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Re-thinking the role of religion in Orlando Fals-Borda's ideas of social change, 1948-1970

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

Thematic Issue:

MARIÁTEGUI, CRITICAL THINKING AND ANDEAN FUTURES

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To the memory of Leonidas and Carmen

Abstract

Scholars of the renowned Colombian sociologist and co-founder of Participatory Action Research (PAR), Orlando Fals-Borda (1925-2008) have generally acknowledged that both his Presbyterian upbringing and his friendship with the Catholic priest Camilo Torres strongly influenced his thinking and writing. This article both extends and refines this more conventional view by examining the way this religious background appears in his early academic writing. Moreover, based on document analysis spanning four historical archives, the article analyses how his involvement in religious matters influenced the understanding of what social change is and how should be done and hence, of his role as a sociologist committed to it. The analysis of the complex network of knowledge and relations articulated with regard to Fals-Borda's involvement with religious matters aims to shed light on the tight relation between ethics, social research and politics at the basis of PAR.

Key words: Orlando Fals-Borda, Participatory Action Research, Religion and Society, Theology of Revolution, Subversion and Social Change

Introduction

The life and work of Orlando Fals-Borda (1925-2008), one of Latin America's most renowned and influential thinkers of the second half of the past century and co-founder of Participatory Action Research, continues to be of keen interest to scholars across myriad disciplines. Yet despite the consensus that both his Presbyterian upbringing and his friendship with the Catholic priest and revolutionary Camilo Torres strongly influenced his thinking and writing (Cataño et al, 1987; Cedales et al, 2005; Restrepo, 2008; Pereira, 2008; Suárez, 2017), the question of how, and to what extent, his intellectual career was influenced by his involvement in Christian progressive thinking has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention (Perez Benavides, 2010; Poggi, 2015; Moreno, 2017; Diaz, 2017; 2018). Seeking to contribute to this growing body of work, and drawing on his early works as well as on letters and unpublished writings across four archives,¹ this article centrally argues that Christian ethical and theological concerns are a major yet under-appreciated contribution to Fals-Borda's ideas about social change.

Until recently, it was generally assumed that Fals-Borda's radical ideological stance — culminating in his decision to resign from the National University of Colombia and join the *campesino* movement's struggle— had mainly intellectual basis: specifically, his abandonment of positivist functionalism (Cataño, 1987; 2008; Pereira, 2008; Rojas Guerra, 2010). Indeed, his letter of resignation, published in a nationwide newspaper, appeared to suggest this. The University's Faculty of Sociology, founded by Fals-Borda and Camilo Torres in 1959, was regarded as 'one of the important centers in the development of

sociology in Latin America' (Lowry, 1967: 337). However, as Fals-Borda wrote in his letter, the reforms carried out during his time at the United Nations Research Institute in Geneva, 'represented a significant setback for a pioneering academic programme established with the purpose of seeking radical changes in society'. According to him, the destruction of past achievements was accompanied by a re-enthronisation of structural functionalism, a framework the faculty had been gradually discarding since 1962, having proved inadequate to understand Colombian reality.² As his letter concluded: "there is much to do for the country outside the university and one cannot be constrained by these circumstances that so painfully limit the liberating role that the National University should play among the bases" (*El Tiempo*, 29/071970).

However true, the "new Fals-Borda" —as he mockingly wrote to José María Rojas Guerra in 1969 (ACH-UN, FOFB. Relaciones Internacionales, Europa II, Suiza, 32)— was also shaped by the events that marked his life as a member of the Protestant church. As will be shown, Christian commitment, not only intellectual concerns, underlay the invocation of a moral basis for subverting an unequal and exclusionary state of affairs in Colombia.

Close analysis of Fals-Borda's intellectual history between 1948 and 1970 reveals radical changes, as well as recurrent leitmotifs that he wholeheartedly embraced throughout his life, including most importantly, his commitment to social change for the people of his native land, rather than to any theory or institution. By exploring the complex interplay between religious, academic and political values developed during his involvement in religious matters, this article offers a renewed analysis of the ethical and theological basis underlying Fals-Borda's works on social change. These values and experiences would later inform the inception of Participatory Action Research (PAR) —a methodology in which the traditional division between researcher (subject) and the researched (object) was substituted by a

subject/subject relation, leading to a participatory circle of research, action and reflection (Díaz, 2017).

This article is divided into four sections and broadly follows a chronological order. Section 1 examines the beginning of Fals-Borda's relationship with Richard Shaull—one of the most influential Protestant theologians in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, which had a profound impact on his view of the social dimension of Christianity. Section 2 introduces renowned theologian John Mackay's notion of *sacred order*, which Fals-Borda would incorporate in his analysis of violence in Colombia. Section 3 explores Fals-Borda's participation in the 1966 World Conference on Church and Society, and examines how this experience influenced his writing on subversion. Lastly, Section 4 examines Fals-Borda's analysis of Catholic priest Camilo Torres's neo-socialism. The article closes indicating how Fals-Borda's elaborations on 'subversion' laid the groundwork for his theoretical and methodological elaborations leading to PAR.

1. Richard Shaull and the ethical-theological basis of Fals-Borda's approach to social change

In a letter to the theologian Richard Shaull, dated January 1970, an enthusiastic Fals-Borda wrote a brief account of his latest professional developments as Program Director of Cooperatives and Rural Development at the United Nations Research Institute; his well-received presentation on the "Sociology of Commitment" at the Latin American Conference of Sociology in Mexico; his recent trip to Cuba (where he intended to learn from the Cuban model of revolutionary activism), and his plans to return to his academic duties in Colombia later that year. In the closing paragraph, he wrote: 'Dear Dick: Hopefully we will meet soon to exchange ideas. As you know, I owe you a lot intellectually and I hope, along with many of your other Latin American friends, that you continue in your campaign of intra- and extra-ecclesiastic renewal' (ACH-UN, FOFB. Congreso Mundial Iglesias, 366).

