

Introductory Essay

I am fully confident that we will form a government. It does not matter how long it takes to achieve power; it is certain that one day it will be in our hands. That will be the time to carry out what today is a world of dreams and desires.

Rómulo Betancourt to Gabriel de Mazo, March 9, 1945, in Betancourt, *Antología política*, vol. 3, pp. 301–302

I am a stubborn believer in the virtuality of democratic ideas, and I am convinced that they will be incarnated in governments born of collective will.

Rómulo Betancourt to Eduardo Santos, August 14, 1955, *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 425

What we say, and to whom we say it, is of interest not because we are so intelligent, but because we offer a real possibility of government, because we are effectively the only ones who will govern in Venezuela, of course.

Rómulo Betancourt to Gonzalo Barrios, December 7, 1955, *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 343

I think the same about your *compadre*. He, in his meditative solitude, is surely thinking about the future. He knows how he should act, what he will do, much more, infinitely more, than the little he did before because of the special conditions in which he then found himself. He prefers that they quote his words, his public expressions, and not his unpublished deeds. And not because he is ashamed of them, but because he will carry them out tomorrow in a bigger way, and appropriately, wants to stay in the shadows. This might not be a “professorial” opinion, but is it not a coincidence that he takes refuge in the past because there is no future?

Rómulo Betancourt to Juan Bosch, December 30, 1955, *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 429

What follows is an ambitious attempt to anticipate the way in which Rómulo Betancourt might be perceived by a Venezuelan in five to ten decades, and the place that the life and work of this figure might occupy in a general history of Venezuela, or extensive history of Venezuela, as it has become fashionable to categorize this kind of historiography. This is said in keeping with the author’s conviction that Betancourt’s is a historical personality whose significance is and will be more and better appreciated by placing it in a long historical context. I am mindful that this luxuriant tree that is Rómulo Betancourt’s historical personality is already planted in the historical mind of the Venezuelan people. It will shed leaves and branches, leaving bare the robust trunk that

allows me to refer to him as the “Father of Modern Democracy in Venezuela,” or at least, “democracy Venezuelan-style.”

I consider one trait to be very expressive of this significant historical personality. In the course of a life of tenacious democratic militancy and fertile ideological creativity, Betancourt summoned the intellectual and spiritual power needed to internalize the thoughts and sacrifices of those who, in the country and in exile in Venezuela and all of Spanish America, sought a path to freedom by fighting against despotism. He persisted in this until he had formulated the doctrinal foundations and the strategic criteria needed to establish the Liberal Democratic Republic in Venezuela, framed in what he defined as the “democratic revolution” or the “evolutionary revolution.”

The decision to approach the historical personality of Rómulo Betancourt in response to the honor represented by this commission from the Rómulo Betancourt Foundation placed me on a historiographical path strewn with challenges. They arose even before I could get under way because I had to face two preliminary questions. The first consisted of clearing away the dense foliage formed by the debate around the political significance and the psychological and intellectual personality of the subject of this study. There was no time in Rómulo Betancourt’s life when he did not provoke enthusiastic or, frequently, adverse reactions.

The second difficulty requires the following long explanation. The task I undertake will consist of an effort to acquire knowledge that should start from a discovery of the spiritual and intellectual personality of Rómulo Betancourt, seen as the basis of his historical trajectory. To accomplish this I must traverse the various levels of his personality that he intentionally cultivated. One corresponds to how Rómulo Betancourt saw himself. This was organically linked to his aspiration and actions as a political leader. Another level corresponds to how he wished to see himself and how he wished to be seen. Still another reflects what he challenged himself to become, adjusting to a model whose definition took him time to develop and which he synthesized in the expression “mastering oneself.” This is an aspiration common to exceptional personalities because of their ambition to achieve great things.

For this he had to go through phases. An early one, which he himself classified as “romantic,” could be called the “Santos Luzardo phase,” paired with a recurrent Garibaldi-style inclination. There then follows a “militant communist phase,” with its aspect of critical creativity. The culmination of this process was the “revolutionary democratic phase” that can be broken down into at least two periods. First, he had to harmonize the vestiges of his militant period with the constraints that arose with the exercise of public power. He was forced to reconcile his conscience as a genuine militant

democrat with the demands of consolidating and defending democracy. This challenge required him to face threats that brought together the musty militarist strongman heritage, still socially ingrained, with the backwash of original authoritarian socialism, cloaked in what soon became known worldwide as “Fidelismo,” this a modality of Leninist-Stalinism adopted as pseudoideological cover by the vulgar Cuban Caribbean dictatorship.

But the study of the historical personality of Rómulo Betancourt also raises a fundamental question of method: should this personality be appreciated within the context of the theater of his actions as he saw them at the time or as we know him today within our historical perspective? Certainly we know more now than he could have known then given the information at his disposal and his ideological conditioning, whether these were expressly assumed or the vestiges that remained active in the thinking that guided his vision. If we take the latter direction, would the assessment of his ideas and actions have to consider present reality, in a detailed manner, while correlating it with the reality he perceived? To be prudent, I will not attempt this, because I would be accused of two methodological vices: that of modernism and the so-called “history if,” which is what comes from engaging in “should have” and “if he had.”

