

# ACCIÓN CULTURAL POPULAR, RESPONSIBLE PROCREATION, AND THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN RURAL COLOMBIA

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*Abstract: This essay examines the Responsible Procreation campaign of Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO) within the context of “zones of crisis” characterized not only by the legacy of long-standing violence but by tensions experienced within the Catholic Church and Colombian society at large during the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s. ACPO centered its Responsible Procreation campaign on a radical critique of authoritarian and exclusionary gender relations that could only be remedied by guaranteeing women’s access to education and their participation as equals in household and community decision making. As a Catholic-affiliated organization, ACPO enjoyed legitimacy many secular organizations did not, enabling it to provide spaces where rural Colombians, especially women, could experiment with voice and agency and explore alternative visions of citizenship and community development without fear of reprisal or social ostracism. Christian social activism, the essay concludes, often laid the basis for the proliferation today of social movements spearheaded by rural women.*

Latin America’s first Catholic radio network, Radio Sutatenza, was founded by a Colombian priest in 1947 to combat rural adult illiteracy and spread catechetical teachings to isolated, dispersed, and impoverished parishes. Confirming Daniel Levine’s observation that “the lived experience of religion is closely linked to ways of managing ordinary life” (2012, 8), Radio Sutatenza and its parent organization, Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO), partnered with reformist Colombian administrations as early as the 1960s to disseminate scientifically based health and sex education materials and promote acceptance of modern approaches to sanitation, cooperative association, and technology (Gómez Mejía 2008). In 1972 ACPO initiated a multipronged family planning campaign called Responsible Procreation. The campaign rooted citizenship in the practice of community-centered Christian values and made shared decision making and mutual respect between spouses the centerpiece of national democracy as well as Christian marriage. In the course of this effort, ACPO extended its collaboration to include Latin America’s largest Planned Parenthood center, the Bogotá-based Profamilia; the Federation of Coffee Growers (FNC) and its network of rural extension agents, health workers, and community liaisons; and various Colombian government ministries and agencies. Through these collaborations, ACPO sought to foster discernible improvements in a zone of crisis defined by alarming incidences of abandoned children, prostitution, and maternal mortality occurring in communities historically char-

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acterized by deficits in official investment, state presence, public services, and rights.

ACPO seems at first glance to be an unlikely champion of positions now deemed progressive, such as the right of couples to determine family size or women's right to have an equal voice in household and community decision making. Indeed, during its first quarter century of existence—when it consolidated a media presence that encompassed more than half of Colombia's national territory with a combined 750-kilowatt broadcasting network, a weekly rural paper with a yearly circulation rate of over three million by 1964, and a network of trained catechists, peasant leaders, and radio school auxiliaries—ACPO operated under the supervision of a governing board that included bishops and the national director of Colombia's Catholic Social Action.<sup>1</sup> ACPO relied, moreover, on the participation of rural parish priests, whose responsibility it was to direct the hundreds of laymen and laywomen who served as volunteer radio school auxiliaries, parish representatives, and trained community leaders charged with coordinating and accompanying ACPO's community-driven catechetical and development activism (Rojas 2011; Torres Restrepo and Corredor Rodríguez 1961; Bernal Alarcón 2009).

The case of ACPO provides an illuminating point of entry for exploring and rethinking how seemingly self-evident distinctions drawn between categories such as secular/religious, modern/traditional, and progressive/conservative are contested and historically contingent and may obscure rather than elucidate how “the logics of religious ways of being in the world . . . [and] non-religious ways of being in the world” operate in real life (Vásquez 2010, 5, 8). ACPO's Responsible Procreation campaign never explicitly recommended any form of birth control, insisting instead in its educational materials, broadcasts, and rural theater scripts on the moral and religious consequences of thoughtless procreation and the importance of engendering children as a deliberate choice in which spouses had equal say. Yet the campaign galvanized intense opposition among both the Right and the Left, eventually jeopardizing the support of the Catholic episcopal hierarchy, which pressured both local clergy and international Catholic donors to withdraw their financial and moral support from ACPO, leading to the organization's demise in the 1990s (Bernal Alarcón 2009; Lópera López 2012).

Yet if “what matters religiously is not high doctrine but everyday existential problems” (Vásquez 2010, 2), no existential problem more bedeviled rural Colombian Catholics in the 1960s and 1970s than the moral dilemma of balancing Church teachings regarding procreation with the challenge of achieving long-deferred socioeconomic development (Stycos 1971; Brzezinski 1976). At a time when the Right rejected family planning on moral grounds while the Left insisted family planning was misdirected and imperialist, and neither gave priority to the rights of women, the Responsible Procreation campaign—spearheaded by a seemingly conservative or at least religiously conventional organization such as ACPO—was surprisingly radical (Brzezinski 1976; Bernal Alarcón 1979; Pérez and Gómez

1. Approximately 94 percent of Colombia's population would have been concentrated in the areas where ACPO was active; half of the national territory is sparsely populated.

