

# The Role of Politics in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper will be to focus on the political aspect of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Specifically, the central argument is to assert that its political element is ultimately an apolitical condemnation of both the abuse of political power and of the dressing of such abuse in the trappings of democracy. This apolitical aspect is significant in that García Márquez, as a self-identified socialist, might hypothetically have wished to include in his novel an overtly ideological agenda. This is an interesting contrast with other novelists of strongly held political views.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is shown that the depicted abuse of power increases as the isolation of the story's setting, the village (later town) of Macondo decreases, and the most important person in mitigating such abuse is Úrsula Buendía, perhaps the most apolitical character of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

## Colonel Aureliano Buendía and the Nature of Political Power

The main stream of political activity in the novel begins and ends with the actions of Colonel Aureliano Buendía, son of José Arcadio Buendía, founder of the village of Macondo. Macondo, despite existing in an isolated region of 19th century South America, is caught up in the political turmoil that has frequently characterized that continent.<sup>3</sup> Colonel Aureliano Buendía leads the revolution of the Liberal Party against the Conservative Party of his country's government. He is ultimately unsuccessful in his endeavors, and after the cessation of hostilities cannot even succeed in convincing the government to issue pensions to all the veterans on both sides of the war.

The citizens of Macondo, particularly its most important family, the Buendías (who comprise the main characters of the novel), are generally either actively involved with, sympathetic with, or at least do not oppose the activities of the Liberal Party, which seems more or less secularist and left-leaning in orientation.<sup>4</sup> Political matters disturb the solitude of Macondo as much as anything, and the hardships caused by the fruit company that sets up a banana plantation (climaxing in a massacre of striking workers) would seem to indicate a strong pro-socialist message.<sup>5</sup> This is underscored by the fact that García Márquez himself was known to have strong socialist leanings, evinced by for example his co-founding of the leftist

magazine *Alternativa* in 1974 and his well-known friendship with Cuban socialist dictator Fidel Castro.<sup>6</sup>

Such convictions, one may speculate, might well tempt a writer to compose a political tract in the guise of a novel.<sup>7</sup> Yet instead, García Márquez illustrates elements of the nature of power relationships generally, rather than the promotion or repudiation of political ideologies in and of themselves; this is the primary element of how political power is depicted. The abuse of power and its negative effects on the people of Macondo increase as Macondo's isolation from the outside world is reduced. Márquez shows the reader the potentially malignant nature of large-scale authority per se, with both "left-wing" and "right-wing" individuals and organizations comprising a depictive framework. In connection with this, Gene H. Bell-Villada makes a significant observation regarding *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

[The novel's] appeal is to all ideologies: leftists like its dealing with social struggles and its portrait of imperialism; conservatives are heartened by the corruption and/or failure of those struggles and with the sustaining role of the family; nihilists and quietists find their pessimism reconfirmed; and apolitical hedonists find solace in all the sex and swashbuckling. (93)

To expand upon Bell-Villada's insight: the novel ideologically having "something for everyone" ultimately means "nothing for anyone" in terms of truly having one's ideological stance confirmed. This makes *One Hundred Years of Solitude* much more sophisticated and nuanced than it might otherwise have been.

Whatever ideological fervor Aureliano may have possessed at the start of his military adventures, he grows cynical and pessimistic as time goes on, as evinced by this exchange with his comrade Colonel Gerineldo Márquez:

"Tell me something, old friend: why are you fighting?"

"What other reason could there be?" Colonel Gerineldo Márquez answered. "For the great Liberal party."

"You're lucky because you know why," he answered. "As far as I'm concerned, I've come to realize only just now that I'm fighting because of pride."

"That's bad," Colonel Gerineldo Márquez said.

Colonel Aureliano Buendía was amused at his alarm. "Naturally," he said. "But in any case, it's better than not knowing why you're fighting." He looked him in the eyes and added with a smile:

"Or fighting, like you, for something that doesn't have any meaning for anyone." (139)

This does not necessarily mean that Aureliano has become a political nihilist. Rather he sees that whatever potential good there is in human society, this good cannot be achieved by either the Liberal or Conservative parties, even if Aureliano's sympathies are with Liberal ideology. The most telling display of this loss of faith is when Aureliano, in his capacity as commander of the Liberal forces, comes to an accommodation with the enemy through six

Liberal Party lawyers who have come to Macondo. The terms they propose result in a Liberal Party platform that is little different from the Conservative Party's:

They asked first that he renounce the revision of property titles in order to get back the support of the Liberal landowners. They asked, secondly, that he renounce the fight against clerical influence in order to obtain the support of the Catholic masses. They asked, finally, that he renounce the aim of equal rights for natural and illegitimate children in order to preserve the integrity of the home.

