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The Cartagena Railroad: A failed hegemonic experience and a laboratory of social movements in the Caribbean (1894-1951)

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In most cases, the study of railways in Colombia has focused on technical aspects, leaving aside those legal, business, and institutional elements that gave meaning to the initiative, its impact on territorial appropriation and settlement processes, the central questions on sovereignty itself, and, ultimately, the incidence of public policy on the State and the Nation in 19th-century Colombia. The Cartagena Railroad was part of a joint effort to recover the port's dynamism and to compete with sub-regions that sought to achieve a leading role in the Colombian Caribbean. In this struggle, although partially fulfilling this purpose, the railroad failed to become established as a hegemonic project in terms of territorial dominance, and it was displaced in importance by Barranquilla and its railway line.

In Colombia, it was not an easy task to connect export-producing regions with the rest of the world. In most cases, the connection with seaports required the construction of a highway or a railway line to a navigable river, and, in addition, the regularization of steam navigation with a return charge that ensured the profitability of investments. In general, most of the railroads connected these regions with the Magdalena River, the communication route *par excellence* with the Caribbean Sea.

Paradoxically, the two main ports in the Caribbean until the eighteenth century—Cartagena and Santa Marta—had serious problems for trade. The first had a leading role during the Colonial period since the natural conditions of the bay were ideal for military defense; however, the sedimentation of the Dique Canal made navigation virtually

impossible until the 20th century. In turn, Santa Marta had a bay with deeper waters, but with difficulties for its defense, and it was connected with the Magdalena River through channels and swamps that limited navigation.

The Cartagena Railroad has been treated in historiography in a dispersed manner, and we are still missing a systematic analysis of its impact on regional development and how it faced the challenges posed by the new sectors of a regional elite. Nevertheless, in general terms, it is important to highlight the work of Alfredo Ortega between 1917 and 1932 to document the history of national railways, which offers a general vision of their status in the late 19th and early 20th century. Similarly, the study of Theodore Nichols (1973) on the three most important ports in the Colombian Caribbean (Barranquilla, Cartagena, and Santa Marta) presents interesting descriptions of the development of this route—although without analyzing its impact in terms of foreign trade—and the urban and economic development of Barranquilla. Other texts, such as those by Gabriel Poveda (2010; 2002), Gustavo Pérez (2007), and Thomas Fischer (2002), present similar results to the above mentioned studies, although it is important to highlight Fischer's proposal regarding the relative success of Colombian short routes (less than 150 kilometers) compared to longer ones.

Meisel (2017) presents an analysis of four railroads built in the Colombian Caribbean in the 19th century (Panama, Barranquilla, Cartagena, and Santa Marta), which mainly focuses on the economic behavior of railway operations. For his part, Pérez (1998) states that the greatest incentive for the implementation of railroads was based on the need to create a transport infrastructure that would support the coffee boom in order to reduce freight costs.

In this sense, Safford (2010) and Restrepo and Rodríguez (2013) analyze the conditions of Cartagena with respect to other Caribbean ports during the 19th century. Although the city had a deep bay that allowed the mooring of larger vessels, the connection between Cartagena

and the interior was difficult, since it had to be through the Dique Canal, which presented constant problems of navigability and interconnection with the Magdalena River, making its operation very costly. Ripoll (1997) indicates that even in periods when the connection with the Magdalena River was possible through the Dique Canal, Cartagena had lost its leadership in the region.

Based on a wide use of oral sources and histories of settlements along the railway line, Ortiz (2017) analyzes the reasons for the construction of the railroad, and he considers that although coffee production had a positive impact on the development of railway infrastructure, Cartagena did not become its main port of embarkation. In the same way, Meisel (1980) discusses the reasons why Cartagena had a very marked loss of dynamism during much of the 19th century, leading to a significant demographic contraction.

Nevertheless, Restrepo and Rodríguez (2013) show that despite these difficulties and a marked loss of economic dynamism, the commercial sector in Cartagena managed to develop alternatives to the problem of connectivity with the interior by diversifying its investments in other options. According to these authors, this sector evidences a notable presence of foreign immigrants and people from the region, who concentrated their investments in banking development, an industry, and agricultural projects in the second half of the 19th century.

