

# **RÓMULO BETANCOURT**

His Historical Personality and  
the Genesis of Modern Democracy in Venezuela

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## Foreword to the English Edition of *Rómulo histórico*

Although we might imagine that this remarkable book is a work of traditional historical scholarship, it is instead an unusual historical essay on the interrelationship of ideas and action as seen through the political trajectory of an exceptional leader in challenging times. The work reflects the commitment of Venezuela's dean of academic historians, and a *pensador* in the Latin American tradition of academics who participate in public life, to engage in a personal encounter with a fascinating and significant public figure.<sup>1</sup> Germán Carrera Damas remains as his country's most distinguished historian, the creator of a disciplined program of academic history at the Escuela de Historia at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, which has produced a generation of outstanding historians. He is the author of influential historical monographs and syntheses that have reoriented and reframed the interpretation of Venezuela's independence movement and republican history based on a close reading of original documents and a careful application of a historical methodology in accordance with the highest international standards of the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

Carrera Damas has never been one to rest on his laurels, and his long list of monographs, essays, analyses, and reference works, as well as his constant collaborations with international colleagues on various projects, reflect a historian whose gifts of inspiration, insight, and indefatigable research challenge all who engage Latin American history. He inspires us to think more clearly and broadly to enhance our understanding, not only of Venezuela, but of the larger context within which the opportunities and disappointments of the region's people have evolved.

This book is an extended essay, and for the unwary, its title might imply a biographical approximation of a dramatically important Latin American leader.<sup>3</sup> It is not a biography. Instead, it confronts a challenge different from the one before biographers. Carrera Damas is, above all, a historian of ideas in history. He sees the interrelationship of action and ideas as organically connected and he believes that one of the key defining characteristics



of significant historical leaders is their skill in understanding and adapting large-scale ideological and intellectual constructs to the service of particular societies. His search is for the relationship between the major ideological and intellectual concepts of a time and the actions of those who make a difference on the world scene. Rómulo Betancourt is one of those people who made a difference, not only for his native Venezuela, but as an exemplar of what might be possible for other nations in their quest for freedom and democracy within a context of economic prosperity and socioeconomic well-being.

The critical question around which this essay turns is: how did Betancourt take the ideological framework of his time and, within that perspective, confront the realities of his country, modifying, developing, and integrating these ideas into a coherent internal and external persona capable of leading the creation of a modern, democratic, and effective government within an international context fraught with two world wars, a cold war, a catastrophic world financial crisis, and a range of external threats to the invention of this new modality for Venezuela?

In this essay, we discover Betancourt's relationship to ideas and circumstances, trace the evolving nature of his political doctrine from its theoretical formulation through the elaboration of his ideas as a result of his encounter with various local and international realities. This relationship between man, ideas, and reality illustrates the process that produced a doctrine for democratic political success. Within this schematic structure, Carrera Damas's essay tracks the evolution of Betancourt's thought and action, always connecting the two and recognizing that, above all, this historical figure dedicated his life to the acquisition of power for the purpose of creating in Venezuela a democratic government capable of sustaining itself without his presence. Among the many characteristics of the "Historical Rómulo" of the work's Spanish title, it is the cycle of his ideas and actions, constantly adapting to external circumstances while maintaining a key focus on the creation of a democratic Venezuela, that proves endlessly fascinating. This requires the supreme erudition and evaluation found in the essay.

Only after reading this essay, immersing ourselves in a cyclical style that begins a conversation at one point in time only to reconnect back to it at another, layering subtly different shadings to the facts and circumstances of Betancourt's trajectory, can we approach an answer to this key question: What uniquely distinguishes this historical figure from others within his time and place?

Everyone may arrive at a different answer, but one powerful insight emerges. Betancourt knew what he wanted to become (a major figure in the invention of a new and democratically oriented Venezuela), recognized the



need to nurture this aspiration within a strong theoretical and ideological construct that could sustain his ambitions, and came to understand that the power of leadership could only serve his goals if, at the moment his vision triumphed, he could walk away. This would be proof that his long and difficult political trajectory had succeeded because he could leave the result to his successors. Few dynamic, charismatic, creative, self-confident, and above all ambitious leaders find the strength to recognize that, having won the game, they need to leave the field.

In constructing this work on the history of ideas in action, Carrera Damas followed an unusual methodology. Recognizing the exceptionally visible and often controversial place of Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuelan history, he took advantage of the support of the Betancourt Foundation (whose sponsorship provided assistance without influence) to offer a collaborative opportunity for anyone with an interest in the subject to participate in an ongoing discussion of his evolving essay. By posting comprehensive drafts, complete with citations, on the Fundación Rómulo Betancourt website and asking for comments, as well as by participating in more formalized group meetings and discussions of the interpretations of the draft, Carrera Damas could test his analysis, choice of issues, reliance on facts, and success in capturing context against the critiques of a remarkably well-informed constituency. The final website draft after all this conversation is still available, and as we would expect, the published edition closely follows that heavily vetted version. One proof of the efficacy of this procedure has been the remarkable success of the original publication in Spanish, whose printing now exceeds some three thousand copies sold in a time of severe economic hardship for the country.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps an additional impetus to the significance of this essay emerged from the hope of finding inspiration and insight from the Betancourt process that might well be applicable to the dramatic issues of today when Venezuela finds itself overwhelmed by an unprecedented implosion of its overall economic circumstances, a dramatic disintegration of its democratic traditions and institutions, and swirling international competition. The turmoil of this moment has made Venezuela a strategic economic and tactical prize for the ambitions and interests of international competitors. The history of Betancourt's process of ideas and action, oriented relentlessly toward a self-sufficient, autonomous, and prosperous democratic Venezuela, will surely attract the interest of everyone seeking the return of an independent, democratic, and successful Venezuela.

*John V. Lombardi*