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The Crime of Barrocolorado: A History of Emotions, Anarchism, Medicine, and Crime in Early Twentieth-Century Colombia

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Abstract

This article explores contemporary discourses of deviation in early twentieth-century Colombia. Through analysis of a presidential assassination attempt in 1906, known as the Crime of Barrocolorado, it discusses the social construction of notions of criminality and danger in the light of the history of emotions. The assault on the president triggered a series of commentaries and reactions that revolved around anarchism, medicine, and criminology, topics that are dissected and connected here in search of their emotional components. In this way, the study brings forth the importance of emotions in the construction of social and political ideas in the past.

Keywords: anarchy; criminology; emotions; medicine; social order

Resumen

Este artículo explora discursos contemporáneos sobre la desviación en la Colombia de principios del siglo XX. A través del análisis de un intento de asesinato presidencial en 1906, conocido como el Crimen de Barrocolorado, discute la construcción social de las nociones de criminalidad y peligrosidad a la luz de la historia de las emociones. El atentado contra el presidente desencadenó una serie de comentarios y reacciones que giraron en torno al anarquismo, la medicina y la criminología, temas que aquí se diseccionan y conectan en busca de sus componentes emocionales. De este modo, el estudio pone de manifiesto la importancia de las emociones en la construcción de las ideas sociales y políticas en el pasado.

Palabras clave: anarquía; criminología; emociones; medicina; orden social

Barrocolorado was a quite unremarkable place at the dawn of the twentieth century. It was located on the outskirts of Bogotá, near the bridge of the Arzobispo River, along the road that led to the town of Chapinero. The site owed its name to the reddish tone of its soil, whose properties, ideal for the manufacturing of tile and brick, became the backbone of a modest cottage industry: the famous *chircales*, one of many that would expedite the urban development of Colombia's capital city. Life in Barrocolorado was not elegant. Rooftops were made of straw, houses were blackened by chimney smoke, and roadsides were littered with wide and "deep pits of yellow water" (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 8). However, against all odds, on February 10, 1906, Barrocolorado would make its way into history.

At around 11:30 a.m., eleven revolver shots disturbed its customary silence. That day, in plain sight, three men on horseback opened fire on President Rafael Reyes's carriage. The first blast frightened their horses, almost launching one of the assailants into a *chirca*. This was followed by four additional discharges, and then six more, which came from the second and third *pistoleros*. Oddly enough, none of the projectiles, fired at close range, found the president or his daughter, and the horsemen had to flee in a hurry. The attack lasted no more than three minutes, but its consequences would dramatically change the lives of those involved. Hours later, the police revealed the names of the hired guns: Marco Arturo Salgar, Carlos Roberto González, and Fernando Aguilar.

Nearly eighty years separated Simon Bolívar's mythical jump through the window of his residence from Reyes's miraculous escape from the gang of *pistoleros*. And eighty years were more than enough for this attack to present itself as a disturbing novelty in Colombia. Except for Reyes and a handful of senior ranking officers, few expected anyone to assault the president in such a fashion.¹ The civil war (1899–1902) was over, the new administration was adamant on preserving peace and fostering mutual understanding between the nation's two opposing political parties (conservatives and liberals), and liberals—who had lost the war—were even beginning to enjoy their long-sought political recognition in the new conservative administration. Furthermore, Colombia had no tradition of presidential assassinations, and the last memories of something alike had already been buried with the generation of *independentistas*.

In this scenario, the assault of Barrocolorado engendered great commotion. Who was behind the attack? What were the assailants looking for? Between February and March 1906, the nation's newspapers covered this event and, for several weeks, put together all kinds of theories that serve as sources for this article. With the help of the history of emotions, the framework of this analysis, my goal is to understand how the Colombian elites reacted to an event of such magnitude. To do so, I study their discourses and highlight in them the different ways in which contemporary emotional concepts were used to explain the nature of the attack.

This article builds upon a rather scarce historiography on Rafael Reyes's administration, which has mainly focused its attention on political and economic aspects of nation-building (Bergquist 1999; Castro-Gómez 2009; Fischer 1998; Henderson 2006; Mesa 1982; Vélez 1983, 1986, 1989). Much has been said about the government's effort to lay the material foundations of modern Colombia and how these first post-civil-war years (1904–1909) were greatly determined by the president's political persona (Lemaitre 1994). Yet, we still know very little about early twentieth-century emotions and their role in the country's reconstruction after the war. Through this analysis, I argue that emotions were fundamental to nation-building and the preservation of social order (Scheve 2013), as they were embedded in the different frameworks that conservative elites used to explain the events; and, more specifically, emotions helped fabricate discourses of anomaly, deviation, crime, and, in this way, facilitated the separation, condemnation, and stigmatization of those who contravened the status quo in early twentieth-century Colombia. This argument unfolds in three parts. The first one shows how the conservative elites, frightened by the ghost of European political upheaval, portrayed the gunmen as *passional* anarchists. The second one shows how contemporary criminology employed emotions to profile criminal

¹ Several sources reveal that President Reyes was aware that the man behind the attack was Pedro León Acosta, a former conservative general and well-regarded *hacendado* (landlord) of the savanna of Bogotá. We know that several months before the attack both men met and unsuccessfully tried to straighten out their differences (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 35–40). In his memories, Pedro León Acosta also refers to the “Coburg” conference, when the president personally invited him to his private residence in Fusagasugá and offered to appoint him as chief of police in exchange for suspending his “conspiracy activities against the regime.” Pedro León Acosta, “El atentado del 10 de febrero,” *Sábado*, November 3, 1945.

actions. And finally, the third part shows how medical knowledge helped describe irrational behaviors through mental imbalances produced by emotional alterations or imbalances.