1975). At stake was not simply the possibility of building a more equitable and just society where the long-ignored spiritual and material needs of rural citizens were addressed from the perspective of Christian ethics in order to forestall violence or revolution. Rather, the goal was the conscious intermingling of religious and citizenship subjectivities in which the restructuring of household gender relations held the key to building a democracy, and in which practicing rural Catholic women became protagonists and agents of social change.

This essay examines ACPO's Responsible Procreation campaign within the context of zones of crisis characterized not only by the presence or legacy of physical violence but by tensions experienced within the Catholic Church and Colombian society at large in the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s. In Colombia, the effects of the devastating civil war known as *La Violencia* (1948–1958), the Cuban Revolution, Vatican II reforms, guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and accelerated projects of economic modernization played out with particular intensity in rural areas, where conservative Catholic values, authoritarian political practices, and historic official indifference combined in explosive ways (Roldán 2002; Bergquist, Peñaranda, and Sánchez 1992).

The Catholic Church enjoyed unparalleled legitimacy in Colombia's rural communities, enabling Church-supported organizations such as ACPO to stage conversations, disseminate information, and promote alternatives that rural Colombians could use to navigate sensitive, even taboo issues such as family violence, gender inequality, authoritarianism, procreation, and sex without fear of reprisal or social ostracism. Indeed, in some cases, without the commitment and accompaniment of a Church-affiliated organization such as ACPO, private or public secular forces might not have been able to achieve the transformation of engrained forms of cultural practice and the acceptance of new framings of rights and individual agency.

Church-sanctioned spaces and support were particularly significant in enabling historically marginalized individuals in profoundly Catholic societies such as Colombia, especially rural women, to grapple with complex issues such as their right to an equal voice in society and the household. These experiences proved fundamental in the journey of these individuals to become both full-fledged citizens and “embodied” Christians. Indeed, the proliferation of social organizations and movements spearheaded by rural women in zones of extreme crisis in Colombia today—even when such organizations or the individuals who lead them no longer answer directly to a religious organization or acknowledge an explicit religious inspiration or tie—may be traced in several instances to the work of religious organizations such as ACPO in empowering women's community-centered activism from the 1960s to the present (Roldán 2009, 292; Rojas 2009, 209; Mitchell and Ramírez 2009, 153).

#### RADIO DRAMAS AND RURAL THEATER AS MODELS FOR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

By the mid-1960s ACPO had five powerful radio stations in Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, and Magangué, and two channels that provided nineteen hours of daily programming reaching millions of Colombians (Bernal Alarcón

2009). Among the themes that received particular attention on ACPO's media network as early as 1964 was the message to rural audiences that women had the same rights in society and the family as men did, although the primary role assigned to women still followed the conservative Catholic hierarchy's insistence that women's principal sphere of responsibility was the care of children and the home (Lópera López 2012, 74).

ACPO's message regarding the family, Christian values, gender, and rights evolved in the aftermath of Vatican II (1962–1965), and especially in response to Paul VI's 1967 encyclical, *Populorum progressio*. The encyclical recognized the right of public authorities to intervene in population matters as long as whatever measures they undertook were "in conformity with the dictates of the moral law and the rightful freedom of married couples is preserved completely intact." It explicitly affirmed that only a couple had the right to decide how many children to have: "It is for parents to take a thorough look at the matter and decide upon the number of their children . . . following the dictates of their own consciences informed by God's law authentically interpreted, and bolstered by their trust in Him."

ACPO interpreted *Populorum progressio* as confirmation of its message to rural couples that decisions affecting the well-being of the family—from the determination of how to spend household resources to how many children to have—rested solely with spouses, not the state or the Church; that violence against wives and children and vices such as alcoholism ran counter to Christian teachings; and that sex within marriage that did not result in procreation and the decision to limit family size were not sins. These lessons were conveyed in editorials and answers to peasant letters published in the newspaper *El Campesino*, Radio Sutatenza broadcasts, instructional manuals, and rural theater scripts even before Liberal president Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966–1970) took office in August 1966. Lleras Restrepo, to whom it was said that the founder of ACPO, Monsignor José Joaquín Salcedo, acted as a personal adviser, announced the government's intention to cooperate with the Division of Population Studies of the Colombian Association of Medical Schools (ASCOFAME) to fund research on abortion, family planning methods, and cancer (Brzezinski 1976, 491).

Rural theater was singled out as a particularly effective mechanism for conveying new ways of thinking about family and spousal relations and rights while promoting the merits of responsible parenthood. *Peasant Vignettes: Rural Theater (Cuadros campesinos: Teatro rural)* was a collection of seven plays for open-air theater (*teatro al aire libre*) performances that included scripts, stage directions, and sample discussion questions intended to orient the peasant auxiliary or "animator," whose role it was to guide rural participants in open-air performances (Rodríguez, n.d.). Written in response to moral and material concerns expressed in the thousands of letters ACPO's peasant audience wrote every year, the plays tackled a variety of economic and social themes, each of which was set in a different Colombian region. Hilaria Gutiérrez Botello, a peasant woman who worked with ACPO as a volunteer, radio auxiliary, community coordinator, and regional director from 1963 to 1994, remembered that at yearly retreats attended by ACPO peasant leaders from around the country, "the decision was made to create mate-

rials specific to each region, that is, we wrote them in local dialect or slang so that they would feel more immediate to peasants.<sup>2</sup>

