

# Colombian Geography: Tradition and Current Status - up to 2021

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Research and scholarly writing in geography is a well-grounded tradition in Colombia. Nowadays, the country ranks high in the Hispanic American region in the trend of geographic development, but the practice of geography runs back to the very beginnings of the nation in the early sixteenth century. The pre-modern phase of that history has been aptly detailed by Acevedo Latorre (1974). A book entitled *Summa de Geografia* by Fernández de Enciso was the first geographic work prepared in the New World shortly after the Discovery and then published in Spain in 1519.

Since the onset of the colonial period, the Spanish chroniclers set forth in their writings a learned geographical tradition that was continued over the centuries both in the form of studies by individuals and as comprehensive reports by corporate expeditions in which geographic accounts were a substantive ingredient. Of the latter kind were the Fidalgo Expedition (1794-1810), which surveyed and mapped the Caribbean coast for the Crown, and simultaneously the Botanical Expedition, led by the well-known Spanish botanist José Celestino Mutis. Mutis and his Creole associates carried out extensive research on vegetation and other natural resources of New Granada, as Colombia was named under Spanish rule. Later on, during the republican period, such a form of government-sponsored scientific research was replicated in the mid-nineteenth century's Corographic Commission. This highly productive expedition — reminding the Great Surveys of the American Far West that took place a little later in the same century — was led

by the Italian-born geographer Agostino Codazzi, whose death in the field in 1859 put an end to the project. The work of Codazzi was an invaluable accomplishment according to the scientific standards of his time and provided the government of the new nation with most necessary first-hand data and maps of the territory (Caballero 1994).

The contributions of individuals to the development of the discipline of geography have been limited but honorable. Two of them, Francisco José de Caldas (1768-1816) and Francisco Javier Vergara y Velasco (1860-1914), were highly reputed in the early days of geography in Colombia. Caldas, a self-educated geographer of the cosmographic school of the late eighteenth century, is generally regarded as the Colombian scholar (“el Sabio”) par excellence. A contemporary of Alexander von Humboldt, with whom he became acquainted in Quito in 1801, Caldas has been named the “father” of Colombian geography. Nonetheless, he did not attempt to build a school of geography as other “fathers” of the discipline have done in other countries (e.g., Vidal de la Blache in France, Davis in the USA, Deffontaines in Brazil, etc.). In 1816 the Spanish army crashed the first Republic that Caldas had helped to organize and he was shot by a royalist squad in Bogotá at the age of 48. He had been associated with Mutis in the Botanical Expedition and conducted extensive research in climatology, biogeography, geodesy and mapping (cf., for example, Schumacher 1986).

Some seventy-five years later, at the close of the nineteenth century, another geographer caught the attention of the Colombian intellectual community: Vergara y Velasco (1974). Born in Popayán as Caldas was, Vergara pursued a successful military career but he was also very dedicated to studies in history and geography. The use of raw data, reports and maps of the Corographic Commission, together with those obtained through his own field research, allowed him to publish in 1892 his *Nueva Geografía de Colombia*. This was a remarkable book

in which the country's geography was exhaustibly described through a "new geography" approach of natural regions.

### ***Modern Geography***

The roots of modern geography in Colombia are to be found in developments that took place in the 1930s, with the founding by President Alfonso López Pumarejo of the *Instituto Geográfico Militar* (1935) — later on named *Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi* (IGAC) — and the *Normal Superior de Colombia* (1937) —nowadays known as *Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia* (UPTC). As Rucinke (1991: 35) puts it,

If modernization in geography is associated with that process that includes professional organization, advanced training of geographers, and active participation in, and awareness of, current paradigms and trends of the discipline in the world, then Colombia shares with Venezuela, Mexico, [Costa Rica] and Chile a healthy awakening that took place during the past twenty or thirty years. A remarkable parallelism occurs in the history of geography in these countries. That history can be typified by the early foundation of a geographic academy or society and a geographic or cartographic institute, both public. Then college departments of social science with strong pedagogic commitments were established to prepare high school teachers in history and geography. During such an early stage — in which several Latin American countries still remain — every geography post is staffed with non-geographers, many of them retired military officers. Eventually, the take-off stage comes through university innovation prompted by enlightened, self-educated native geographers, or by a foreign scholar (such as Pierre Deffontaines in Brazil), or by native professionals who became geographers through graduate training overseas.

The IGAC is a technical agency created to take care of such governmental functions as topographic and geodetic surveying, photogrammetric engineering, mapping, cadastral and soil surveying, and geographic research at large. After more than six decades of continuous operation, IGAC has evolved into a solid, capable and well-equipped organization. Lately, however, under the pretext of administrative modernization, this Instituto has been plagued by bureaucratic interference, including an unnecessary and impractical merging with the census and statistical agency, and budget cuts that drastically reduce its operative capacity.