This section explores Fals-Borda's intellectual debt to Shaull, the origins of which extend back to his involvement in the Presbyterian Church. According to Fals-Borda's own account, his relationship with Shaull was deeply influential throughout those years:

I was very connected to the church, very connected, to such an extent that one of the missionaries invited me to become a pastor. But my activities were beyond religion ... I was involved not only with music; I was also the director of a Presbyterian Youth Centre. The pastor of that church was Richard Shaull, who would later become one of the founders of liberation theology. My great friendship with Shaull continued, and when he was appointed as a pastor to the Presbyterian Church in Bogotá, it just so happened that I also moved there (Cendales et al, 2005: 11-12).

In 1942, Richard Shaull (1919-2002), having just graduated from Princeton Seminary with high honours, travelled to Colombia by appointment of the Presbyterian Foreign Board. In

the city of Barranquilla, Shaull and his wife Mildred settled in a working-class neighbourhood where he opened a night school for workers, launched a weekly radio programme and established a regional literacy campaign. As stated in Shaull's records of service: 'So great was his influence that he, a North American lad of twenty-five, was elected Honorary President of a labour union in Barranquilla' (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 1949). Shaull also began intensive work with a group of young people, with whom he began teaching literacy in deprived areas, as well as hosting a regular theological seminar in his own home. Among the group was Fals-Borda, who was very fond of Shaull and one of his most devoted supporters (Castillo-Cardenas, 2010: 17). A letter written by Mildred Shaull to her friends in the USA reveals: "The young man who graduated from Dubuque University, is a teacher in our Boys' School. He plans, develops, and designs most of the [weekly radio programme] and supervises the technical aspects as well. So far people have been well satisfied with the program and many who would not dare to enter a Protestant church will listen to our program in their homes." (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 112). Fals-Borda moved to Bogotá in 1948, soon after Shaull had been transferred there, just a few months after the assassination of the popular leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on 9 April—a landmark in Colombian history which would send shockwaves around the country (Díaz, 2017).

Widespread socio-political unrest in Colombia in particular, and Latin America in general, led Shaull to re-evaluate his mission beyond the ecclesiastical sphere. In October 1952, after visiting Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, Shaull wrote a confidential report to the Presbyterian Foreign Board regarding the prospect of "terrific unrest" across the continent. After detailing the notable rise in anti-American sentiment, Shaull went on to analyse the crisis of liberal democracy, which he perceived to be a result of several factors, including rapid inflation, massive rural-urban migration, a decline in economic production and growing political discontent among the industrial proletariat. He anticipated three possible outcomes: firstly, a

strong and violent dictatorship led by the more extreme right-wing elements of the army and the Church (“which is practically what you have in Colombia,” he wrote); secondly, some type of authoritarian-nationalistic movement; and thirdly, Communism: “personally I fear...Communism may easily take over in some parts of the continent, and sooner than we think.” (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 98-99).

For Shaul, the challenge posed by Communism demanded both deep historical understanding and radical changes in the Church’s outlook: ‘Communism has beaten us at our own game of evangelizing the world...[i]t has done so, not primarily by force of arms but by a keener awareness of the human situation: they have confronted a world lost in meaninglessness with a clear-cut comprehensive world-view and philosophy of life which can provide the framework for a meaningful existence’. Whilst Christians had accepted a fatal dichotomy between theology and ethics, Communism was a faith which offered the hope of transforming the structures and institutions of life: ‘Protestants concern themselves that people don’t smoke and drink, Communists are concerned about human suffering and injustice’ (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 106). Accordingly, far from dwelling on condemnatory cries against Communism, Shaul’s plan of action for the Church consisted of a systematic analysis of Marxism and Communism and a new ethical thinking that was both theologically and politically informed. This dual strategy was intended to tackle the two critical issues of Protestantism in Latin America; that is, “a sense of loyalty to certain ethical principles which forced outstanding Evangelicals to practically withdraw from the world,” and “an irresponsible criticism of the government on secondary political issues which had no theological or ethical basis” (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 99). This was meant to confront the climate of fear created by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communism, which also met with a formidable response from John Mackay’s ‘Letter to Presbyterians’ (1954).

Shaul's aim, then, was to forge a new generation of ethically motivated and theologically informed citizens able to challenge Communism's tremendous power with a commitment to social change. At the Conference of the Division of Foreign Missions in Toronto (1952), Shaul outlined a programme for the Christian mission of both ministers and laymen to tackle what he called the "Christian churches' tragic failure in Latin America". If Christians hoped to have any influence where Communism was strong, it would be vital to have a "faith which will provide a motive for concern about social injustice and dynamic for social action, [and] a theology which will force Christians to become involved in all areas of social, economic and political life" (PHS/UPC/Shaul, 1, RG360, 109).

A relevant document to analyse how Fals-Borda's aimed to respond to this challenge is his Master dissertation, *Peasant Society in the Colombian Andes*, a socio-ethnographic study of the peasant community of Saucío, completed at the University of Minnesota and published in 1955 by the University of Florida where he was working on his PhD thesis under the supervision of T. Lynn Smith, and translated into Spanish in 1961 whilst he acted as Dean of the Faculty of Sociology and Vice-Ministry of Agriculture (Lowry, 1967: 336).³ This pioneering book, which laid the foundations of rural sociology in Colombia (Lowry, 1967; Rojas Guerra, 2010; Suárez, 2017), reveals how theory and practice intertwined in Fals-Borda's early commitment to rural social change. A key element in understanding this lies in the epigraph, taken from the Book of Esther, with which Fals-Borda introduces and closes his dissertation:

[Mordecai to Esther:] Think not that in the king's palace you will escape. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise ... from another quarter ... Who knows whether you have not come for such a time as this?' (1955: vii, ellipses in the original).