Lastly, this study contributes to our comprehension of emotions in the past. On the one hand, it reminds us that ideas are forged in a crucible heated by economic, cultural, and political reagents, but also *emotional* ones. And on the other hand, it reveals that the ways a society understands emotions at any given time are shaped by the juxtaposition of different historical layers, much like the strata once envisioned by Fernand Braudel: some of these layers can trace back hundreds of years (the philosophical characterization of passions as opposed to reason); others, no more than a decade (the dawn of a Conservative government in 1886); and others, but a few minutes (the moment the gunmen opened fire on the president).

Emotions and *passions* in the history of emotions

Addressing historical problems through the lens of emotions requires understanding what the word “emotion” meant in the past, for its meaning has changed over the years and is often entangled in a complex web of analogous concepts (Dixon 2003; Frevert et al. 2014; Matt 2011; Reddy 1997, 2001; Rosenwein 2010, 2007). Acknowledging the complexity of this task and being conscious of the limits of any historical interpretation, I mainly focus on the *public* use of the word and not on contemporary philosophical debates (although they will make their way into this story). Two reasons are behind this decision: 1) my main source of information is the press (a *public* discourse), where the word circulated and acquired a life of its own (Van Dijk 1999, 1990); and 2) a proper historical revision of the concept of emotions in Colombian philosophy is yet to be done and merits its own investigation.

In Colombian newspapers, the word *emotion* was generally used to describe sudden mood shifts or states of agitation, as registered in contemporary dictionaries (Zerolo, Toro, and Isaza 1895). For the most part, the word seemed harmless, as an emotion could be either good or bad, and it was interchangeable with terms such as *sentiment* or *affection*, which were employed as stylistic variants. However, victim of a long-lasting Aristotelian heritage that endured through Neo-Scholasticism in Colombia (Carrasquilla 1914; Oviedo Palomá 2019; Saldarriaga Vélez 2005) and trickled into the press, the word *emotion* was often employed as the opposite of *reason*: it was used to describe the realm of human desires, instincts, and forces that had to be tamed or controlled. This was especially true for a cognate term, *passion*, which, unlike its cousins, held a terrible reputation. Used extensively in political commentary throughout the nineteenth century, passions were portrayed as potentially dangerous forces that awakened dark and primitive instincts. They were referred to as the antipode of Christian values, symptoms of corruption and immorality, poison for society.² Passions, it was said, could overthrow the “government” of reason and turn humans into animals. They were associated with violence, alcoholism, and moral sin, and were generally attributed to those who displayed moral or social deviations (Código Militar de los Estados Unidos de Colombia 1883, commentary to art. 504). Some even argued that unrestrained political passions were responsible for Colombia’s bloody nineteenth-century wars.

This way of understanding emotions as potentially dangerous passions heavily influenced contemporary theories about society, crime, and medicine. It served as a framework to give meaning to the complexities of human nature (i.e., “irrational” behavior such as assaulting the president) and as an important piece in the configuration of political and social thought in early twentieth-century Colombia.

² Faustino Correal, “De la guerra,” *El Correo Nacional*, April 27, 1904; Hernando Holguín, “Risum teneatis,” *El Correo Nacional*, May 24, 1904.

Anarkos

Unlike many other parts of Latin America, at the dawn of the twentieth century, Colombia was a country relatively alien to common expressions of anarchism (Simon 1947). It is true that some Liberals had approached Proudhon's writings around the 1850s (Paredes 2016; Gómez-Müller 2009) and that several *artesano* revolts voiced antigovernment sentiments in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the country would have to wait until the 1920s for the emergence of fully fledged anarchist ideologies and organizations (Flórez 2011; Gómez-Müller 2009). Between 1904 and 1909 (Rafael Reyes's presidency), there is no clear evidence of anarchist movements in the country, and it was only in the 1910s that trader and worker unions would start to gain a foothold in Colombia's political landscape with disruptive actions such as strikes and boycotts (Archila 1992; Flórez 2011).

However, this does not mean that anarchism was completely inexistent as a concept. It was documented by the press, used in several (although scattered) publications (Gómez-Müller 2009, 70–71), and most importantly, feared by some of Colombia's finest politicians. As Frederic Martínez has documented in his *Nacionalismo cosmopolita* (2001), Colombia's conservative ruling elites used Europe as an important reference for nation-building. This included political and economic models but also its experience with social unrest. England and France, for instance, became mirrors of moral and social decomposition, riddled with problems such as “delinquency, prostitution, impiety, suicide, socialism, anarchy, nihilism” (Martínez 2001, 438). Likewise, the increasing activity of anarchists in Europe worried prominent conservatives like Miguel Antonio Caro (historical leader of the Conservative Party and architect of the country's most recent constitution in 1886), who asserted that this European phenomenon could already be seen in the country “in the explosions of popular anger, political conspiracies, and the propagation of suicide and prostitution” (Martínez 2001, 444). France had been shaken by numerous anarchist attacks and had already accrued an important record of emblematic figures: Auguste Vaillant, Ravachol, and Émile Henry would be recognized for their explosive impetus; others, such as Sante Geronimo Caserio, for their murderous spirit. News of their endeavors traveled fast, and in this context, it is not surprising that Colombian elites quickly associated the events of February 10 with anarchism of European stock. The circumstances, after all, were strikingly similar to what was happening on the other side of the world.

