

Society and Politics in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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Ever since *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was first published the purpose and rationale of the work has been a subject of intense critical reflection. There seems to be a general agreement that the novel is best understood as Marquez's humorous take on the quintessential Latin American reality. The fictional town of Macondo, its inhabitants and the whole atmosphere of *One Hundred Years* are so essentially Latin American that the whole continent appears to have erupted in speech in this novel. Yet, this is so evident a preoccupation of the novel that to stress it further runs the risk of labouring the obvious. Having reached a dead end these 'totalistic' readings have given way to more focussed and pointed discussions on different thematic concerns of the work. There are now excellent studies of *One Hundred Years* ranging from desire and feminism to a purely humanist reading (Prieto, Spiller). This paper proposes to offer a reading of *One Hundred Years* in its social and political context and in the way explore some of the personal political convictions of its author Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The extraordinary popularity of *One Hundred Years* throughout the world brought Marquez literary fame and recognition like no other Latin American author had ever experienced before or after. This unprecedented fame and celebrity has ever since been used by the author to voice his political beliefs and articulate his concerns over the state of affairs in his country and the Latin Americas. Marquez has thrown his weight behind countless political causes and this has earned him friends as well as enemies. The United States has denied him visa for his self-professed communist sympathies (Estorino), while he continues to be friends with France's Francois Mitterrand (Simons). His friendship with Cuba's Fidel Castro did not however prevent him from criticizing the Cuban government for the imprisonment of the paralyzed poet Armando Valladares which finally led to the end of his captivity (Simons). All this suggests a highly individual mind with strong political beliefs and convictions that refuses to be compassed by narrow dogmatic affiliations. Yet, we can perhaps identify some consistently held positions by looking a little more closely at his life and letters.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was born to Gabriel Eligio Garcia and Luisa Santiago Marquez in Aracataca, a small town in Colombia. His childhood influence were however his grandparents, with whom he lived until he was eight (Ruch). Colonel Ricardo Marquez Mejia, the grandfather, was a well known Liberal leader of the town and, in Marquez's own words, was his "umbilical cord with history and reality".(Simons) About his grandfather's social standing. Marquez writes, "My grandfather's lineage was one of the most respectable but also the least powerful. But he was distinguished by a respectability recognized even by the native-born dignitaries of the banana company. It was that of the Liberal veterans of the civil wars...." (Marquez 2004, 48). No doubt the Colonel's stories of the civil wars made a lasting impression on the young grandson, and it is also perhaps the source of the theme of the melancholy solitude of power that keeps recurring in Marquez.

1946 marks the beginning of a fateful phase in the history of Colombian politics when Mariano Ospina Perez was put into power by an elite Conservative faction. The year after, Marquez matriculated and would soon begin his career as a journalist. This was a period of turmoil in Colombian history. *La Violencia*, as this period was known, saw the death of around 200,000 people in the hands of Liberal and Conservative guerrilla bands. This was exacerbated in the *bogotazo*, which was a series of riots that followed the assassination of the Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. As Stephen Minta observes:

"The apparently endless cycle [of *la violencia*] has been One of the central preoccupations in nearly all of Garcia Marquez' work to date.... His concerns are... with the origins of violence, and with the effects that it has on the society in which people have to live." (Minta, 30)

This is also perhaps the source of Marquez's distrust of dictatorial power. As we will see later this is one of the major thematic concerns of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

It is somewhat ironic that even after so much debate and discussion the central question about Marquez' personal politics still begs to be answered: is Marquez a communist or is his politics best understood as anti-imperialistic? Many see his friendship with Castro as proof of his strict communist beliefs. However, this relationship is more personal than political and in no way can be said to be indicative of the author's political preferences. In fact, Marquez was writing a novel about the flaws of Castro's regime in Cuba which is yet to be published. On the other hand, his distaste for capitalism is more fundamental and is associated with his deeply held convictions about life and society in Latin America. At first sight his crusade against capitalism appears to be paradoxical. For how can someone praise France and Sweden and denounce capitalism in the same breath? Yet the paradox is resolved when we recognize the fact that for Marquez a system is not good or bad in itself, but only in its context. Marquez believes capitalism to be a European invention and therefore suitable as an economic system only in Europe. There it has flourished and prospered as expected. The problem is with the forcible

imposition of the capitalist system on grounds that are unsuitable for it. Latin America must be left free to decide and pursue its own course of development. The intrusion of capitalism in Latin America has been a disaster.

