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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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reform in the novels of
R{226}omulo Gallegos*

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THE ELEMENT OF SOCIAL REFORM
IN THE NOVELS OF RÓMULO GALLEGOS

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PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to examine and to prove the prime significance of the element of social reform in the novels of the contemporary Venezuelan novelist Rómulo Gallegos.

Obviously, the most important sources for such a study must be the novels themselves. In addition to these primary sources, liberal use has been made of all available material which might be considered valuable in forming a sound and accurate conclusion. Secondary sources comprise literary criticism, biographical data, Venezuelan history and other general background material.

The work contains four main divisions. Chapter I is an analysis of the purport of Gallegos' recent election to the presidency of Venezuela in the light of his background as a novelist of reform. Chapter II deals exclusively with the element of social reform in the novels written during the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez. The three novels written since Gómez' death are treated in a similar manner in Chapter III. The logic of dividing the novels into these two groups is pointed out. Chapter

IV states conclusions drawn concerning the element of social reform in Gallegos' novels, summarizing the decisive factors.

In attempting to discover the importance in Gallegos' eight novels of so broad a subject as social reform, the writer has arbitrarily subdivided the treatment of this matter in Chapters II and III into four parts. Thus the element of social reform is examined as it applies in these works to the basic components of Latin American national life: Government, People, Land and Church. By means of this presumably all-inclusive device it has been possible to discuss systematically all material relevant to reform.

The writer wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Edgar T. Kuff for the latter's guidance in the preparation of this thesis and to Dr. C. I. Sonnichsen for his constructive criticism and suggestions. Mr. Baxter Polk and the staff of the College of Mines Library have been most helpful also in the matter of bibliography. In addition, the assistance of Miss Estellita Hart of the Library of the Pan American Union and Sr. Julio Pocatererra M. of the Venezuelan Consulate in New York City is gratefully acknowledged.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

MAN OF DESTINY

On February 15, 1948, Rómulo Gallegos was inaugurated President of Venezuela under the new Constitution adopted eight months previously, thereby becoming the nation's first chief executive popularly elected by universal suffrage. Having already outlined a broad program of social reform for Venezuela, the new president reaffirmed his pledge of a democratic administration. The impressive ceremonies,¹ which included a visit to the tomb of Simón Bolívar, climaxed the presidential campaign which Gallegos undertook in September, 1948, when, in accepting the nomination, the novelist declared with confidence that he was speaking for history.² T. R. Ybarra's comment on the import of Gallegos' election was as follows:

It was as if those hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan voters wished to proclaim to the world that, at long last, in Venezuela, the sword is no longer mightier than the pen. Believers everywhere

¹ See Time, February 23, 1948, p. 44; Life, March 8, 1948, pp. 51-57.

² Time, September 29, 1947 (Latin American edition), p. 16.

in true democracy will extend felicitations to Señor Gallegos and to his fellow-Venezuelans. 3

Actually Gallegos' interest in the political welfare of his country antedates his election by many years, for his efforts to guide his people toward a solution of their social problems began under the dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled Venezuela with an iron hand from 1908 until his death in 1935. Indeed, the new honor bestowed upon Gallegos by his countrymen would seem the natural result of his entire life's work as a novelist. His knowledge of the Venezuelan people, his heritage and background well qualify him for his new office.

Rómulo Gallegos was born in Caracas on August 2, 1884, the son of Rómulo Gallegos Osío and Rita Freire Guruceaga. Andrés Iduarte, indicating the mixture of Spanish, Indian and Negro blood that flows in Gallegos' veins, has called him a "compendio de americanidad."⁴ The family was poor. Gallegos received his education at the Colegio Sucre and the Central

³ The New York Times, December 20, p. 16.

⁴ U O, abril de 1936, p. 17.

University in Caracas. He studied law for a year, but, lacking the means to complete his course, was forced to renounce this career. There followed a period when he worked for a railroad. In 1912 he became Director of the Colegio Federal de Barcelona (Venezuela), and in 1918 he was made Director of the Escuela Normal de Caracas. From 1912 to 1930, he was professor of philosophy and the history of philosophy at the Liceo Andrés Bello in Caracas, which he headed from 1922 until 1930.

In 1931 Gallegos went into voluntary exile, having shown his disapproval of the Gómez regime by resigning from the Senate, where he represented the southern state of Apure. He first visited New York, and thence he traveled to Spain. There he resided until after the death of Gómez in 1935.

Returning to his native land in 1936, Gallegos was appointed Minister of National Education, which position he held for three months. In 1937 he was elected Federal District deputy to the still predominantly conservative National Congress, in which he served as a member of the opposition party until 1940. It was this group that in 1941 nominated him

for the presidency. The election was by the government-controlled national legislature with no popular vote, and he was overwhelmingly defeated by General Isías Medina Angarita. In that same year Gallegos founded the liberal left-wing party, Acción Democrática, which came to power with the customary coup d'etat in 1945.⁵ Refusing office, he continued to lead the party under the provisional presidency of Rómulo Betancourt. The party in open convention nominated Gallegos as its candidate in the late summer of 1947 after the promulgation of the Constitution of July 5, 1947, providing for the popular election of presidents. The campaign was unusual in that it was conducted in a strictly democratic manner, with Rafael Caldera, candidate of the church-supported conservative party accusing Gallegos of being anti-Catholic, and with Gallegos denouncing the Jesuit order for introducing a religious issue. On December 14, 1947, the people of Venezuela demonstrated their confidence in the man who had championed their rights through the hopeless years of the Gómez regime, electing him by a sweeping majority.⁶

⁵ Newsweek, October 29, 1945, p. 64.

⁶ Ibid., December 29, 1947, p. 34.

That the Venezuelan people suffered immeasurably under the twenty-seven-year rule of Gómez is undeniable. The oppression they endured is related in a portion of a particularly astute article by Hubert Herring which appeared after the dictator's death.

Gómez . . . to the day of his death . . . dominated his country. Political dissidents went to jail or exile. Hundreds . . . rotted in prison for ten, fifteen, twenty years. Gómez had a fabulous army of secret service operatives who haunted restaurants, railroad stations, and loitered in the streets. Suspects were jailed for an idle word, and kept for months and years without trial. University students were objects of special concern. Jailed, they had heavy iron shackles riveted to their ankles; they went insane, or died in prison, and their cries were quite unheard in the outside world. 7

A later article by Charlton Ogburn on the Three Year Plan of López Contreras, who succeeded Gómez, further indicates the bitter fruits of the dictator's autocratic rule.

. . . hospital and medical service is inadequate; so is the school system. Illiteracy is high. Actually the natives have a lower than health-subsistence standard of living. Undernourishment, lack of proper sanitation and medical care, and poor housing have reduced the physical stamina of the population. The people have the appearance of being underfed; large numbers of them show the ravages of chronic illness. 8

⁷ The New York Times, December 29, 1935, IV, p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., January 29, 1939, VII, p. 11.