Among the most frequently voiced concerns in the letters written by rural housewives was the preoccupation that “their husbands were given over to alcoholism or were frequently violent” (Torres Álvarez 2012). The consequences of the latter were vividly explored in “Poor Woman, Poor Children!” a play set on a country farm in Tolima on a Sunday, traditionally market day in rural towns. The opening scene features a father shouting angry orders to his daughter and son, who are too weak to lift the cargo off a pack mule loaded down with goods. “Get out of the way, you lazy piece of *arepa!*” the father yells, before leaving to meet his friends at the local tavern (*cantina*).<sup>3</sup> When his children timidly ask if he is not planning to attend Mass, the father retorts, “I don’t need you to boss me around!” As the children head to church and the father goes drinking, the narrator turns to the audience and notes that the father has set a bad moral example for his children, and they know it because they have studied the ACPO instructional manual (*cartilla*) “Christian Community.”

On their return from Mass, the children discover to their horror that the mule and the packs are gone; they assume they have been stolen and their father will blame them. The phrase that is used to convey the children’s sense of terror at the thought of their father’s wrath once he finds out is a typical Colombian colloquial saying: “*Se los tragó la tierra*” (literally, the earth swallowed them up). Rather than stay and face his father, the brother, Lisandro, makes plans to leave home even if it means being reduced to begging and leaving his sister to face his father’s anger alone (though this may mean he will beat her within an inch of her life). Less impetuous than her brother, the daughter inquires around the village and finds out that the mule and the packs have been sold rather than stolen.

Returning home dead drunk, having spent all but ten pesos of his profits, the father hands what’s left to his daughter, ordering her to go out and buy food for his evening meal, while his wife chastises her husband for spending all the family’s money without considering anyone’s needs but his own. “I don’t have to answer to anybody,” the father lashes out, “least of all you. I am free to do whatever I want with my money.” As her husband threatens her while shouting, “These fists can hit, and really hard,” the wife ends the play with a bitter monologue in which she reminds her husband and the audience of her wedding vows and the Christian duty of husbands to treat their wives with respect and as equals: “This is the last straw! That he would dare to hit the wife who has served him without rest and who has borne all his excesses. How ironic the words the priest said when he married us seem to me now.” The narrator then steps in to recite those very words: “That the husband love his wife and the wife love her husband, and that you remain in the fear of God—I give thee a companion not a slave. Love each other as Christ loves the Church.” Turning to the audience, the narrator then

2. The plays were also performed by ACPO actors and aired over Radio Sutatenza. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

3. An *arepa*, or corn cake, was a typical item in the Colombian rural diet.

instructs them to ask themselves why things in the play are the way they are, whether the home depicted in the play is a "school of faith," and what God asks of partners in a marriage, concluding with the admonition that the audience meditate on the state of their own marriages (Rodríguez, n.d., 116–117).

For a modern audience accustomed to tell-all talk shows where the most intimate details of strangers' lives may be exposed and dissected before a public of millions, the dialogue and themes of a play such as "Poor Woman, Poor Children!" may seem disappointingly mild, but for a society where domestic violence, machismo, and intrafamilial relations were (and continue to be) taboo subjects—especially in rural communities—performing in public scenes of abuse and suggesting that such behavior was not tolerated by God, and that wives had rights equal to their husbands', was deeply unsettling (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1975; González 1995). Indeed, peace activists such as "Lucia" reported that participation in Church-sponsored women's groups in the 1970s marked the first instance in which women received encouragement to speak out about domestic violence and abusive marriages. Lucia attributed her evolution from barely literate, battered rural housewife to literate and respected community and human rights leader to the possibility for collective sharing in safe spaces provided by organizations sponsored by the Catholic Church. The self-esteem, organizing, and mobilization skills she learned there empowered her to become an advocate and agent in defense of her own and her community's interests (AMOR 2007, 29–30).

Diana Medrano and Rodrigo Villar's 1988 comparative study of Colombian women's participation in popular urban and rural organizations echoes Lucia's testimony (Medrano and Villar 1988, 7). Rural women, the authors found, faced challenges that made participation in *any* kind of organization outside the home difficult. Women were responsible for domestic duties and farm work that condemned them to working long days for which they received no remuneration; they lacked services to make their work more efficient and productive; they had low access to education; the dominant culture of machismo in rural areas kept women isolated from participation in organizations and impeded an awareness of their rights; and women were frequently subject to sexual abuse and the authoritarian attitudes of men in their families (Medrano and Villar 1988, 40). Of the three organizations Medrano and Villar studied, the most enduring and successful one was also the only group that began life as a Christian-centered, parish-based social assistance movement led by a priest.