Meisel (1999) describes in more detail the operation of the Calamar-Cartagena railroad, as the axis of the industrial development of companies like the Canadian multinational Andian, whose oil pipeline reactivated export activities from the dock, and analyzes the demographic effects of this development. One of the most interesting points of his work lies in comparing the efficiency of railroad operations as a private company and as a public company, with the second option producing lower yields.

Ortiz (2005) offers a refreshing reconstruction based on existing oral memory about the railway, and explores the structural difficulties of its construction; among them, the absence of a steel industry and the lack of trained engineers, which led to a dependence on foreign entrepreneurs, who enjoyed, in his opinion, unusual exemptions and privileges.

In the historiography of social movements, Gómez's research on the Cartagena Railroad (2010) stands out, which analyzes the formative process of different worker organizations in parallel with the transformation of the productive organization and infrastructure. For Cartagena, the author indicates that the border between workers and artisans was diffuse because the industrial development was still incipient. As a consequence, the development of trade union organizations followed a similar pattern due, among other reasons, to the weakness of the industry, the intervention of the State, the short life of companies, or the apathy and indifference of workers.

Santana (2016) points out that historiography on the union struggles of port workers in Colombia has received greater attention since the beginning of the 21st century, although he argues that its development is still precarious. The author analyzes in more details worker organizations in Cartagena during the early 1930s, with a special focus on the development of the union movement and strikes caused by difficult working conditions of union members, in particular the Railroad Union of Cartagena, and continuous violations to agreements that resulted, in some cases, in the repression of workers and, in other cases, in conciliations and advances regarding labor conditions.

Urrutia (2016) analyzes the development of unionism by situating its birth between 1919 and 1920. He points out that unemployment and the lack of demand for work in railways became barriers that prevented workers from reaching effective agreements with railway companies.

Preston (2013) focuses on the analysis of strikes in the railway sector in the last decade of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th century. He argues that the success of strikes in the Caribbean region was due to two main factors: the political-economic situation of the region and the collective action of members that led them to understand that a paralysis of trains and ports could cause serious economic losses.

Solano (2010) identifies a process of transformations in the normative framework as well as in contractual mechanisms in the period between 1850 and 1930 as a consequence of the strengthening of different forms of wage labor. For this period, the author indicates that the oversupply of labor in cities was not absorbed by the livestock industry in the Caribbean region, which resulted in the weakening of the bargaining power of social movements.

Railway lines, such as the Cartagena Railroad, allow understanding the formulation of responses of hegemonic resistance to processes of territorial redefinition, although this was unsuccessful in this case. In this sense, in the present work, the construction of railways is understood as a form of spatial appropriation by a given society and, therefore, is in itself an act of power. Therefore, to study how this appropriation occurs is to understand how a society determines the exercise of power itself.

Thus, the analysis of power, and its representative forms, allows us to investigate the political and legal aspects of social life. Based on the above, questions are posed about conformity, resistance, as well as the stability potential of the system, the cohesion of the social order, and the strength or weakness of the dominant value system (Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994, págs. 4-6).

The concept of power used here is not limited to the legal or political sphere within an institutionalized framework; instead, it refers to a broad spectrum of political activities that include economic, cultural, and social movements, which are expressed through a system of

checks and balances, immersed in hegemonic relations that, due to their characteristics, are unequal and asymmetric. This approach involves asking what type of networks are being woven around the exercise of power, with multiple tensions within various political groups in the department of Bolívar Grande, particularly between Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta, to maintain or achieve a privileged position in the Colombian international trade flows.

Cartagena was not able to impede the Barranquilla railway project and once it started to operate, the city's position was severely relegated due to the success of Barranquilla and its area of influence. When Cartagena set in motion a railway project (1894) to regularize the flow of goods between the Caribbean and the Magdalena River, this had a limited influence on regional definition. This railway line was a delayed response that sought to compensate the consolidation of a new sub-region with greater dynamism.

Thus, this paper will analyze, first, the role of this railroad in the context of the changes in territorial appropriation patterns in the region at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. On the other hand, despite a rather limited success in recovering Cartagena's commercial dynamism, the railroad became an important scenario for worker movements in the region between 1930 and 1951, when the railway line ceased operations. For this reason, the second purpose of this paper is to analyze worker organizations that emerged in relation to the railroad and their impact on the operation of the railway line and on the recognition of social demands.

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