

# **Broadcasting Modernization: Ford Foundation's Shifting Priorities in Colombia during the Cold War, 1962-1972**

*by Diyun Song*

*University of Miami*

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## Abstract

The Ford Foundation was one of the most prominent private partners of President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress (AFP) program, 1961-1973, aiming to modernize Latin American societies and to enhance hemispheric relations during the global Cold War. Colombia was the operation hub of the Ford Foundation, as Bogotá started to host its Latin American headquarters from 1962 until 1972, when the Foundation dissolved the office due to civil unrest in Colombia. In 1968, under McGeorge Bundy's leadership, the Ford Foundation adopted a broad, organizational strategic shift from focusing on managerial elites to alleviating poverty for the popular masses. This report synthesizes some of my findings about the internal debates about the Foundation's strategic reform and Colombia's unique significance for its work in Cold War Latin America. These findings were gathered during my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center in January 2020 under a generous research stipend from the Archive. This is a working document for a chapter in my dissertation, tentatively titled *The Power of Philanthropy: Development, Empire, and Non-State Actors in Cold War Colombia, 1961-1973*.

## Introduction

Latin America has long occupied a unique position in the Ford Foundation's institutional strategy. In the 1960s, when "development" dominated the Foundation's focus in the rest of the world, "modernization" took preeminence in its agenda for Latin America.<sup>1</sup> The Ford Foundation perceived "development" as the transformation towards industrialization, and held shifting visions of "modernization" in the Colombian context.<sup>2</sup> Before 1968, the Foundation's vision of modernization had been to invest in training local managerial elites and fostering through initiatives such as higher education reform and public administration training. In 1968, however, McGeorge Bundy became the Foundation's president, and the priority shifted to poverty alleviation and educating popular-sector households, including through the dissemination of television programs aimed at urban slum dwellers. Consequently, according to William Cotter, Ford Foundation representative to Colombia and Venezuela, "class mobility, income redistribution, and individual justice" through programs that "*directly* [affect] the disadvantaged in Colombia" had replaced the vision of "enabling the *leaders*...to understand and use modern knowledge to achieve self-reliant management" in 1968.<sup>3</sup>

Why did the Ford Foundation shift its priority in Colombian modernization? Is there a broader indication of this shift? By exploring the answers to these questions, I claim that the Foundation's shifting priorities signal its increased control in the infrastructure of knowledge production. The Ford Foundation's growing efforts in the monitoring and evaluation processes that accompanied the priority shift elevated its influence beyond deciding the content, but also the legitimacy of modern knowledge. Meanwhile, Colombian elites capitalized on this moment to gain political advantages and achieve progress for their version of modernization.

This report begins with a survey of the domestic politics of Colombia in the 1960s, focusing on a period that spans an arc from the arrival of the Ford Foundation in Colombia in 1962 to the office's relocation to Santiago de Chile in 1972 due to domestic civil unrest. I will examine how the Ford Foundation's philosophies

coincided or differed with its own attempts, as well as Colombian elites' understandings, in the application of modernization theory, following the inauguration of its Bogotá office in 1962. One of the Foundation's educational television (ETV) programs for illiterate adult residents in Bogotá's urban slums can be seen as an example of its shifting priorities in practice. This program serves as a case study to demonstrate the frictions, collaborations, and resistance the Ford Foundation encountered on the ground, and how the Colombian elites negotiated with Ford in advancing its national agenda.

## Literature Review

By focusing on the case study of 1960s and early 1970s Colombia, my dissertation reveals the importance of non-state actors like foundations to the contest over Latin American development. It seeks to make two main contributions. First, my project illuminates with greater clarity how the mechanisms of “soft power” and “informal empire” operated in the Cold War era. In deepening our historical understanding of US-Latin American relations, it considers the full spectrum of negotiations among non-state and state actors. The large number of public-private partnerships established during the Alliance for Progress era make this an ideal period for such inquiry. The literature on US-Latin American relations highlights the forms of empire projected by the “Colossus of the North” through military invasion, economic expansion, and international diplomacy. Along these lines, Latin American responses are often categorized either as forms of outright resistance or submissive collaboration to these impositions. While recent studies in diplomatic history have begun to appreciate the leverage Latin American authorities exerted over their US counterparts, we still lack an in-depth analysis of the strategies employed by locals when they engaged with non-state actors like the Ford Foundation. My inquiry seeks a better appreciation of the decision-making processes employed by Colombian government officials and private sector allies as they welcomed, refused, and limited the influence of these foreign organizations.

