternity as a relational identity of large social groups. New answers are being found to provocative questions such as: “Why can’t Colombian political parties—resembling only the Peronists and those of Venezuela—really reform themselves?” and “Why doesn’t behavior in Colombia seem subject to any general norms, but only to loyalties and inclinations?”

The most significant contributors to the analysis of the factors that led to the breakdown in the social arena stress that a large role was played by the very late process of secularization. One of

political scientist Daniel Pécaut's most important insights is that "secularization took place more in the perspective of catastrophe than that of modernity." The inability to make the transition to a new civil ethic results from that fact. The social actors do not have an attitude of flexible and creative reflection in response to pressures emanating from diversity, disagreements and conflict, even when these could be resolved. Their notoriously intolerant ways of responding to these pressures increase the fragility of the social fabric. The final irony of the social and political situation is the elaboration of the 1991 Constitution which spelled out—as a ritual of change and in accordance with liberal political theory—a structure of institutions to represent and mediate particular wills and the general will. Nevertheless, at the same time, the ruling class did not manage to envision—and even less to negotiate—a minimum agreement for the re-foundation of an inclusive and integrating society.

Despite the general agreement about the tendencies leading to the present Colombian crisis, recent research has tended to overlook the genealogy and the "effective" history of the relationship between social relations, political, economic and cultural institutions and forms of subjectivity in the period spanning across the 19th and the 20th century. This period is crucial for all of Colombia's development—including its vanishing present.

In the decade 1880-90, discontinuous and paradoxical articulations of a modernity in the periphery resulted in crisis throughout Latin America. Around 1880, the literary spokesmen for the established elites and the new middle-class urbanites began to see nationhood as essential and started to talk about the nation as the spiritual body of the State in the ascendant process of consolidating and imposing its sovereignty. In reference to historically-specific discursive practices, the question of Culture became a symbolic battleground in which to negotiate, rearrange and articulate the establishment of a new hegemony. It is this understanding of secularization and modernity—a gradual elaboration of the historical components of the modern national and the discourse of nationalism in Argentina—that differentiates this country from the case of Colombia and the rest of the region. In Colombia, the nation does not exemplify modern social cohesion. It fails in its attempt to constitute this cohesion in such a way that the Athens of South America is emblematic of a particularly questionable cultural construction of nationhood.

A TALE OF THREE CITIES

At the beginning of the 19th century, long before the figure of Bogotá as the Athens of South America came about, Prussia and Massachusetts had almost simultaneously tried to recreate imaginary replicas of classic Athens. In these two pre-industrial societies, in the tension between civic-urban imagination and diverse forms of symbolic, mythic, and utopian imagery, Berlin became *das Spree-Athen*, the Athens on the bank of the Spree River, while Boston was dubbed *the Athens of America*. Impressed by the French revolution and the justified expectations of a possible Swabian Republic, in 1798 Friedrich Hölderlin began to imagine a Greek-Swabian citizen and Friedrich Schiller an "aesthetic State of beautiful semblance" (*ästhetischer Staat des schönen Scheins*). Along these lines, Wilhelm von Humboldt theorized Hellenism in historic, pedagogic and linguistic works, definitively breaking with the tradition of Latin humanism. After the fiasco of these projects and the catastrophic defeat of Prussia in 1808 by Napoleon's troops, military, administrative and educational reforms



Bogotá in the 1950s

were imposed to squelch any revolutionary fervor. Hellenistic studies made up the core of educational reform, based on the idea of *Bildung* as cultural and moral formation. From 1815 on, the neoclassical architectural profile of a reformed Berlin was defined by Karl Schinkel, following the model of what was called "the forms and methods of Greek construction." Schinkel constituted the *Spree-Athen*, endowing it over the course of three decades with buildings destined for theatre as places of education and museums as key epistemological institutions of Enlightenment.

