

**Myriam Jimeno, *Juan Gregorio Palechor: historia de mi vida*
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Myriam Jimeno's *Juan Gregorio Palechor: historia de mi vida* is divided into two parts—an introductory section by Jimeno and an autobiographical narrative of the life story of Juan Gregorio Palechor, a leader of the *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (CRIC). Yet the book reads as if it consists of three parts: Jimeno's introduction, the life story of Palechor before his disillusionment with traditional party politics in Colombia, and his life story after he moves away from the Liberal Party and towards political activism centered on an indigenous identity.

Palechor was born in 1923 in the Guachicono *resguardo* in southern Cauca. His earliest aspirations for education were frustrated by his family's poverty, making the fact that he only attended primary school for two years a lifelong source of anger and disappointment. It was years later, during his military service, when Palechor's education began in earnest. At that time, he became more fully conscious of Colombia's class structure and the depth of its racism. After the military, he read broadly, focusing on Colombia's judicial system, ultimately becoming an advocate for his family and neighbors in their legal battles with *mestizos* over *resguardo* lands.

Up until the 1960s, Palechor was very active in Liberal party politics, although he gravitated toward the party's splinter groups, such as Jorge Eliecer Gaitán's *Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria* (UNIR) or Alfonso López Michelsen's *Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal* (MRL). Despite his continued adherence to the Liberal program, his disillusionment with the party began in the 1940s, and became more pronounced when Alberto Lleras Camargo's 1957 pact with Laureano Gómez created the National Front. But, it was López Michelsen's betrayal of the MRL when he aligned with the National Front in 1966 that pushed Palechor to abandon the Liberal Party for good. With great reluctance, he joined the CRIC in 1971. Very quickly, however, he discovered the political home he had been searching for and, until his death in 1992, dedicated his life to working through the CRIC to provide legal services and bilingual education for the indigenous residents of Cauca's *resguardos*.

Palechor's life story provides an invaluable window for understanding the early history of the CRIC and the politicization process that led Colombia's indigenous groups to abandon traditional party politics in favor of ethnically based activism. It also complements some of the recent studies exploring the relationship between memory, history, intellectuals, and contemporary politics among indigenous groups. His intriguing story, however, raises more questions than it answers, and highlights important areas of twentieth century Colombian history that remain unstudied.

For example, little is known about the politics of the National Front at local levels. After decades of partisan conflict,

how readily did local power brokers and party leaders adhere to the National Front's requirements for parity in governmental institutions and political appointments? What were the conditions that led rural communities, indigenous or otherwise, to either accept or reject parity and power sharing? Palechor's narrative suggests a process fraught with conflict. He describes the National Front as a great betrayal of the Liberal Party, as an organization that deceived the people, as an impediment to development, and as a national coalition that dramatically changed, for the worse, political dynamics at the local level.

Similarly, Palechor's narrative hints at the unstudied relationship between the agrarian reform of the 1960s, and the emergence of ethnically based activism in the 1970s. According to Palechor, the *resguardo* residents opposed agrarian reform – they found it confusing, and interpreted it to mean that the government was going to take their land. Their response was to zealously defend their lands as if they were “the eye on their face” (167). This raises the question – to what degree did their defensive stance in the 1960s push them to organize along ethnic lines in the following decades?

Rather than a criticism of the book, identifying these unanswered questions reflects the richness of autobiographical narrative and oral history as evidentiary sources, a topic discussed by Jimeno in her introduction. Along with the information she provides regarding how Palechor's narrative was recorded and an overview of the CRIC, *Historia de mi vida* is an excellent contribution to the history of indigenous organizing in Colombia, told in his own words by one of the movement's founders.