My study makes a second contribution by providing a deeper, historically-oriented understanding of the origins of the current global NGO order in regions like Latin America. Recent studies in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science have considered the contemporary roles of NGOs in fields such as disaster relief, drug trafficking, and democratization. These research efforts, however, tend to overlook how NGOs first gained momentum and expanded their presence in countries like Colombia, often by following in the footsteps of charities and philanthropic foundations. Historicizing the rise of NGO power during the heyday of the Alliance for Progress, my project aims to reveal that the current centrality of NGOs to international development initiatives is a contingent, rather than inevitable, consequence of converging worldviews and a sometime fractious process of alliance building.

Additionally, departing from intellectual histories and US-centered studies, I will offer a methodological contribution by providing a more socially-grounded perspective on the impact of modernization theory in a Latin American context.<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Michael E. Latham (2000) and Nils Gilman (2003) have laid out convincing theoretical frameworks for modernization theory's ideological priorities. My paper, instead, focuses on deconstructing the processes in which modernization theory was applied by a non-state actor on the ground in Latin America. Of interests is to formulate a more concrete perspective of how modernization theory converged into a broader Colombian modernization period. This report aims at revealing Ford Foundation's competing interpretations and methods of modernization in Colombia. The Foundation's engineering and execution of the modernization theory could illuminate both the confluence and parallels of US and Colombia's visions of modernization.

## **Colombia before the Ford Foundation's Arrival**

To begin, we cannot understand the Ford Foundation's role in Colombian modernization without knowing Colombia's political and social dynamics before

its arrival. Provoked by the assassination of the dissident Liberal Party presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on April 9, 1948, *Bogotazo*, a massive urban riot soon accelerated the heightened partisan tension between the Conservatives and Liberals.<sup>5</sup> Colombia then witnessed intense strife during the decade of 1948 to 1958 known as *La Violencia*, whose aftermath continued to plague the nation with political rivalries and popular violence.<sup>6</sup>

The troubled domestic political outlook, burdensome foreign debts, and the massively paralyzed economic infrastructures formulated a precarious challenge to the Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962) administration. Economic development, consequently, especially through industrialization and agrarian advancement, rose to the top of Lleras' political agenda.<sup>7</sup> It is of crucial importance to note that Colombia's domestic economic and political crisis predated the Cuban Revolution, as well as perceived communist threats in the Western Hemisphere. Rebuilding democratic institutions and rejuvenating economic growth at home received paramount attention compared to diplomacy.<sup>8</sup> Lleras' dissent from Castro did not shift from anti-authoritarianism to anti-communism until Cuba's nationalization of the oil industry in 1960 threatened Colombia's economic interests. Colombia's interests in receiving US economic development aid did not compromise or dictate Colombia's foreign relations with Cuba, as Lleras' anti-communism stance would still have happened without pressure from the US.<sup>9</sup> Rather than submissive, the Lleras' administration effectively mobilized international non-state actors, such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, to protect sovereignty, multilateralism, and non-interventionism in all inter-American affairs. Lleras' involvement in regional diplomacy posed a sobering counterpoint to the US' polarizing Cold War foreign policy in Cuba, and Latin America as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

As the economic and political tensions with Cuba continued to simmer, Lleras announced Bogotá's suspension of diplomatic relations with Havana for a year and a half, shortly after the adoption of the milestone Law 135. Both events stemmed from domestic priorities. The strategic timing, yet, presented the Lleras administration a pinnacle moment to showcase both its capability in restoring order and defusing the perceived communist threat. It was under such

momentum that President Kennedy inaugurated the Alliance for Progress partnership with Colombia.<sup>11</sup>

## **Colombia's Strategic Significance for the Ford Foundation**

Although Colombia did not view communism as a pressing threat, the US government, as well as the Ford Foundation, saw Colombia as a crucial “gateway of South America” of strategic political significance for the fight against communism.<sup>12</sup> For US state agencies, Colombia's consistent pro-US attitude and, especially, it being the only Latin American country that committed troops to fight alongside the United States in the Korean War, made Colombia a strategic ally for the Cold War.<sup>13</sup>