The press, as expected of the main media outlet of the time, had great participation in the construction and reproduction of the imaginary of anarchism. This was demonstrated four days after the attack by the editors of *El Anunciador* (Cali) in an analysis of the events. In it, they expressed, on behalf of the people of the city, that the attack not only constituted a social crime but also was “the symptom or clear and evident manifestation of anarchy,” whose forces sought to destroy order, authority, and respect. From their perspective, the attack on the president could not have been the work of honest and hardworking people but of lovers of disorder, chaos, and insecurity, men who held nothing in value, not even their own preservation.³

La Prensa, a newspaper from Medellín with a clear conservative tendency, made a similar assessment of the events of February 10. According to its editors, the country almost fell into the “clutches of anarchy.” “Providence” had saved Colombia from the “insanity” of miserable and vulgar murderers, parricidal scoundrels who could compare only with the dogs of polar expeditions “who go crazy when they do not see the light of the sun.” For them, the attack was “exotic, aberrant, unusual, and of socialist madness.” It was a direct attack on the Christian republic, the *hidalguía*, morality, and the laws of honor. The editors of the newspaper even crowned Reyes as “Tamer of Anarkos” and reminded him

³ “Por el honor patrio,” *El Anunciador*, February 14, 1906.

that Louis XVI would not have been a victim of the guillotine had his enemies seen the sword of Napoleon or the whip of Louis XIV on his belt. According to *La Prensa*, anarchy had to be fought and “tamed” by force if necessary.⁴

Pieces like these appeared in newspapers from Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Cartagena, and other cities between February 10 and 28, 1906. Everyone seemed to agree that the attack on the president had been the result of the “exotic” tree of European anarchism. And with good reason. The events fit perfectly with the *modus operandi* of famous anarchists such as Sante Geronimo Caserio, known for having killed President Marie François Sadi Carnot while the French statesman was cruising the streets of Lyon in his car on June 24, 1894. The similarity between the events was so evident that it was difficult to escape from this powerful imaginary that was already emerging as a global phenomenon: Elisabeth of Bavaria (1898) and Umberto I of Italy (1900) joined the list of recently assassinated leaders, and the first alarms were ringing in Argentina with the presence of anarchists in workers’ unions (Suriano 2005; Migueláñez 2013).

The president’s communications also helped reinforce the anarchist imaginary in the country. In one of the first letters he sent to governors, military inspectors, prefects, and mayors of the savanna of Bogotá, Reyes referred to the incident as “the agony of anarchy and revolution” in Colombia. Something similar would appear in a cable sent to the Associated Press in New York, London, and Paris on February 17. In it, the president did not hesitate to describe the attackers as anarchists in his account of the events: “Ten February, eleven-thirty a.m., three anarchists assaulted my car and unloaded on my body all the shots of their three revolvers, without injuring me. I declare God saved me. The whole city and the country were moved and protested anarchic attack” (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 48). His words, which circulated in the press in the form of letters, communiqués, and official documents, ended up confirming the theory that Colombia joined the list of nations ravaged by anarchism.⁵

However, the most interesting aspect of these associations between the events of February 10 and anarchism is that they incorporated emotional elements. In fact, as several newspaper articles reveal, anarchists were often depicted as passionate subjects. They were considered victims of an uncontrollable love for disorder, heralds of hatred toward every notion of authority. It was said that they found pleasure in the unthinkable—destruction and chaos—and that their actions challenged all logic. Sometimes they were even compared to animals that behaved guided by only their most primitive instincts—or as the editors of *La Prensa* would say in 1906, like “rabid dogs.” These descriptions lead us to the belief that the conservative elites saw anarchists as irrational beings, prone to the involuntary, to the dark forces that resided within them. For many, only someone with such characteristics would dare attack the president, the country, and “civilization” itself.⁶

The poem “Anarkos” (1898) by Guillermo Valencia helps us further understand the passionate character that conservatives attributed to anarchists in general.⁷ It was written a few years before the attack, likely during Valencia’s time as secretary of the Colombian legation to the governments of France, Switzerland, and Germany in 1898, but it provides an opportunity to explore how conservative elites understood emotions in this context.

⁴ “Manifestación conservadora,” *La Prensa*, February 13, 1906.

⁵ “Documentos oficiales,” *La Prensa*, February 20, 1906.

⁶ “Manifestación conservadora,” *La Prensa*, February 13, 1906.

⁷ Guillermo Valencia (1873–1943) was a conservative poet-statesman (father of future president Guillermo León Valencia). In addition to being considered a pioneer of modernism in Colombia, he stood out as a member of the House of Representatives, diplomatic delegate, and minister of finance. It is very likely that his poem “Anarkos” was the result of his experience in Paris as secretary of the Colombian legation to the governments of France, Switzerland, and Germany in 1898. “Guillermo Valencia,” *Banrepcultural*, https://enciclopedia.banrepcultural.org/index.php/Guillermo_Valencia.

In his poem, Valencia takes us through the streets of Paris, filled with smelly sewers, melancholic dogs, corpses, invalids, beggars, and dust—sordid images of a decadent society consumed by the absence of authority, religion, and morality (Betancur 1967). That was the France that the conservative elites saw: a fertile ground for the seed of anarchism to grow. In this dismal journey through fin de siècle France, Valencia then takes us to a group of ragged people, a “mob of prophets” with profuse hair and anemic faces, who mouthed all kinds of blasphemies. “Give way to bohemial!” they shouted, drunk with wine, as musicians played the violin. For the author, this “tribe of wretches,” among which artists, miners, and dogs alike ruminated, not only reflected the most decadent side of civilization but also was potentially dangerous:

Out of blind *anger* yesterday’s miner rushes over the thrones. An *angry* fire between his trembling hands throbs, and deaf to childhood, to crying, to pleading, the dynamite tempest roars! They are the children of Anarkos! Their gaze, with reverberations of madness, evokes ruins and predicts evils: they look like tigers of the dark jungle with nostalgia for victims and reeds

He asks for a rough weapon, to break bones and to squeeze the verb of *anger*; sharp from work, he picked up his file, and under the blow of Lucheni, mute fell the Empress like a lamb! Pini, Valliant, Caserio and Angiolillo, your courage in the face of death frightens; black emperors of the knife, who surrender their throats like weak crumbs of stale bread to the avid jaws of the executioner. (Valencia 1914)

Friends of gunpowder and knives, anarchists were seen as deeply passionate individuals in early twentieth-century Colombia. Their descriptions fit the trope of emotions, or passions, as entities that opposed reason: they were represented as angry, crazy, irrational beings—comparable to animals—capable of attacking even the noblest ideals, such as peace and “progress,” to satisfy their vengeful spirits. And these emotional elements were precisely what made them a threat. According to the press and to conservatives like Valencia, men capable of such an assault were victims of unruly passions that had led them toward the path of evil, destruction, disorder, war, and anarchy—or the absence of all authority—which was what the conservative elites feared the most. In this way, anarchists were condemned not only because they challenged order and authority but also because of the destructive potential of the entities that lived within them: passions.