The lack of confidence in 'the king's palace' refers to the circles of the elite — unable to meet with intelligence and integrity 'the peasant problem,' meaning, socio-economic

stagnation and backwardness in a country that was mainly rural —with around 55% of its work force in agriculture by the mid-20th century (Berry, 1978: 355)— coupled with ‘people’s unprecedented feeling of dissatisfaction,’ which was driving rural Colombia to the verge of ‘social revolution’ —a phenomenon that, he wrote, ‘promises to be the distinguishing feature of our century’ (Fals-Borda, 1955: vii). He then urged the national leadership to work with altruism on intelligent, far-sighted and “scientific” policies of socio-economic transition before relief and deliverance to the modest, though equitable, desires of the rural population arising from revolutionary quarters. “Scientific” referred, as Fals-Borda called it, to “enlightened action” ([1961] 2017). This meant at least three interrelated things: i) scientific knowledge of social reality combining socio-ethnographic methods with historical long-term analysis to map the evolution of land distribution, political and religious institutions, socio-cultural manifestations and habits since the pre-Columbian (1955: vii-ix); ii) gradual modernisation of rural areas through education. This allowed Fals-Borda to initiate and follow up a 10-year process of actual change, 1950-1960, which, in turn, demystified identity stereotypes of peasantry as passive and backward *per se* (Letters to W. Ogburn and L. Smith. ACH-UN, FOFB. Universidades, Florida, 54; 58; 81); and iii) local participation in the design of agrarian programmes and policy. As Fals-Borda recalled, after the innovative and entrepreneurial experiences he fostered in Saucío and Camilo Torres’s communal organisation in Tunjuelito (a shanty town in Bogotá), the Advisory Team of Communitarian Development (of which Fals-Borda and Torres were members) ‘was enthusiastic about the prospect of working with people usually regarded by the political elite as unable to cooperate with each other and lacking in initiatives’ (1987: 84). These works and many others paved the way for the development policy (Law 19 of 1958), which sought to spread Community Action Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal* – JAC) across Colombia. In this vein, the construction of the local school of Saucío became a symbol of socio-cultural change, firstly,

because it was itself the product of community organisation, and secondly, because the first JAC in Colombia was established in the facilities of that very school (Cendales et al, 2005: 25).

The epigraph of Fals-Borda's dissertation encapsulated the social awareness of, as he put it in 1949, 'a new generation able to foster change for the better of the country' (ACH-UN, FOFB. Documentos Personales, Instituto Antropología Social, 02).⁴ In his letter to Leo Nussbaun, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Dubuque, declining a work offer received in July 1956, this sense of commitment acquired specific content: 'I certainly would like to enjoy the advantages and the great teaching opportunities offered by the University of Dubuque. But I feel morally obligated to continue my present work, a mission for which I have trained and to which I feel that I should devote my life. I owe this loyalty to my country and its people' (ACH-UN, FOFB. Universidades, Dubuque, 03). In another letter of November 1956, in which Fals-Borda also declined another work offer, this time to lecture at Grinnell College, Iowa, he described himself as a researcher engaged in applied sociology and his role as that of contributing to 'smoothing somewhat the transitional stage' of rapid social change in Colombia (ACH-UN, FOFB. Universidades, Florida, 76-77).

Sociologist Gabriel Restrepo's (2008: 599) reading of the epigraph identifies a sense of guilt within it.⁵ Yet against the backdrop of Fals-Borda's unwavering commitment to social change, the epigraph bears witness to his confidence in the ability of a new altruistic and ethically motivated generation to adjust the state apparatus to tackle the 'peasant problem', namely the dialectics between chronic cultural and socio-economic stagnation and the 'inevitable', though belated, transition towards political, economic and cultural modernization.

2. Mackay' *sacred order* and *la Violencia*

The influence of Protestant ethics and theological concerns on Fals-Borda's early works was not limited to the use of biblical references. This became apparent in the framework he used to analyse the role of violence in the disintegration of the 'sacred order' in rural Colombia (1962; 1964). His research of Saucío overlapped with the harshest years of *la Violencia* —a conflict between the rival Conservative and Liberal Parties, 1946-1958, during which period the civilian death toll was approximately 200,000. However, the magnitude and viciousness of this period was only revealed when Fals-Borda and other members of the newly created Faculty of Sociology of the National University began their investigation of the phenomenon in 1962.

Fals-Borda's analysis of *la Violencia* neither dwelled on the brutality and horrors of it nor on the persecution of Protestants.⁶ Drawing on G. Guzmán's vast descriptive analysis Fals-Borda's socio-analytical approach focused on the significant shift in power relations at various levels and the extent this had modified *sacred* traditional values. The historical basis for this analysis could be traced to his earlier study of Saucío (1955), his PhD thesis (1957) and other studies of the 'peasant problem' (1954; 1956; 1959). In these, he observed an all-embracing ethos of "passivity and resignation," which he regarded as the result of the combined action of religious and political institutions over the long span of four centuries that shaped the *pax hispanica* of the colonial order (1955: 242-245): an order of extraordinary durability accomplished by the coalescence of the cross, the sword, a signorial system of servitude and bonded labour and its own humanism— the 'humanitas colombiana,' (Soto Posada, 2006: 138), which was both erudite and violent.

