

Colombian Cultural Politics, 1930-1946

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Prepared for delivery at the 2009 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association,

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,

June 11-14 2009

It was a Sunday night in September 1939, and the Media Torta, an open-air theater nestled in the eastern mountains overlooking the city of Bogotá, was bustling with cheering people. The theater, with a capacity of five thousand spectators, was completely full. About one thousand people who could not find a seat had to stand in the Paseo Bolívar, the road running along the upper edge of the theater, as well as in an adjacent school. Working class families had gathered to attend a concert sponsored by the Mayor's Office and the Sección de Extensión Cultural (Section of Cultural Extension, SEC), the office of the Ministry of Education in charge of the government's cultural campaign.¹ Both offices, "interested in the artistic and cultural development of the workers," organized free shows on open-air stages in order to make cultural spectacles accessible to the working classes as well as to provide them with educational entertainment.² On this particular evening, the program included artistic groups from the city such as the National Music Band, the choir of Doña Rosa Pérez de Solano, and the Dance School of the Teatro Colón. According to Gabriel Ospina, manager of the SEC's theater—the Teatro Colón—and organizer of the event, the Dance School's traditional Colombian dances were the greatest success of the evening: they aroused the audience's never-ending applause. The crowd was so excited that the artists had to repeat all of the pieces. In his report to the city mayor, the organizer stated that such a huge success ought to be repeated as often as possible.³

Many shows like the one described above took place under the auspices of the Liberal governments that ruled Colombia between 1930 and 1946. They are representative of the unprecedented efforts of these administrations to give culture what they called a "social function" and of the noteworthy expansion of state intervention in cultural affairs during this period. This paper examines how Liberal cultural managers used theaters and stages for diverse cultural events including drama, opera, ballet, cinema, typical Colombian dances, concerts of classical and folk music alike, and lectures, as part of a wider campaign of democratization and inclusion. These state-sponsored cultural activities were part of a larger reformist program that the most radical members of the Liberal party sought to implement upon the party's return to power in 1930 after over forty years of rule by the Conservative opposition. Liberalism was internally divided between a moderate faction represented by Presidents Enrique Olaya Herrera (1930-1934) and Eduardo Santos (1938-1942) and a more radical and left-leaning wing led by President Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934-1938 and 1942-1945), but despite their internal divisions Liberals came to power with a shared banner of reformism that they believed necessary for a country undergoing deep economic changes and an increasingly mobilized society.

Most of the existing historiography on the Liberal Republic has concentrated on its politics and political ideology as well as economic and labor interventionism.⁴ Its cultural interventionism

¹ The SEC was created in 1938 but was a continuation of the Dirección Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Direction of Fine Arts, DNBA), established in 1930 during the first months of the Liberal Republic. Its range of action included the direction of all the cultural activities of the country, developing popular artistic industries, creating schools of drawing, decoration and music, inspecting primary and secondary artistic education, controlling the archaeological activity in the country, watching for the preservation of historic buildings and national monuments, organizing museums, expositions, concerts, lectures and other public spectacles, organizing and controlling the activities of national radio and educational cinema as well as the Ministry of Education's publications, directing the activities of physical education, and organizing a section of tourism. See Decrees 1965 and 1976 of 1938.

² TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 79. Letter from the manager of the Teatro Colón to the newspapers El Tiempo, El Siglo, El Liberal, La Razón and El Espectador, announcing the event. Bogotá, Sep. 21, 1939.

³ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 82 and 87. Letter from Gabriel Ospina to Mayor Germán Zea. Bogotá, Sept. 25, 1939.

⁴ See for example: Mauricio Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera: Colombia 1910-1945* (Santafé de Bogotá: Cinep, 1991); Jesús Antonio Bejarano, *El régimen agrario de la economía exportadora a la economía industrial* (Bogotá: La Carreta, 1979); Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America. Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 274-375; Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia*

has seldom been explored despite the fact that side-by-side policies like labor legislation, government support to unionized workers, tax reform, and a secularizing Constitutional reform, culture also became a significant aspect of Liberal reformism.⁵ Liberals believed that culture was a powerful tool for social inclusion and ultimately for modernization; the shaping of productive, rational, educated and patriotic citizens was considered vital for the nation's economic and political modernization. Furthermore, by institutionalizing cultural politics Liberal rulers sought to do more than just administer the arts and intellectual activity; cultural management was about deeply political issues like forging definitions of national identity and citizenship. In approaching Liberal cultural politics I seek to complement our understanding of the Liberal Republic by assessing the achievements and limitations of its democratizing discourse through its materialization in concrete policies ingrained in institutional practice. Cultural policies were not cut off from other fields of Liberal intervention and they provide an understudied instance from which to approach the extent, implications and limitations of the Liberal Republic's reformist project.⁶

Among a long list of cultural programming including traveling schools, book fairs, radio broadcasting, music education, archaeological research, folkloric surveys, hygiene campaigns and cultural centers for workers, Liberals used theaters and stages widely in their cultural campaign. Cultural managers—as I term the intellectuals and artists who joined the reformist state project believing that culture could be used as a significant political instrument⁷—profusely used traditional popular venues such as the Media Torta, the Santamaría bullring, and the Teatro Municipal, as well as other public spaces such as city parks, schools and the public squares of working-class neighborhoods in Bogotá. They also moved beyond Bogotá by bringing spectacles to remote villages in traveling trucks that carried theater companies, marionettes, books and cinema. Furthermore, they opened the doors of traditional, elitist institutions such as the Teatro Colón to the lowest segments of society—all in the name of turning Colombia into a democratic, nationalist, and modern country. This paper examines the extent to which Liberal cultural politics achieved their democratizing goal. Significant changes were achieved in terms of democratizing access to culture in

(Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); W. John Green, *Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism, and Popular Mobilization in Colombia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Marco Palacios, *El café en Colombia 1850-1970. Una historia económica, social y política* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2002); Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia: Colombia 1930-1954*, trans. Jesús María Castaño, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Bogotá: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1987); Richard Stoller, "Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo and Liberal Radicalism in 1930s Colombia," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 2 (1995); Álvaro Tirado Mejía, *Aspectos políticos del primer gobierno de Alfonso López Pumarejo, 1934-1938* (Bogotá: Procultura, Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1981); Alvaro. Tirado Mejía, "López Pumarejo: La Revolución en Marcha.," in *Nueva Historia de Colombia. Historia Política 1886-1946.*, ed. Alvaro Tirado Mejía (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1989).

⁵ Even though the cultural policies of the Liberal administrations emanated from the Ministry of Education and cultural programs were thought to be part of the educational campaign, the histories of twentieth-century education have also overlooked Liberal cultural policies. See: Aline Helg, *La educación en Colombia, 1918-1957. Una historia social, económica y política* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1987). Very recently, Colombian historian and sociologist Renán Silva has started to inquire about Liberal cultural policies with a special interest for Liberal programs related to literacy and the diffusion of books and highlighting the Liberal politicians' change of attitude towards the so-called *pueblo*. My research seeks to advance Silva's efforts by giving more texture to the Liberal cultural project through attention to its internal contradictions and to the diversity of perspectives among its managers. See: Renán Silva, "El libro popular en Colombia, 1930-1948. Estrategias editoriales, formas textuales y sentidos propuestos al lector," *Revista de Estudios Sociales RES*, no. 30 (2008); Renán Silva, *República Liberal, intelectuales y cultura popular* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2005); Renán Silva, *Sociedades campesinas, transición social y cambio cultural en Colombia*. (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2006).

⁶ For existing scholarship that demonstrates the merits of this approach in other Latin American cases see: Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution. Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1997); Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime, 1930-1945* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁷ I have adapted the term "cultural manager" from Daryle William's use of the term "cultural management" in reference to the "institutionalized, administrative relationship between the state and culture" shaped under the Vargas regime in Brazil. Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 26.

the country. However, cultural managers also faced many obstacles, including their own party's heterogeneity. The different venues were not all equally open to people from the lower social segments; old hierarchies proved resilient.

The Liberal cultural campaign used culture as a means of education and “uplift,” seeking to guide workers and peasants away from forms of entertainment considered to have “degenerating” effects such as drinking or wandering the streets. Cultural managers believed that culture could transform the lower classes into educated, productive, and active citizens. However, their agenda went beyond the assumption that the masses lacked culture and thus needed to be “cultured.” Besides seeking the diffusion of what they denominated “high” or educated culture—which was imported for the most part—the cultural campaign also notably celebrated grassroots national culture. Cultural expressions such as folk music and traditional popular dances came to be part of the definition of national culture, and they gained recognition, if only for a brief period, in the most respected cultural venues. This paper argues that under the Liberal Republic, despite significant obstacles including the opposition of Conservatives and moderate Liberals as well as the lack of support by regional and local governments, the lower classes of Colombian society were invited to participate in the cultural building of their nation.

The Teatro Municipal: A “Duty of Cultural Vulgarization”

The Teatro Municipal was inaugurated in 1890 in downtown Bogotá as an initiative of the City Council.⁸ Only two years later, the national government followed this impulse and founded the Teatro Colón, the first national theater, a few blocks away. Both theaters, the municipal and the national, were conceived as institutions of high culture and sought to resemble European theaters. They adopted Italian architectural styles, and during their first decades of existence invited mostly foreign companies to perform. Their managers believed that culture had to be imported: it was a European product that Colombians could not produce but could merely enjoy. Also, they thought not all Colombians were capable of enjoying it; culture was conceived as a commodity of the few. Anything different would have been unimaginable in the late nineteenth century, not only by the Colombian elites, but by those in the rest of Latin America who sought to mold their nations after their foreign models of progress and civilization.

This was the spirit of Colombia's ruling elites from the 1880s, when an authoritarian, centralist regime committed to Catholicism and social order as necessary for progress was established by President Rafael Núñez—the *Regeneración*—up to 1930s. The ruling elites of the time were eager admirers of Europe and looked up to it in search of culture. A good illustration of this admiration of European civilization in the case of the Colombian ruling elites of the time was the inclination of many of the prominent Conservative political figures of this period such as Presidents Miguel Antonio Caro (1892-1898), José Manuel Marroquín (1900-1904), and Marco Fidel Suárez (1918-1921) towards the study of Latin and Spanish grammar and philology. Along with their political activities, they wrote books of philology, grammar, dictionaries, and guides to good pronunciation and writing. Malcolm Deas has argued that this interest in the study of the Spanish language and its correct use corresponded to the Colombian ruling elite's continuing admiration of Spain, and a feeling that the cultivation of the language would maintain a connection with the Hispanic past and heritage.⁹ Their commitment to a Hispanic heritage went hand in hand with their allegiance to Catholicism as the base for the maintenance of social order and hierarchy.

⁸ For a history of the Teatro Municipal see: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, *Historia del Teatro Municipal* (Bogotá: IDCT, 1997).

⁹ Malcolm Deas, “Miguel Antonio Caro y amigos: Gramática y poder en Colombia,” in *Del poder y la gramática, y otros ensayos sobre historia, política y literatura colombianas*, ed. Malcolm Deas (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1993).

