mark as the beginning and end dates of the Cold War, 1947 to 1989. At the same time, the solutions Monsignor Salcedo devised to address the pressing issues of rural education and community development in Colombia faithfully reflected postwar western developmental obsessions with rural communities as “easy targets for Communist infiltration” because of prevailing conditions of “poverty, exploitation and injustice.” The ACPO approach, in which literacy formed the linchpin of development, followed up by a training program for rural leaders that emphasized technical solutions to address the material symptoms of poverty (inadequate housing, poor nutrition, lack of clean water, the absence of collective or communal organization) ultimately left intact the complex social, cultural, and material conditions rooted in structural inequalities of power and material resources that had characterized Colombia’s rural society for centuries.

But of course, radical change was exactly what ACPO had been created to avoid and what attracted the significant financial and political support it amassed at home and abroad for the better part of four decades. Like other projects of rural improvement based on an ideology of self-help, moreover, ACPO’s one-size-fits-all recipe for raising rural communities out of their supposed lethargy and lack of technical know-how eventually ran up against the realization that while the dearth of schools and general condition of poverty in the Colombian countryside tended to be widespread, the social and geographic situation of the rural poor was varied. Teaching peasants in relatively prosperous coffee-producing regions how to improve their soil with compost, vary their diet by planting a kitchen garden, or reduce bacteria-borne diseases by building a latrine was one thing, but it was quite another to convince those with no access to land, bound in near feudal servitude, to take advantage of ACPO’s lessons in how to raise rabbits for extra protein or adopt the use of shoes to avoid hookworm.

ACPO’s early and rapid success came at a steep price, moreover, eventually unraveling in the face of controversy over its mission and director, questions about its finances and internal management, political polarization between the Church, the state and Colombian society, and skepticism regarding the efficacy and even the need for education and leadership training aimed at rural adults in an increasingly urbanized country where television and air travel had supposedly supplanted “old-fashioned” technologies like radio in the countryside. Colombia’s rural poor were already “modern,” ACPO’s critics argued by the 1980s, and ACPO’s mission and the technologies it deployed, old-fashioned and out of date. Coupled with the organization’s inability to continue to reconcile the conflicting agendas and demands of the eclectic patchwork of secular, religious, domestic, and international funders and collaborators that had originally made possible its transformation from a modest, parish-centered catechetical and literacy outreach