Paradoxically, while the press catered to the scaremongering elites, Marco Arturo Salgar, Carlos Roberto González, and Fernando Aguilar, the gunmen, were hidden in the mountains. They were hired by a conservative landlord and former army general, Pedro León Acosta, allegedly to stop Reyes from giving away the government to the liberals, as it was rumored among staunch and paranoid conservatives who disagreed with the president’s numerous approaches to the opposing party (*El diez de febrero* 1907). According to several testimonies collected by the police, the original plan was to kidnap Reyes; others attested that he had to be killed. In any case, the attack turned out to be a fiasco. None of the bullets even grazed the president, and after an exchange of gunfire with his bodyguards, the gunmen were forced to make a desperate escape. They sped north of the city, through the towns of Chapinero and Usaquén, and stopped only once they reached the hills.

Once the group was safe, González said he was injured. Reyes’s postilion had shot his right calf, leaving him with a bloody wound. His companions poured some brandy over it and, once the pain was alleviated, helped him limp his way to hacienda El Retiro, hoping that on Pedro León Acosta’s lands they would find some help. Unfortunately, they were wrong. One of Acosta’s brothers arrived shortly after and berated them for being on his family’s property. He then asked them to leave because the police were already sniffing

around. Scared and with no other alternative, they did. Salgar, González, and Aguilar tied up their horses, took to the mountains, and remained hidden until the cold night found them asleep among *frailejones*. For a few days, sheltered by nature, they were able to avoid capture (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 239). They were poor, conservative, Catholic men, convinced that the attack on the president was part of a patriotic mission to save the country from power-hungry, religion-hating liberals—or so the man who had hired them said—but in the newspapers they were portrayed as the envoys of European anarchism in Colombia.

Filiations

Right after the attack, Reyes ordered his postilion to head toward the Panóptico, an imposing government jail that had deterred the gunmen from attacking the president within the city (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 111). There he commissioned the generals Francisco Arana and Eliseo Arbeláez to notify El Puente del Común and Chapinero about the attack. The order was to apprehend the fugitives. Minutes later, the president went to the Central Telegraph Office to broadcast the same information, and at around twelve o'clock, he arrived back at the palace. That afternoon, Reyes comforted his relatives and spent the rest of the day writing numerous letters to governors and military officers so that everyone was aware of the situation. The government's priority was to hunt down the criminals (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 43–47). Their boldness could not go unpunished.

As of February 10, the savanna of Bogotá fell into a state of alarm. According to Pedro León Acosta, “horsemen roamed the streets at night covered and anonymous like shadows, followed by guards and runaway patrols.” People heard police raids and the metallic sounds of their “sabers and steels.”⁸ These were “scenes of threat and power” with which the government staged all its punitive capacity. And it was to be expected. The attack on Reyes had not been just any crime. For the government, much more was at stake: it was an attack on the homeland, a revolutionary attempt, a lash of anarchism (*El diez de febrero* 1907, 48).

Despite the daunting task of finding three men in a region inhabited by almost one hundred thousand souls (Rey 2010), the police, led by Reyes's close friend and chief general Pedro A. Pedraza, soon yielded results. One day after the attack, authorities had already confirmed the identities of the attackers and, shortly after, on February 14, shared their “filiations” in *Diario Oficial*—the government's official newspaper—for public knowledge. According to the gathered information, the suspects were:

Marco Arturo Salgar or Neira (uses both surnames): age, thirty-two years; neighborhood, Suba; married; no profession; regular height; light eyes and wears mustache; white and pale color; marked by smallpox; good and complete teeth; wears light colored wool national fabric; light-colored *ruana* and felt hat.

Roberto González: age, twenty-eight years or so; neighborhood, Suba; businessman; light eyes; black hair and wears a sparse mustache; tall body; aquiline nose; near-sighted; wears a dark cloth suit, including *ruana*; light brown felt hat, straight brim; black ankle boots; is pale white.

Fernando Aguilera: thirty-two years, more or less; native of Subachoque; neighbor of Suba; without profession; regular height; brown color; black eyes; rather flat nose; black hair and mustache; large mouth; good and complete teeth; wears dark cloth; gray *ruana*; *jipa* hat and black ankle boots.⁹

⁸ Pedro León Acosta, “Diez de febrero de 1906,” *Diario de Colombia*, May 1, 1953.

⁹ “Circular,” *Diario Oficial*, February 14, 1906.

At first glance, these police filiations appear to be nothing more than detailed descriptions of the suspects. However, deep down, this procedure involved a meticulous way of constructing them as criminal subjects. Here, the process of identifying the body through codes and signs (height, eye color, shape of the nose, mouth, color of the hair, face, state of the teeth, and even particular signs such as “marked by smallpox”) was important to capture the criminals and also served as a powerful tool to decipher their character and morality (Hering 2018, 2019).