The Teatro Colón and the Teatro Municipal were built in this context of elite admiration of European civilization and the desire to emulate it at home. It was only natural at the time that most theaters of this kind throughout Latin America were only willing to house shows of the well-respected arts imported from the so-called civilized world. However, in the early twentieth century, the situation slowly started to change. The world of the authoritarian oligarchies that had ruled Latin America since the 1880s began to be challenged within the context of proliferating social unrest all over the region. The challenge came from both the workers and peasants that were paying the price of progress, and urban nationalist groups of students and intellectuals discontent with the lack of self-respect inherent in the Europeanizing discourse. Since the late nineteenth century intellectuals like José Martí began vindicating Latin American racial and cultural uniqueness by praising the *mestizo*, indigenous and black populations and directly criticizing intellectuals and politicians for excluding these populations from nation-states that seemed to have remained colonial. Martí also criticized the ruling elites for their veneration of European and North American models and the subsequent neglect of the Hispano-American experience, calling the intellectual production that taught foreign history as the model “false erudition” that was useless for American realities. Criticisms like Martí’s continued to develop as Latin American nationalist movements developed in the early twentieth century. Such is the case of José Vasconcelos in México who formulated the glorification of the racial mix of Latin America, the “cosmic race” that was superior to its original components.¹⁰

Nationalism, however, was not an invention of the twentieth century in Latin America. The defense of the native had been popular in the late colonial period as Americans tried to define themselves in opposition to European immigrants. After the independence movements of the early nineteenth century the nativist spirit faded as the new republics strived to resemble the venerated European model, only to be revived in the second half of the century.¹¹ In Colombia, this was epitomized by the Comisión Corográfica, a commission launched to study the national geography as well as natural and human resources in 1850. Also, the artistic movement known as Costumbrismo kept alive a nostalgic idealization of the rural and the native in literature and painting. When nationalism came back with more strength in the early twentieth century, it responded to new challenges such as a growing anti-imperialist feeling throughout the region.

It was during the 1920s that Colombian musicians, artists and writers started exploring the possibility of developing national arts in opposition to the foreign models coming from abroad. Such was the case of “Los Bachués,” a group of artists that defined themselves in opposition to the previous generation of artists whose work was characterized by academicism and neoclassicism. Instead, the Bachués adopted either an *indigenista* tendency representing subjects of Chibcha mythology, or a nationalism that focused on the representation not of distinguished citizens but of common people including *campesinos*, factory workers, beggars, working women, etc. It is not surprising that some of the members of the Bachués were to become enthusiastic cultural managers after 1930. Such was the case of Darío Achury Valenzuela, writer and literary critic who directed the Sección de Extensión Cultural (SEC) from 1940 to 1946, of Gregorio Hernández de Alba who directed the Servicio Arqueológico Nacional from 1935 to 1944, and Luis Alberto Acuña who managed the Teatro Colón in 1942.¹²

¹⁰ See: José Martí, *Nuestra América* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977 [1891]); José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1966 [1925]).

¹¹ On the way in which the *indígenas* were incorporated into elite ideas of the nation in Latin America see: Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹² Other members of the Bachués were intellectuals and artists like Hena Rodríguez, Rómulo Rozo, Pedro Nel Gómez, Ramón Barba and Alipio Jaramillo. For the Bachués group statement see: “Monografía del Bachué,” *Lecturas Dominicales*, *Suplemento semanal de El Tiempo*, June 15 1930.

In this context of growing artistic nationalism the Teatro Municipal of Bogotá started to grow apart from the Teatro Colón. Realizing that the public favored performances that related to situations and characters of the national scene, the Teatro Municipal accommodated its style to these demands and began opening its doors to the artists excluded by the more traditionalist and elitist Teatro Colón. Nationalist playwright Luis Enrique Osorio—who was one of the pioneers of Colombian theater in the twentieth century—was able to put his plays on stage. His plays were political and social satires directly related to the national reality and local idiosyncrasies, and were hugely successful among the public. Osorio was joined by other nationalist writers. Instead of writing in verse like the classic Spanish playwrights, they wrote in prose and used common language winning popular favor. Also, while the Teatro Colón presented opera, the Teatro Municipal presented the more popular zarzuela, a genre of Spanish operetta. Instead of the Colón's classical music concerts, the Municipal welcomed the local and popular Banda Nacional (National Band) and its more varied repertoire.¹³

Besides providing a home for nationally produced theater and its consumers, in the 1920s the Teatro Municipal also became a stage for student events, political debates, and lectures. Bogotá had grown significantly in the past decades from a city of 100,000 inhabitants at the turn of the century to 200,000 in 1927.¹⁴ Working class neighborhoods proliferated as people from the countryside flooded into the city seeking the opportunities resulting from the economic growth that accompanied the consolidation of the coffee export economy during the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ The boom of public works in the city, financed by rising coffee prices in the international market, an expansion of foreign loans and the indemnity paid by the U.S. for the loss of Panamá, also demanded more workers in the city. In a parallel manner, labor unions expanded and the student movement emerged.¹⁶

It was the students who began to turn the Teatro Municipal into a political forum. In May 1920, the Student Assembly of Bogotá, led by Germán Arciniegas, called for a critical debate of the argument of psychiatrist Miguel Jiménez López about the degenerate character of Colombia's racially-mixed population. This argument was representative of the Conservative ideology of the time, which, following the racial theories of the late nineteenth century, asserted that Colombia's lack of progress was explained largely by the negative effects of the Indigenous and African heritage present in its population. Outraged by this pessimistic evaluation, the students invited ten speakers including psychiatrist Luis López de Mesa, hygienist Jorge Bejarano, and sociologist Lucas Caballero to respond to Jiménez López at the Teatro Municipal.¹⁷ In the 1920s, the students also organized talks by Liberal opposition speakers such as Alfonso López Pumarejo and Darío Echandía at the Teatro Municipal, lecturers to whom they did not have access at the Conservative-controlled University. In the following years, the widely popular leftist Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán took advantage of this new political stage where he often delivered speeches to his devoted followers. The public that came to the Teatro Municipal to listen to these speakers represented the growing nationalist forces that opposed the Conservative regime that they considered archaic and oligarchic.

¹³ Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, *Historia del Teatro Municipal*, 21. Bands were musical ensembles based on the use of brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments, popular throughout Latin America, which profusely participated in civic celebrations often performing in open-air stages.

¹⁴ Fundación Misión Colombia, *Historia de Bogotá*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1988), 22.

¹⁵ Alfredo Iriarte, *Breve historia de Bogotá* (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1988), Ch. 3.

¹⁶ On the economic expansion of the 1920s and its political and social implications see: Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera*, 209-267; Jesús Antonio Bejarano, "El despegue cafetero, 1920-1928," in *Historia económica de Colombia*, ed. José Antonio Ocampo (Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores, 1987); Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 274-375; Paul Drake, *The Money Doctor in the Andes: The Kemmerer Missions, 1923-1933* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Alfonso Patiño Roselli, *La prosperidad a debe y la gran crisis, 1925-1935* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1981); Daniel Pécaut, *Política y sindicalismo en Colombia* (Bogotá: La Carreta, 1973).

¹⁷ See: *Los problemas de la raza en Colombia*, (Bogotá: Ed. El Espectador, 1920).

Given this background, when the Liberals came to power in 1930, their campaign to bring culture to the lower classes proved more feasible at first at the Teatro Municipal than at the Teatro Colón. This is interesting given that the Teatro Colón was the only theater administered by the national government—it was subordinate to the national Ministry of Education—while the Teatro Municipal answered to the city of Bogotá. The fact that the Ministry's Dirección Nacional de Bellas Artes (DNBA, which in 1938 would be renamed Sección de Extensión Cultural, SEC) had to request permission of the Mayor of Bogotá to use the Teatro Municipal for its cultural campaign, instead of using its own Teatro Colón, reveals the difficulty cultural managers faced in their project to break the long-held tradition of the Colón and to redefine national culture more inclusively.

The MEN's difficulties in advancing the cultural campaign in the first years of the Liberal Republic are explained by the moderate degree of reformism of the first Liberal government led by President Enrique Olaya Herrera (1930-1934). His government sought to avoid political crisis and called on several Conservatives to participate. The social legislation of this period was devised to bring back social stability but was not part of a larger reformist campaign. Reformers did not have the upper hand until after the election of Alfonso López Pumarejo in 1934. Under President López Pumarejo's reformist discourse it became possible for the cultural campaign of the MEN to solidify. In addition to López Pumarejo's radical discourse, the DNBA came to be directed from 1935 to 1940 by the enthusiastic musician and music critic Gustavo Santos. Santos became very influential given not only his personal enthusiasm for cultural interventionism but his privileged social position: he belonged to one of the most prominent Liberal families of the country and the owner of the prestigious newspaper *El Tiempo*. Santos began using the Teatro Municipal extensively for activities planned by the DNBA. Among the main events that took place every week were the so-called "popular concerts" of the Banda Nacional, directed by José Rozo Contreras. Directly controlled by the DNBA, the Banda Nacional enlivened diplomatic functions, national parades, etc., but also collaborated prominently with the DNBA's cultural activities. Every Monday evening, the Banda Nacional gave concerts organized by the DNBA as a "task of musical vulgarization."¹⁸

In 1940, new life was injected to the theater when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was made Minister of Education. This young leftist lawyer had become the most popular politician among urban workers and peasants alike by travelling all over the country speaking in defense of people's rights in the face of international exploitation and local corrupt politicians. After campaigning for Liberalism's comeback in 1930 and collaborating with the Olaya administration, he abandoned the Liberal party briefly between 1933 and 1934 disappointed by the slow pace of reform. During that period he founded his own party, the Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria, but after losing his seat in Congress and hopeful about the reformist program of President elect Alfonso López Pumarejo, Gaitán rejoined Liberalism. He was called to be Mayor of Bogotá in 1936-1937, position he lost given the popular opposition to his emblematic hygiene campaigns which included enforcing the use of shoes by all public employees, the use of white aprons by street food vendors, and the use of uniforms—instead of the popular woolen *ruana*—by public transportation employees. Three years later, in 1940, he was called by President Eduardo Santos to assume the Ministry of Education. Gaitán had already shown his support to cultural and educational programs as Mayor of Bogotá replacing schools in bad conditions with new ones, ordering the distribution of free notebooks to school children, requiring that all foreign artists performing in Bogotá offer a free performance on a Sunday at the Media Torta, and also organizing a book fair in the city. He also promoted hygiene as a tool to transform the poor into proud, decorous and healthy citizens.¹⁹

¹⁸ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 3, Carp. 4, f. 66. Annual report of Gustavo Santos, Director of the DNBA, to the MEN. Bogotá, July 1, 1936.

¹⁹ See: Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán*, 109-145.