On the other side of the ocean, William Tudor bestowed the name of *The Athens of America* on Boston on 1819. At the beginning of the 19th century, Boston was the most economically and culturally significant city in North America. Its neoclassical profile is the work of Charles Bullfinch, the post-revolutionary U.S. architect with a notable republican civic-urban imagination and an equally notable capacity for planning. Boston would later be described as fifty percent crumbling Calvinist theocracy (permitting it at last to cultivate the arts) and fifty percent super-democratic egalitarian republic. As a constructed architectural reality, the neoclassic style derived from Athens corresponded in both Boston and Berlin to the forms in which these cities tried to represent them-



selves. It reflected the way in which they construed forms of communication and established rules and regulations with which to organize and understand their new urban life. In situations of crisis of legitimacy, the neoclassical aesthetic gave them a tangible family tree with which they could postulate a cultural continuity which, in fact, had been interrupted.

At the same time, another important process was taking place through which classical antiquity lost its standing as an unattainable model. After the discourse that would make Paris the capital of the 19th century, Victor Hugo began to make Paris the new Memphis, the new Babylon, the new Athens and the new Rome. And while Maxime Ducamp, the intimate friend of Gustav Flaubert, made Paris the city that would replace Thebes, Assyria, Babylon, Athens, Rome and Constantinople. It is against Modernity that Bogotá is proclaimed, toward the end of the century, the Athens of South America. For Bogotá, Paris is the capital of immorality, vice and impiety.

THE TWO STEPS OF BAPTISM

Bogotá's baptism as the Athens of South America took place in two steps. The first, of translation and appropriation, takes place at the same time as the process of Paris' irrepressible ascent as the

capital of the 19th century and the loss of the normative function of classical antiquity. An important part was played by Elisée Reclus, passionate reader of Alexander von Humboldt, who went from Paris to the *Spree-Athen* in 1850 to study with Karl Ritter, the only geographer teaching at that time in Europe. After Louis-Napoléon's 1851 coup, Reclus went into exile as did many other young democrats, first to London and then to New Orleans. For two years, from August 1855, he got involved in a "project of colonization and geographical exploration" in the Sierra Nevada region of Santa Marta in Colombia. Returning ill and penniless to France, he became a tourist guide writer for the Hachette publishing house in 1860.

In a long February 1864 article in the prestigious *Revue de deux mondes*, Reclus observed that every country wanted to have its own Athens: "AngloSaxon America demonstrates its Athens in Boston. The Colombian continent is proud of having many, among them the two principle ones, one in the middle and the other in the north, Buenos Aires and Bogotá." Reclus never lived in those cities. One can only imagine that the second one came out of his pen because of the contagious homophony in French between the vowels of Boston and Bogotá.

Three years after Reclus published his article, José María Vergara published the second volume of the first work of literary historiography written in Colombia, his *Historia de la literatura en la Nueva Granada*. Reclus' name was not mentioned but reference was made to "an illustrious traveler." In the context of an open controversy concerning the Liberal government's education policy, Vergara invoked "the thirst for learning of Bogotá's people" to create hypostasis of this attribute giving an ontological status of identity: the people—the inhabitants—of Bogotá are the "Athenians of South America." The idea that there would be many Athens on the "Colombian continent," or at least another principal Athens, was not mentioned. And it did not occur to anyone in Buenos Aires, based on what Reclus had written, to reclaim the nickname of "Athens of South America" for that city.

The second phase of the name's appropriation took place in the decisive decade of 1880, when fear of subversion (of the European type) put a stamp on the political atmosphere. According to the premises of social philosophy that inspired the ideal that Colombia be an organic Catholic community and not a modern society, there was the impossibility of moral equivalency among its members. From that premise came a reinforcement of the social hierarchy and a restriction on the exchanges and interactions between levels of this hierarchy. The primacy of the Catholic Church, as a representative of moral order—above the authority of the State—and its standing in people's conscience as the source of salvation of one's soul and life above concepts of progress brought with it exclusion from the politics of citizenship. The nation has not been understood politically, in relation to the State. The assimilation of social differences to differences on an imaginary scale of moral perfection in a hierarchical community joined the definition of public good as honesty in work habits with the use of religious discipline and the Christian faith as an instrument of social integration. The ambivalent project of the moral integration of good Christians—not of citizens—in the social hierarchical community assumed, moreover, the rejection of generalized schooling and scientific discourse. Culturally valued knowledge was the spiritual patrimony of an exclusive group.