Both these themes form the core of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. At some level it is perhaps obvious that *One Hundred Years* is a passionately ideological novel. The author would not have taken the pains of writing it if he did not believe in what he wrote. The central character of Colonel Aureliano Buendia, the banana strike and massacre, and the evolution of the town of *Macondo* are all subtle retellings of actual political and social realities. This paper will focus on the rise and fall of Colonel Aureliano Buendia and the banana company episode to see how the themes of dictatorship and imperialism are handled by Marquez in his *magnum opus*.

Colonel Aureliano Buendia is the most influential and charismatic character in *One Hundred Years*. The future Colonel's political journey begins when he tries to help the Liberal cause after seeing his father-in-law manipulate the local elections in favour of the Conservatives. The journey from being a shy young man who falls in love, and is married to, a girl who has not yet reached her puberty to the Commander-in Chief of the Liberal army is as fascinating as it is unexpected. Marquez is here affording us a look into the psychology of people who wield absolute power and authority. Power is an obsession and although noble considerations may be at work behind the assumption of power, yet it inevitably translates into a meaningless passion. With the death of Remedios Moscote, his wife, and the primary obsession, Aureliano, proclaims himself Colonel of the Liberal army to fight the violence and injustices of the Conservative regime. His father-in-law, whom he spares execution, exclaims: "This is madness, Aurelito." But the Colonel is now on his way to war. "Not madness, war. And don't call me Aurelito anymore. Now I'm Colonel Aureliano Buendia" are his parting words.(105)

Only after fighting and losing dozens of battles does the pretence of idealism fall apart. The Colonel is now a stranger to his own people and has transformed into a symbol of power:

Amaranta could not reconcile her image of the brother who had spent his adolescence making little gold fishes with that of the mythical warrior who had placed a distance of ten feet between himself and the rest of humanity. (Marquez 1996, 175)

The intoxication of power is ruthlessly portrayed when General Teofilo Vargas is cut to pieces in order to exterminate the threat to the Colonel's authority. Marquez writes about the fate of all dictators when he observes:

His orders were being carried out even before they were given, even before he thought of them, and they always went much beyond in the solitude of his immense power, he what he would have dared have them do. Lost began to lose direction. (Marquez 1996, 170-71)

The fall from glory is as inexorable as the loss of idealism. Hurt and disenchanted the Colonel will finally fill his days making little gold fishes in his laboratory as he used to do in his youth.

Besides, the treatment of tyrannical power in the figure of Colonel Aureliano Buendia, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also affords us a glimpse of its author's views about imperialism in the banana company episode. The banana company arrives in Macondo, led by an American Mr Brown, and proceeds to rapidly industrialise the town. Macondo becomes a modern township all of a sudden and schools, hospitals, theatres spring up overnight. People now have jobs and the town appears to be flourishing and doing well. The initial contact with the capitalist system is --- as almost always --- characterized by awe and wonder: "Dazzled by so many and such marvellous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where their amazement began" (229). But this honeymoon period is soon replaced by ruthless exploitation and the workers rise up in protest and strike. The army, which is in agreement with the company, steps in and violence is unleashed on the striking workers. Marquez renders the episode in the least possible detail and gives the most vivid description imaginable:

The people in front had already [got down], swept down by the wave of bullets. The survivors, instead of getting down, tried to go back to the small square, and the panic became a dragon's tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon's tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease (Marquez 1996, 311).

One Hundred Years of Solitude, among other things, is a passionate plea for a more sensible political atmosphere in Latin America. On the one hand it is informed by the author's deep distrust of tyrannical, absolute power, and on the other his hostility to capitalism as an economic system. Garcia Marquez has created his masterpiece to promote change and progress for his people and society.

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