The Ford Foundation entered the story as a key executor and the private partner of the alliance, which was first launched on March 13, 1961. The Foundation then opened its first overseas offices in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1962, and named it the headquarters for the Latin America region. In the 1960s, the Ford Foundation saw Latin America as an incompetent region mired in “stagnation” in its domestic affairs and “thwarting” the rapid progress of developed nations.<sup>14</sup> The Foundation observed such ineptness at home and envy attitude abroad in Latin America that created a sense of urgency and anxiety to intensify both the Foundation's and developed countries' humanitarian assistance in the region. (This matter was particularly urgent for the United States.) The Foundation believed that Latin America's current state, fueled with Fidel Castro's communist influence, would compromise the already “keen love-hate relationship” with the United States, which would challenge hemispheric stability.<sup>15</sup>

The Ford Foundation perceived Colombia's political significance as more than the proportion of its geographical size for two reasons. First and foremost, Colombia's close diplomatic interactions with the US, since US' acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone, led the Foundation to privilege Colombia with a crucial position in

US-Latin American relations. In light of its stance against Cuba, the Ford Foundation saw Colombia's exceptional potential and competence in rebuilding and maintaining democracy, which is another factor that set this nation apart from its neighbors.<sup>16</sup> Its optimistic attitude towards Colombia mirrored that of the USAID, which was rooted in the Lleras' left-leaning Liberal governance. After the failure of Gaitán's populist experiment and the overthrown Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's dictatorship (1953-57), Colombia did not need any catalysts to bypass the shadow of authoritarianism and embrace a US-like democratic model instead.

While the Ford Foundation's priorities in Colombia echoed the development plans of the Alliance for Progress, it also exercised influence in some surprising fields. A closer look at the Foundation's initiatives and internal correspondence in the early 1960s reveals that it focused largely on higher education reform and the development of mass media to tackle education development in urban areas, while paying little attention to rural and primary education. Additionally, the Foundation invested a significant amount of energy in training Colombian government officials in institutional reform and governance, which was an unusual move for a foreign private philanthropy.<sup>17</sup>

The Ford Foundation viewed its role in foreign assistance as a purveyor of expertise, while the government was tasked to attend to certain massive demands that only a state actor was capable of fulfilling. Before 1968, the Foundation's vision, beyond acquiring the "immediate, first-handed contact" with local issues, was to establish self-sustaining institutions through the production of a "modern" Latin American elite class who could raise the competence of developing nations to resolve internal affairs through "self-reliant management."<sup>18</sup> The Ford Foundation also viewed itself as the intermediary that could integrate and connect Latin America to the rest of the world by establishing the professional community in the region. It is worth noting, however, what the Foundation wanted to produce was a group of *managerial* modern elites. It prioritized initiatives that were constructive to national identity and coherence, such as government reform, the rule of law, and urban planning, which it believed to be pertinent to development issues and the Foundation's expertise.<sup>19</sup>

The Ford Foundation's prioritization of training an elite class in Latin America reflected this region's special place in both its organizational strategy and the interests of the United States. Although Latin America was the second largest program recipient of its grantmaking in the decade, the Foundation did not see the region as material-deprived or in need of expediting its industrialization like the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it envisioned a Latin America as:

a modern society is one that can continue to change without institutional breakdown. This implies rational decision-making, an effective public consensus, and creation of a meaningful national community. Such a policy requires an informed and participating populace; and such a populace in turn needs the economic, educational, and other institutions common to all modern societies. We believe the Foundation's resources will be used most efficiently if they are applied to leadership and other elite groups. The scarce resources of ours should be applied first to teaching and research institutions that can become "breeders" for other institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Ford's rhetoric conveys three important points. First and foremost, the Ford Foundation believed that the sacred resources would be best spent in investing in the elites to become the "breeders" for other institutions. It wanted these people, who were trained in the "Ford way," to further train and procreate other individuals alike. "Breeder" has a denaturalizing undertone towards the Colombian elites, as if they were not even humans. With this very attitude, in all its involvement, with education in particular, the Foundation strictly focused on higher education institutions in urban areas, which is the opposite of what the Alliance for Progress had intended. In this, we can see the Ford Foundation's sense of independence as a non-state actor in its decision-making.

Furthermore, rather than a material industrialization, the Foundation aimed to produce an "ideological" and "infrastructural" industrialization that could not only produce a Latin American elite class, the so-called "breeders," who could mimic US ideologies, but also a decision-making and knowledge-production assembly line to transplant US modernization to Latin America. These high-level decision-makers were perceived as the primary agencies to broadcast the Ford Foundation's plan for modernization in society at large. Additionally, the

managerial elites, beyond “breeding” individuals and institutions alike, were also expected to breed “public consensus” and a coherent national identity.