THE SPECULARY STRUCTURE OF AUTOMONUMENTALIZATION

In the beginning of the 19th century Andrés Bello's interest in Spanish was oriented in accordance with the national strategy of communications. This favored fluid cultural circulation, capitalized by a national State. The Athens and the intellectual Academies, as territorialized spaces in the national, as well as scientific corporations and other actors in the linguistic community primarily, the writers, who, according to Bello, socially articulated the national territory.

From its initial conception and its manner of operating, the Colombian Academy of the Language was precisely the opposite as a political-cultural project. In the decade of 1880, invention of tradition sought to establish permanent identifying links between Colombia and the Spain of Felipe IV and the Restoration. Political groups thus spurred a project that positioned itself definitively in its will to oppose the propagation of European subversion. The celebratory proclamation of Bogotá as the Athens of the Americas implied *ex post facto* the fantasy of identification with the Spain across the mountains, in accordance with its own project of socio-political domination.

What was Bogotá then? It was a big village with pre-modern urban standards, incipient industries, and 80% illiteracy. It had 350 buildings with one floor or more, with the Panopticon begun in 1878, and not a single neoclassical construction. Newspapers had a circulation of 800-1000 copies. Its elite—mostly large estate owners and officials—boasted of 250 writers. It was the capital of a country in which life expectancy was 30 years, with 90 percent of Colombians living in rural area, with only ten percent of those knowing how to read and write, a country without a capital base, respectively holding the last and next-to-last ranks in Latin America in terms of per capita exports and foreign investments. All efforts to attract immigration failed, and yet anti-immigrant discourse prevailed. The only immigrants that managed to set down roots were some hundred European priests and nuns.

It is with this background that in the decade of 1890, the meaning of Bogotá's nickname was renegotiated. In this task, the principle protagonist was one of the most conspicuous figures in the regime: Monsignor Rafael Maria Carrasquilla, Ministerio of Education under Miguel Antonio Caro, rector of the Our Lady of Rosario School for more than 30 years; Monsignor Carrasquilla embodied the contradictions that epitomized a heroic personality in the Athens of South America: the courtliness of the *cachaco*—an imitation of Paris gentlemen during the Second French Empire and the clumsiness and customs of frugality mixed with the indulgent extremes crossed with obedience to the logic of conflict for power. Many indeed were proud of the fact that they had never left Bogotá and its surrounding areas and of never having seen the ocean.

Why in 1895 was the nickname of Athens of South America no longer attributed, as Vergara would say, to "an illustrious traveler"? Because Reclus, who meanwhile had become a world class geographer and had gotten mixed up in the workers' movement, had been jailed after the Paris Commune. The name no longer corresponded to the "people of Bogotá." In 1905, the very conservative erudite Spaniard Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo formulated, in *Historia de la Poesía hispanoamericana*, the nucleus of the narrative about the unchanging Hispanic essence of the culture and identity of Bogotá: "The literary culture of Santa Fe de Bogotá,



Women pray at the Voto Nacional Church in Bogotá, "The 19th century didn't get to Colombia until almost 1935."

destined with time to become the Athens of South America, is as old as the conquest itself."

A more certain fact is that the topography of Bogotá was dominated for centuries by two mountains. For the indigenous Chibcha population in Bacatá, this would have great significance. Later, the mountains were baptized with the Catholic names of Monserrate and Guadalupe. The negation of the indigenous footprints is obvious as is also a return to the repressed, found in the dark-skinned faces of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Christ of Monserrate. With them, subalternity is renegotiated.

HOW TO ASSUME THIS LEGACY?