Inspired by physiognomics in the past and now by European criminology, filiations sought to establish a correspondence between physical features and psychological or moral attributes, as if the body were a window into the soul. This kind of descriptions were common in Colombia throughout the nineteenth century and would be further developed by the police during the first decades of the twentieth. According to Hering (2019), the first Anthropometric Cabinet in the country was founded between 1911 and 1912, and specialized techniques such as the Bertillon system and dactyloscopy were standardized in the 1920s. However, by 1906 criminology was already becoming an institutional reality in Colombia, as evidenced by the creation of the Oficina Medico-Legal de Cundinamarca in 1894 and the influential work of its director, Dr. Carlos Putnam, who discussed the importance of scientific observation to determine the nature of crime in the first volume of his *Tratado práctico de medicina legal* (1896) and debated some of Lombroso’s theories in the second (1908) (Hering 2024; Rojas 2016).¹⁰

This relationship between the outside and the inside, or rather, between social behavior and the realm inhabited by passions, raises several historical questions in terms of emotions: Did criminology’s “modern” and “scientific” approach leave room for them? If so, how did emotions affect the criminal? And ultimately, what kind of individuals were Reyes’s assailants in the light of this new “science”?

Regicides and “presidenticides”

The filiations shared by the police four days after the attack led to various commentaries on the horsemen of Barrocolorado. Some, unsurprisingly, took up the tropes of anarchism and passion. On February 19, *El Yunque* of Bogotá published a piece signed by one “J.L.C.” in which the author drew conclusions from the data presented by the police. Imbued with the stereotypes of the time that criminalized poverty and vagrancy (Bautista 2019), J.L.C. argued that the murderers were surely hired guns because they were “men without professions,” subjects who wanted to live “in the slack and be wealthy without working.” In addition, he suggested that they were, in a way, anarchists: “No. Those people who are stinging the murder do not belong to any party; they are the scum of some of them, which must be gathered and set on fire so that it does not infect this land of nobles and brave people, where the anarchists have never laid their seed.” Finally, he said that the men were victims of “sectarian fanaticism,” with its “disastrous effects” in the country, and nothing but “political atheists” who did not believe in anything or pretended to do so “to defend and fester their savage wrath.”¹¹

That same day, *El Yunque* published another article of even more interest. It is a piece by a man named Federico G. Calvo, titled “Regicidas y presidenticidas” (Regicides and presidenticides). In it, the author criticized the “vague” and “deficient” police filiations and suggested a detailed technical study of each of the suspects. For Calvo, evidently well informed on European criminological debates, it was important to determine the “general character” of the assailants because, according to him, as Emmanuelle Régis (French

¹⁰ I thank Professor Max S. Hering Torres for sharing his manuscript during the preparation of this article.

¹¹ “Otros conceptos sobre los asesinos que atentaron contra la vida del Presidente Reyes,” *El Yunque*, February 19, 1906.

physiologist) and Cesare Lombroso (expert in criminology) had shown, not all criminals were the same.¹² In Lombroso's works, for example, there were references to different typologies of criminals: hysterical, thuggish, occasional criminals, epileptics, and madmen. There were also fanatics, murderers, enthusiasts, and alcoholics (Lombroso 2006, 293). These differences in nomenclature were not irrelevant. According to the Italian criminologist, each of these criminals entailed a different evil for society. While some, like criminaloids, acted only in times of need—and could even become excellent parents—others exhibited enormous destructive potential (Lombroso 2006, 293). These approaches led Calvo to question whether the attack had been perpetrated by “real regicides” or if it were rather the work of “vulgar criminals.”¹³

Based on the advances of positivist criminology, Calvo explained that true regicides belonged to the matoid group due to “the extravagance of their conceptions” and the “exoticism of their acts.” These individuals were characterized by being imbeciles; megalomaniacs; exaggerated altruists; and proud, indomitable, and hallucinated fanatics; as well as for having distinctive physical stigmas: “nasal deviations, strabismus, cranial malformations, prognathism, tooth necrosis, black and abundant hair, ear abnormalities, etc.” In addition, regicides were victims of a form of psychosis, a kind of “hereditary mysticism” that was expressed in “the stubborn belief in a mission that they have to fulfil.”¹⁴ This had been the case of notable murderers such as Jean de Poltrot, who attacked the Duke of Guise “convinced that he would thus remove from the world of mortals an enemy of the Holy Gospel”; Balthasar Gérard, executioner of William of Nassau; and many others such as Ravailac, Damiens, Henry Admiral, Charlotte Corday, Loubel, Charles Guiteau and Aubertin, who also wielded their weapons carried by political fervor or “divine passion.” According to Calvo, all these “barbaric and bloodthirsty” acts were typical of epileptoids and revealed “the pathogenic nature” of the subject, as well as a certain “obtuseness of their nerve centers.”¹⁵

In his analysis, Calvo also referenced fear and cowardice in his description of the assailants, two emotional attributes as important as pathological conditions or physical features in criminology. In fact, the work of the renowned Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso—referenced by both Calvo and Dr. Putnam—included emotions. In a brief chapter of the first edition of his work (1876), titled “The Emotions of Criminals,” Lombroso showed that the most “noble” of feelings tended to be “abnormal, excessive, and unstable” in criminals and that they generally exhibited some degree of moral insensitivity. This made them impervious to other's misfortune; indifferent to their victims and bloodthirsty acts; and it explained extravagant acts of courage because, insensitive as they were, they could not recognize danger and therefore did not feel afraid to act (Lombroso 2006, 64–65). According to Lombroso, the combination of “hasty passions” and insensitivity explained the illogical nature of some crimes and the gap between the severity of criminal actions and their motivations. Thus, emotions could explain absurd cases such as the murder of a cellmate due to his snoring or the death of a prisoner who refused to clean a pair of shoes (Lombroso 2006, 63–64).