Third, it reveals that the Ford Foundation was not only concerned with bringing the changes, but the response to the changes that no “institutional breakdown” would take place after modernization. The rhetoric highlights its apparent focus on working with institutions rather than individuals during their early years in Colombia. Bearing these philosophies in mind, before 1968, the Foundation made intensive efforts in establishing graduate-level programs in Colombia’s major urban universities, offering fellowships to US university students and professors to work in Colombia, as well as visiting scholar programs for Colombian students and faculty to receive training at selected US universities.

It is revealing that pre-1968, the Ford Foundation’s rhetoric underscores its interests in working institutions and institutions alone. The popular sectors did not register as the Foundation’s concern or appear as a pertinent actor in its envisioned “modern society.” Although William Cotter, the Foundation’s representative to Colombia, emphasized that it should advocate for “pluralism” in its overseas initiatives, the Ford Foundation’s ideal in modernization presented contradicting interests.<sup>22</sup> How could pluralism survive in a society that is procreated by a small number of selected “breeders”?

## **The Shift**

McGeorge Bundy, one of the masterminds behind the Vietnam War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, two-term national security advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, became the president of the Ford Foundation in 1966.<sup>23</sup> He led a “remarkable nearly revolutionary” shift, in which the popular sectors and poverty alleviation became the center of focus for the very first time.<sup>24</sup> In 1968, William Cotter applauded the “Revolution” Bundy had led, and called for the application of this new direction to Colombia. Cotter was convinced that Colombia’s problematic class structure, limited upward mobility, and inequitable

contribution of wealth made it necessary to shift the Foundation's focus from institutional training to individual-centered initiatives that directly tackle "class mobility, income redistribution, and individual justice."<sup>25</sup> He identified four national priorities: 1) progressive social impact that induces "class mobility, opportunity and income redistribution; 2) emphasize that the Colombian government advocates for individual freedom and justice; 3) economic advancement and "national unity and stability;" and 4) enhanced international relations.<sup>26</sup>

Although Cotter believed in an increased attention paid to individuals and the underserved, the Ford Foundation's institutional concern and skepticism towards the Colombian government remained adamant. He claimed that "most Colombians appear to look on the government as a remote irrational regulator of lives rather than a servant of the people." Because of societal fear and institutional injustice caused by government corruption at all levels, Cotter was convinced that Colombian individual's freedom and justice were at stake.<sup>27</sup> Besides, the Lleras' administration's "lack [of] imagination (and to some extent the means) to do all it would like," while having a "receptive" attitude, also made it the Foundation's obligation, according to Cotter, to enhance national coherence and stability.<sup>28</sup>

The shifts in the Ford Foundation's policy in Colombia in 1968 may have been more "revolutionary" in motto and less so in its rationale and practice. Rather than redirecting its concerns from institutional and national reform and training to direct programs that prioritized individual rights, what the Foundation, or at least the Bogotá office, seemed to believe was that more direct impacts individual-based programs could contribute to a more significant institutional and national change. The Foundation's primary concern still centered around the Colombian government's ability to prevent violent rebellions, and to establish and maintain a bureaucracy that served individual freedom and rights.

Nonetheless, at the same time that the Foundation intended to influence, reform, and, to a certain extent, direct the "lacking" institutions in Colombia, it also valued the opinion of its Colombian counterparts. Harry Wilhelm, the Foundation's New York-based Director of the Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, called

1968 a:

new test of relevance, that is, whether the activities the Foundation assists contribute to a more equitable sharing of political power and economic resources or whether the Foundation is viewed as a support of the Latin American establishment and, therefore, to be resisted by political leaders who view themselves as liberals and leftists.<sup>29</sup>

The dynamic between the Ford Foundation, a non-state actor, and the Colombian state was delicate and sophisticated. First of all, the Foundation had an elitist attitude towards its work and purpose in the developing world. Its overarching standard of “modernization” was to uplift and redirect the institutional architecture to reach US and European standards.<sup>30</sup> The Ford Foundation believed that its “presence in foreign countries is at the pleasure of their governments,” because the local government has the authority expel the programs if anything was subversive.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, Ford Foundation’s involvement of a foreign country’s nation-making and reform as a non-state actor was also a new phenomenon during the Cold War era. In particular, it invested a significant amount of interest and efforts in improving the perceived institutional inefficiency and ineffectiveness of foreign governments. The Foundation was aware of its affiliation to one of the biggest North American business empires and the unavoidable association with the imperialistic United States identity.<sup>32</sup> On the US side, it walked the fine line of operating within the scope of US foreign policy while defending its independence from government dictation. On the Colombian side, the Ford Foundation depended on the government’s support to maintain its operations, and it also wanted to challenge the establishment and the civil society to implement its agenda. The Foundation was particularly aware of the nationalists in the society, especially their emphasis on autonomy and self-rule. Thus, it intended to avoid delegating host government’s responsibilities and policies regardless of its organizational stance.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not such philosophy was executed or not remains debatable, however.