In his forementioned 1895 speech, Monsignor Carrasquilla explained that "our Hispanic sister republics have called our capital the Athens of South America... [r]ightfully they gave such a distinguished title to a city that was home to philologists such as Cuervo, humanists like Caro, poets like Rafael Pombo, thinkers like Marroquín and a novelist like Jorge Isaacs." Precisely, José Manuel Marroquín as president of Colombia and Miguel Antonio Caro as the principal political figure are protagonists of the secession of



FROM LUIS B. RAMOS, COLOMBIA 1899-1931, BANCO DE LA REPUBLICA

Panama, in which the political incapacity to make imaginative, historical, geographical, economic, cultural projections for the construction of a modern nation of the Athens of South America became palpable. In the face of this disorienting redrawing of the world's map that demonstrated an end to the alliance with the spirit of world history, the symbolic resources and the structures of attitude and reference that Bogotá lent to this urgent political moment were very much limited. The paradoxical point, of course, is that Marroquín and Caro, the responsible governors, never explained the incongruities of their strategies of negotiation with the United States. Trying to imagine a ritual with a participatory dynamic, to foster identity and to exorcise the popular discontent for the loss of the not yet constructed Panama Canal, a triumphant tour took place in a decorated coach with a pompous provincial coronation of the very conservative poet Rafael Pombo, in the midst of a display of the feminine eroticism of dancing nymphs on the stage of the Colon Theatre. The symbolic action of the coronation was aimed at perpetuating the norms and values that were claimed as the only legitimate guarantors of the health of the motherland. The ritual was not part of the work of mourning, and thus

the trauma became hereditary.

The Athens of South America tended to become a defensive bastion. Its links with modernity and modernism as well as a heterogeneous aesthetic movement was, in a sense, decidedly innovative and included a postcolonial attitude toward Spain. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Bogotá writer Clímaco Soto Borda implored that "the sublime gods of literature that imposes a sanitary cordon around our Athens to liberate our poets from the terrible contagion of modernism." The 19th century didn't arrive in Colombia until almost 1930. One has to wait until then for Jorge Zalamea, in a report to parliament about the first Liberal Party government, to illustrate the discrepancy between its accomplishments in the area of education and the progress made after forty years of conservative regimes. In this manner, the voices lamenting the end of the Athens of South America can be seen as incongruent. The secularizing force of the Liberal government was inconsistent.

In any case, the structural similarity between Freud's topography and urban topography permits, in the case of Bogotá, the tackling of the aesthetic handling of the problems that the Athens of South America represents as a legacy, that is, not as a legacy that establishes norms, but as a settling of accounts. This is the case of the meanings with which the Plaza Mayor de Santa Fe, converted into the Plaza de Bolívar, has been operating. The design of the plaza has been modified many times and its limits defined by a series of constructions and demolitions which converted the plaza into a locus par excellence for political expression, collective memory, identity, and history of the city and the country. What has happened to it? In 1959 the architect Fernando Martínez tried to symbolically stage the Plaza as a meeting place for citizen participation, of democratic transparency, a space of hope evoking the *polis*. In order to achieve this, Martínez combined in a monumental form an imaginary democratic alternative country with the concern for modern re-engineering to convert it precisely into a political monument, dominated in the middle by Bolívar's statue, thus making the Plaza a symbol of the New Colombia. The problems involved in creating this Plaza divested of the classic are those of the darker side of the Modern. What is notable in the last forty years of Colombian history is that the great painter Gustavo Zalamea, at the end of the 1980s, was asked to bring the sea to the Plaza, to sink it, to place there an unexpected symbol: a white whale. Later, in a solemn series

The very late process of secularization contributed to the breakdown in the social arena.

of large oil paintings in 1999 entitled "The Sea in the Plaza" and "Shipwrecks," the immense symbol of the power of Moby Dick evoked a universe of extremely powerful icons. They range from Carpaccio's "George and the Dragon" to Guericault's "Medusa's Raft" and Rousseau's "War" with the national capitol as the Titanic amidst the raging waves. The Plaza of Bolívar is the Shipwreck.

Carlos Rincón was a 1999-2000 Santo Domingo Visiting Scholar at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. He is currently working on a book about the three Athens: Berlin, Bogotá, and Boston.