



JOSEPH LÉON HELGUERA: His Life and the History and Teaching of Colombia

Biography: J. León Helguera (1926-2015)

By Gloria Clemencia Perez*

Joseph León Helguera was born in New York in 1926 from a Mexican father and an Austrian mother in a family environment that nurtured his love for books and history. In 1944 he enlisted in the army and was eventually stationed in the Philippines, an experience that helped shape his interest in the study of the Spanish colonies in the Americas. After serving in the military he moved to Mexico to study Hispanic and Hispanic American history at the Mexico City College (today Universidad de las Américas), from which he graduated in 1948. For his graduate studies Helguera attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His doctoral research focused on General Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, who was president of Colombia several times in the 19th century and a very important political figure in the national post-independence period. This work positioned Helguera as one of the leading figures in the study of Colombian history in the U.S. In 1958 he was hired by North Carolina State University and in 1962 he joined Vanderbilt University as an Associate Professor at the History Department, where he worked until his retirement in 1991. In addition to his seminal work on Mosquera, Helguera published hundreds of articles and essays on Colombian and Latin American history. He was a member of the historical academies of Perú, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela and received several awards during his career, among those the Order Andrés Bello for his work on Venezuelan history. Upon his arrival in Colombia for his doctoral research in 1950, Helguera began to

collect a books, newspapers, pamphlets, and personal documents of important national figures. He donated thousands to the Vanderbilt Libraries, of these forming the books of the Helguera Collection of *Colombiana*. Vanderbilt acquired an additional 9,000 documents from Helguera to expand the collection, which today is one of the largest and best collections of Colombian documents in the United States and attracts scholars from North and Latin America alike. His commitment to building the collection kept Helguera working for more than two decades after. This great collection and his published work make up a rich legacy that Helguera left to scholars of Latin America. He died in Nashville, Tennessee in 2015.

Interview

Interview conducted by Michael LaRosa† with emeritus professor of history at Vanderbilt University, J. León Helguera, in Nashville on December 2nd, 1995

His Life

Can we talk a bit about how you came to Colombia, about your personal history and your academic training?

My father comes from a group of people that in Mexico we call *mochos salteños*. This is a group of people particular to a region in the Lagos de Moreno, Aguas Calientes, León, and Tenochtitlán, who, after colonizing this area dedicated themselves to reproducing an excess of people who then became workers or farm administrators or simply farmers, and in general were more Anglo-Saxon. The place is called

†Originally published in Michael LaRosa and Victoria Peralta, *Los Colombianistas: una completa visión de los investigadores extranjeros que estudian a Colombia* (Bogotá, 1997)

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Los Altos and all the people there are related by blood to each other, but that's another story. My father, of course, first intended to study for the priesthood, but he didn't like it and was kicked out of the San Luis seminary. Afterwards, he went to the military academy in the City of Mexico in Chapultepec. With the onset of the revolution, he was mobilized as an officer under the command of General Díaz and General Huerta; unfortunately, he ended up on the losing side after many adventures, including a memorable capture by Emiliano Zapata, almost receiving a bullet from Pancho Villa, and going many times to the border where he was rejected by the people, of course. Finally, he managed to cross the border and joined his brother in Trenton, New Jersey. After spending some years in Trenton, the Helguera brothers moved to New York, where my uncle and namesake, the younger of the two, enrolled in the New York Academy of Arts where my mother was also studying. She is of Austrian ancestry. Well, my parents met and my father learned to speak German and my mother Spanish. I was born in New York one year after they got married.

We always had strange guests in the house, because my father was fascinated by languages. He loved music, which means that I had the good fortune to have a very cosmopolitan upbringing. My father's business became bankrupt, and during the Second World War he became an export manager in Mexico City. From there they sent me to a republican school in Spain and then to a Mexican school, both private schools, and finally I ended up in a secondary school in the United States, with a colorful crowd including refugees from Hitler's Europe. It was a very interesting and cosmopolitan secondary school, very "*sui generis*." I made good friends, ventured into amateur archaeology, ruining the work of centuries because I neither realized what was being excavated nor how I was destroying the sites in and around the Mexico valley. The war, of course, went on and on, and my father decided I should enroll myself as a volunteer in

the United States armed forces. We were in a bad economic situation, and my father had to sell the priceless antiques that he had kept over all these years following the revolution. And I was the proud owner of 90 US dollars and a one-way ticket to New York, where I joined the military forces and traveled, curiously enough, to the Philippines, another Spanish colony.

At the beginning of 1947 I returned to Mexico, and I enrolled at what is now the University of Mexico City. There I studied Latin American and Spanish history under great teachers, exiles from the Franco regime. I graduated and my uncles decided that I should again join my parents in New York. So, I returned to the United States and submitted an application to Columbia University, but because there were no openings until the following year, I applied to Chapel Hill in the fall and was permitted to enroll in the History Department as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina as of March, 1949. I chose Colombia because I only had that option, since I was forbidden from my true object of interest, the history of Mexico, and from my second alternative, the history of Spain. Therefore, I ended up in Colombia, and there I married. I obtained my masters, took classes, and finally passed my preliminary exams- barely- but with good showing in European history.