Once in the Ministry of Education, Gaitán created his Cultural Fridays (*Viernes Culturales*) at the Teatro Municipal that included concerts of the Banda Nacional as well as lectures. The programming of the Cultural Fridays concerts included pieces by foreign and national composers, such as the Austrian operetta composer Franz Lehar, the Toledan zarzuela composer Jacinto Guerrero, Cuban composer Eliseo Grenet, Colombian composer Luis A. Calvo, and popular songs like *Serenata Venezolana*.²⁰ The idea was to make concerts of varied types of music—from the classics to Latin American and national composers—available to the masses, providing healthy entertainment as well as enlightenment. The cultural managers like Santos and Gaitán wanted to turn culture into a need not only of the elites but of the Colombian working classes; this had not been a concern for any previous government in the country.

The Banda Nacional's outreach campaign was not limited to the weekly concerts at the theater but went much further. Instead of expecting people to come to it, it went looking for them in their residential and work environments. The Banda Nacional gave weekly performances in working-class neighborhoods such as La Perseverancia, Las Cruces and El Ricaurte. It also performed at public schools, the university campus, factories, prisons, the Media Torta open-air theater, and the Parque de la Independencia, a public garden in downtown Bogotá flooded by working-class families on the weekends. Furthermore, in an effort to reach as many people as possible, the Banda Nacional also transmitted concerts through the Radiodifusora Nacional (National Broadcasting Company) reaching far-away regions all over the country.²¹ The statistics in the SEC's reports are surprising: in the period 1940-1942, the Banda Nacional is reported to have performed 158 times in theaters, plazas, factories and neighborhoods, with a recorded attendance of 153,490 people.²² If they had performed all year long, this would mean that the Banda Nacional gave on average one weekly presentation, and that each presentation was attended by nearly a thousand people. However, since they did not perform all year but took a few months off, this per performance average was even higher.

The concerts were of two types. Those presented on open-air stages like the Media Torta, neighborhood plazas, or the Santamaría bullring sought “to provide a healthy distraction to the working-class sector of the capital city.”²³ Those that took place in enclosed spaces such as factories, schools, and the Teatro Municipal were called “didactic concerts” and sought “to enlighten in a pleasant and simple way workers and students about the essential characteristics of music in its diverse manifestations, popular, select or classical.”²⁴ Often, didactic popular concerts were accompanied by explanatory lectures given by musicologist Otto de Greiff about the pieces played by the Banda Nacional. While the existing documentation contains little direct information about public responses to these events, in the early 1940s the SEC affirmed that “the people have responded with amazing enthusiasm, intelligence, and comprehension beyond our most optimistic expectations.”²⁵ The large numbers of spectators recorded in the SEC's reports provide a better clue of the success of such concerts if we assume that people attended voluntarily. The documentation

²⁰ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 3, Carp. 8, f. 52. Program of a Cultural Friday at the Teatro Municipal. June 8, 1945.

²¹ The Liberal cultural campaign made extensive use of radio broadcasting in its effort to give access to cultural goods to as many Colombians as possible. About this particular topic see: Renán Silva, “Ondas Nacionales. A propósito de la creación de la Radiodifusora Nacional de Colombia” in *República Liberal, intelectuales y cultura popular*, ed. La Carrata Editores (Medellín: 2005).

²² AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14, f. 1-28. “Resumen de las labores de Extensión Cultural en los tres últimos años, 1940, 1941 y 1942.”

²³ AGN, Ministerio de Cultural, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 3, Carp. 1, f. 48. Report on the Popular Culture campaign, 1942-1943.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 002, Carp. 14, f. 2. “Resumen de las labores de Extensión Cultural en los tres últimos años, 1940, 1941 y 1942.”

does not give any evidence to the contrary. There is no mention of methods used to force people to attend but only of methods of persuasion such as combining pieces of popular and classical music so as to make concerts more appealing.

In the late 1930s, while this lively cultural activity was taking place all over the city, the Teatro Colón remained quiet. According to Arcadio Dulcey, a poet who briefly directed the SEC in 1939, “the need to set relatively high prices for the tickets to the Teatro Colón, given its category as our prime national theater, and the limited interest in art among us, results in the fact that most of the shows presented there do not count with public favor.”²⁶ The SEC, in fact, later resorted to providing free tickets as a way to attract audiences to the Teatro Colón.

But why did the working classes not go to the Colón? First, its status and tradition made it an intimidating institution for working-class audiences who had never before been invited to be part of a national cultural movement of this magnitude. This was a theater that the ladies and gentleman of Bogotá’s elite attended wearing their finest attire. Moreover, besides the high price of the tickets, it was a venue neither familiar to nor welcoming of the lower classes. Furthermore, there is the question of which cultural activities attracted which audience segmentation. The general public seems to have been more attracted by the comedies of the Teatro Municipal to which they could relate, the performances of popular dances they knew at the Media Torta theater, and the popular concerts of the Banda Nacional, than to the imported performances of opera or drama at the Teatro Colón, often performed in languages other than Spanish. In his comment, Dulcey assumes that the public had no interest in “art” because it was not interested in the art taking place at the Teatro Colón. However, by 1940 this definition of art began to be seriously questioned, especially after Jorge Eliécer Gaitán became Minister of Education.

The Teatro Colón: “Our Prime Coliseum”

The Europeanizing and elitist tradition of the Teatro Colón proved harder to break than that of the Teatro Municipal. Devised by the ideologue of the late nineteenth century *Regeneración*—President Rafael Nuñez—it was conceived as an institution of high culture and built to resemble European theaters. After expropriating the abandoned and private Teatro Maldonado, the government hired Italians to rebuild it: architect Pietro Cantini designed the new building, and Cesare Sighinolfi and Luigi Ramelli were in charge of the ornamentation. The building was inaugurated on October 12, 1892, during the commemoration of the fourth centenary of Columbus’s arrival to America, and received the name of Teatro Colón.²⁷ During its first decades, the theater hosted predominantly foreign companies. By the late 1920s, the performances subsidized by the Ministry included the Italian opera of Maestro Bracale and several drama and comedy performances by the Spanish companies of Ernesto Wilches, and Fernando Diaz de Mendoza and María Guerrero.²⁸ In his autobiography, Colombian playwright Luis Enrique Osorio alluded to the predominance of hierarchies that considered American theater inferior at the time. He mentions an anecdote involving the Spanish company of Fernando Diaz de Mendoza and María Guerrero. While visiting Bogotá in the late 1920s they requested a play from Osorio “not because they appreciated American theater” but out of need. Osorio, realizing that they were going to put his play on stage “*de mala gana*” and only as a last resort, requested his play back and caused a scandal.²⁹

²⁶ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 1, Carp. 4, f. 114. Report of Arcadio Dulcey, Director of the SEC, to the MEN. Bogotá, June 19, 1939.

²⁷ For a history of the Teatro Colón see: Jaime Villa Esguerra, *100 años del Teatro de Cristóbal Colón, 1892-1992* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1993).

²⁸ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 132, Carp. 746, f. 11-14 and 21. Reports of years 1926-1927 and 1927-1928.

²⁹ Luis Enrique Osorio, “Odisea de un actor en busca de público,” *Sábado*, no. 59 (1944).

As soon as the Liberal Party came to power in 1930 and recruited left-leaning Liberal intellectuals seeking deep social change, small efforts were taken to reform the national theater. Among the reformers who enthusiastically got involved with the government's cultural agenda was writer and playwright Daniel Samper Ortega. As early as August 1930, he wrote a letter to the Minister of Education: "I here include a draft of a decree that synthesizes more or less what we discussed yesterday about giving national culture an immediate and sensible impulse." He then described his idea of converting the Teatro Colón into a leading institution of education and the arts, as well as about the need to reorganize the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (National School of Fine Arts, ENBA), the Music Conservatory, and the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library).³⁰

The inspector of the Teatro Colón must have followed these discussions and made some reforms, because a year later he received a letter from Alvaro de Alas, an intellectual from the coastal city of Cartagena, applauding the inspector's initiative of starting a cultural movement with nationalist intentions. Alas asked the inspector for a copy of the statutes of the Teatro Colón as well as a summary of his activities as director, so as to impel a similar movement at the Teatro Municipal of Cartagena.³¹ An article published in the newspaper *El Tiempo* in mid-1931 also praised the patriotic campaign started by Daniel Samper Ortega to revive and develop national theater and established that for the first time the Ministry of Education was collaborating effectively with national theater. The writer criticized the previous administrations for overlooking the matter and for assuming that the country was not capable of developing its own national theater.³²

This was the only information I could locate about this early impulse to national theater, but it certainly did not last very long. Changing the trajectory of the most traditional Colombian cultural venue was a highly disputed task and many jumped to defend its traditional status. Some intellectuals worried that the MEN's nationalist campaign would result in the Teatro Colón opening its doors to "unworthy" performances. Not everyone was convinced that national theater was even possible, and even those who thought that it was doubted that the national companies seeking to perform at the Colón were commendable yet.

José Umaña Bernal, a poet who managed the Colón from 1933-1934, was one of the defenders of the Colón's status. In early 1934, he received a letter from Sra. Carlota de Merlán, director of a theater company, asking permission to use the Teatro for two days. Umaña Bernal considered that while Sra. Merlán's company was national, it could not be considered proper art:

Even in the case of national shows, it is necessary to establish strict criterion so that only companies of the highest class may rise to the Colón's stage, companies which today do not exist in our incipient theatrical environment. I believe [...] that more than helping national culture, we do a job of intellectual disconcert by promoting shows that, even if worthy of support, do not have the necessary characteristics to be qualified as a movement of proper art yet.³³

³⁰ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 3, Carp. 3, f. 1. Letter from Daniel Samper Ortega to Abel Carbonell. Bogotá, August 22, 1930. Samper Ortega was director of the Biblioteca Nacional for most of the 1930s and he was an eager supporter of the government's cultural campaigns in different arenas including alphabetization, educational cinema, book fairs, and expositions, among others.

³¹ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 132, Carp. 749, f. 35. Letter from Alvaro de Alas to Daniel Ortega Ricaurte, Inspector of the Teatro Colón.

³² Article quoted in letter from Carlos Daniel Roca to Abel Carbonell, Minister of Education. Barranquilla, July 3, 1931. AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 2, Carp. 4, f. 42.

³³ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 2, Carp. 5, f. 7. Letter from José Umaña Bernal to the Secretary of the MEN. Bogotá, Feb. 3, 1934.