Lombroso considered that pride, or an excessive feeling of self-esteem, was one of the main emotions that criminals experienced. This emotion presented itself with such strength in them that it even gave the impression that the psyche was overpowered by the reflexes. Pride, moreover, made the criminal vain by nature, far above “artists, literati and flirtatious women,” and induced them to talk about their crimes before and after committing them to feel important in society. Finally, vanity made criminals prone to

¹² “Regicidas y presidenticidas,” *El Yunque*, February 19, 1906.

¹³ “Regicidas y presidenticidas.”

¹⁴ “Regicidas y presidenticidas.”

¹⁵ “Regicidas y presidenticidas.”

revenge: their high self-esteem made them unable to endure provocations, insults, or attacks on their honor, and in this they resembled prostitutes and children (Lombroso 2006, 65–66).

For Lombroso, the emotions of criminals, usually “unstable, impetuous and violent” (Lombroso 2006, 68), also provoked all kinds of reprehensible behaviors in them. It made them uncontrollably violent, eager to experience the pleasure of blood, to be fierce, cruel, and prone to drinking and gambling. Criminals, moreover, were unable to feel true love. Their relationships were based not on noble feelings like that one but on carnal impulses that they satisfied in brothels. There, they regularly indulged in mass meetings and “enjoyed the jubilant, tumultuous, unbridled and sensual company of other criminals and even police spies” (Lombroso 2006, 68).

In emotional matters, Lombroso did not find many differences among criminals, “indigenous and savage” peoples, “blacks,” or the Chinese. In all these cases, emotions seemed to manifest themselves with extreme violence and impetus. He claimed that history proved it. Black Americans, he argued, were so insensitive to physical pain that they even laughed while mutilating their hands to avoid forced labor. “Indians,” in contrast, sang while burning at the stake, and during puberty they underwent unthinkable tortures without letting out a single moan. Tattoos, cuts on lips and fingers, and the practice of extracting teeth also showed that all these populations were irremediable victims of “fast and violent” emotions. In Lombroso’s words, they had the strength and passions of adults but the character of children. They felt a lot but thought very little (Lombroso 2006, 69).

Enrico Ferri, disciple of Lombroso and founder of the Italian school of criminology, also referred to emotions in his work *Sociologia criminal* (1884). Following the approach of his former teacher, he noted that in extraordinary cases it was possible to evidence a direct correspondence between passions and criminality. Subjects who committed crimes carried away by their passions did not share the atavisms of born or habitual criminals such as nervous or temperament problems, and in many cases they demonstrated acceptable social behavior. However, they often transgressed in their youth—particularly women—“under the stress of passion, which overrides all the constrictions of anger, indignant love, or outraged honor” (Ferri 1896, 40). For Ferri, these individuals were “highly emotional before, during and after the crime,” and although they usually carried out their actions openly, there were also those who premeditated the crime and did it treacherously (Ferri 1896, 40).

Years later, in a series of lectures given at the University of Naples between April 22 and 24, 1901, Ferri further referred to passions. This time, as one of the many conditions that affected the free will of subjects and that, as a result, could lead him or her to commit crimes. On that occasion, he said: “A man who intends to commit a crime, or who allows himself to be carried away by a violent passion, or by a psychological hurricane that drowns out his moral sense, is not affected by the threat of punishment, because the volcanic eruption of passion prevents him from making any reflection” (Ferri 1913, 56). Ferri, however, was not entirely convinced that passions could excuse all criminals from their responsibility. Quoting Francesco Carrara, an important Italian jurist, he argued that while there were passions that blinded criminals, others did not. Among the first were fear, honor, and love; social passions that could even help to live in society. Among the latter were hatred and revenge, completely antisocial passions from which nothing good could come out (Ferri 1913, 91–92). Thus, if criminals experienced social passions, they could be excused from their actions. Otherwise, they had to take responsibility for them.

Now, what were the riders of Barrocolorado classified as under the light of contemporary criminology and the filiations published by the police? Based on Lombroso’s criminal typologies, Calvo argued that Salgar, González, and Aguilar did not fit the profile of true regicides. In his opinion, the attack revealed that the plan to murder

Reyes was “a means and not an end,” because the president had not been assassinated. Moreover, the fear and clumsiness with which the killers had executed the plan brought them closer to the common criminal or the “born criminal” than to the regicide. For Calvo, the cowardice of these individuals, demonstrated by fleeing “in such a hasty manner,” was far from the “courage of regicides and presidenticides” and strong proof that the riders of Barrocolorado were nothing more than vulgar criminals.¹⁶

However, if we explore further the construction of the typologies they were classified with, the answer is far richer because emotional disorders were an underlying feature of criminal behavior. In fact, contemporary criminology saw emotions as forces that, when wayward or altered, could push someone to commit a crime. From notorious regicides and murderers to common street thieves and alcoholics, all criminals seemed to have some sort of deviance that prevented them from feeling properly. Their emotions were always abnormal, violent, unstable. And this framework was extremely useful for explaining irrational behaviors, failures of character, sectarianism, hatred, murders, and even war. Thus, in light of this emerging “science” of crime, Marco Arturo Salgar, Carlos Roberto González, and Fernando Aguilar were constructed as individuals who endangered the social order due to the criminal—and therefore emotionally deviant—nature of their actions. Who would dare to open fire on the president and his young daughter? Who would risk another war leaving the government headless? A criminal, of course, but not just any criminal. It had to be one with violent and mutinous forces inside.

Moral madness

Federico G. Calvo’s comment on the riders of Barrocolorado incorporated terminology that could have well been written in a medical examination. Calvo spoke of pathologies, psychosis, hereditary redoubts, epilectoids. He even referred to the “obtuseness of [the] nerve centers” of those individuals capable of murder. And in doing so, Calvo made explicit the tight connections that had been woven between criminality and disease at the dawn of the twentieth century (Rojas 2016; Agostini and Speckman 2005). For many, including Lombroso—among other things, professor of psychiatry at the University of Turin—the offender’s behavior was also rooted in medical phenomena. Based on this relationship, this section explores the construction of the criminal individual through medicine, and how this “objective” and “positive” discourse of science understood emotions.