To analyse the ethical question underlying the *sacred* order, Fals-Borda drew upon John Mackay's *The Other Spanish Christ* (1932) —regarded as 'one of the best explanations of the

raison d'entrée of Protestant Christianity in a Roman Catholic continent' (Padilla, 2007: 261). Mackay, a renowned theologian with whom Fals-Borda cultivated a friendly relationship, was a Scottish Presbyterian who had aroused missionary zeal in a number of young Presbyterians, among them Shaull. Mackay's argument was that the image of Christ—the Christ of Tangiers introduced by the conquistadores—was of one who was born and died, but who had never lived. The 'South-Americanization of the Spanish Christ', as Mackay called this process of acculturation of Spanish popular religious into Latin America, had a cathartic value for worshippers but had no ethical meaning: "Their exclusive interest in Christ's meaning for death and immortality has led them to ignore the One who by the lake-side told men how to live" (Mackay, 1932: 102). Therefore, Mackay draws his readers' attention to the other Spanish Christ, the redemptive Christ of the Spanish mystics whose way to America was barred (Ibid: 111).

A second approach to *la Violencia*, which clearly revealed Mackay's influence, was Fals-Borda's unpublished 'The Sacred and the Violent: Problematical Aspects of Development in Colombia', a paper presented at the Conference 'Obstacles to Social Change in Latin America,' at Chatham House, London, in 1965 (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1965/1415/04). Here, Fals-Borda argued that the suffering and thorn-crowned Christ of Tangiers — 'a marginal saint who was to find many ghastly niches in the Colombian churches' (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1965/1415/04, 8)—was still the Christ of the then present-day Latin American Catholicism. For him, this path to salvation, which was 'thorny and heavy like the very cross of Jesus' (Ibid), embodied a philosophy of life, the basis of which was the ethics of "otherworldliness": the promise of heaven on the one hand, which served to keep people quiet in their suffering and thus politically subdued, and the threat of hell on the other, which nourished a sense of fatalism highly beneficial to dominant groups. The resulting uncritical morality turned out to

be equally effective to justify passivity as to deploy political violence, and indeed proved to be explosive at the onset of *la Violencia* (Ibid, 06).

As Fals-Borda's analysis of the role of violence in breaking traditionalism (1964) indicated, one of the collateral effects of *la Violencia* was the breakdown of both the sacred character of political institutions and the habit-forming religious acculturation of the peasantry, which resulted in a state that Fals-Borda defined as 'anomical' rather than anarchic (1964: 29). As he explained, the application of the techniques of violence on a grand scale, even where the violence literally runs away with itself in an uncontrolled fashion and produces unforeseen results, demands cooperation (1964: 21). Therefore, despite its immense chaos, *la Violencia* gave rise to a complex web of integration of power from both top down —as the fearsome conservative police, *los chulavitas*, or the conservative armed civil groups, *los pájaros*— and bottom up like the guerrillas of self-defence formed by men, women and children. As documented in *la Violencia en Colombia* (Fals-Borda et al [1964] 2005), some grassroots organisations managed, amidst the conflict, to write their own codes. For example, the *Leyes del Llano*, written by a Liberal self-defence guerrilla group, revealed a significant effort to establish a social order symbolically and pragmatically divorced from the State. In a similar way, the peasantry's disaffection with the church was 'probably not solely produced by those elements of the clergy who in some way encourage the killing of political adversaries' (Torres, 1972: 167). It also resulted from the church's lack of sincere solidarity or will to defend people's interests.

Despite the loss of traditional values and patterns, *la Violencia*, 'the greatest mobilisation of armed peasants in the contemporary history of the Western Hemisphere' (Hobsbawm, 2003: 375), to some degree represented continuity. After a decade of brutality and merciless fighting, the Liberal and Conservative leaderships reached a new power-sharing agreement,

the National Front, wherein the parties agreed to rotate the Presidency over a period of 16 years (1958-1974). When this system was established, Fals-Borda saw the Liberal Party's plans for institutional reconstruction and agrarian reform —heavily supported by President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress— as a positive sign of transition towards political and cultural modernization. As a Protestant who in principle rejected the 'sacred' character of political structures, Fals-Borda regarded the construction of a social order based on secular democratic political action as the means to produce social change in a country where the national identity was synonymous with membership of the Roman Catholic Church. In this way, his ethical analysis of the disintegration of the *sacred* found a strong framework in Mackay's ecumenical humanism of Freedom. Framed within the Calvinist ethos, Mackay's humanism demanded an attitude of confidence in man's power to shape the world while was also being largely optimistic about secular modern institutions (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1965/1415/04).

After his analysis of *la Violencia*, Fals-Borda saw the National Front in a different light. It had not only reestablished the power of those who had unleashed *la Violencia*; it also allowed them to impose their own interpretation of its causes. As President Lleras's speech on the day he took office in August 1958, stated: 'We saw with amazement how there had been a reserve of savagery in our people which defied entire centuries of Christian preaching, of civil order, and of advanced communal existence' (in Fals-Borda, 1964: 28). For Fals-Borda, the 'moral crisis' Lleras referred to was not the result of the alleged 'peasantry's natural aggressiveness and moral disorder,' but of excessive use of force to preserve the elite's political hegemony and the great extent to which such criminal behaviour 'was justified or excused by the State, the political parties, or the ruling groups' (Ibid: 26). For him, the moral crisis was more a crisis of justice caused by the abolishment of core features of the rule of law than a crisis of peasants' morality.

Moreover, in contrast to his letter of November 1956, where Fals-Borda defined his role as that of smoothing the transition towards modernization, his analysis of *la Violencia* ([1962] 2005) eroded his confidence in reformist policies to produce a new social order—as well as in functionalism to understand it.⁷ Similarly, his precautionary statements against social revolution in *Peasant Society* gave way to a sense of historical frustration once he concluded that *la Violencia* had failed to be a ‘true social revolution’ after having passed to the full stage of uncontrolled conflict (1964: 26)—a failure that ‘made violence [in Colombia] the constant, universal, omnipresent core of public life’ (Hobsbawn, 2003: 373).