On the other hand, the UPTC has been the leading university in educational programs. When first functioning as the Higher Normal School in Bogotá in the late 30s, it became the first academic center in which geography courses were taught at the college level. Several social sciences were combined in a four-year licentiate degree program with yearly courses on physical geography, cartography, human and economic geography, and world and Colombian regional courses. In 1952, the Normal School was relocated at Tunja, some 100 miles north of Bogotá, later to be re-named as Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). A school of education still exists in the multidisciplinary UPTC, though no longer alone in the country — over twenty such schools now crowd the nation's university system, both public and private. And as far as the geography part of the social studies program is concerned, all of them follow the pattern set forth by the Normal School over sixty years ago (Rucinke 1989).

By and large, individuals getting licentiate degrees in education with emphasis in the social sciences are not geographers *stricto sensu*. The same is true of graduates in geographic and cadastral engineering. But a number of persons of either these or other academic extraction have become competent geographers through advanced training both locally and overseas.

Since the mid-1960s, the UPTC and the IGAC joined efforts to promote geography as a scientific and academic discipline in Colombia. All that process started in Tunja in 1967 when the UPTC served as the host institution for a small gathering of geographers and geography-supporters, conveyed there by the late Dieter Brunnschweiler, a Fulbright visiting scholar from Michigan State University, and Hector F. Rucinke, his Colombian liaison at Tunja. At that time, Rucinke had done part of the course work towards a Master's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under professors William M. Denevan, Henry Sterling and Karl Butzer. The historical

outcome of the meeting at Tunja was the foundation of the Association of Colombian Geographers, ACOGE for short.

For over five decades, ACOGE has provided apt leadership to build a solid geographic profession and to orient geography as a modern scientific discipline. Every two years this organization has sponsored the Colombian Geographic Convention, one of them (1977) international in scope and attendance, held in conjunction with a meeting of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG). To pursue its educational goals, ACOGE was able to secure the cooperation of the US Fulbright Commission in the early 70s. With this support, as well as the UPTC's and IGAC's, four graduate summer seminars were taught by several American geographers led by C.W. Minkel, then a Michigan State University professor and dean of the Graduate School. These seminars proved to be a significant stimulus for about twenty would-be geographers who in the following years became leaders of the discipline in all research and academic centers related to geography. Minkel helped two of those students all the way through the Ph.D. (H.F. Rucinke and Luis Aragón, the first Colombians ever to earn that degree in 1977 and 1978, respectively).

Again, the UPTC and IGAC joined efforts in 1983 to carry out a formal Master's degree program in Bogotá. During the first 10 years of operation under the chairmanship of Dr. H.F. Rucinke the project was staffed with a selected number of geographers (Dr. Gustavo Montañez, Dr. Antonio Flórez, Dr. Welf Selke, Dr. Verena Meier, Dr. Darío Galindo, Dr. Catherine Martinez, Dr. Gloria Umaña de Gauthier, Dr. Carlos Munar, and a few others holding at least a Master's degree: Prof. Ovidio R. Toro, Prof. Ricardo Martínez, and Prof. Fernando Casas). The program was designed to meet all scientific and academic standards as those current in similar ventures in the developed world. It originally took two years of full-time study plus the approval of comprehensive examinations and the writing and defense of a thesis. A score of Colombian geographers who

have graduated in the UPTC-IGAC program now lead the way in all universities offering career options in the field.

During the 90s the development of Colombian geography was furthered through the formal organization of academic departments to provide university-wide services and to offer degree options at the B.Sc. level. In 1992 the National University at Bogotá began its four-year geography degree program staffed with two PhDs and four Master's. Currently, this program has a faculty of ten geographers, and several professionals have already been graduated there. Subsequently, other undergraduate programs have been established in other places: in the University of Nariño, at Pasto, southwestern Colombia; then in the nearby University of Cauca at Popayán, at the University of Córdoba, Montería, and at the University of Valle at Cali. In 2005 a Master's degree program designed by Dr. H.F. Rucinque started operation at Córdoba in close association with *GeoCaribe*, a research institute created in that university to deal with geographic and environmental problems of the Caribbean realm.

Since the 90s the National Pedagogic University at Bogotá established a graduate option at the M.A. level in geographical education. Regrettably, such valuable program is now defunct. Likewise, in this same city the undergraduate program in geographical engineering of the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano came to an end. Such project had been in operation since the early 50s and was one of the three founding careers of a college that was established as a private concern to revive the ideals and deeds of the 1850-59 Corographic Commission. At the close of the century, a number of interested geographic engineers succeeded in having their school resurrected at the Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas (UDCA), a new private college sited in the Colombian capital. Another undergraduate program started in 2005 at the Universidad Externado de Colombia, being this the second instance in which geography is offered at private colleges in the country.

On the other hand, during the last decade of the twentieth century, geography was enriched through the passing of a bill in Congress by means of which Colombian geographers were granted legal career recognition. The same law established a *Colegio Profesional de Geógrafos*, a sort of professional council whose main function is to issue the professional ID cards to individuals who meet legal requirements for such recognition. Likewise, the law established the *Geographer's Day* (the last Friday of October), and created the *Order of Caldas* as the highest academic distinction to be conferred upon geographers by the Colombian President.

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