

## *The Colombian Soul*

Nobel Prize-winning novelist Gabriel García Márquez, writing in *Américas* (Dec. 1997), limns the character of his fellow Colombians.

*Our banner is excess. Excess in everything: in good and evil, in love and hate, in the jubilation of victory and the bitterness of defeat. We are as passionate when we destroy idols as when we create them.*

*We are intuitive people, immediate and spontaneous autodidacts, and pitiless workers, but the mere idea of easy money drives us wild. In our hearts we harbor equal amounts of political rancor and historical amnesia. In sports a spectacular win or defeat can cost as many lives as a disastrous plane crash. For the same reason we are a sentimental society where action takes precedence over reflection, impulsiveness over reason, human warmth over prudence. We have an almost irrational love of life but kill one another in our passion to live. The perpetrator of the most terrible crimes is betrayed by his sentimentality. In other words, the most heartless Colombian is betrayed by his heart.*

*For we are two countries: one on paper and the other in reality. We are precursors of the sciences in America but still take a medieval view of scientists as hermetic wizards, although few things in daily life are not scientific miracles. Justice and impunity cohabit inside each of us in the most arbitrary way; we are fanatical legalists but carry in our souls a sharp-witted lawyer skilled at sidestepping laws without breaking them, or breaking them without being caught. We adore dogs, carpet the world with roses, are overwhelmed by love of country, but we ignore the disappearance of six animal species each hour of the day and night because of criminal depredations in the rain forest, and have ourselves destroyed beyond recall one of the planet's great rivers. We grow indignant at the nation's negative image abroad but do not dare admit that often the reality is worse. We are capable of the noblest acts and the most despicable ones, of sublime poems and demented murders, of celebratory funerals and deadly debauchery. Not because some of us are good and others evil, but because all of us share in the two extremes. In the worst case—and may God keep us from it—we are capable of anything.*

## *What Price Democracy?*

“Misreading Mexico” by M. Delal Baer, in *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1997), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1779 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Drugs, corruption, and the “perfect dictatorship”—that is the lurid picture of Mexico in the minds of many Americans, observes Baer, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington, D.C. But the happier reality, highlighted by the historic midterm elections there last July, is that Mexico is moving from single-party rule to competitive democracy “in a way that most other developing countries can only dream about—without sudden collapses or charismatic saviors.” The question now, he says, is whether Mexico will also move away from the free-market economic reforms of recent years.

When Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa said in 1990 that Mexico was a “perfect dictatorship,” having all the characteristics of a dictatorship except the appear-

ance of one, his phrase was widely repeated in Mexico. But it was already becoming out of date, Baer says. Change began in earnest “soon after an embarrassing electoral computer ‘crash’ marred the 1988 election” of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, presidential candidate of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). (When early returns showed opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano in the lead, the computerized vote tabulation system providing returns over national TV suddenly went dead. Votes were counted “the old-fashioned way.”) By the 1991 elections, Baer says, the Salinas administration had overhauled the electoral system, taking needed steps such as issuing fraud-proof voter ID cards.

Still, Mexican voters did not deal the PRI

any big defeats until last July. In balloting for seats in the Mexican Congress's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, the PRI won only 39 percent of the popular vote—the lowest level of support in its 68 years of rule—and lost 59 seats. Cárdenas's leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) garnered 26 percent of the popular vote and gained 60 seats, while Cárdenas himself was elected Mexico City's mayor.

Now the question is not whether Mexico can hold free elections, Baer says, but whether the Mexican electorate will tilt left, rejecting the free-market economic reforms of recent years, including the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Mexican Left "bitterly opposed" NAFTA in particular. Is the Mexican Left now reconciled to it? So far, notes Baer, Cárdenas has given only mixed signals.

## *Enslaved by the Past*

"'God Created Me to Be a Slave'" by Elinor Burkett, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 12, 1997), 229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The best testimony to the persistence of slavery in the West African country of Mauritania may be the number of times it has been outlawed. It was banned by the French colonial government in 1905, again in 1961, after independence, by the first government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and yet again in 1980 by presidential proclamation. Even so, reports Burkett, a free-lance writer, in Mauritania's "endless expanses of wind-swept nothingness . . . an estimated 90,000 slaves labor as they have for more than 500 years—serving their masters by tending their herds, bleeding their acacia trees for gum arabic, picking dates, and bearing the next generation of human property."

Though there have been occasional instances of slavery elsewhere in modern times, only in Mauritania, Burkett contends, does widespread, institutionalized slavery continue to exist. The enslaved are blacks who serve the nation's ruling Arab tribes. "Slaves here, descendants of generations of human chattel, receive no salaries, no education," she says. "They cannot marry without permission or plan the futures of their children."

The 1980 emancipation proclamation by President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla freed the slaves without making slave ownership illegal, and specified that owners should be compensated for the loss of their property. In the absence of compensation, masters generally consider the law null and void. Many religious leaders also oppose it as contrary to the Koran. "The state, if it is Islamic, does not have the right to seize my house, my wife or my slave," said El Hassen Ould Benyamine, imam of a mosque in Tayarat. Most

of Mauritania's slaves are unaware of their legal emancipation, Burkett says.

Slavery in Mauritania is not the same as the slavery that once existed in the United States, she notes. Slave markets are unknown. No self-respecting master would resort to selling his slaves, since that would be an admission of economic desperation. In fact, "slaves are so numerous," she says, "that they are routinely 'discharged' to save their owners the expense of feeding them." There is virtually no chance of rebellion. "After 15 or 20 generations, people become totally submissive," observes Boubacar Ould Messoud, founder of SOS-Esclave, the Mauritanian underground railroad.

"God created me to be a slave, just as he created a camel to be a camel," a young runaway named Fatma Mint Mamadou believes. Her mother was an *abd*, a slave, as her mother before her had been. Only when Fatma suffered a particularly severe beating from her master in 1990 did she take off across the desert. In the capital city of Nouakchott (population 700,000), she learned that Mauritania's slaves had been emancipated 10 years earlier.

Fatma "might be a black African, but like all Mauritians raised as slaves, she thinks of herself as an Arab," Burkett writes. "She considers herself part of the tribe and clan of her master. She has no other identity in a society where individualism is anathema, a world where to belong is to be." Fatma and an estimated 300,000 other black Mauritians—most of them abandoned during the decades of drought that have killed off their masters' herds—are now mired in poverty and caught between slavery and freedom.