"That means," Colonel Aureliano Buendía said, smiling when the reading was over, "that all we're fighting for is power."...

Still smiling, he took the documents the delegates gave him and made ready to sign them.

"Since that's the way it is," he concluded, "we have no objection to accepting." (172-173)

Aureliano, seeing the farcical parody of social reform that the Liberal Party has become, signals his contempt for it by not mincing words with the lawyers, even as he gives up on any chance for a truly beneficent revolution and accedes to their requests. He has come to see political power as ultimately an end in itself. Later, as he leads his troops to suppress resistance to the armistice among the Liberal forces, his motivation is far removed from politics, or rather is anti-political:

He was never a greater soldier than at that time. The certainty that he was finally fighting for his own liberation and not for abstract ideals, for slogans that politicians could twist left and right according to the circumstances, filled him with an ardent enthusiasm. (174-175)

Aureliano's disillusionment, then, makes him eager to completely detach himself from the political arena, to become in effect an apolitical figure. The corollary to this is that power per se and its abuse, rather than any "ism," are what primarily infringe on the solitude of Macondo.

### **The Abuse of Power across the Political Spectrum**

The political goals of the Liberal Party are described in scathing terms by the government-appointed magistrate of Macondo, Don Apolinar Moscote, to the young Aureliano Buendía (who later leads the rebellion against the landowner-supported Conservative government):

The Liberals, he said, were Freemasons, bad people, wanting to hang priests, to institute civil marriage and divorce, to recognize the rights of illegitimate children as equal to those of legitimate ones, and to cut the country up into a federal system that would take power away from the supreme authority. The Conservatives, on the other hand, who had received their power directly from God, proposed the establishment of public order and family morality. They were the defenders of the faith of Christ, of the principle of authority... (98)

As the book was written in an age when civil marriage and the rights of "illegitimate" children had come to be taken for granted in much of the world, this passage can easily be seen

as a criticism of the ideology Moscote promotes. García Márquez seeks to damn the devil with his own words, as the magistrate's speech will seem to many modern readers ludicrous and hypocritically immoral. Moscote's stuffing of the ballot boxes as he supervises an election in Macondo (99) completes the picture of a corrupt regime that only pays lip service to democracy.

Yet the depiction of Liberal Party characters is far from pristine. When Aureliano, angry at the injustice of the Conservatives' election-tampering, speaks with Dr. Noguera, a secret federalist agitator hiding out in Macondo, he is horrified at the latter's intention to initiate mass assassinations of not only all Conservative officials but of their entire families as well, including Moscote, his wife, and six daughters:

“You're no Liberal or anything else,” Aureliano told him without getting excited. “You're nothing but a butcher.” (102)

When Colonel Aureliano Buendía takes on the mantle of revolutionary leader, he does so with scruples, guaranteeing the safety of Moscote and his family (not least because of his marriage to Moscote's daughter Remedios). But while Aureliano is off to war his nephew Arcadio assumes authority over Macondo and in the name of the Liberal Party becomes a murderous tinpot dictator. Exercising power arbitrarily to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, he prohibits religious services, orders the execution of a man who mocks him, and imprisons those who protest his actions (107–108). As his megalomania increases, only the intervention of Aureliano's mother Úrsula, matriarch of the village, saves Macondo from more of Arcadio's ravages.

While Úrsula is the most vocal opponent of such corruption, the character who tries to prevent this process from the beginning is her husband, José Arcadio Buendía, founder and patriarch of Macondo and father of Colonel Aureliano Buendía. When Don Apolinar Moscote first arrives and declares himself to be Macondo's government-appointed magistrate, his first official act is to order all residents to paint their houses blue in celebration of the country's Independence Day. José Arcadio Buendía calmly confronts the magistrate:

Facing Don Apolinar Moscote, still without raising his voice, he gave a detailed account of how they had founded the village, of how they had distributed the land, opened the roads, and introduced the improvements that necessity required without having bothered the government and without anyone having bothered them. “We are so peaceful that none of us has died even of a natural death,” he said. “You can see that we still don't have any cemetery.” No one was upset that the government had not helped them. On the contrary, they were happy that up until then it had let them grow in peace, and he hoped that it would continue leaving them that way, because they had not founded a town so that the first upstart who came along would tell them what to do... (57–58)

A significant element of this statement is that while it extols the virtues of what essentially begins as an idyllic, socialist utopia, the society in question — Macondo — exists on an

exceedingly small, localized scale. Once Macondo becomes embroiled in national politics (i.e. “left” versus “right”), events such as the petty and murderous tyranny of Aureliano’s nephew Arcadio and the massacre of the striking workers eventually arise. José Arcadio Buendía’s assertion that Macondo does not and has never needed anything from the government stands in sharp contrast to the common perception of socialism as entailing a slavish dependence on government handouts.