In another letter Umaña Bernal stated that he considered it preferable to keep the Teatro Colón closed for most of the year than to have to lend it to theater companies or to speakers that according to him did not correspond with the status of “our prime coliseum” or with the cultural tradition of the city.³⁴ Surprisingly the MEN agreed with him, giving the order to restrict as much as possible the lectures and performances for which the theater received countless petitions.³⁵

The MEN and the director of the Teatro also worried that low-quality performances could harm the status of the institution by drawing dubious audiences. In April 1934, the members of the National Opera Company and the employees of the Teatro Colón wrote a letter to the MEN asking for a reduction in ticket prices given that their high cost was keeping the public away from the theater and thus keeping their own wages down.³⁶ The response was again negative:

The manager has always considered that the status of the Teatro Colón has to bear relation with the performances presented, and in consequence, with the prices that apply for each locality. He also considers it unacceptable that the first theater of the country remain equal to the cinema theaters in which the charged price equals the \$0.60 requested by the petitioners. On the other hand, the public attracted with the reduced price causes considerable damage [...] as we have been able to notice in the past when they have even cut and taken with them pieces of the leather of the upholstery of the seats.³⁷

Once again the MEN agreed with the manager and denied the petitioners’ request for lower prices.³⁸ These examples show the contradiction in the MEN’s early campaign to promote and diffuse national culture. While there was a nationalistic discourse in the promotion of the arts, the case of the Teatro Colón shows that there was still much debate regarding whether the arts produced in Colombia could indeed be considered proper culture, and whether culture should be made accessible to all. The ground was still not ready for a more radical transformation.

Umaña Bernal is an interesting case because he belonged to “Los Nuevos,” a prominent group of young intellectuals who advocated reform in the 1920s. They began meeting at the Windsor, a Bogotá coffee shop, and for a brief period they published a magazine. Followers of Latin American thinkers like Rodó, Vasconcelos and Haya de la Torre, this group criticized the older generation of politicians for its academicism and lack of nationalism. Its members ranged from socialists to anarchists, including Jorge Zalamea, Germán Arciniegas, Alberto Lleras, and León de Greiff, names that after 1930 were connected one way or another with the Ministry of Education and its campaign of cultural extension.³⁹ Surprisingly, Umaña Bernal was part of this group. His attitude as manager of the Colón in the early 1930s is significant because, while it may seem contradictory, it actually illustrates the complexity of the situation. On the one hand, the movement for cultural reform was not homogeneous, and on the other hand, it took time for reform to become possible. Someone like Umaña Bernal could be part of a reformist group but at the same time prove

³⁴ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Carp. 753, f. 22-23. Letter from José Umaña Bernal to the Secretary of the MEN. Bogotá, Feb. 1934.

³⁵ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Carp. 753, f. 28. Letter from the Secretary of the MEN to José Umaña Bernal. Bogotá, Feb. 19, 1934.

³⁶ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 2, Carp. 5, f. 25-26. Bogotá, Apr. 6, 1934.

³⁷ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Carp. 753, f. 42. Letter from the manager of the Teatro Colón to the MEN. Bogotá, April 12, 1934.

³⁸ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 2, Carp. 5, f. 27. Letter from the MEN to the members of the National Opera Company and the employees of the Teatro Colón. Bogotá, April, 1934.

³⁹ On Los Nuevos, see: Eduardo Posada-Carbó, *El desafío de las ideas. Ensayos de historia intelectual y política en Colombia* (Medellín: Banco de la República, EAFIT, 2003), 59-66; Jorge Zalamea, "La aparición del grupo de Los Nuevos," in *Literatura, política y arte*, ed. Jorge Zalamea (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1978).

reticent to certain changes revealing the limits of reform. This case illustrates how Liberal heterogeneity often limited the implementation of reformist programs. In the early 1930s the Ministry of Education itself was not willing to accept any radical changes yet, and the Teatro Colón remained a bastion of high culture in the first years of the Liberal Republic.

Courses of Cultural Extension: the beginning of cultural democratization at the Teatro Colón

The prices of the Teatro Colón indicate that by 1936 it was still not very accessible to the general public. While tickets for a concert of the season of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (National Symphonic Orchestra) in August 1936 started at \$0.30, tickets for a Mexican, Argentine, or Hollywood movie could be purchased for as little as \$0.04.⁴⁰ However, as the MEN's cultural campaign began focusing on the democratization of culture, the Teatro Colón slowly started opening its doors. Lectures were the first step in this direction. In 1937, the MEN organized a series of free Cursos de Extensión Cultural (Cultural Extension Courses) at the Teatro Colón.

The Cursos de Extensión Cultural had the double objective of instructing the lower social classes through educational lectures, and of persuading Colombian intellectuals to share their erudition with them in a clear language. Minister of Education Alberto Lleras Camargo explained this objective as “accelerating both currents” of Colombian society, the one coming from above and the one coming from below, towards one another.⁴¹ Behind this there was a deep preoccupation with the distance that intellectuals and scientists had from the country's reality and needs. Liberal cultural managers criticized the cultural model that the Conservatives had established in which intellectuals and scientists worked from a privileged and remote place and concentrated on intellectual issues with little if any contact with the practical problems and needs of the country. The fact that the cultural elites during the Conservative Hegemony had concentrated on and excelled in matters such as Latin grammar is a good example of this. In contrast, Liberal cultural managers called for a nationalistic academic establishment that was in touch with Colombian reality; an establishment that was practical and useful. This was a very nationalistic objective as well. They claimed that, “In America, we came to know science turned into a pale museum of wax figures, into a herbarium of dried nature, into a catalogue of facts and things with no relation to the clattering activity of men on their land.” Seeking to change this, the Cursos de Extensión were an opportunity for “our scientists” to “approach old problems of the world and new Colombian cases” in new ways.⁴² Through the Cursos, scientists would be taken out of their secluded sphere “to be trained in the healthy, strong, and clear language of their nation and its *pueblo*.”⁴³

The goal of the Liberal cultural managers was to achieve the cultural unity of the Colombian nation. Progress required that all citizens of a country share a sense of patriotism and common purpose around a common national project. However, they did not seek a simple homogenization of the country by imposing Culture with a capital C. While indeed many saw it this way, a group of radical reformers involved with the MEN developed a more pluralist understanding of the nation by considering their campaign as a two-way street. Their policies included not only providing the masses with access to the forms of culture that had been an elite privilege, but also a campaign to recover “national” forms of culture that had been previously undermined. Considering only the former fails to explain the complexity of a project that sought to redefine the nation and citizenship.

⁴⁰ See prices in: *El Espectador*, August 7, 1936. Cinema prices varied but only in a few theaters they could rise to \$0.30.

⁴¹ Opening discourse of the first Curso de Extensión Cultural by Minister Alberto Lleras Camargo. Published in: *El Tiempo*, February 2, 1937, p. 4. A draft of this document can be found at: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, Actividades culturales: informes, Caja 3, Carp. 3, f. 139.

⁴² *Ibid.*, f. 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 143.

A good example of the project to redefine the nation in a plural way was the Encuesta Folklórica Nacional, the National Folkloric Survey, of 1942.⁴⁴ The Encuesta consisted of questionnaire that the Ministry of Education sent to public school teachers all over the country regarding different aspects of community life. It inquired about issues such as housing, the uses of the land, work instruments, industries, daily wages, the number of schooled children, forms of transportation, superstitions, medical practices, locally celebrated holidays, music and dance practices, staple foods and dress. School teachers responded to the Encuesta with different degrees of detail, and the enterprise resulted in pages and pages of insights by teachers all over the country—271 responses survive today in the archives.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that the Ministry of Education did not carry out a systematic use and analysis of the resulting documentation this initiative is indicative of the government's interest in what they called “popular culture.”

The first Curso de Extensión Cultural at the Teatro Colón was scheduled for every weekday night of February and March of 1937, from 5 to 8pm. Among the invited speakers were intellectuals who were direct supporters of the Liberal government including Jorge Zalamea, Germán Arciniegas, Luis López de Mesa, Jose Francisco Socarrás, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Darío Echandía, Gustavo Santos, Antonio María Valencia, and Gerhard Masur. Among the topics they addressed were the problem of land in Colombia, the significance of cultural progress, the riches of Colombian pre-Hispanic cultures, the state of social legislation in Colombia, and the role of women at the university. These topics were all in line with the agenda of the Liberals in power, which demonstrates the political content implicit in cultural events such as this one.⁴⁶ For its organizers the Curso was a success. According to the records of the MEN, there were over 1,500 registered participants, including professors, lawyers, doctors, engineers, students, employees and workers. It was one of the first occasions in which the latter had access to the Teatro Colón, which was now being used explicitly for the campaign of cultural democratization of the MEN.

Although the first Curso de Extensión Cultural was reviewed positively, it did not become a permanent program. Only two Cursos were held in Bogotá and one in the city of Popayán.⁴⁷ However, the format of the lecture as a tool for cultural democratization continued to be frequently used during the rest of the Liberal Republic. Other lecture series began to be organized by the SEC directly or by the cultural institutions it sponsored. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Minister of Education in 1940-1941, was an important force behind the so-called Cultural Lectures. For him, the lectures were an opportunity to bring politics to the public realm, putting an end to the practice of politics in a mysterious and exclusive sphere. In his report to Congress in 1940, Gaitán stated that

⁴⁴ The Encuesta Folklórica Nacional is a relatively underexploited source that has only recently been brought to light by Renán Silva. Silva analyzes the complexities of this source, encouraging its use by researchers while warning them against its misleading character: while it purports to contain the cultural practices of the masses, it assumes that “folklore” is their only form and therefore partially ignores other popular practices that we could call modern. Silva nevertheless finds this source to be immensely valuable, and discusses its significance in the context of the modernizing Colombian state and its use of scientific tools like statistics, censuses and surveys for nation formation. See: Silva, *Sociedades campesinas, transición social y cambio cultural en Colombia*. For an analysis of the Encuesta’s approach to music practices in particular see: Catalina Muñoz, “To Colombianize Colombia: Cultural Politics, Modernization and Nationalism in Colombia, 1930-1946” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 130-190.

⁴⁵ The surviving documentation, at least that which researchers have been able to locate to date, is partly at the Archivo General de la Nación and partly at the Patronato Colombiano de Artes y Ciencias, both in Bogotá.

⁴⁶ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 3, Carp. 3, f. 108. Printed booklet with the program of the Curso de Extensión Cultural y Universitaria of February-March, 1937. See also a report on the outcomes of the first Curso de Extensión Cultural in: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 3, Carp. 6, f. 67-74. Bogotá, June 11, 1937.

⁴⁷ The report of the SEC to the MEN in mid-1939 expressed the SEC’s will to revive the Cursos de Extensión Cultural, which had only taken place three times under the organization of Gerhard Masur. See: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 1, Carp. 4, f. 117-118.