According to the latest advances in contemporary medicine, passions were not the only entities capable of bending the will and leading individuals to transgress the social order. In his thesis *Medicine and Surgery* (1904), Dr. Pedro Pablo Anzola, an intern at the San Juan de Dios Hospital between 1902 and 1903, presented a “much-discussed topic,” on which “science has not said its last word”: that of moral madness. By this, Anzola referred to forms of mental imbalance in which “little by little, the overexcited brain center” was emancipated “from the moderating action of the higher centers, that is, from the will.” When this happened, individuals suffered from severe internal disorders. They became violent, irrational, insensitive, angry, depressive, prone to vices, to the flesh, to commit all kinds of immoral acts. And these symptoms, of course, made them dangerous for society (Anzola 1904, x).

Following in detail the work of several French scholars, who seemed to be an endless source of inspiration for this generation of doctors, Anzola compiled in his thesis several causes of this disturbing disease.¹⁷ First, there was what he called civilization, or “the continuous evolution of ideas, the superactivity of intelligences, the appetite for

¹⁶ “Regicidas y presidenticidas.”

¹⁷ Anzola’s thesis was, in essence, the compilation of extracts or transcriptions of “distinguished alienists” such as Philippe Pinel, Ulysee Trélat, and Bénédicte Morel, among others cited in his work. The contributions of French scholars were undoubtedly preponderant in his research.

endlessly renewed sensations, the advancement of the sciences and the development of industries with the new needs they engender,” which involved an exacerbated work for the brain that made it vulnerable to “disorganizing causes” (Anzola 1904, 20). Wars and revolutions, abundant in violence, death and starvation, also burdened impressionable brains. There were also religious ideas, which degenerated into “dark” fanaticism and “madness.” Other causes of moral madness could be marital status, due to the harmful effects of celibacy; intellectual and military professions, which were predisposed to psychopathies and suicide; and misdirected education, for this could “exert a harmful action on impressionable spirits, and susceptible to react strongly to the influence of the environment.” According to Anzola, all these phenomena forced the brain to function in an exaggerated and disproportionate way, led to tiredness and fatigue, and eventually made it vulnerable to mental imbalances (Anzola 1904, 23–24).

Moral madness unsettled the will. It began when the psychic unit—composed of four functions: sensation, thought, feeling, and action, according to Anzola—dissociated after suffering a pathological attack. Then, product of a neurasthenia of moral sensitivity, the will lost its ability to control morbid feelings and inclinations, and gave rise to “eccentric actions” and “deviations from behavior,” such as incessant fluctuations between exaltation and depression, violence, irritability, anger, and even convulsions. In other words, individuals lost control of their emotions. This resulted in sympathies and antipathies “reaching unprecedented proportions” and torments by “strange” and sometimes dangerous “obsessions”: drinking alcohol, immoral acts, homicides, robberies, etc. Absent of will, the individual was left at the mercy of irrepressible impulses (Anzola 1904, 31–32).

Now, for Anzola, this disorder did not affect everyone in the same manner. A first group, composed of subjects of perfectly balanced intelligence (who usually held important positions in the social hierarchy), had to make only “a slight effort of the will” to vanish bizarre, extravagant, or dangerous ideas. A second group, comprising individuals with some kind of moral or character deficiency, used to lose control of their emotions with anything they were passionate about (e.g., gambling, licentious life, drinking), and therefore it was common to hear “strange, original, heretical, paradoxical” opinions from them or to see them as “imperious, violent, liars, spiteful” and stubborn (Anzola 1904, 33). Finally, there was a third group: people with diminished or overdeveloped intelligence (prone to “perverse instincts, depraved feelings, bad inclinations” that made them “capricious, lazy, quarrelsome, rapturous, violent”) (Anzola 1904, 33) who were entirely at the mercy of “the instincts hidden in the depths of every human heart” which often surfaced in them (Anzola 1904, 36).

By segmenting the effects of this disease, Anzola ended up producing some sort of taxonomy with clear social analogies. In it, the “notables,” or those with balanced intelligence who usually held important positions in society, were more likely to exert control over their emotions. They could be affected by moral madness, like any human being (and this was demonstrated by numerous cases of famous and powerful “eccentrics”). However, being able to regulate their instincts through sheer power of will and reason, they were unlikely to pose a real threat to society. This control, however, was lost as the subject descended on the social ladder. According to Anzola, for example, “overwork to obtain an insufficient wage” and the “inescapable need to achieve it” caused disorders in the brains of the proletariat, “almost always under the burden of physiological misery and alcoholism” (Anzola 1904, 29). At the bottom of the ladder, the situation was even worse. Criminals, evildoers, and licentious individuals often proved particularly vulnerable to their impulses, instincts, and obsessions.¹⁸

¹⁸ This correlation had at its core Morel’s class system: “Morel makes a first of those who present anomalies, but not empty, in the sphere of their affective faculties: patients are fully aware of the irregularity of their eccentricities, but they are unable to subtract from them. A second class includes those who, apparently preserving their intellectual faculties, present a deep and empty disorder in their moral faculties, with delirium of

Anzola, in fact, drew attention toward the common ground that allegedly existed between moral madness and crime. According to the doctor, it was possible to trace complications in the “moderating centers” of criminals that prevented them from controlling their emotions. In “idiots,” for example, the moderating centers never intervened, while in the “unbalanced” there was a “disharmony between intellectual faculties, on the one hand, and feelings and inclinations, on the other.” In Anzola’s words:

Those circumstances in which the sick impulse is so clear have analogues in the degenerates whose actions make them be called criminals; but while in them the moderating centers, despite their weakness, counterweight the impulse in the degenerate criminal for some time, these centers are barely represented: there is no struggle, and still very weak impulses drag the sick without protest from the other region: it is the reign, without counterweight, of the instincts. (Anzola 1904, 72–73)

The interest of medicine in crime was nothing new in Colombia. As Rojas (2016) has documented, doctors were regularly involved in legal procedures since the early republic, performing autopsies and providing medical concepts used in trials. However, their role had started to change by the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of modern forensic medicine, the creation of specialized institutions such as the Oficina Medico-Legal de Cundinamarca (1894), and a push for further professionalization of medical practice (Hering 2024). Inspired by the latest advances of criminology and forensics in Europe, many of them, including Dr. Anzola and Dr. Putnam, thought medicine had a bigger say in deciphering criminal behavior. This is why it is common to find entire sections of medical treatises dedicated to the subject.