Fals-Borda was a rural sociologist who became increasingly interested in *la Violencia* because it had shaken the rural world to its foundations. Yet the sheer complexity and diversity of Colombia’s regions made it difficult for him to be precise about the scale of the axiological changes which Colombian rural society experienced in its aftermath. However, it led him to conclude that the country would require unprecedented efforts and perseverance to produce something better. ‘Something *better*,’ he said, ‘refers to the configuration of a new social structure based on the actual application of recognized ideals such as justice, respect for life, and encouragement of the creative impulse’ (1964: 30). To this end, meaning to transform these values into a platform of political action, Fals-Borda dedicated his work as a researcher committed to moral subversion during the late 1960s, as will be seen in the following sections.

3. The 1966 World Conference of the World Council of Churches and the theology of revolution

In 1966, after concluding his role as Dean of the Faculty of Sociology, Fals-Borda requested permission to go abroad for one year to return to research, refresh his sociological training and “write [his] book on *campesino* transformation in Colombia, which had been pending for three years” (ACH–UN, FAFS. 1415/6/3). The book he wrote during his stay as a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin was *La subversión en Colombia, visión del cambio social en la historia* (1967) (*Subversion and Social Change in Colombia*, 1969, English version), which differed significantly from the original project.

Fals-Borda’s dedication of the book to Camilo Torres and analysis of his utopian neo-socialism led critics to assume that it was mainly inspired by the revolutionary priest, who had recently died in combat (Rojas Guerra, 2010: xxx). Consequently, this controversial book, which aimed to understand the dialectics of social change against the backdrop of collective endeavours to subvert the established order,⁸ has been seen as an ‘epistemological rupture’ (Pereira, 2008) as it marked its author’s ‘departure from functional positivism’ (Cataño, 2008).

What has been previously overlooked is that before Fals-Borda arrived in Wisconsin, he had attended the 1966 World Conference on Church and Society hosted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. His active involvement in the preparatory studies and documents for this conference during the three preceding years (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1443/5/105; 1462/5/102; 338), and the resulting opportunities he had to network with Protestant and Catholic international institutions, has also gone unnoticed.⁹ Furthermore, as Fals-Borda himself indicated, his project of approaching the concept ‘*subvertere*’ from a positive perspective, rather than as synonymous with violence and destruction (as in his

Unfinished Revolutions in America Latina, 1968), took inspiration from Shaull's elaborations on 'Subversion and Development in Latin America' (Cendales et al, 2005: 12). This was even more apparent in his presentations on *Subversion and Development* at the 11th Annual Foyer John Knox Lecture and the Sodepax Assembly, Rome, in 1970, which he introduced indicating that he would attempt 'the same heterodox course' prescribed by Shaull, according to which 'only a systematic subversion of institutions can ensure essential social transformation' (1971:12).

At the 1966 Conference, Presbyterian pastor and co-founder of La Rosca Foundation, Gonzalo Castillo-Cárdenas, recalled that Richard Shaull surprised the audience with an 'intriguing' presentation on the theology of revolution (Castillo-Cárdenas, 2010: 17). Shaull's 'The Revolutionary Challenge to Church and Theology,' one of the two major addresses, was indeed indicative of a new attitude in protestant theology towards secular movements struggling for social change. According to Shaull's keynote, the real question was 'the vitality of the Judeo-Christian tradition to relate to the present human situation, in such a way as to liberate old images, symbols, and concepts and create new ones that can perform this task' (1967: 470). Activating the meaning of 'revolution' as a theological category, not an ideological one (Barreto 2004: 167), Shaull sought to establish a theological framework that facilitated the connection of the Christian faith to the historical situation of Christians struggling for structural transformation.

Provocative as it was, Shaull's presentation dwelled on issues about which a number of theologians had openly expressed their concern. This included the Methodist Alan Austin, whose work *The Revolutionary Imperative* (1966) addressed the "strange odyssey of the Church from the Bible to the picket line", and Vernon Grounds, co-founder of American

evangelicalism, for whom such an odyssey went even further: “from the seminary lecture hall to the guerrilla hideout” (1971: 71). Therefore, the impact of Shaull’s presentation must be assessed not only in terms of its programmatic content, but also for the focus of its retrospective criticism. Fundamentally, his statement took issue with ‘the theology of the responsible society’: the official theological tenet underlying ecumenical social ethics adopted since the 1st WCC Assembly in 1948. In the face of a nuclear threat, the war in Vietnam, the spread of military rule and worldwide socio-economic injustice, Shaull insisted the mission of the Church required involvement with those involved in revolutionary struggles to transform and overthrow existing power structures. Indeed, the conference moved from recognising the need of ‘nothing less than radical structural changes in international economic relations’ (WCC, 1966: 417) in General Secretary Visser’t Hooft’s opening speech to the open discussion of revolution. As Fals-Borda proposed in his presentation at the Commission on ‘Person in Community’: “if [true socio-economic development] is revolution, or achieved only through revolutionary violent uprisings, let us not be afraid to call it so” (WCCA, 1966 Conference, 243.13/01). The conference, as its final report explained, represented a serious attempt ‘to understand the revolutionary realities which shape the modern world, undertaken with the help of Christians intellectually and emotionally involved in them’ (Thomas, 1968: 410).