The Asociación de Mujeres por una Nueva Sociedad (Association of Women for a New Society) answered to SEPAS (the Social Pastoral Secretariat) and the Coordinator of Organizations in the northeastern Colombian state of Santander del Sur. As a Church-sponsored entity, SEPAS had the legitimacy to broach "certain questions regarding the values and patterns of conduct that shape rural communities" and to convoke women "not just as family members, but as individuals and members of a community in which they are called upon to fulfill an active role in the search for social change" (Medrano and Villar 1988, 39). The Church, the authors found, was able to create a "social space" where "new forms of participation" could be proposed "that encompassed not only the family context but the context of the community as well." "Without the presence of members of the



Church," the authors concluded, "this type of convocation would not have been possible" (Medrano and Villar 1988, 49).

For the rural women of Santander del Sur, the path to empowerment as citizens was mediated by and inextricably bound up in religion, blurring any possible ontological distinction between secular and religious spheres. The process that culminated in the members of the Association of Women for a New Society coordinating a powerful grassroots community organization known as *El Común* (the Commons)—which in the late 1980s occupied the governor's office and blocked a major highway to press for social and economic reforms—had begun fifteen years earlier as a struggle to negotiate permission to attend Church-sponsored meetings to learn to sew. One woman poignantly described the hurdles to her participation:

He didn't agree at first that I go to the family or women's meetings . . . first, because they took place at night, then because that was for women who had nothing better to do, for single women who could go out at all hours with no one to scold them or anything. But then when I told him that the priest was supporting the meetings, that it wasn't just for unmarried women, that mainly they asked that married women attend because they had more experience and were more respected, . . . he changed his mind because he said, okay, since it's connected to the Church, the priest and SEPAS is made aware of everything that goes on in the group, it will be published and made public, so he says, okay, let them go. (Medrano and Villar 1988, 106)

#### POPULATION GROWTH, POVERTY, AND RESPONSIBLE PROCREATION

Colombia's population grew 3 percent a year between 1951 and 1964 and the rate jumped to 4 percent between 1964 and 1973 (Prada and Ojeda 1987, 116), sparking concern over excessive population growth even among the Colombian Catholic Church hierarchy. Responding to a Colombian government initiative to partner with ASCOFAME for instructional courses led by health professionals to promote family planning awareness in 1967, the Church denounced the use of artificial birth control even as it acknowledged in a statement on paternal responsibility that Colombian couples had the right to decide on the size of their families and to take into account their ability to materially provide for children before deciding to have them (Brzezinski 1976, 492). Concerned that a public dispute with the Church could undermine the already fragile restoration of democracy under the bipartisan arrangement known as the National Front, the Lleras Restrepo government invited leading figures of the Catholic Church hierarchy to meet with the government to discuss common preoccupations with the growth in illegitimate births (over 40 percent of all births); the dangers to maternal health posed by widespread, illegal abortions; and concerns over the lack of sex education and entrenched conservative attitudes that condemned women who became pregnant out of wedlock to a life of prostitution and their progeny to a life of poverty and homelessness. Colombia's Church hierarchy, however, refused to cede, condemning official efforts to legislate or promote policies intended to rein in population growth as a sin and in violation of the concordat that governed Colombian Church-state relations (Brzezinski, 1976, 493–494).

For Catholics, the Church hierarchy's refusal to condone any method of family planning except abstinence posed a moral and material dilemma, even though it was already apparent by 1964 that knowledge and acceptance of contraceptive methods was fairly high among Catholics in cities such as Bogotá and Medellín (Simmons and Cardona 1973). Responding to the number of women from all walks of life that flooded his elegant clinic seeking to limit their fertility, Dr. Fernando Tamayo Ogliastri, an obstetrician-gynecologist with a private practice in Bogotá, established the first large-scale family planning program in Latin America, Profamilia (the Colombian Family Welfare Association), in 1965. By 1972, when it would discreetly partner with ACPO and the Colombian Federation of Coffee Growers (FNC) to develop a pilot family planning program in rural areas, Profamilia had grown into the largest Planned Parenthood clinic in the world (Tamayo 1973).

Profamilia was not a religiously affiliated entity barred from explicitly endorsing artificial birth control methods for fear of violating Church teachings, as was ACPO. Yet when Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (*On the Regulation of Human Births*) in 1968, hopes were dashed that the Church might adopt a more lenient approach toward at least some forms of family planning (Brzezinski 1976, 495). Profamilia took a circumspect approach in order to avoid alienating the Church, omitting any mention of specific methods when it launched its 1969 radio advertising campaign. Instead, broadcasts in different cities focused exclusively on advertising the location and availability of family planning services and clinics where individuals could inquire about different birth control options. The rationale behind Profamilia's campaign "was that a substantial number of women in Colombia did not want any more children but did not know where they could receive family planning services" (Bailey 1973, 275). In Bogotá, nine radio stations broadcast the Profamilia commercials several times during the day and evening over the course of a six-month period (Stycos 1975). Profamilia sponsored a study based on questionnaires and interviews conducted with individuals who frequented the clinics to inquire about ways to limit the size of their family in the aftermath of the radio campaign; it found that at least 5,500 women cited the radio ads as the reason for their visit to Profamilia clinics (Bailey 1973, 278).