I received a scholarship from the Doherty Foundation to travel to Colombia, where I would study the first period of rule of General Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera (1845-1849). In Colombia, of course, in the year 1953, I followed in the steps of a notable colleague and great friend, David Bushnell. In reality there was no custom of accepting international graduate students; neither from around the world nor within the country. Everyone was a lawyer or a doctor or a priest. In this sense it was still a very colonial society. The clergy, especially foreign clergy, had an enormous amount of power. At 26, I became friends with Don Horacio Rodríguez Plata, who was a

fantastic man. He was very young, full of life and *chispa*, and even though he didn't sympathize with North Americans (in any case he forgave me for being from the United States) he convinced himself that I was more Mexican. It was very useful to have a dual nationality... I also made friends with the ambassador of Mexico in Colombia. I made friends with people from the Spanish and Mexican embassies, and even met some people from the North American embassy, such as Willard F. Barber, who put his body and soul into Colombia.

I worked mainly in the National Archives, but also in the historical archive of the Academy and in the National Library, thanks to the recommendation of Doctor Bushnell. After some years of hunger, I finished my dissertation and was hired by the State University of North Carolina, which was fascinating to me. I graduated in 1958. I stayed at this university for four more years, teaching engineering and architecture students, when I received a job offer from Vanderbilt University in 1963. Intent on making Latin America and Spain as areas of study in the university, I taught Mexican history, Central and South American history, as well as Spanish history. All of these were courses that I started. I inherited some graduate students from another professor, who continued to work on their theses.

The History and Teaching of Colombia

When you arrived to Bogotá for the first time in 1953, did you know that you wanted to study Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera? How did you arrive at this idea?

Well, that's not very complicated. I read a very bad essay about Colombian dictators written by Fred Rippy. I was outraged by his characterization of Mosquera. I felt that that image could be corrected if there was documented evidence; Rippy, after all, only used secondary sources for his description of Mosquera, which was very hostile, for sure.

Mosquera was a tyrannical man, and difficult to deal with, and bloodthirsty with his enemies. Therefore I thought that I could go further with Mosquera. His government was an extremely important four-year period for the country, as it proved that they [Colombians] could govern themselves with relative success. I was interested in Mosquera because of his family background: his family, his brothers, his father and his uncle, they had been very important... in the same way I was interested in the family and its relationship with Mosquera. The Arroyos, the Arboledas, and the Valencias of Popayán dominated the south of Colombia in the 18th century. In fact they continued to dominate until the mid-19th century.

In 1993, David Bushnell wrote that "Colombia is the least studied and thus least understood of the main countries of Latin America." Do you agree with this observation?

Definitely yes. In the first place it's a difficult country to study. Until recently one had to go to Bogotá in order to do anything, because there were all the newspapers, and the access to the information sources was complicated. It takes time to study Colombia in depth... you must know people, you must create networks. Colombians are not very open about their sources, therefore, you have to study a lot. Nevertheless, it is paradoxical that among all the nations of Latin America Colombia is the most prolific in literary production, about which there is ample research and publication; but it's not that easy. I think that the historiography of Colombia is weak: there is not yet a good biographical dictionary on Colombia, we are still missing a good central bibliography on the history of Colombia... one can't work without these instruments, and we don't have them. I think that, now, thanks to the efforts of Jaime Jaramillo in Bogotá and the efforts of the Universidad del Valle, which started with money from the Rockefeller Foundation (although they may not like this reminder), the body of experienced historians that we have in Colombia is impressive,

especially over the last 15 years. This is also true of the group that studies General Santander. But there is still a lot to be written and we have to separate the history to be written from politics, and this is something that will be hard for Colombians to do.

When you went to Colombia for the first time in 1953, did you go immediately to the National Archive?

No. First, I went to the cultural official at the American Embassy, as I had been directed. He didn't know anything. But he had a Colombian assistant, who had an assistant who ended up being the nephew of Luis Martínez Delgado, an important Colombian historian and vice-president of the Academy of History, and who was married to a descendent of General Mosquera. Through Helena Delgado Mosquera I was introduced to Don Horacio Rodríguez Plata. Thanks to his connection to the director of the National Archives I was able to begin my work there. Later Guillermo Hernández de Alba, director of the National Library, offered me his services and resources. This brought me to the Archives of Congress, where I gained entry, at a time when it was not completely open to the public. I was there for 13 or 14 months. I couldn't go to the archives of General Mosquera, which were still under lock and key in Popayán.

Please mention some of the areas in which you would like to see more research about Colombia...either by Colombians or foreigners...

It seems to me that within the historiography of Colombia – that still doesn't have the basic research tools – one could work more on the topic of military conscription. What happened, for example, with the great number of artisans in the region of Bogotá and Boyacá, which by the decade of 1890 had disappeared? Where did they go? At the beginning of the 20th century, where did the officials of the Colombian armed forces come

from? I have a gut feeling that those were the children of the artisans. Much more must be done with the documents in the Archives of Congress, with the complete and excellent reports of the congressional session. After 1840 these were no longer published; they had to stop doing so because they were becoming so eloquent that they couldn't pay for the paper! These documents are indicators of key issues hitting a nerve in society. We don't have much on slaves or Afro-Colombians, but there is information about riots, demands, etc.