If Shaull’s analysis of revolution afforded Fals-Borda a theological reference for his socio-historical research on social change, the conference in general provided him with an ecumenical framework in which faith and the struggles for social justice were connected through a new humanism. This can be seen in at least three elements underlying Fals-Borda’s understanding of subversion, which later became distinctive features of PAR. Firstly, an

ideology for political action in keeping with Christian ethical principles which, drawing on Camilo Torres's utopian neo-socialism, he called 'moral subversion'. Secondly, an eschatological interpretation of revolution, which greatly distanced from the statement on radical social change he delivered at the beginning of the conference. In this, Fals-Borda's analysis was strongly reminiscent of Torres's revolutionary agenda, as he argued that in the wake of palliatives postulated by international policies such as the Alliance for Progress — John F. Kennedy's \$100 billion programme of development for Latin America— the alternative was to seize power from the 'traditional, parasitic elites that are rooted like a swamp jungle in the sloughs of underdevelopment', if necessary through violent, revolutionary uprising, and hand it to those 'with clearer consciousness of their mission of service' (WCCA, 1966 Conference, 243/13/01). Importantly, the broader focus of the 1966 Conference was directed towards understanding the state of contemporary revolutions from an innovative eschatological perspective, thereby portraying struggles for social justice as historical participation in the renewal of things promised by God. This less radical approach arguably served as a deterrent to the temptation to absolutize revolution as a scheme of salvation: since revolutions are threatened most by the temptation of false messianism and the fury of self-righteousness, 'this eschatological note can help the revolution to avoid utopian illusions and disillusion without neglecting the inspiring strength which also lies in utopian hope' (ACH-UN, FOFB. Congresos, Congreso Mundial Iglesias, 63). This understanding permeated Fals-Borda's dialectics of subversion which he saw as a continuous and never-ending struggle between utopia and commitment, theory and action.

The third element related to the Conference's open-ended debates on the nature of revolutionary violence and its strategy: a locus of danger and ambiguity. The conference broadly defined the essence of revolution as radical change in power structures in order to bring about social justice. However, the question regarding the use of violence as a means of

achieving social justice was still an issue of deep concern, particularly as it was widely recognised among attendees that there is always a potential for violence, even when the strategy itself is non-violent. This, in turn, left open the question regarding the legitimacy of the various means of political struggle, particularly in terms of their consistency with Christian notions of social ethics (Thomas, 1968: 415). For Fals-Borda, in view of the then present 'revolutionary social vacuum' in Colombia, subversion, broadly understood, provided a complex but effective strategy for political action in which, he wrote, 'the violent revolutionary upburst (sic) is simply its crowning act' (ACH-UN, FOFB. Libros, Subversión, 84) whilst the overall strategy should focus on the formation of a counter-elite and the importance of research committed to those involved in such struggles.

4. Camilo Torres' principle of efficacious love and political pluralism

By the mid-1960s, Camilo Torres and Fals-Borda, like many other representatives of their generation, had grown scornful of the National Front regime, which had become synonymous with corruption, aloofness and authoritarianism. Torres, who openly confronted it, became the symbol of his generation —the generation of *la Violencia*. Hence, the dedication of Fals-Borda's *Subversion and Social Change* to Torres was not 'an act of friendship but one of just recognition of his contribution to the understanding of the meaning of the times in which we live' (1969: xiii).

Decades later, responding to whether his work with Torres had influenced his understanding of PAR, Fals-Borda replied in a similar manner: 'The seed was there with Camilo. His contribution was commitment, commitment to the popular struggles, to the need of social transformation ... The idea of commitment to the problems of society in order to understand them and then to solve them, is one of the roots of participatory research' (in Cendales et al, 2005: 23;25).

This section looks at two interrelated expressions of Torres's commitment: his notions of efficacious love and political pluralism. During his years at the University of Louvain (1955–1959), Camilo Torres's ideas and attitudes regarding the mission of the Church were tightly bound to the sociological and theological teachings of Catholic vanguard thinkers such as François Houtart and Canon Jacques Leclercq, who strongly supported the Vatican Council II, 1962–1965, the process of institutional reform of the Catholic Church called by Pope John XXIII (1958–1963). Torres, along with his friend the priest Gustavo Pérez, established the research group of Socio-Economic Investigation of Colombian Reality (ECISE), first in Louvain and subsequently in Paris, London, Rome, Madrid and Berlin. The purpose of ECISE was “to look for unity over and above party matters...[and] a preliminary examination

of the reality of our country” (in Broderick, 1975: 73). Later, Torres’s engagement with the worker-priests of Abate Pierre in Paris expanded his understanding of ecumenism and its relation to Marxist principles. However, as Shaull observed, what captured the imagination of this young generation committed to the struggle of the masses was the humanism embodied in local ideologies, such as the indigenous Marxism of the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui and Jorge Eliécer Gaitán’s autochthonous socialism (1962: 14). The ‘traditional humanism of the Iberian soul’, as Shaull put it, was an element that Fals-Borda discovered with Torres in the early 1960s; one on which he would draw his own ideas of *socialismo raizal* three decades later.

Moreover, soon after Fals-Borda and Torres founded the School of Sociology in 1959, Torres went on to put in practice what he called *investigación activa* (active research) (Archila, 2017: 37) with the University Movement for Communal Development (MUNIPROC) that he created. MUNIPROC, which engaged students and scholars in improving the harsh living conditions of slum dwellers in Bogotá, rapidly established a solid base of support that encouraged student participation in community projects. According to Houtart, Torres’s involvement with the social reality of the poor and the increasing preoccupation with the questions that this posed to his Christian conscience became a virtual torture (1967: 69). Such soul-searching would become increasingly apparent in Torres’s political writings; as a Colombian, Sociologist, Priest and Christian, he had reached the conclusion that, given Colombia’s concrete circumstances, embracing revolutionary struggle was the only way he could love his neighbour (Torres, 1971a: 306).