José Arcadio Buendía grudgingly tolerates Don Apolinar Moscote’s presence, but the latter’s authority is tentative and conditional upon the alliances he builds with the Buendía family. This initial confrontation between the two men is a crucial point in the novel, as it is the beginning of Macondo’s gradual loss of isolation and its corresponding difficulties: the beginning of the end of Macondo’s utopian peace, an end characterized by political conflict in which there are ultimately no ideologically-based “good guys and bad guys.”

### **Úrsula Buendía’s Apolitical Activism**

Aureliano’s mother Úrsula, who exhibits little interest in anything political, simply wishes to have a quiet family life. A devoutly religious woman, she expresses no views remotely resembling the Conservative insistence on a God-given right to rule the country or the denial of legal rights to children born out of wedlock. Nor does she take any explicitly pro-Liberal Party stance, despite her son’s position as leader of the revolution. However, through a deep sense of moral conviction and sheer force of will, she uncompromisingly intervenes upon seeing extreme abuses of power.

Only when Úrsula severely whips her grandson Arcadio as he is about to have Moscote executed (for having criticized Arcadio’s despotism) do things in Macondo go back to normal, with Úrsula in charge. It is thus Úrsula, an apolitical force, who ends the tyrannical hold Arcadio has had over the village. Similarly, Úrsula plays a significant role in Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s decision to rescind his order to execute fellow revolutionary Gerineldo Márquez for high treason (which in this case meant protesting Aureliano’s coming to an accommodation with the Conservative regime) (173). She also fruitlessly goes to great lengths to prevent Aureliano’s execution of Conservative military commander General José Raquel Moncada (who had spent a period in control of Macondo), pleading that he was a good man who had given Macondo the best government it had ever had (162).

It is significant that all three of the above interventions are to prevent executions, the planned and calculated destruction of human life for specifically political rationales. In the absence of such situations, Úrsula focuses her attention on household duties and on caring for her family. Úrsula, then, represents a benevolent, apolitical power that lies dormant except in extreme situations. She is in this sense the conscience of the Buendía family and of Macondo, personifying an unimpeachable sense of right and wrong that both eschews and transcends political considerations.

## Conclusion

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, no political ideology is depicted as ubiquitously keeping the moral high ground to the exclusion of all other factors. If such were the case, the efforts of one side or the other would be relatively benevolent and utopian in nature rather than the mixture of idealism and corruption seen in the novel. The warm personal relationship between Colonel Aureliano Buendía and Don Apolinar Moscote, and the connection of the two men through marriage further defy the separation of good and evil in such simplistic and stark terms.

Positive aspects of both socialism and capitalism are depicted in the story, but on a small, localized scale. In the early days of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, Úrsula's husband and patriarch of the village, "set up the placement of the houses in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort, and he had lined up the streets with such good sense that no house got more sun than another during the hot time of day...It was a truly happy village..." (9). This depiction of benign local collectivism is in contrast to Úrsula's lucrative private business of candy animals, bread, and pastries undertaken after Macondo has grown into a busy town (55). It is a decidedly capitalist enterprise, albeit on a small scale. Rather than either condemnation or praise of socialism or capitalism per se, we can see that each way of life becomes less benevolent or less tenable as more arbitrary power becomes involved. This trend increases as Macondo becomes less and less isolated. There is an absence of any clear-cut delineation between "good" and "bad" systems depicted in certain dystopian tales such as Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (socialist) and Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (capitalist).

This is partly reflected in García Márquez's stated views on the language of politics in a *New York Times Book Review* interview conducted in 1988:

I really detest political-speak. Words like "the people," for example, have lost their meaning. We have to fight against fossilized language. Not only in the case of the Marxists, who have petrified the language most, but the liberals too. "Democracy" is another such word. The Soviets say they're democratic; the Americans say they're democratic; El Salvador does, and Mexico too. Everyone who can organize an election says he's democratic. "Independence" is another one. These are words that have come to mean very little. They're disconnected; they don't describe the reality they represent.