In March 1972, approximately two and a half years later, as Profamilia was in the midst of establishing its first rural pilot program, ACPO's Radio Sutatenza formally launched its Responsible Procreation campaign with a series of radio spots that lasted between twenty and sixty seconds and aired every half-hour or hour between five in the morning and midnight. A typical spot ran something like this:

[Audio effects: street sounds, horns, motors, voices]

Felipe: [*surprised*] Manuel! When did you arrive?

Manuel: Felipe! It's been so long! I've just arrived, but you have forgotten your hometown!

Felipe: Where are you going to stay?

Manuel: No! I'm not staying. I'm leaving today. I don't like the city; it frightens me, look, there on the sidewalk . . .

Felipe: What? I don't see anything!

[Audio effects]



Male voice: As a matter of fact, all day long, Manuel has seen several children sleeping on the sidewalk. This is not new for Felipe. He sees them every day. . . . Everywhere dirty, abandoned, sad children.

Female voice: Thousands of children die of hunger and cold all over the world. Think about it before you have the next child. (Bernal Alarcón 1979, 62)

ACPO complemented these spots with radio dramatizations, such as *Viva la vida* (*Up with Life*), broadcast in fifteen- to twenty-minute segments. The broadcasts aimed at provoking reflection on the part of the listener, who could then send in questions that “would be handled by the regional field-workers and trainers, through correspondence or in more detailed newspaper articles” to be published in the rural newspaper, *El Campesino* (Bernal Alarcón 1979, 63). In this way Radio Sutatenza attempted to avoid possible public polemics with the Church hierarchy, while making peasant-generated inquiries the basis for editorials tackling the need for greater sex and health education. Under the section reserved for “spiritual notions,” ACPO reassured rural folk that Responsible Procreation did not violate Catholic teachings, though their local priests insisted that any attempt to space out births or limit family size was a mortal sin (Lópera López 2012).

The Responsible Procreation campaign was the logical culmination of more than two decades of teaching peasants to read, write, and assimilate technical knowledge, an objective that ACPO never regarded as an end in itself but rather as a necessary tool to enable peasants to integrate the principles of Catholic doctrine, civics, farming, health, and domestic economy in grassroots efforts to foment community development. ACPO insisted that the keys to effecting rural change lay not in armed revolution or the radical restructuring of property relations but in education and access to information, an approach that appeared anodyne but nonetheless struck at the heart of patriarchy, hierarchy, and engrained cultural norms. “You are the one who can freely choose to inform yourself or determine what is best to regulate your fertility,” ACPO reminded its listeners and readers, adding, “marriage is a contract whose purpose is not only procreation” (Lópera López 2012, 87). Under the Spiritual Notions element of its five-point educational program, ACPO also disabused peasants of the unfounded but widespread belief that it was Church dogma that sexual intercourse within marriage was condemned unless procreation was the objective: “Love is not just sex, but the main goal of sexual relations should always be love.” And for those who were uncertain about exactly how conception occurred or assumed that when it did, it was only the mother’s concern, ACPO chided, “procreation should be consulted with a doctor, but not just by one member of a couple, but by both spouses” (Lópera López 2012, 89).<sup>4</sup>

A year before ACPO initiated its campaign to make peasants aware of the benefits of family planning, Profamilia had already proven highly successful in

4. Not all listeners responded positively to ACPO’s campaign. Some male listeners wrote in consternation about the use of the term “contract” to describe the marriage union, wondering if ACPO were not violating Catholic doctrine in suggesting that couples base their decision to have children on their ability to support and educate them.

disseminating information and contraceptive methods among urban Colombians. An estimated three hundred thousand women, for instance, had attended Profamilia workshops, film showings, and health-related seminars, while doctors and sociologists from Colombia and other Latin American countries interested in reproducing the Profamilia model had participated in more than twenty training courses sponsored by the organization (International Planned Parenthood Foundation 1971, 6). But Profamilia's message did not reach rural areas, where televisions were scarce, commercial radio reception spotty, and resistance was likely to emerge not only from parish priests but from their conservative parishioners, especially men, who might feel threatened by attempts to appeal to their wives and include them in decisions about the household and fertility. ACPO and the FNC would emerge as the critical partners in Profamilia's efforts to extend family planning beyond large cities into the Colombian countryside, where nine million people, some 40 percent of Colombia's population in 1975, resided in small, isolated rural agricultural settlements known as *veredas*, birthrates averaged a child or two more than in urban areas, and access to health practitioners and information on family planning methods were scarce (Prada and Ojeda 1987, 116; Echeverry 1975, 142).

Several circumstances explain why the FNC, ACPO, and Profamilia joined forces to extend family planning and health education to rural areas. Since the late 1940s, ACPO had pioneered media-based, grassroots education and community development in rural Colombia. By the early 1960s, it had a well-developed network of lay peasant volunteers and community leaders in place in over half of Colombia's municipal areas. In coffee-producing regions, the FNC exercised a presence similar to ACPO's but through a network of extension agents, credit unions, cooperatives, and "health promoters." ACPO and the FNC were thus the two organizations with the greatest institutional presence, influence, and legitimacy in rural communities, particularly in coffee-producing areas, aside from the Catholic Church. Moreover, despite the fact that one was a private producers' association and the other a religiously affiliated organization initially devoted to catechetical and adult literacy training, the philosophical underpinnings of both institutions lay in Catholic social doctrine, and both were longtime proponents of community-based development.