Despite their close friendship, Fals-Borda’s writing on Torres did not centre on either the man or his advocacy of armed struggle on behalf of his Christian faith (Díaz, 2017). Fals-Borda, who aimed to create a framework to dialectically analyse radical or marginal changes

to the social order in Colombia (1969: 13-25), was concerned with the secular challenge to Christian membership, structures and theology that Torres represented, and how his legacy could be used to sustain the struggles of the less privileged.

On the one hand, Torres's conception of "efficacious love" as a moral imperative was at odds with the ritualistic form of religion prescribed by the *sacred* tradition of Catholicism in Colombia. In unprecedented fashion, Torres openly contested the long-held assumption that the Gospel could not be successfully preached unless the country's secular institutions were either subordinate or favourably disposed to the Church (Funk, 1972: 330). He also declared himself in communion with non-Christians, provided they were charitable: "The non-Christian who loves ... possesses grace. On the other hand, the Christian who acts without love is not Christian" (1971: 91). Behind the national press's sensationalist coverage of Torres's conflict with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, there was a more essential element: as Fals-Borda (1969: 170-71) noted, Torres's notion of "efficacious love" was concerned with the practical implications of Christianity and therefore provided his 'commitment' both a practical meaning (charity) and a *telos* (the underprivileged).

At the same time, Fals-Borda did not overlook the fact that despite his short political life, Torres's preaching of the new socialist revolution from a Christian point of view had become the crossroads at which many leftist factions converged. Indeed, Torres's dialogue with Marxists and Communists challenged the ideological Manicheism, held by the church-state alliance, which had perceived all good on one side, and all evil on the other. Torres's dialectics was no longer between good and evil, but between justice and dignity on one hand and exploitation and oppression on the other: 'when religion makes people take human problems seriously, it is no longer religious alienation' (1971b: 371). So, in contrast to the dominant groups who blamed the socio-political turmoil on inimical outsiders or foreign

(mostly Communist) conspiracies, Torres declared: ‘I am not, nor will I ever become, a Communist. However, I am prepared to fight together with the Communists for our common goals’ (Ibid).

Fals-Borda’s effort to rescue Torres’s ideological and moral drive had a pragmatic aim: to bind diverse groups together and establish a broader base for political participation — a goal he partially achieved in the 1990s.¹⁰ Although Torres’s neo-socialist utopia was distorted by realities almost immediately after he expounded it, Fals-Borda believed that there still existed ‘the minimum ideological and organisational elements to initiate a new cycle of subversive development in Colombia that will lead to another order, the fifth of the historical series’ (1969: 170). Subsequently, in a letter sent from Geneva to a dozen of scholars in July 1969, Fals-Borda and his wife, the sociologist María Cristina Salazar, sounded out their friends’ willingness to participate in the creation of an independent centre of social and historical research in Colombia (Díaz, 2017; 2019). As Fals-Borda indicated, one of the aims of this centre was to reinvigorate Torres’s legacy and thereby unite ‘strategic groups committed to our ideal of service’ (ACH-UN, FOFB. Relaciones Internacionales, Europa II, Ginebra, Suiza, 18). The responses available (Ibid, 14-22) indicate that the proposal was received with reservations.

Interestingly, before Fals-Borda’s strategy had any practical implication in Colombia, it resonated in the U.S (Vernon, 1971: 37-8). In his review of *Subversion* (1967) for the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) Newsletter (December/1967), Richard Shaull, who was then teaching at Princeton Seminary, supported the implementation of Fals-Borda’s subversive strategy in the U.S. Established in February 1967, NACLA was created by a movement increasingly distrustful of U.S. foreign policy, including Fred Goff, Procter Lippincott and Richard Shaull, along with a religious group called the University Christian

Movement (UCM) (Rosen, 2007). According to Shaul, NACLA's two-fold aim was to support the political struggle in Latin America and develop—in relation to U.S. policy towards Latin America—a strategy of subversion similar to that which Fals-Borda suggested for his own country.

Such a strategy was not a mere repetition of Torres's neo-socialism, though. Indeed, both Torres's religious-ideological justification for joining the armed struggle and excessive reliance on military success after the success of the Cuban Revolution marked a crucial disjunction between Torres's and Fals-Borda's radical politics (Fals-Borda, 1968: 457). For the latter, the problem of violence as *ultima ratio* or, in Marx's words as 'the midwife of history,' was not so much in its justification as in the conditions and limitations of its use. As he wrote (1969: 171), the new socialism in Latin America did not hesitate to recognise the need for 'counter-violence within plans and projects as part of its political strategy'.

However, violence remained a problem of strategy since it might serve as a catalyst for the masses just as it might alienate them. Therefore, dwelling on ideological justifications of any sort was to ignore the necessity of objective conditions for subversion over ideological principles or ideals.

Therefore, Torres's decision to abandon the formation of a political and intellectual 'popular counter-elite'—a crucial element of the neo-socialist utopia—to join the rigid and dogmatic ELN guerrillas was his considerable tactical error (Fals-Borda, 1969: 169). Consistent with his idea that violence was not the main, let alone the only, means of revolution (1968), Fals-Borda was deeply concerned with the 'overall strategy,' that would accompany and make the efforts of such rebellious groups effective.

Closing remarks: Moral Subversion towards Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This article sought to examine the important yet overlooked role of Christian ethical and theological concerns on Fals-Borda's intellectual history. These religious influences would shape much of his thinking, from his confidence in the ability of his generation to respond, ethically and from within, to the 'peasant problem', in the 1950s, to a critical analysis of the structural causes of violence and social inequality, in the 1960s, to his abandonment of the establishment to join the peasant movement's struggle for social justice in the years that followed. This decision was preceded by a series of elaborations on subversion. This framework of sociological and historical analysis, which sought to combine a critical reading of the past with a utopian outlook for the future, was Fals-Borda's effort to, using W. Benjamin's words, 'brush history against the grain' (2006: 391). Furthermore, Fals-Borda's realisation of religion not only as a resource of social cohesion but also a liberating force in keeping with his own imperatives, played a major role in amalgamating social concerns, ethical values and academic thinking. It also paved the way for his engagement with liberation theology in the 1970s, which was followed by his excommunication by the Presbyterian Colombian Synod in 1972 (Moreno, 2017; Diaz, 2017).