A well organized democracy is characterized by the free discussion of its plan of action, exact knowledge of its problems, and the perception of the rhythm of national life in all its aspects. The *pueblo* needs to know about conflicting opinions and controversies when what is at stake is our future as a nation.⁴⁸

These ideas, coming from a Minister of the government, were innovative and even revolutionary in a country where, since the Regeneración in the late nineteenth century, politics had been a closed-door gentlemen's affair. Gaitán was a fierce critic of the traditional dichotomy between what he called the *país político* and the *país nacional*, the “political country” and the “national country,” the ruler and the ruled. The Colombian ruling elites had adopted this impersonal form of rule in the context of the oligarchic and authoritarian regimes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that depended on the export economy. On the contrary and in the context of an increasingly mobilized society, Gaitán was an advocate of giving political agency to the lower segments of society and in particular to the rising urban middle-classes he represented.⁴⁹

Gaitán talked about opening up spaces for common people to contribute to the political debate—about finding places for communication and the exchange of ideas. It was with this purpose that as Minister of Education he sponsored weekly lectures at the Teatro Municipal and at the Teatro Colón. Lectures at the Teatro Colón in the early 1940s included prominent international speakers, many of whom were in Latin America exiled from World War II and Franco's Spain. Among the people who spoke in Bogotá were José Antonio Aguirre, Basque leader; Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Mexican labor leader who spoke about Mexico's cultural programs; Antonio García Banús, Spanish chemist; José de Recasens, Spanish intellectual who promoted anthropological studies in Colombia; Paul Rivet, French ethnologist exiled in Colombia from 1941 to 1943; José María Ots, Spanish exile and historian; and Henry Wallace, U.S. Vice President on a goodwill tour of Latin America against Germany.

Colombian speakers were as numerous as foreign ones. The Minister himself gave lectures often with titles such as “Culture and Democracy” and “A Mystic for Culture.” As was the case with the Cursos de Extensión Cultural, most speakers were strong collaborators of the Liberal government's reformist cultural policies, including people like Gustavo Santos, director of the DNBA; Luis Alberto Acuña, artist and critic, member of the reformist group of artists “Los Bachués,” who served as manager of the Teatro Colón from 1942 to 1943; Jorge Zalamea, writer who served as Minister of Education in 1937 and 1942; José Francisco Socarrás, psychiatrist and educator who collaborated with the MEN in different capacities, especially at the Escuela Normal Superior; Gregorio Hernandez de Alba, anthropologist who directed the DNBA's Servicio Arqueológico Nacional; artist Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo; musicologist Andrés Pardo Tovar; and Dr. Francisco Gnecco Mozo.⁵⁰ The purpose of these lectures was both nationalistic and democratizing. In Gaitán's words, the lectures sought “the affirmation of a national conscience” and “the awakening and intensification of a precise idea of Colombianness among the *pueblo*” as a way of defending democracy against the perceived threats of the times.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, *La obra educativa del gobierno en 1940*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1940), 79.

⁴⁹ On the role of Gaitán in this personalization of politics see: Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán*.

⁵⁰ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 763, f. 258-264. “Movimiento de los espectáculos efectuados en el Teatro Colón desde el primero de Agosto de 1942 hasta el 30 de Junio de 1943.”

⁵¹ Gaitán, *La obra educativa del gobierno en 1940*, 80.

The slow opening of the Teatro Colón

While Gaitán was a very important force behind the opening of the Teatro Colón and turned it into an active institution within the Ministry's campaign of cultural extension, it would be inaccurate to say that democratization only began after 1940 when he became Minister. The documentation provides evidence that, besides the Cursos de Extensión Cultural in 1937, other activities in 1938 and 1939 pointed in that direction as well. In 1938, the SEC began to sponsor shows that had initially taken place at the Teatro Colón to be repeated for workers at different venues. One example was the performance of Berta Singerman, a recognized Argentine actress and poet. After her presentation at the Teatro Colón, the SEC sponsored another show for workers at a popular venue, the Santamaría bullring, on Sunday, January 9, 1938. For this show, Gustavo Santos, Director of the then DNBA, sent tickets to be distributed among the workers of the Energy Company, the Telephone Company, the Municipal Companies, the National Railways, the Center of Social Culture for Workers, and the Secretary of Public Works of Bogotá. Each of these institutions received between 150 and 200 tickets for their employees.⁵²

Another similar example was the Viennese Ballet. After a successful season at the Teatro Colón, the mayor's office organized a low-price presentation at the Santamaría bullring at for Sunday, August 21, 1938. The success of the presentation was such that the mayor received many particular requests for another presentation, which was organized at even lower prices that facilitated high working-class attendance. Furthermore, besides the ballet performance, the show also included groups of popular musicians and artists from Bogotá to make the show even more appealing to the masses.⁵³ In this way, performers that had been exclusive to the Teatro Colón began performing for more popular audiences, although not necessarily at the Colón.

Another strategy to make such performances available to broader audiences was to set aside seats for public school children in shows at the Colón. In the 1939 season of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (National Symphonic Orchestra, OSN), the SEC assigned the first three rows of box seats for public schools in all twelve concerts.⁵⁴ Similarly, when the Piccoli—a world famous Italian puppet theater—visited Colombia, the SEC paid its director \$2,000 pesos to give four exclusive presentations for public school children, three at the Teatro Colón of Bogotá and one in the city of Medellín.⁵⁵

In 1940, when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was named Minister of Education, he explicitly launched a campaign to democratize the Teatro Colón, although not without resistance. In his own words, “opening the doors of the Teatro Colón to the *pueblo* was and still is seen in some circles as a lack of respect for a solemn tradition and a breach of protocol.”⁵⁶ Seeking to end this custom, which Gaitán described as “an extreme injustice and a perjury to the extension of culture,” the MEN organized a series of free “Popular Concerts” by the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional at the Teatro Colón in 1940. The target audiences were university students, the middle class and the general working-class public. The OSN gave an average of three free concerts a month in the second semester of 1940 as part of the agreement they made with the Minister.⁵⁷ In the following years, the Popular Concerts grew in number and variety. They were not only held at the Teatro Colón but also

⁵² TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Vol. 760, f. 4 ff. Bogotá, January 5, 1938.

⁵³ *El Espectador*, Aug. 22, 1938.

⁵⁴ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 25. Letter from Bernardo Romero Lozano, director of the TC, to the Chief of the Fiduciary Section of the Teatro Colón. Bogotá, Feb. 25, 1939.

⁵⁵ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 27-28. Letter from the Director of the SEC to Vittorio Podrecca, director of the Piccoli. Bogotá, March 8, 1939.

⁵⁶ Gaitán, *La obra educativa del gobierno en 1940*, 95.

⁵⁷ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Vol. 763, f. 568-569. Resolution by which the MEN concedes the Teatro Colón to the OSN for free “Popular Concerts.” Signed by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, MEN. 1940. See also programs to some of these concerts in: *Ibid.* f. 647 and 652.

in more popular venues such as the Media Torta open-air theater; they included performances of the OSN, foreign interpreters, the Banda Nacional, and popular folkloric groups. In 1946, Minister of Education Germán Arciniegas reported to Congress that in the previous year 215 Popular Concerts had taken place: an average of 18 concerts per month. The Teatro Colón had passed from being a closed, elitist institution to one open to the general public, thanks to the MEN's sponsorship. The Minister declared that, "the best artists that have performed at the Teatro Colón have been seen and heard by the *pueblo*, which otherwise would have never had the opportunity to appreciate them."⁵⁸

The reports of the performances presented at the Teatro Colón in the first half of the 1940s also suggest that the Teatro was diversifying its repertoire and allowing for a broader definition of the "arts" it welcomed. Performances continued to include the foreign interpreters and theater companies that had characterized the Teatro Colón to that point. Some examples were Danish-American opera singer Lauritz Melchior, Spanish harpist Nicanor Zabaleta, Russian classical pianist Alexander Uninsky, the Original Ballet Russe of Colonel W. de Basil, Polish violinist Henryk Szeryng, American violinist Yehudi Menuhin, Spanish pianist Joaquín Fuster, the Italian Piccoli puppet theater, the Mexican theater company of Virginia Fábregas, Mexican soprano Mercedes Caraza, the Spanish Folkloric Company of María Atinea, and the French theater company of Louis Jouvet—whose plays were executed in French. However, parallel to these traditional performances were numerous national ones, previously rare in the Teatro Colón's programming: the children's company "Aires Boyacenses" ("Resemblances from Boyacá," probably a folkloric group as suggested by its name); the popular music ensemble of the Colombian folklorists Hermanos Hernández; the Colombian poet Laura Victoria; the Colombian poet Victor Mallarino; free concerts of the OSN as well as a didactic music course; concerts of the National Conservatory; performances of the Compañía Nacional de Opera (National Opera Company); the Compañía de Operetas Santa Fé (Santa Fé Operetta Company); and the National Ballet of Jacinto Jaramillo. By 1942, the Colón housed an average of 19 monthly events, and the prices indicate that they were accessible to the general public. In September 1944, for example, tickets to the performance of the Compañía de Operetas Santa Fe at the Teatro Colón started at \$0.50, and on the same day, the prices for cinema ranged from \$0.50 to \$1.00. The MEN had made the Teatro Colón as accessible to the public as cinema, one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the time.⁵⁹

All of these events show that from around 1940 the Teatro Colón hosted more events than it had previously, and that the repertoire of the performances it housed varied greatly. A significant event that demonstrates the transformation of the Teatro Colón's profile was the celebration of the Day of the American Indian organized by the Instituto Indigenista Colombiano on April 19, 1943. A new fascination with and interest for the native had recently given rise to a Colombian movement of *indigenismo* among artists, intellectuals and anthropologists.⁶⁰ An *indigenista* event at the Colón epitomized the break with what the theater had represented before, particularly its elitist desire for Europeanization. The fact that Luis Alberto Acuña was the manager of the Teatro at the time must have facilitated the event. Acuña was an artist who belonged to the *indigenista* group Los Bachués.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Germán Arciniegas, *Memoria del Señor Ministro de Educación Nacional al Congreso de 1946* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1946), XLIX. For the statistics about concert attendance see the SEC report in the same publication, p. 215 and ff.

⁵⁹ For reports of activities at the Teatro Colón see: TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 763, f. 258-264. "Movimiento de los espectáculos efectuados en el Teatro Colón desde el primero de Agosto de 1942 hasta el 30 de Junio de 1943," as well as several reports in TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 763, f. 219-226, 269 and ff. On prices: *El Tiempo*, September 16, 1944.

⁶⁰ Brooke Larson provides a thoughtful definition of *indigenismo* as "the political, literary, and ethnographic production of educated creole elites, who arrogated to themselves the authority to study, diagnose, represent, assimilate, reform, or celebrate the indian race(s) that inhabited their nation." Brooke Larson, "Capturing Indian Bodies, Hearths and Minds: The Gendered Politics of Rural School Reform in Bolivia, 1920s-1940s," in *Natives Making Nation. Gender, Indigeneity, and the State in the Andes*, ed. Andrew Canessa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 39.

⁶¹ See note 47.