ACPO and the FNC also shared a belief that science and faith could be reconciled, evincing a "modern" understanding that what held rural communities back was not some inherent biological or ethnic impediment but centuries of official indifference and exclusion that could be offset—indeed, to be true to the concept of Christian charity, *must* be offset—through a concerted commitment to education. The moral imperative and basic right to education was succinctly laid out in ACPO's 1963 instructional manual titled simply *Tierra (Land)*, which stated under the rubric "Education": "The right to education is not contingent on age. If society failed in its obligation to facilitate instruction to a citizen when he was a child, it must provide it when he is an adult. Moreover, it may be affirmed that society is under the obligation to repair the damages that have been suffered over the lifetime of a citizen who did not receive a sufficient education as a child or adolescent" (ACPO 1963, 7).

Two elements of ACPO's mission statement are especially worth noting. First is the repeated use of the word *citizen* to refer to the subjects of the instructional manual, and second, the idea that education is a right that society is obligated to provide regardless of age, and when it has failed to do so, must redress because the consequences of not having provided it are implicitly understood as representing damages that affect society as a whole and extend beyond the mere fact of remaining illiterate. Health, sex, and family planning information were just as much an educational right owed peasants as the right to learn how to read and write, be better Christians, sow more productive fields, and raise healthier, more devout, and better-educated families.

In all its written and broadcast instructional materials, ACPO made clear that religious and citizenship subjectivities could not be treated as separate or discrete categories of belief and action but were inextricably intermingled. "Acción Cultural Popular is a project of the Church which has as its mission 'the integral Christian education of the people [*pueblo*], especially rural adults.'" A central object of that mission included "opening mentalities to the idea of the social good, to the criteria of efficiency and productivity. Its aspiration is that all Colombia's peasantry not only become good farmers but that, in addition, they come to occupy in Colombian society the role that they deserve because of their own merits, abilities, production, and values"(ACPO 1963, 8–9).

#### PLANTING THE SEEDS OF FAMILY PLANNING IN THE LAND OF JUAN VALDÉZ

The first pilot rural family planning program was set up in 1971 in the state of Risaralda, part of the *eje cafetero* (coffee axis) and *antioqueño* cultural complex, and the bailiwick of both ACPO and the FNC (Bailey and Correa 1975, 152).<sup>5</sup> Historically characterized by being deeply Catholic and conservative, the coffee-producing regions shaped by antioqueño colonization were also more open to discourses of modernization and development than was often typical of rural communities where subsistence production or large landed estates (*latifundia*) predominated. Although it also had many landless laborers, the coffee axis was part of an export-based economy in which smallholders and medium-sized growers made up two-thirds of producers, and small industries and home-based businesses were not uncommon (Bergquist 1986). In other ways, however, coffee-producing regions like Risaralda posed problems typical of Colombian rural regions as a whole: populations were scattered in settlements at a considerable distance from each other and from the parish Church, and the rural credit union or agrarian bank (if there was one) and marketplace were concentrated in town centers where often less than 2 percent of the total municipal population resided (Fals Borda 1955; Echeverry 1975, 143). For rural women the problem of social isolation was particularly severe as few sanctioned areas of public encounter and

5. In fact, all of Profamilia's subsequent rural family planning efforts would focus on coffee-producing states, especially those in the *eje cafetero* colonized by Antioqueños (Risaralda, Quindío, Caldas, Tolima, northern Valle, and Antioquia), and only "acceptors" in rural settlements that produced coffee within those states were eligible to participate in the contraceptive program.

interactions existed outside the home, aside from the Church (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1975; Fals Borda 1955).

The Risaralda pilot family planning program was a nonclinical contraceptive distribution program in which no doctor's supervision was involved but where health promoters (*promotoras de salud*) hired by the FNC initially provided back-up guidance and support. The health promoters were in turn assisted by local married women whose experiences as catechetical instructors, radio auxiliaries, or coordinators and participants of "housewives clubs" (*clubes de amas de casa*) gave them a certain legitimacy and authority within their communities. The participation and mobilization of rural women, facilitated in large measure once ACPO became a partner in the program, would be hailed by international evaluators as "two of the most significant developments in the area of family planning during the last several years," and these evaluators recommended that the "program's organization, method of operation, and achievements be widely disseminated as soon as possible" (Bailey and Correa 1975, 154).

Before Profamilia undertook any distribution of contraceptive methods, ACPO deployed teams to conduct a survey of rural women at marketplaces throughout a large portion of Colombia, asking questions about their knowledge of family planning methods, literacy, awareness of *El Campesino* and Radio Sutatenza, and attitudes towards birth control (Doster and Torres 1973). Responses obtained from the survey, coupled with information gleaned from thousands of letters received annually from peasants at the ACPO headquarters, became the basis for developing the records, radio spots, dramatizations, instructional manuals (such as "Sex and Marriage," which ACPO produced specifically for the campaign) and plays used to promote Responsible Procreation.