Seen this way, Fals-Borda's subversive thinking was less a rupture than a change in his strategy to reaffirm his commitment to social change for the deprived peasants in Colombia. On the other hand, it also represented a synthesis of a complex interaction between ideological, historical, political, religious and ethical concerns. This open-ended synthesis that he elaborated between 1966 and 1970 was highly epistemological not so much in methodological but in ethical terms. He placed great emphasis on the question: "To whose benefit?", to which he responded: "to those groups which strive for social change in all honesty" (ACH-UN, FOFB. Relaciones Internacionales, Europa II, Suiza, 36). This radical

ethical stance was the driving force of his systematic search for a strategy to counter a system of political exclusion and extreme social inequality maintained through repressive means.

This is the backdrop of Fals-Borda's interplay between theory and practice whilst embedded with the *campesino* movement in the 1970s, which led him to his conception of Participatory Action Research—a common, universal methodology these days, the origins of which are more often than not forgotten—a topic on which this author is currently working.

The history that Fals-Borda's subversive historiography tells is the history of the utopian dream of the past—the aspiration to happiness for everyone, especially for the poor, in a better social order. Fals-Borda's notion of *subversion* was inescapably bound up with the idea of redemption.

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Notes

¹ The Fondo Orlando Fals-Borda (FOFB) and the Fondo Acumulado Facultad de Sociología (FAFS), both at the Archivo Central e Histórico de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia (ACH-UN). The archive of the Presbyterian Historical Society of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States (PHS/UPC); and the World Conference on Church and Society, 1966, from the Archive of the World Council of Churches (WCCA) in Geneva.

² Reference to *La Violencia en Colombia* (1962)

³ ‘When [Fals-Borda] came to the University of Minnesota to begin his graduate work, he brought with him a bundle of schedules containing information on 71 families living in a neighborhood near the place where he was employed by a construction company which was building a reservoir dam. Entirely on his own initiative he visited each family, some of them several times. The data when analyzed constituted the basis for his M.A. thesis’ (Lowry 1967: 336).

⁴ This sense of being part of a new generation came early in his youth from his belonging to the Grupo Barranquilla in the American School (Jaramillo 2010: 8) and the Presbyterian Youth Centre that Fals-Borda cofounded with Shaull, to which also belonged artists and writers such as the painter Alejandro Obregón, the writers Alvaro Cepeda Samudio and Gabriel García Márquez and the musician Luis Biava (Cendales et al 2005: 11).

⁵ For the sociologist G. Restrepo Fals-Borda’s identification with *Esther*, an exiled woman, reflected his feeling of ‘guiltiness’ since he was criticising the establishment whilst being a public servant. For his criticism Restrepo referred to the Spanish edition 1961— in which year Fals-Borda was certainly working for the Ministry of Agriculture and the National

University. However, he seems to ignore that the book he was talking about was Fals-Borda's MA dissertation, written in 1952-3 and published in English in 1955 when he was doing his PhD at the University of Florida.

⁶ From 1948-1957, there had been 2,046 recorded acts of violent persecution and more than two hundred protestant schools closed by official orders. In September 1953, General Rojas Pinilla re-enforced existing measures against Protestantism and issued a new circular which outlawed Protestant worship in the territories of mission (Goff, 1968: 10/29).

⁷ As Fals-Borda recalled: 'In analyzing [*La Violencia*], its intensity, the nature of the conflict, the whole scheme that I had brought from functionalism broke down in my mind; you cannot explain it with the frame of reference that I had learned in my teachers' classes (Cendales et al 2005: 24).

⁸ i) The rule of the pre-Colombian group, the Chibchas, and its domination by the Spanish conquest; ii) the three-century seigniorial order with its Hispanic peace, and its partial liberal-democratic transition in the mid-nineteenth century; iii) the seigniorial-bourgeois order after the Conservative hegemony, 1885, and the socialist transition whose ideology appeared in Colombia after 1925; iv) the liberal-bourgeois of the National Front and the short-life neo-socialist subversion of Camilo Torres.

⁹ For instance, his participation in the editorial board of the theological journal *Cristianismo y Sociedad* created by the Latin American Committee on Church and Society, where Shaull was assessor of studies (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1462/5/104); his involvement with the Presbyterian Commission on Cooperation for Latin America (CCPAL) (ACH-UN, FAFS, 1441/3); his participation in the Presbyterian Synod of Colombia, where he delivered a

keynote on “The future of the Church” (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1442/8/55); his role as Director of Studies for a large-scale international research project on the role of the Christian church in supporting social and economic development, led by Egbert De Vries, the Protestant Institute of Social Studies (ISS), and François Houtart, the Catholic International Federation of Institutes for Social and Socio-Religious Research (FERES), sponsored by both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, with further financial support from the Ford Foundation (ACH-UN, FAFS. 1415/ 3/62), and his contributions to ecumenical dialogue among Latin American theologians and social scientists (ACH-UN, FAFS, 1483/39, 2).

¹⁰ As a representative of Alianza Democrática M19 and other groups from the left, he was elected as one of the seventy representatives for the Constitutional National Assembly on 09 December 1990. In the early 2000s until his death, Fals-Borda was executive director of the Polo Democrático Alternativo, at that time the most important left-wing political coalition in Colombia.