Furthermore, Anzola’s thesis allows us to understand, on the one hand, why Calvo spoke of “epilectoids,” “pathogenic” agents, and the “obtuseness” of the “nerve centers” when referring to the riders of Barrocolorado. It was because medicine had gained ground in the country as an explanatory framework for different social phenomena at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was the case of crime, where murderers, criminals, and transgressors were seen as sick or potentially degenerate individuals. However, his thesis reveals that emotions helped to build different notions of disease. In exploring moral madness, the physician saw them as symptoms of disorders and imbalances within the individual; as almost uncontrollable forces opposing reason and the will; and particularly, as an element of social differentiation, because, according to him, only the weak of morals and character, the poor, and the transgressors were subjected to the cruel “empire of the instinct.”

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Dr. Anzola was not alone when including emotions and passions to explain criminal behavior. Dr. Carlos Putnam also included them in his *Tratado práctico de medicina legal* (1896 and 1908), and some years later Dr. Demetrio García Vásquez would dedicate an entire investigation to the different ways they affected the will in *Psicología patológica de la emotividad y de la voluntad* (1912). All of them, in one way or another, suggested the problematic nature of wayward emotions, revealing that in early twentieth century Colombia, emotions were an important piece in the medical framework that explained social deviance.

The danger within

In this article, I have shown how Colombian elites fabricated the riders of Barrocolorado from three different perspectives: the anarchist imaginary, criminology, and medicine.

feelings and acts, irresistible impulses, generic perversions. The third class contains instinctive tendencies of precocious and innate tendencies for evil. The fourth class, in short, comprises individuals who present a complete suspension of intellectual and moral development” (Anzola 1904, 37).

This has allowed me to create a complex and multidimensional image in which Marco Arturo Salgar, Carlos Roberto González, and Fernando Aguilar are not only protagonists of a significant public event but also vessels of multiple imaginaries of criminality and danger that circulated in Colombia at the beginning of the twentieth century. By opening fire on the president, the three men crossed the narrow threshold that separated the “normal” from the “deviant” and became effigies of everything that society feared and condemned. Unknowingly, that February 10, 1906, they stopped being men and became anarchists, criminals, and sick.

Each of these approaches served to explain the danger that men like them posed to social order. Some, victims of their own fears, saw Salgar, González, and Aguilar as seeds of the “exotic tree” of European anarchism, completely oblivious to who they actually were: conservative, Catholic folks who followed the orders of an ultraconservative landlord who promised that their feat would save the country from the scourge of liberalism. Unfortunately for them, the lack of information opened a gap that would be filled with one of society’s worst fears: the absence of order, anarchy, another revolution. Faced with the absent body of the criminals, the public opinion focused on their actions, on the *modus operandi*, on the “form” of the crime. And thanks to those elements, the elites were able to build a generic effigy, “the anarchist,” to deposit in it everything they considered a threat: disorder, chaos, violence, political passion.

Those who invoked modern criminology and contemporary medicine saw their theories and social prejudices confirmed. European sciences dedicated to crime and the mind had insisted on the existence of potentially dangerous individuals: misfits, lacking in character, violent, imbeciles, *tarados*—an entire taxonomy of individuals whose bodies reflected hereditary stigmas and flaws. And all of this would make sense on that February 10, as Colombian elites were faced with the task of deciphering the nature of the attack on the president. It was a challenge to authority, of course, but also to logic. Who would dare to shoot Reyes and his daughter at point-blank range? Who would endanger peace and social order? This contradiction led public opinion to find answers in the new sciences, capable of explaining the illogical, the irrational. Thanks to them, it was possible to understand that those who threatened peace, order, progress, and “civilization” could be only individuals with internal disorders that easily buckled to the empire of instinct, to the rule of passion.

These perspectives followed different paths to build deviation but also found common grounds. On the one hand, in all of them deviation was constructed according to the social status of the individual (Palma 2015; Trujillo 2018; Trujillo and Quitar 2003). The assailants were men of scarce resources—economic and social—without profession, and relatively marginal, and for early twentieth-century Colombian elites, those conditions made them potential transgressors. As in the poem “Anarkos” and in the taxonomies developed by Lombroso and Dr. Anzola, it was not strange in this period to establish a direct correspondence between social place and moral place; between social place and crime. Hence, anarchists, criminals, and the sick shared the same cradle: precariousness.

Finally, this article has shown how specific ways of understanding emotions have influenced social ideas in the past, in this case, ideas about criminality and deviance. Seen as powerful entities that could overthrow the government of “reason,” passions and unruly emotions helped Colombian elites reinforce many prejudiced discourses about social anomalies. In this sense, emotions not only facilitated the explanation of an act as “illogical” and “irrational” as opening fire on the president but also became a tool with which to separate, condemn, and stigmatize those who contravened the status quo. And in doing so, they ended up confirming the suspicion that the country was under siege by powerful forces emanating from the subject; that the danger to peace, concord, and national unity was also within.

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