In fact, he was also behind the mounting of a ballet called “Bachué,” written by him, which was presented at the Teatro Colón in November 1943. This show was inspired by the legends of the Chibchas, the largest indigenous group that inhabited Colombia when the Spaniards arrived in the early sixteenth century. Acuña’s work, performed by the National Ballet of Jacinto Jaramillo, had an *indigenista* plot and choreography set to music by Beethoven. None of these events of indigenous inspiration would have been possible at the Teatro Colón under the Conservative conception of Colombian race that viewed the indigenous as a force pulling the nation backwards.⁶²

By the early 1940s, the SEC also seems to have started exercising more forcefully its duties as manager of the Teatro Colón. Letters addressed to company directors suggest that the SEC’s control was becoming tighter as they advised companies not to approach intermediaries in trying to obtain rights to perform at the theater, but to approach the SEC directly. Letters from the theater’s managers emphasized the fact that since the Teatro Colón was an official institution, it would only be used for shows sponsored by the SEC. They were taking the Teatro Colón outside of the domain of private cultural promoters and directly into the control of the state. The conditions were that the SEC would concede the theater to the company, assuming all theater expenses except for the wages of the ticket clerk, doormen, cleaning, and stage machinery. The SEC would also provide the performing company discounted prices with the national transportation companies for travel within Colombia. Finally, the SEC offered to pay companies for a few shows for public school children. It was also stipulated that the companies had to give a certain number of performances, sometimes including shows in cities other than Bogotá such as Cartagena, Medellín, and Cali.⁶³

While the Teatro Colón’s opening to national performers was undoubtedly a result of the reformist impetus of Liberal cultural managers, the international context in which it took place played a significant role. World War II had closed the European markets for coffee, the main Colombian export. The stagnation of coffee exports resulted in a fiscal deficit which meant a cut of resources for many government sectors including culture.⁶⁴ In the early 1940s, the Director of Cultural Extension often complained of the lack of funds resulting from the War, which made it difficult to hire renowned international artistic ensembles for the Teatro Colón. Furthermore, difficulties with transportation complicated the arrival of foreign companies to Colombia.⁶⁵

In his 1940 report, Minister Gaitán discussed the impact of the War on his cultural campaign. The budget assigned for both national and international performances was less than inadequate. He explained that the Teatro had not been able to hire theater companies, ballet ensembles, opera companies, or performers with international status.⁶⁶ Hoping to fill in the gap left by the absent international companies, the MEN decided to strengthen support for national companies. The government’s backing of national theater can be viewed as another aspect of the import substitution process that was taking place at the time. In 1940, the Minister of the Treasury, Carlos Lleras Restrepo, announced that the fiscal deficit of the country was not necessarily negative but that it could be used as a tool for economic revival. He implemented this with the creation of the Instituto de Fomento Industrial (Institute for the Promotion of Industry) which was to sponsor

⁶² TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 763, f. 48. Report of activities of the Teatro Colón from 1943 to 1944. Signed by José María Mora, manager.

⁶³ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Vol. 760, f. 130. Letter from Gustavo Santos, Director of the SEC, to Vittorio Podrecca, Director of the puppet theater Piccoli. Bogotá, Nov. 15, 1938. TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 7. Letter from Bernardo Romero Lozano, manager of the Teatro Colón, to Ernesto Csillag, manager of the Spanish dancer “La Argentinita.” Bogotá, Jan. 20, 1939. TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 761, f. 10. Letter from Bernardo Romero Lozano to Nicolas Kostrukoff, choir director. Bogotá, Feb. 9, 1939.

⁶⁴ On the effects of World War II on Colombian economy see: José Antonio Ocampo, “Crisis mundial y cambio estructural (1929-1945),” in *Historia económica de Colombia*, ed. José Antonio Ocampo (Bogotá: TM Editores, 1994).

⁶⁵ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14, f. 17. “Resumen de las labores de Extensión Cultural en los tres últimos años, 1940, 1941 y 1942.”

⁶⁶ Gaitán, *La obra educativa del gobierno en 1940*, 96.

import substitution through the state's direct investment in industry.⁶⁷ Something similar happened to Colombian theater at the time. Just as the War had hindered the flow of manufactured goods into the country, it had hindered the flow of cultural products, and cultural managers adopted similar strategies to economists by seizing the opportunity to develop national production given the absence of international supply. While some bemoaned the absence of worthy performers, others took advantage of the situation to give strong government support to national theater.

The support for national theater was instituted by Decree 917 of 1944 which enforced Law 109 of 1943 to promote the development of national theater.⁶⁸ This Decree ordered an exception of public-performance taxes to all theatrical representations that were authored by a Colombian and performed by at least 80% Colombian actors. The Decree benefited all national drama, comedy, opera, operetta and variety shows, all dance or ballet groups, singers, poets, musicians, and in general all Colombian artists "by birth or adoption." Since taxation could amount to 15% of earnings, the decree gave national companies a great advantage over international ones.⁶⁹

The results seem to have been positive. The report on activities of the Teatro Colón from 1943 to 1944 stated: "it is undeniable that the intense stir that has taken place around National Theater has been set off by the vigorous encouragement that the Ministry of Education has given to these activities." National artists must have taken great advantage of the new interest displayed by the government in their art since according to the author of the report, Jorge Arturo Mora, there was a "new favorable climate for the reemergence of the Colombian scenic arts throughout the country."⁷⁰ Among the beneficiaries of the Decree were the Compañía de Teatro Renacimiento, the National Ballet of Jacinto Jaramillo, the Compañía Nacional de Zarzuela, the Compañía de Comedias de Amira de La Rosa, and the Compañía de Operatas Santa Fé.⁷¹ The latter, for example, was granted permission to put an operetta season at the Teatro Colón with great success in all of their twelve performances, "received with outstanding enthusiasm by the devoted public."⁷² Press advertisement for this event emphasized the fact that it was performed 100% by national artists.⁷³

When the Liberals left power in 1946, the Teatro Colón had become a lively institution that while still associated by many with the traditional "high" arts, had managed to open its doors on innumerable occasions to the general public which attended to watch world-class performers as well as growing national companies. The report of the theater manager to congress in June 1946 stated:

In the previous years, our governments, sensibly realizing what [the Teatro Colón] represents, have given decisive support to the promotion and diffusion of all those activities related with the arts and letters which is evidently reflected as we can see in the ascending cultural level achieved in these fields. Expositions, concerts, lectures, open-air theater, etc., have definitely contributed to instilling in people of all classes the love and taste for aesthetic emotions which make more pleasant and bearable the struggle of life.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Marco Palacios, *Entre la legitimidad y la violencia: Colombia 1875-1994* (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 1995), 538-539.

⁶⁸ See this legislation in *Diario Oficial*, No. 25432 of 1943, and No. 25530 of 1944.

⁶⁹ This percentage appears in: TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 133, Vol. 760, f. 136. Letter from Bernardo Romero, manager of the Teatro Colón, to Raimundo Vives, representative of the Spanish company Chavalillos Sevillanos. Bogota, Nov. 22, 1938.

⁷⁰ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Carp. 763, f. 46. "Informe de las actividades del Teatro Colón en el lapso comprendido entre el 1 de Julio de 1943 y el 30 de Junio de 1944."

⁷¹ *Ibid.* F. 48.

⁷² TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 135, Vol. 764, f. 67. "Informe de las actividades del Teatro Colón del mes de Junio de 1945 al mes de Junio de 1946."

⁷³ *El Tiempo*, September 16, 1944, p. 18.

⁷⁴ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 135, Vol. 765, f. 66. "Informe de las actividades del Teatro Colón del mes de Junio de 1945 al mes de Junio de 1946."

The Teatro Cultural: Bringing culture to Bogotá's children and workers

Besides the Teatro Colón, there was another official theater under SEC control: the Teatro Cultural located at the Parque Olaya Herrera in Bogotá. While in the Teatro Colón the SEC had trouble breaking the elitist past of the institution in order to insert it into the cultural extension campaign, the Teatro Cultural was a creation of the Liberal Republic, and so it was born with the spirit of this era. It was inaugurated in August 1936 by the MEN with children in mind.⁷⁵ Strategically located, the Teatro was built in the 700-acres city park created in 1931 as an extensive green space for the recreation of Bogotanos. The modern building, entrusted to Colombian architect Carlos Martínez Jiménez, included a theater room and a library.⁷⁶

At first, the Teatro Cultural opened with a library for children and a theater used for film showings. Additionally, a year after its opening, a marionette company was also added to the repertoire. The library had over 1,500 volumes and opened daily in the mornings and the afternoons, with an average of one hundred daily visitors.⁷⁷ The cinema and marionette programming during weekdays began with film showings in the mornings for school children, organized with the collaboration of teachers according to the topics they were studying in the classroom. In the afternoons, there was another film showing which was more recreational and open for both children and adults, and after an intermission, the marionette show took place. During the weekends there were also marionette shows and movies for children and families at the park.

The Teatro Cultural was founded to complement the MEN's cultural extension campaign:

The purpose of education [...] is to generate happiness [...] The creators and founders of the Colombian Teatro Cultural have been inspired in these thoughts, and following them, they are developing a vast program—vast within our limitations of men and resources—to carry out a large nationalist project that tries to democratize knowledge and present new forms of life and new horizons to the peoples that inhabit the ground of the *patria*.⁷⁸

The Teatro Cultural had two specific missions: on the one hand, it was to bring the campaign of cultural extension to children, and on the other, it became home to the MEN's campaign of Educational Cinematography, both for children and adults. The first goal, to reach children, was sought through the library, film showings for children, and the marionette theater. The manager of the Teatro Cultural, Antonio Angulo, inaugurated the theater's marionette company in 1937. The marionettes performed for the first time in October of that year, presenting comedies, variety shows, operas, zarzuelas, educational dialogues, and *costumbrista* scenes. While some of the titles of these marionette shows appear on the reports of the director, it is difficult to know what their specific contents were since they were not published or recorded. However, the titles do suggest locally-based themes such as “Fiestas de plaza,” “El trapiche,” or “Los promeseritos.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Darío Echandía, *Memoria que el Ministro de Educación Nacional presenta al Congreso en sus sesiones de 1936* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1936), 57.

⁷⁶ Carlos Niño Murcia, *Arquitectura y Estado. Contexto y significado de las construcciones del Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Colombia, 1905-1960*, 2 ed. (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 2003), 165-166.

⁷⁷ See reports of the manager from 1936 to 1938 in: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2. Other reports for 1942 in: AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14, f. 63. “Informe rendido por el Departamento de Extensión Cultural y Bellas Artes.” July, 1942.

⁷⁸ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 199-200. “Cómo utiliza el Ministerio de Educación el cinematógrafo y las películas educativas.” April 27, 1937.

⁷⁹ See reports of the manager from 1936 to 1938 in: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 206.

During intermission, children were allowed to rise to the stage and interpret dialogues, dances, songs and recitals themselves.⁸⁰ Since admission was free of charge and the Teatro Cultural was located in a very popular park of Bogotá, the shows always had good attendance. On the weekends, for example, when the park was full of people, the theater was occupied above its limit with up to 600 spectators, including those that could not find seats and had to stand. The shows were so popular that usually there was not enough room for all the people who wanted to come in.⁸¹

Besides the library and the marionettes, the Teatro Cultural was also put in charge of the government's campaign of Educational Cinematography which was devised both for children and adults. Educational Cinematography began in 1934 when the director of the National Library, Daniel Samper Ortega, organized it. In 1932, he brought up for the first time the topic of cinema, as he called the attention of the MEN to the interesting use that libraries such as those in Paris were making of "this modern educational media" to intensify its cultural campaign.⁸² By mid 1934, his report to the MEN stated that the section was almost ready to begin functioning at the library. He said that the first projector was already in Bogotá, and a second one was on its way, sailing up the Magdalena River.⁸³ In 1936, when the Teatro Cultural opened, it became the home of the cinematography campaign, showing 35mm films for adults and children alike, with plans to extend this campaign to the rest of the country.