Humor, music, and doggerel were harnessed in the effort to introduce peasants to the idea of family planning within a broader project of promoting equitable spousal relations, a higher standard of living, and better-educated rural households. The Holy Family (conveniently small) emerged as the model to be emulated by rural families. Radio Sutatenza broadcast messages and slogans published in the widely read *El Campesino* such as: "Rural friend [*Amigo campesino*]: you belong to a community. Be responsible to it: don't engender new beings without knowing what you are doing." Forty-five-rpm records with lyrics and jingles set to popular musical rhythms and sung by well-known performers saturated the Radio Sutatenza airwaves, including "Mi parejita" (My spouse); "Amor y paz" (Love and peace); "Si queremos ser felices" (If we want to be happy); "Cuentos de mi Abuela Pepa" (My grandmother Pepa's stories); "Mas vale pocos y bien" (Better a few but well off); "Así es mi pequeño hogar" (This is my small home); and "El hogar de Pedro y Brigida" (The home of Peter and Bridget) (ACPO, n.d.).

After weeks of systematic broadcasting, teams of women field-workers fanned out across a *vereda* or area, going door to door during the daytime, when most rural women could be found at home and were unlikely to be inhibited by their spouses. The field-workers were assigned to a certain number of rural settlements whose houses were strategically located to facilitate easy access should a potential user have a question. Like the instructions in the ACPO rural theater scripts, field-workers were admonished always to be respectful and not to insist if they

encountered rejection but to make it known that they were available at any time to talk. Field-workers became repositories for community concerns. Women confided their illnesses, the troubles in their households, and the difficulties they encountered feeding or caring for their families. At monthly field meetings overseen by a female zone supervisor, concerns were aired, program effectiveness discussed, and challenges analyzed. This constant self-assessment became the basis for the introduction of other programs that were unrelated to family planning but aimed directly at improving the health and well-being of rural women and children (Bailey and Correa 1973, 155).

For instance, by 1973 survey information collected in Risaralda with assistance from ACPO and the FNC made it clear that many rural children and women suffered from chronic bronchitis, diarrhea, and stomach pains and that the cause was the use of wood-burning stoves in kitchens with no exhaust, where food was left out all day, developed bacteria, and sickened the family. To address this issue, the local FNC committee trained people to use pressure cookers and kerosene stoves and offered twelve-month low-interest loans to coffee-producing families. Over three thousand pressure cooker and stove combinations were sold in an eighteen-month period using the installment system pioneered in the early 1960s by ACPO and the FNC for the dissemination of radios to rural inhabitants enrolled in Radio Sutatenza's Radiophonic Schools. ACPO's illustrated instructional manuals on home improvement and environmental conservation, as well as radio programs dedicated to teaching people the rudiments of construction, became the basis for building exhaust systems in kitchens and reducing the use of firewood, a critical aim not least because the obligation to collect firewood typically fell on women and children who were forced to travel considerable distances on foot to gather it.

Bolstered by ACPO, the Risaralda pilot program (later extended to Caldas, Antioquia, Quindío, Tolima, Cundinamarca, and northern Valle) proved to be a considerable success. By August 1973, fifteen of the sixteen counties in which the program operated had been surveyed, seventy-seven distribution posts were set up in an area that encompassed 951 rural settlements, and 6,700 women had used Profamilia's services, representing 60 percent of all the rural settlements where the program functioned. By 1978 the most dramatic reduction in Colombia's rural birthrate had occurred precisely in the Central Colombian region encompassing the coffee axis where ACPO, Profamilia, and the FNC had collaborated since 1972.

In 1969 Colombia's rural birthrate had stood at 9.2 overall and 6.8 in the Central region encompassing Antioquia, Caldas, Quindío, Tolima, Huila, Caquetá, and Risaralda. By 1976 Colombia's national rural birthrate had dropped to 6.3 and in 1978 to 5.4, but the central region reported the most dramatic drop and lowest rural birthrate of any region in Colombia: 4.1 in 1976 and 3.3 in 1978 (Prada and Ojeda 1987, 117).<sup>6</sup> This accomplishment was all the more notable given that five of the seven departments or states defined as "central" that were included in the family planning program were also part of the region deemed the most Catholic

6. The eastern region, which included Cundinamarca, the only department outside the coffee axis's antioqueño settlement complex, reported a birthrate in 1978 of 4.0, a decline of 3.9 births since 1969.

and culturally conservative in Colombia (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1975). Reprising the accomplishments of family planning in rural areas twenty-five years after the initiation of Profamilia's pilot program, Jayne and Guilkey (1998, 338) found that the single most important factor influencing the decline in Colombia's rural birthrate was not the availability of birth control but rather access to education, which led women to delay both marriage and fertility, a finding that was confirmed in a 2006 study published in the British medical journal the *Lancet* (Cleland et al. 2006).