## Conclusion

This report highlights my preliminary reflections on the Ford Foundation's shifting priorities' significance in its increased role in knowledge production, and underscores the multi-directional nature of both its involvement in Colombia, and US-Colombian relations, state-civil society interactions at large. In my future research, I intend to focus on deconstructing the processes in which discourses operated within the Ford Foundation and with its Colombian counterparts. This approach provides a wider perspective on the efforts of some Colombian and US actors to move beyond domestic civil conflict and create a, at least partially, shared vision of national progress and social development.

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<sup>1</sup> "Information Paper: The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," September 1967; "International Division Discussion Paper: Basic Policy Issues and Guidelines for the Foundation's work in Less Developed Countries," p. 7, March 1967, Box 3, Series III, Office Files of Joan R. Dassin (FA660); Developing Countries Program, Latin America and the Caribbean, Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>2</sup> "The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean."

<sup>3</sup> William R. Cotter, 1968, "Ford Foundation Development Goals in Colombia," (004168), Catalogued Reports, Report 3255-6261, Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>4</sup> On modernization theory see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*. New Cold War History. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.) See also Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*. New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.)

<sup>5</sup> On Gaitán, see Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> On *La Violencia*, see Paul H Oquist, *Violence, Conflict, and Politics in Colombia*, (New York: Academic Press, 1980); see also Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946-1953*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

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<sup>7</sup> See Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia*, 389; also see Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, 232.

<sup>8</sup> On Lleras administrations' priorities and scholarships examines Colombia's domestic environment, see Stephen J. Randall, "Cold War and Containment, 1946-1960" in *Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992,) pp. 188-219; Marco Palacios, "An Elusive Legitimacy" in *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 170-213; see also Karl, "Reading the Cuban Revolution," 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Karl, "Reading the Cuban Revolution," pp. 351-352; Randall, *Colombia and the United States*, 219.

<sup>10</sup> On Lleras administration's shifting diplomacies with Cuba, and its earlier resistance towards U.S Cold War pressure, see Karl, "Reading the Cuban Revolution."

<sup>11</sup> On Alliance for Progress in Colombia, see Karl, *Forgotten Peace*, 216; and Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> "Ford Foundation mission to Colombia" (000322), 1960, Catalogued Reports, Report 1-3254, Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>13</sup> On Colombia's political significance to the United States, see Randall, *Colombia and the United States*, pp. 198-207.

<sup>14</sup> "International Division Discussion Paper: Basic Policy Issues and Guidelines for the Foundation's work in Less Developed Countries," 1967.

<sup>15</sup> "Information Paper: The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," 1967.

<sup>16</sup> "Ford Foundation Mission to Colombia," 1960.

<sup>17</sup> "Public Administration Training in Colombia," Grants, E-G, Reel 3396, Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>18</sup> "Information Paper: The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," Sept. 1967.

<sup>19</sup> "Information Paper: The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," Sept. 1967.

<sup>20</sup> "Information Paper: The Ford Foundation's Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," Sept. 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> William R. Cotter, 1969, "How far should we go in providing leadership and management to the development assistance activities of others," Series III Box 3, Folder "History of Latin America Program 1959-1980," Office Files of Joan R. Dassin (FA660), Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>23</sup> On McGeorge Bundy, see Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.)

<sup>24</sup> "Ford Foundation Development Goals in Colombia," op.cit. 2.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> “Ford Foundation Development Goals in Colombia,” op.cit. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>30</sup> “Information Paper: The Ford Foundation’s Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

<sup>31</sup> Peter D. Bell, “How far should we go in providing advice to governments, and thereby sharing responsibility for policies about which we may be doubtful.”, 2, Series III Box 3, Folder "History of Latin America Program 1959-1980," Office Files of Joan R. Dassin (FA660), Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>32</sup> William R. Cotter, “How far should we go in providing leadership and management to the development assistance activities of others,” 3, Series III Box 3, Folder "History of Latin America Program 1959-1980," Office Files of Joan R. Dassin (FA660), Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>33</sup> Bell, “How far should we go” op.cit. 2.