Since the late 1920s, movies imported from Mexico, Argentina, and the United States had become one of the preferred forms of entertainment in Colombian cities. In 1935, Minister López de Mesa expressed deep concerns about this popular form of entertainment:

Thousands of movies are shown yearly on the screens of the salons that sell this distraction with great popularity. And thousands are the hours that the *pueblo* spends in digesting this useless food, barely spiced with the juices of sensuality to dissimulate its dullness and insipidness. Sometimes, not only time is wasted, but youth is given the corrosive juices of shrewdness, of romantic criminality.⁸⁴

For López, the problem was not cinema *per se* but the kind of material that reached people through it; and it reached great numbers of people. Being aware of the potential of cinema in terms of its reach, the MEN decided to take advantage of it for its own purposes. Minister Luis López de Mesa said that "it is indispensable that we declare these services [cinema and radio] a 'function of the State' since a weapon of such efficacy, and such danger as well, cannot be left to the chance of merely commercial convenience."⁸⁵ This attitude is representative of the controlling aspect of Liberal cultural management, as it was of other contemporary nationalist regimes—whether democratic or authoritarian.⁸⁶ While it was done in the name of democracy, the management of culture under

⁸⁰ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14, f. 60-62. "Informe rendido por el Departamento de Extensión Cultural y Bellas Artes." July, 1942.

⁸¹ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 3. Daily reports of activities of the Teatro Cultural.

⁸² Julio Carrizosa Valenzuela, *Memoria del Ministro de Educación Nacional al Congreso de 1932* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1932), 155.

⁸³ Jaime Jaramillo Arango, *Memoria del Ministerio de Educación Nacional al Congreso de 1934*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1934). Report of the Biblioteca Nacional, Vol. 2, pp. 197-204.

⁸⁴ Luis López de Mesa, *Gestión administrativa y perspectiva del Ministerio de Educación, 1935*. (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1935), 76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁶ This was the case of European totalitarian regimes as well as Latin American countries like Brazil, where most forms of mass consumption including cinema, radio, and the press were declared to be of "public utility." See: Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 66 and 82-86.

Liberal rule was nonetheless patronizing and continued to consider the lower classes children in need of guidance. Cultural programs were often devised as a means of social control and engineering, as they were seen as tools to take workers away from the tavern and children away from the streets; all of this would help bring the nation closer to modernity. Cinema was one of the programs inserted in this category: movies could teach people about hygiene, about how to better their crops, how to raise their children, and about the wonders of modern life.

Furthermore, cinema could be an effective disseminator of the MEN's message. The cinematographer could be easily carried around and films could be projected almost anywhere. The Ministry took advantage of this in order to reach the most needy and isolated sectors of society, both in Bogotá and beyond. Target audiences were children, the urban working class, and the *campesinos* of the Colombian countryside. Films on their part, were seen as objective presentations that could complement the work of teachers all over the country and educate the young and the old:

By this means, we aspire to facilitate and extend with an objective presentation the duty of teachers, and to interest in their teachings all social groups that form Colombian society, *campesinos* and students, small businessmen, the army and the police, [and] public officials. [...] As doctor Felipe Antonio Molina has rightly said, 'We want to offer everyone live and constant lessons that without a doubt will contribute to create a more modern industrial, agricultural, civic, and cultural conscience within the human complex of Colombia.'⁸⁷

In Bogotá, the Teatro Cultural was not the only stage used. Instead, cultural managers launched a campaign to bring what they called "cultural cinema"—as opposed to commercial cinema which was considered "useless" and "dangerous"—to working class neighborhoods. Every evening from Tuesday to Saturday two films were projected free of charge in a portable movie projector that visited over forty working-class neighborhoods in the city including La Perseverancia, Egipto, Las Aguas, Santa Inés, 20 de Julio, Olaya Herrera, Centenario, Santander, Primero de Mayo, La María, Santa Lucía, Restrepo, El Vergel, Ricaurte, Gaitán, and Acevedo Tejada. Once all the neighborhoods had been visited, the cycle was repeated. In addition to neighborhoods, the cinematographer also visited public schools, institutions of higher education, city jails, and the Centro de Cultura Popular, a cultural center for workers.⁸⁸

The MEN's cinematography campaign attracted large audiences and had an effect beyond that of commercial cinema theaters. The 19 commercial cinema theaters with a capacity for 20,000 people that existed in Bogotá in 1938 attest to the popularity of cinema in the city given that the city had 330,000 inhabitants.⁸⁹ When the MEN began its campaign, free of charge, it certainly achieved the goal of pulling people away from commercial cinema to watch its cultural productions. In May 1940, the SEC received a letter from Carlos Guzmán, manager of the Teatro de los Barrios Unidos located in the working-class neighborhood El Restrepo. Guzmán explained that his business, with

⁸⁷ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 200. "Cómo utiliza el Ministerio de Educación el cinematógrafo y las películas educativas." April 27, 1937.

⁸⁸ For weekly cinematography programs see: TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Vol. 763, f. 123-127. July-August, 1940. However, the traveling cinematographers began a few years before this. The Minister's memoir of 1936 (presented a few months before the inauguration of the Teatro) already reports that the cinematographer of the MEN in Bogotá had shown movies at the Biblioteca Nacional, the Teatro Colón, the Centro Cultural para Obreros, the Parque Nacional, and other locations. In addition to this, a traveling cinematographer had made two trips to villages in Cundinamarca, Boyacá and Santander. See: Darío Echandía, *Memoria que el Ministro de Educación Nacional presenta al Congreso en sus sesiones de 1936. Anexos II* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1936), 40-43.

⁸⁹ CIFA Universidad de los Andes, *Crónica del Teatro al Aire Libre de la Media Torta*, ed. Centro de Investigaciones de la Facultad de Arquitectura de la Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá: IDCT, 2001), 48.

capacity for 500 people, had suffered greatly due to the daily public film projections of the Ministry. Given his grave situation, he offered to rent his theater to the MEN. Understanding that the goal of the MEN was to reach the working class, he highlighted the benefits of the location of his theater which was close neighborhoods like Olaya Herrera, Centenario, Luna Park, Santander, Bravo Paez, Eduardo Santos, Santa Lucía, and Vergel, appropriating the MEN's discourse:

It covers an area inhabited by over 25,000 people, mostly working-class, and in the same area there are nearly 20 schools [...] The acquisition of this theater in rental by the Ministry has advantages of unquestionable significance for the campaign of promotion of popular culture since it could give daily showings to public schools of the south of the city as well as lectures and cinema showings for all the inhabitants of that remote area, which is the most favorable for the intelligent campaign that is taking place in favor of national culture. This way, besides obtaining a significant economic benefit, the Ministry can easily organize a cultural theater that will yield the same social benefits as the one currently set up at the Parque Olaya Herrera of this capital.⁹⁰

This document attests to the impact of the MEN's cinematography campaign, as well as to the Ministry's enhanced role as cultural patron. While the government's resources were scarce, its support of cultural programs turned it into a provider not only for the private industry—as in this case—which adopted the government's language to get benefits from it, but for artists as well, as in the case of the many performers that had to negotiate directly with the SEC in order to gain access to the Teatro Colón, which was the most important venue for theatrical performance in the country.

The films presented by the MEN were obtained through donations from other countries and purchases. The films were of different kinds but the main criterion for selection was that they have a cultural and educational character. The categories along which the MEN classified its movies responded to the selection criterion as they included agriculture, geology, industry, farming, botany, crops, mining, aviation, arts, biography, cosmology, customs, science, sports, education, the world, Colombia, hygiene, and nutrition.⁹¹

For a short period, the MEN produced films itself for the cultural campaign. It established a cinematographic laboratory in 1937 with filming machines for movies with sound. A small building was made specifically for this purpose at the Parque Nacional Olaya Herrera. By April 1937, three movies are reported to have been produced by the MEN's team: an agriculture course for travelling teachers ("Curso de agricultura para maestros ambulantes"), a film about the educational activities of the government ("La obra educativa del actual gobierno"), and a film about cotton crops in Colombia. By October of the same year, a movie that documented the archaeological excavations in the region of San Agustín was released, and in 1938 the cinematography team produced the movie "Antioquia," publicizing the region. Titles pertaining to Colombia came to include different cities and regions such as Bucaramanga, Cartagena, Cúcuta, Barranquilla, Medellín, Popayán, Santa Marta, Santander del Norte and Santander del Sur.⁹² The MEN's films documented the life of the working

⁹⁰ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 134, Vol. 763, f. 948-949. Letter from Carlos Guzmán to the SEC. Bogotá, May 28, 1940.

⁹¹ For a catalog of the films contained in the library of educational cinematography at the Teatro Cultural see: AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Teatro Cultural, Caja 13, Carp. 25, f. 1-15. The catalog contains over 450 titles.

⁹² I was not able to find any of these movies in Colombian archives and libraries. Gonzalo Acevedo, director of the MEN's section of cinematography, reported in an interview years later that he had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the equipment or the movies made during that period for the ministry. See: Jorge Nieto and Luis Gonzalez, *50 años de cine sonoro y parlante en Colombia. Archivo histórico cinematográfico de los Acevedo*, vol. 1987 (Bogotá: Fundación Patrimonio

and peasant classes, the state of public education, and advertised the different regions of the country for investment and tourism. As such, the cinematography campaign became central to the Ministry's propaganda. According to Arcadio Dulcey, director of the SEC, the campaign was to be "directed to the showing of our natural beauties, our typical motifs, our industries, and everything that may be used to promote Colombia both here and abroad."⁹³

The efforts of the MEN to produce its own educational films were short-lived. In 1941 the Ministry realized that the expenses were too high and were not justified in light of the results. From 1939 to 1941, \$39,748 pesos were spent on filming but only 17 productions were filmed and finished, and 160 movies were copied. The Ministry estimated that this job was worth \$9,000, so over \$30,000 had been lost. For this reason, the MEN abandoned filming and decided to produce its films through contractors.⁹⁴

The MEN also tried to extend educational cinema beyond Bogotá, in an effort to reach them "even if they are isolated in very distant and forgotten corners of the country."⁹⁵ Outside of Bogotá, the MEN carried out its cinematography campaign in two ways. The first was through the Escuelas Ambulantes (Travelling Schools) and the second was the presence of MEN's cinema projectors in every department. Established during the Ministry of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the Escuelas Ambulantes traveled around the country bringing books, giving lectures, producing marionette performances, showing educational movies, and distributing information about agriculture, hygiene, childcare, citizenship, etc. Inspired by similar campaigns in other countries such as Mexico, they were devised as a strategy to overcome the absence of cultural institutions in many Colombian regions.⁹⁶

The Escuelas traveled in small trucks donated by the private sector and were equipped with portable movie projectors of 16mm. Between 1940 and 1941, for example, two tours of Escuelas Ambulantes visited the departments of Boyacá, Caldas, Cauca, Cundinamarca, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Santander, Tolima, Valle, Atlántico, Bolívar and Putumayo, as well as the working-class neighborhoods of Bogotá.⁹⁷ According to the statistics of the SEC, they visited 381 towns and gave 3,054 film showings to 874,487 spectators: that is, an average of 286 viewers per film showing, and 8 showings per town.⁹⁸ These first tours were organized centrally from Bogotá. This proved problematic especially when they set out to reach distant provinces. For this reason, in 1941-1942, Minister Germán Arciniegas decided to contract their immediate direction with departmental Directors of Education. According to Arciniegas, the results of this were satisfactory but the Ministry still needed to provide more trucks in order to extend the campaign.⁹⁹

Filmico Colombiano, 1987). For movie titles see: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 203-204. "Cómo utiliza el Ministerio de Educación el cinematógrafo y las películas educativas." April 27, 1937. About the movie of San Agustín see references in: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 4, Carp.3, f. 112-113, 162 and ff. Details about the making of the movie "Antioquia" are in AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 5, Carp. 3, f. 99-117.