Education, of course, was a central element of ACPO's mission, and rural women were repeatedly reminded, in the words of longtime ACPO activist Hilaria Gutiérrez, "to study and prepare ourselves to work on a par with men, that together, we complemented each other, that neither was subordinate to the other" (Torres Álvarez 2012). The emphasis on education as a right extended to ACPO's approach to family planning. More than a question of advocating the use of birth control methods per se, ACPO sought, in its collaboration with Profamilia and the FNC, to galvanize among rural communities a conversation about individual and collective responsibility and agency, where these concepts were understood as impinging in fundamental ways on the construction of citizenship and religious subjectivities, and the welfare of individuals and the collective. That conversation required spaces of interaction in order to occur and tools to turn those interactions into collaborative mobilizations that might trigger changes—in outlook, practice, and relations—within the family and in the community at large. Although the fall in rural birthrates was a notable achievement, perhaps ACPO's greatest legacy was to have contributed to a "revolution" in self-esteem, especially among rural women, convincing them, as Hilaria Gutiérrez put it, that "they were valuable, had qualities, that they were listened to, that their opinions were taken into account" (Torres Álvarez 2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

The 1960s and 1970s, the decades in which ACPO undertook its Responsible Procreation campaign, represented a particularly convulsed period in Colombian history. Between 1948 and 1958, more than a million peasants had been forced from their rural settlements or fled to towns and cities from their places of origin to escape years of civil conflict that left more than 200,000 mainly peasant Colombians dead. Meanwhile, the restoration of democratic rule in mid-1958 after five years of military dictatorship brought little respite from political persecution, hunger, unemployment, inadequate public services, isolation, and exclusion. Dissident political groups and revolutionary guerrillas mushroomed, inspired in part by the success of Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution, while counterinsurgency efforts to stem the threat of armed revolution in the countryside spread fear and violence. The same country that hosted the first and largest Peace Corps contingent and was touted, along with Chile, as a "showcase" for the Alliance for Progress, was also the regional showcase for burgeoning guerrilla warfare (Lernoux 1991).



Despite a legacy of violence shaped in part by religious fanaticism that compromised the stature of the Colombian Catholic Church, religion and people's religious faith did not give way or disappear even as technological advancements, modernization, and exposure to new ideas reshaped Colombia's economy, society, and politics after 1960 (Levine 1981; Smith 1991; Arias 2003). Indeed, organizations like ACPO—which enjoyed the legitimacy conferred by association with a powerful entity like the Catholic Church but also embraced community-driven economic development rooted in scientific principles and Christian humanism—proved critical in helping traditionally isolated and culturally conservative rural communities navigate the challenges posed by a rapidly changing society.<sup>7</sup> As an expression of “emplaced religion,” ACPO/Radio Sutatenza offered rural Colombians, especially historically marginalized rural women, spaces where they might incorporate religious images, practices, discourses, and values into the fabric of their daily lives, enabling them to experiment with opening alternative paths.

The need to construct alternative paths where religious beliefs could be reconciled with long-postponed material needs was perhaps the most pressing and agonizing dilemma facing rural Colombian communities in the 1960s and 1970s. The issue was hardly academic. Religious and secular spheres have never operated or been understood as discrete categories of belief or action in Colombia. During *La Violencia* individuals belonging to the political opposition had been publicly pilloried and humiliated for their liberal beliefs; accused of being atheists, communists, and masons; and punished accordingly (Bidegaín 1985). Social, political, and cultural policing was fierce in rural settlements, and the cost of offending the parish priest or the dominant moral sensibilities of one's neighbors and fellow parishioners was considerable and sometimes catastrophic. No issue was as socially combustible in a profoundly Catholic and conservative society like Colombia's as the question of an individual's right to determine their fertility or the right of women to share equally in household and community decisions. At heart these questions encompassed larger dilemmas and aspirations: was it possible to build a democratic and just society if patriarchal and authoritarian relations were not restructured from the bottom up, beginning in the home? ACPO's position was that it was not.

As made clear by ACPO/Radio Sutatenza's Responsible Procreation campaign and promotion of rural women's right to participate as equals in decisions affecting both the household and collective society, religious concepts and ideas were intimately connected to this-worldly goals as well as deeply embedded in secular institutions of participation and protest. The household, in ACPO's philosophy, was a microcosm of the nation. Just as Colombia could neither flourish nor lay claim to being a democratic, socially just nation if decisions affecting a majority were made by a minority or imposed through authoritarian and violent means

7. The influential mid-twentieth-century Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain is closely associated with the idea of Christian or integral humanism, a philosophical approach that deeply influenced UNESCO, whose educational materials and approach formed one of the critical inspirations for the Fundamental Integral Education (EFI) system adopted by ACPO.

rather than participatory and deliberative democratic consensus, so the household could never be “a school of faith” when women and children were subordinated to the violent whim of a husband and father and excluded from taking part in decisions that affected their spiritual and material well-being (Rodríguez, n.d.). Rural women took ACPO’s message to heart. A decade after the organization’s demise, in areas where it had exercised an important presence, such as the Oriente Antioqueño and Santander del Sur, the vestiges of ACPO’s philosophy of Christian-inspired empowerment lives on in social movements, community radio, and committees devoted to defending the right of citizen participation and the search for nonviolent solutions to conflict.

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