García Márquez's point that anyone can claim the title "democratic" calls to mind the ballot box-stuffing of Don Apolinar Moscote and the tyrannical behavior of Úrsula's grandson Arcadio, both done ostensibly in the name of democracy. Such a view is perhaps most directly reflected in Aureliano's above-mentioned certainty, as he strives to end the civil war, that he is "finally fighting for his own liberation and not for abstract ideals, for slogans that politicians could twist left and right according to the circumstances" (174-175).

The depiction of political action in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is but one thread in a rich literary tapestry of the human experience. As for this element of the novel, even the most isolated community in a modernizing world must eventually deal with national politics, and this political dimension is a key aspect of Macondo's gradual emergence from the solitude of the title. Neither benevolence nor cruelty are depicted as the unique province of any single ideology or ideologue; this element, rather than acting as a vehicle for political advocacy, depicts political action to illustrate the nature of power relationships and the abuse of power.

#### Notes

- 1 To be clear, there is no assertion made herein that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is commonly viewed as a pro-socialist novel. Rather, its subject matter could easily have been used for such a purpose, yet Márquez chose not to. As comparisons, one might consider examples from dystopian fiction: Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908) carries an explicitly pro-socialist message, while Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) serves to convey the author's anti-collectivist / pro-capitalist views. The most iconic of dystopian novels, George Orwell's *1984* (1949), is more nuanced in that while Orwell was sympathetic to socialism and served with anti-fascist military forces in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the hyper-oppressive totalitarian government of *1984* is an ostensibly socialist body; inferably Orwell wishes not to debunk socialism per se, but to warn the reader of what he believes socialism can morph into. As O'Brien, the novel's villain, freely admits to protagonist Winston Smith, "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake...The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives...Power is not a means; it is an end" (200). *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, while vastly different from *1984* in most respects (and certainly not a political dystopian work), is similar in that its depiction of the abuse of power and the betrayal of ideals is not asserted as the distinctive province of a particular system or ideology.
- 2 One of the characters who might be considered more disinterested in politics than Úrsula is her great-granddaughter Remedios the Beauty, who lives as the proverbial child of nature and eventually disappears into the heavens during a miraculous levitation, one of a number of supernatural occurrences in the novel (242-243).
- 3 While the novel's setting is clearly South America, the name of the country in which the village of Macondo exists is never mentioned. It seems safe to assume, however, that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* takes place in Colombia, García Márquez's country of birth. This is evinced by certain historical parallels with events such as the violent conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties (in particular that of their real-life counterparts in the Thousand Days' War of 1899-1902) and the killing by soldiers of striking banana plantation workers (309-319), apparently based upon a similar incident in Ciénaga, Colombia in 1928 (see note number 5). As for Macondo, it is commonly believed to have been based on García Márquez's home town of Aractaca, Colombia (which in 2006 had a failed referendum on changing its name to Macondo). However, Santiago Villaveces-Izquierdo asserts that Macondo is "a powerful metaphor for what has become of Colombia today" (7). Villaveces-Izquierdo cites from the novel a mysterious amnesia that temporarily afflicts the entire village (Chapter 3) as a parallel to the real-life state of Colombia which "opts to forget" actions such as the forced displacement and marginalization of indigenous peoples and other minorities (7).
- 4 It could be postulated that the lack of any specific ideological terms in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (other than the rather wide-ranging categories of "liberal" and "conservative") support the view that

- while political conflict plays a major role in the novel, the *effects* of ideological fervor (rather than the ideologies *themselves*) form the major political element of the story.
- 5 Eduardo Posada-Carbó has argued that the apparent real-life inspiration for the banana plantation massacre (309–319), a strike against the United Fruit Company in 1928 in Ciénaga, Colombia that ended with government troops firing on protesters, actually resulted in no more than five deaths (as opposed to the 3,000 dead in the novel). García Márquez, Posada-Carbó asserts, never claimed that the number killed in the novel reflected historical accuracy (395–396).
  - 6 García’s relationship to Castro is explored in detail by authors Ángel Esteban and Stéphanie Panichelli in their 2009 book *Fidel & Gabo*. They strongly criticize Márquez’s failure to publicly criticize Castro’s imprisonment and execution of scores of Cuban dissidents in 2003.
  - 7 This is not to imply that there was actually any such temptation on García Márquez’s part; there is no evidence of such known to this writer.

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