It bothers me that Colombians are such experts in Marxist-Leninist historiography but know hardly anything about Colombia. I think that Colombians must be more positive about their past and reconstruct events and analyze them in a way that makes sense. When I say "that makes sense," I mean to say not constrained by implicit political goals. One must start at the beginning: the beginning lies with ancient documents, and one has to go through mountains of these. In this way one can learn something.

Can you tell us something about your students, who you have trained as professional historians?

The tragedy of the majority of my students is that they were finishing their research just at the moment in which the jobs began to disappear...at the end of the 60s and early 70s. My first doctoral student, John William Kitchens, who is now a very successful historian of the United States Armed Forces, worked on the diplomatic history of Colombian-Chilean relations. He was not permitted to use the documents of the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Relations; they allowed some [people] to use the documents but not others, and I think that this type of preferential treatment should end. Kitchens gained access to the Chilean foreign archives and finished his dissertation at the beginning of 1969. His colleague, Johanna Rayfield worked on Daniel O'Leary; I also supervised a

dissertation that dealt with Cisneros, a Cuban-born, railroad mastermind, who was key in communications and capitalism in Colombia in the west and coastal regions. James Harold Neal, who worked on the railroads and roads of Cali-Buenaventura, refers a lot to General Mosquera and to his archive. In the same way there is Russ Davidson, who wrote an important dissertation about patronage in Colombia, a colonial economic institution that ended in 1863. This work should be published. His colleague, Glen Curry, studied *los resguardos*, this means, the Indigenous Reserves of Cundinamarca, from 1800 to 1863. There are others: Harold Hines did his research on José María Samper. His dissertation was very well prepared, maybe the most perfect dissertation in terms of language that I ever read. He pursued popular history. Another interesting dissertation, that I think has been forgotten, is that of Terrance Horgan, on the topic of the Liberal Party and the presidency of Olaya Herrera, for which he used information from the personal documents of Olaya. This too deserves to be published.

How do you see the evolution of the profession of history over the time you have worked as a Colombianist?

Of course, it has grown enormously. We have had to face budget cuts and the profession has suffered. Unfortunately, there is a whole generation of people who have not been able to continue in the academy, as the majority of my students have discovered. It seems to me very sad that the profession depends so much on both public funding and what's hot to the public. The United States has an unfortunate legacy of never being sure of what they are, and of course they are so confused, with so many different people, with the result that we are always trying to rediscover ourselves. Professionally, this has harmful implications. The recent history of Latin America, in my opinion, is going to suffer, unless more attention is paid to Spanish history. To our detriment, we have not taken into holistic

account the Iberian Peninsula. This is very serious; no university is creating doctoral programs on Spain. Nineteenth and early 20th century Spain is very important, although Latin Americans don't like this idea. Countries like Cuba or Chile greatly reflect Spanish events. And the historiography of Spain has been able to free itself from the legacy of Franco...and therefore, there is a lot to do.

Are you optimistic about research on Colombia, in this country or elsewhere?

Yes, of course. There are a lot of people studying Colombia. I just regret being born so early. I think that the younger generation will benefit from the work that is currently being done. The study of the history of Colombia is a young discipline; we are still in the first generation of Jaramillo's people, and very few of them have had time to be productive. We need another generation, with more people. We need basic monographs; if we don't have a foundation of monographs, there is no history. The history of Colombia is very behind compared to the history of Mexico, because it doesn't have monographs. Mexican history is behind that of Argentina or Chile because those countries have developed a greater number of monographs.

If a student came to ask you advice about what or where to study in Latin America, would you suggest the study of Colombia?

Definitely. I think that once we establish relations with Cuba, I would tell them to study Cuba as well. All that is related to the Cuban church is worth uncovering; this topic is very rich in archives, and no one has delved into them. Unfortunately, we cannot say the same about Colombia, because the riots during the 9th of April (1948) wreaked much havoc. Nevertheless, the archives of Popayán, for the most part, are intact. And I would have no doubts about sending someone to study the church of Gran Cauca, a marvelous topic. We cannot know anything about this society

without understanding the church, and we don't know it yet. Imagine, they trashed some of the most ancient parochial archives of Popayán because no one could read them: the script was too much to decipher. Popayán was a very important city. The majority of the parochial archives of the 16th and 17th centuries- indispensable archives- have disappeared. One can find some from the 18th century, but with gaps, and while those of the 19th century are in

good condition by now they're no longer that important.

Further Reading:

- Eakin, Marshall C. "J. León Helguera, Historian of Latin America (1926-2015)." *Perspectives on History*, November 2015. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/j-leon-helguera>.
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- Wibking, Angela. "Born Bibliophile." *Acorn Chronicle* 2013, no. Spring (Spring 2003). <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/jlhelguera/>.