This latter possibility raises a question that is not at all easy to resolve. The fact that Rómulo Betancourt’s intellectual and scientific preparation was autodidactic and his aspirations for a university degree frustrated might have affected the treatment he gave to complex questions of an economic and political nature. Could he have been influenced by the very limited preparation of other outstanding political figures of the time?

Prudence recommends that we keep in mind what Rómulo Betancourt in his frequent statements about his personality and principles seems to have put to the test with the malicious precept that goes: “Tell me who you are, and I will know who you are not. Tell me who you are not, and I will know who you are.” The proof would lie in the calibration of the ethical sense that he forced himself to instill and preserve in his personality, built on the basis of tenacity, will, and lucidity. He assumed wholeheartedly harsh life circumstances and faced the often hostile reactions to his frequently iconoclastic judgments.

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The life circumstances of Rómulo Betancourt, seen in a broad perspective, reveal a succession of moments whose urgency, degree of difficulty, and potential transcendence, exceed those faced by other Venezuelan republican public figures active from 1830 onward. This is said knowing that we might be

disregarding historical circumstances resulting from a very risky comparison. It is worth briefly summarizing these circumstances.

Among the many difficulties facing the assessment of a historical personality, one of the most arduous is correlating the necessarily synthetic nature of historiographical construction with the vital evolution of the person. If we opt for the common-sense solution and correlate the phases or stages of the historical personality of Rómulo Betancourt with the stages of his life cycle, we would incur the risk of contradicting the perspective of continuity. To avoid this risk, would it be enough to fix points of reference, chronological or vital, in the historical activity of the person? The following considerations are meant to overcome this methodological obstacle. The caveat is that each situation is marked by constants that define the historical condition of the personality under study.

His habitual notion of “mastering himself” places Rómulo Betancourt from the outset on precarious footing in terms of his life circumstances and resources. He was compromised by his exile, which in his day was equivalent to being a pariah. We must recognize the coincidence, if not something more organic, between this personal determination and the formative code of the good militant communist. One of the basic precepts according to his own statement consisted of overcoming petit bourgeois sentimentalism.

What I call “ideological formation” initially meant recognizing Rómulo Betancourt’s need to force himself critically onto a tortuous path within an urgent time frame driven by the anxiety for an up-to-date intellectual education. This led him from an elemental state of political consciousness, governed by the antinomy between dictatorship and freedom, to the concept of democracy as the antidote to dictatorship and despotism, as well as the guarantor of freedom. He forged ahead, in spite of being assailed by the seductive calls of Marxist humanism, while rejecting the Leninist-Stalinist perversion of this variant of essential humanism. He consolidated this intellectual attitude corresponding to this moment as a constant in face of the need to capture the significance of the great ideological and political events that marked his historical existence.

The “formulation of a theory of modern democracy in Venezuela or Venezuelan style” represented the highest challenge that the creative daring of Rómulo Betancourt set for himself. This was as much because of the ballast of the Venezuelan sociohistorical past that had to be thrown aside, as the ideological effort to discard the baggage of his basic Marxist ideological conditioning. Above all, it took intellectual courage to propose that the ideological repercussions of this effort should dominate Venezuelan political life, for

sociohistorical reasons, while acknowledging the potential impacts on other domains.

Formulating the strategy, designing the tactics, and creating the social instruments for the deployment and triumph of the liberal democratic, political, and ideological proposition required overcoming the atavistic forces of continuity and rupture to open pathways towards enduring change. For this he and his colleagues had to repeatedly marry traditional methods of access to public power with the modernization of traditional modes of sociopolitical organization. They had, nonetheless, to resort on occasion to traditional repressive procedures to preserve what had been accomplished.

The “design and institutionalization of the Liberal Democratic Republic” meant assuming historical responsibility for stimulating a reformulation of the National Project, laying the sociopolitical foundations that would lead to the liquidation of the Liberal Autocratic Republic, in place since 1830, with the demise of the Republic of Colombia (*Gran Colombia*). The basic and enduring accomplishment of this historical feat, which Rómulo Betancourt personified, signified the emergence of the statesman, represented by the transcendental constitutional revisions of 1947 and 1961.

Rómulo Betancourt’s “formulation of the guiding doctrine of the modern democratic aspiration, in function of the ideological and political projection of the Second World War” lucidly responded to Venezuela’s inclusion within the great front created by the fight of democracies against fascism. This guiding doctrine proposed to encourage Venezuelans, and Latin Americans in general, to fight for the consolidation of national sovereignty by installing democratic regimes through the rescue of popular rule and by promoting social welfare. This meant undertaking the work of creating an ideological watermark, developed in a sociopolitical climate in which traditional power factors, the effects of oil imperialism, and the solicitations of autocratic Stalinist pseudosocialism converged. This creative effort reached high levels of complexity in the postwar period, further complicated by the dramatic repercussions of the Cold War.

The events of November 24, 1948, provided a conclusion to this last phase. By this time, we might assume that the historical personality of Rómulo Betancourt, understood as the shape of the basic and lasting components of this personality, had been formed. In reality, though, its development required an additional course of intense readjustment imposed by changes in the national and the international context.