⁹³ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 1, Carp. 4, f. 119. Report of Arcadio Dulcey, Director of the SEC, to the MEN. Bogotá, June 19, 1939.

⁹⁴ Germán Arciniegas, *Memoria, 1942*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1942), IL-L.

⁹⁵ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 200. "Cómo utiliza el Ministerio de Educación el cinematógrafo y las películas educativas." April 27, 1937.

⁹⁶ In Colombia, the predecessor of the Escuelas Ambulantes was the Comisión de Cultura Aldeana and its Misiones Culturales established by Minister Luis López de Mesa in 1934, which consisted of sending school teachers to travel around the country visiting villages where they instructed school teachers and educated the community about issues such as hygiene, urbanism, agronomy, etc. About their formation see: López de Mesa, *Gestión administrativa*, 60 and ff. About the Mexican Misiones Culturales on which the Colombian Comisión was inspired see: Lloyd D. Hughes, *The Mexican Cultural Mission Programme* (Paris: UNESCO, [1950]).

⁹⁷ Guillermo Nannetti, *Memoria del Ministerio de Educación Nacional* (Bogotá: Prensas de la Biblioteca Nacional, 1941), 37-40.

⁹⁸ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14, f. 2. "Resumen de las labores de extensión cultural en los últimos tres años, 1940, 1941 y 1942."

⁹⁹ Arciniegas, *Memoria, 1942*, XLVII.

The second strategy of the MEN to extend the cinematography campaign beyond the capital city was to provide the departments with permanent movie projectors. The Ministry sought to build institutions similar to Bogotá's Teatro Cultural in all department capitals. With this purpose in mind, it executed contracts with the Governors of several departments, in which the MEN assumed the responsibility for providing the department with a loaned movie projector, an operator trained by the Ministry, and the films which would be distributed by a rotation system. On their part, the departmental governments agreed to provide the building to establish the projector, pay the operator, promote cultural cinema in the department, overlook the programming, as well as be responsible for any damage to the equipment. The idea was that the equipment from these departmental capital's cultural theaters would also travel a couple of days a week to small towns of the department to project films.¹⁰⁰ In order to promote attendance at the film showings, the MEN established a prize for the best written composition based on the impression caused by a film. Children were asked to send their compositions to the MEN to participate in the contest.¹⁰¹

The problems this campaign faced were several. The MEN had a hard time finding and acquiring films that fit the "educational interest" requirement. The Escuelas Ambulantes suffered from lack of personnel and from the small budget they were assigned. Their members, including the film operators, could not be properly compensated since the SEC did not receive the required national funds. Also, the 35mm projectors that were distributed at first proved to be an obstacle for traveling given their weight. The Ministry had to replace them with the lighter projectors of 16mm film, for which movies were also cheaper. Furthermore, traveling was difficult because of the precarious roads in many parts of the country. For this reason, the campaign could not work throughout the country as the MEN had intended, but was limited to the largest centers with easy communication routes and with appropriate facilities for the operators.¹⁰² The MEN's filmmaking campaign was also problematic as it required considerable investment. In mid-1943 the campaign to produce films had been abandoned and the distribution of projectors and purchased films replaced it as the main goal. The laboratory was used to copy and edit movies rather than producing them.

The Limits of Cultural Democratization

The campaign of cultural democratization encountered many obstacles that ultimately impeded the extension of its benefits outside of Bogotá where the headquarters of the campaign were located. The largest problem was that departmental authorities proved disinterested towards the cultural initiatives of the central government in most cases. The contract that the government established in order to bring educational cinema to the departments was devised so that departmental input was necessary. The MEN required that departments pay and administer part of the process. The reason for this was twofold: on the one hand, the MEN did not have enough resources to sponsor its cultural campaign fully at a national level, and on the other hand, the decentralization of culture was one of the goals of the Ministry. Cultural managers believed that departments had to become aware of their cultural richness and of the significance of extending "culture"—by which they often meant "high" culture—to all society. They argued that Bogotá needed to stop being the cultural capital and allow the departments to be cultural producers as well.

¹⁰⁰ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Actividades Culturales: Informes, Caja 6, Carp. 2, f. 200. "Cómo utiliza el Ministerio de Educación el cinematógrafo y las películas educativas." April 27, 1937. f. 202-204.

¹⁰¹ AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 1, Carp. 4, f. 119. Report of Arcadio Dulcey, Director of the SEC, to the MEN. Bogotá, June 19, 1939.

¹⁰² See: AGN, Archivo Anexo II, MEN, Educación: Informes Generales, Caja 1, Carp. 4, f. 118-119. Report of Arcadio Dulcey, Director of the SEC, to the MEN. Bogotá, June 19, 1939; and AGN, Min. de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 14. "Resumen de las labores de extensión cultural en los últimos tres años, 1940, 1941 y 1942."

However, there was a general lack of interest in the cultural initiatives coming from Bogotá by departmental Directors of Education. The report of the SEC in 1941 stated that efforts to decentralize culture still needed more economic participation of the departments, as well as more appropriate budget allocations by the central government.¹⁰³

The movie projectors sent by the MEN to the departments ended up abandoned in most cases, paralyzing that campaign. Among the few departments where the campaign did continue thanks to local support were Atlántico, Cauca, and Caldas. In contrast, the contracts with Bolívar, Boyacá, Santander del Norte, Santander del Sur, Magdalena, Tolima, Valle, Nariño, Huila, Chocó, San Andrés y Providencia, Putumayo, Arauca, and Vichada had to be cancelled by the MEN.¹⁰⁴ The few enthusiasts behind the government's campaign were often restrained by a lack of response in the provinces and even in Bogotá where they faced not just apathy but often outspoken opposition.

One of the accusations of the Conservative opposition to Liberal cultural policies was that the government had created an unnecessary and very expensive bureaucracy within the Ministry of Education. Some sectors of liberalism joined conservatives in this critique. The Ministry of Education had in fact expanded considerably compared to what it was before 1930. Under Conservative rule, the state had entrusted education to the Catholic Church. When the Constitutional Reform of 1936 abolished Church tutelage of education and put it directly in the hands of the state, the state apparatus in this area inevitably expanded. Furthermore, Liberal cultural managers sought to make education a larger enterprise that went beyond formal instruction trying to reach as many Colombians as possible. The MEN launched new services such as cinematography, cultural radio broadcasting, school restaurants, national inspection of education, physical education, agricultural instruction, Escuelas Ambulantes, vacation schools, cultural extension courses, publications, village libraries, etc., all of which necessarily implied a growth in the MEN's bureaucracy. Some considered this unnecessary, forcing the MEN to struggle each year to get its budgets approved by Congress, often receiving less money than needed.¹⁰⁵

The frustration caused by the generalized lack of government interest in the MEN's cultural projects was often registered in its internal correspondence. A telling example is the report of Daniel Samper Ortega, Director of the Biblioteca Nacional, which was published as part of the MEN's report to Congress in 1933, and which used an ironic tone:

I present to Your Honor [this] report [...] even though I am convinced that no one will read it, since the honorable senators and representatives, to whom these documents are primarily addressed, get scared and with reason when they are presented at once with the reports of all ministries in thick volumes. [...] I believe that my previous report did not deserve to be read by the budget commissions. Based on very clear reasons and on statistical tables, I had requested a rise that urgently needed not to be postponed.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 2, Carp. 13, f. 9. Report of the SEC for 1941.

¹⁰⁴ AGN, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Extensión Cultural, Caja 3, Carp. 1, f. 50. Draft of the report of the SEC for 1942-1943.

¹⁰⁵ See the defense that Minister Jorge Zalamea made of the labor of the MEN in response to Conservative and Liberal criticism: Jorge Zalamea, *Exposición del encargado del Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Sr. Jorge Zalamea*. (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1937).

¹⁰⁶ Julio Carrizosa Valenzuela, *Memoria del Ministro de Educación Nacional al Congreso de 1933* (Bogotá: Editorial Cromos, 1933), 209. Samper Ortega was especially straightforward in his critiques and demands. In 1934, requesting money for the cataloguing of books, he stated: "[The volumes] could be catalogued before August 1st if the Government would be so kind as to reimburse the Library soon the \$2,000 it took from its budget to buy a painting from Señor Efraim Martínez." See: Jaramillo Arango, *Memoria del Ministerio de Educación Nacional al Congreso de 1934*, 201.

Despite the ever present lack of resources, the cultural programs of the MEN achieved results that were exceptional in Colombian history. Never before had a government sponsored a cultural movement of such dimensions, and after the Conservatives won the presidency again in 1946, cultural politics took a different direction that in some cases implied the reversal of Liberal cultural democratization. Conservatives spoke of saving culture from the degradation that Liberals caused. In an interview with the new manager of the Teatro Colón during the presidency of Mariano Ospina (1946-1950), speaking of the previous administration and its management of the Teatro, the manager stated:

In the end, [the Liberals] have allowed [the Teatro Colón] to suffer from vulgarity. They have somewhat forgotten it. They have rather disdained it. It gives me the feeling of a noble in disgrace. In its direction, to which I have been honorably called to serve, I will know how to restore it in the name of my generation and of the government that spontaneously has given me the opportunity to fulfill a destiny.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ TC, Serie Documental 427.0.1, Caja 135, Vol. 765, f. 636-637. Interview with the manager of the Teatro Colón, during the Ministry of Joaquín Estrada Monsalve (Nov 1947-March 1948).

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