

A Tribute to Guillermo O'Donnell

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Guillermo O'Donnell died on November 29 in his native Buenos Aires at the age of 75, following a four-month battle against cancer. He was a giant in contemporary social science, known around the world for his intellectual creativity, his path-breaking originality, and his passion for democracies that function decently. His scholarly work on authoritarianism and democracy established his international reputation as a brilliant and seminal thinker.

O'Donnell's scholarly contributions can be grouped into four phases. Early in his career, he worked primarily on the origins of authoritarianism in South America, especially in the region's more developed countries. First published in 1973, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* was a seminal work in understanding the origins of modern authoritarianism in Latin America. Unlike many of his contemporaries, O'Donnell recognized that this was a new kind of authoritarian rule. Again unlike his contemporaries, he also understood that this new pattern of authoritarian rule had profound theoretical implications for understanding the relationship between modernization and democracy. He argued that in Latin America at a certain stage of development characterized by the end of an easy phase of import substitution industrialization, modernization generated pressures toward a new form of authoritarianism that he called "bureaucratic authoritarianism." This new form of authoritarianism emerged precisely in the more industrialized countries of South America: Brazil and Argentina. This argument fostered critical rethinking of modernization theory, which posited that more modernized countries are more likely to be democratic.

In a second part of his career, O'Donnell wrote many important works about the nature of authoritarianism in Latin America. Among them was his book on the Argentine military dictatorship of 1966-73, published first in Spanish in 1982 (*El Estado burocrático autoritario*) and in English in 1988. This work emphasized conflicts among the various forces—especially dominant class groups and the military—that had initially supported the dictatorship. Another brilliant work, "State and Alliances in Argentina, 1956-1976," analyzed his country's cycles between authoritarianism and democracy from a political economy perspective.¹ After the 1976 coup, he authored some work that underscored the micro dynamics of authoritarianism that plagued Argentine society during an extended period, but in a particularly horrific way during the brutal dictatorship of 1976-83.²

In a third phase that temporally overlapped somewhat with the second, O'Donnell was the pioneer in anticipating the wave of transitions to democracy that began in Latin America in 1978. With remarkable prescience, when Latin America was at the zenith of authoritarian rule, he correctly and almost uniquely understood that many of the awful dictatorships then in power were likely to be transient. He analyzed the wave of transitions to democracy that resulted in part from the tensions within authoritarianism that he had studied earlier. Once again, he opened a new research question, hugely important both theoretically and in the "real" world. His 1986 co-edited volume *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule* (Johns Hopkins University Press) remains a classic. It is one of the most widely cited works in political science. O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter famously analyzed transition dynamics in terms of four key blocs of actors: hardline and softline authoritarians, and the

moderate and maximilist opposition. They argued that transition periods are marked by uncertainty with unpredictable outcomes; they rejected structural approaches to transitions.

Beginning in the late 1980s, O'Donnell's attention turned to the severe deficiencies of most democratic regimes, again with a primary focus on Latin America. While countless other individuals observed these same deficiencies, nobody matched his acuity in the theoretical analysis of new issues that revolve around these shortcomings. He coined many important concepts that remain at the core of analyses of contemporary democracy. His concept "delegative democracy" refers to democratic regimes in which the president and congress are democratically elected, but in which mechanisms of "horizontal" accountability are fragile. He contributed seminal articles on informal institutions, horizontal accountability, the rule of law, and the relationship between the state and democracy. Other leading scholars have subsequently taken on these themes as crucial for understanding contemporary Latin America.³ His article, "Democracy, Law and Comparative Politics" (*Studies in Comparative International Development*, Spring 2001), won the Luebbert Prize for the best article in comparative politics, awarded annually by the Comparative Politics section of the American Political Science Association.

As a scholar, O'Donnell always focused on great normative issues that confront contemporary humanity—how to build better democracies, how to ensure more effective rule of law and more even citizenship. In the last two decades, he achieved a judicious balance between criticizing the deficiencies of Latin American democracies while at the same time not indulging in facile criticisms that

could fuel anti-democratic sentiment. He constantly moved on to new agendas, and he consistently opened new research questions that were subsequently understood to be highly important.

His scholarship won him wide recognition. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, O'Donnell won the 2003 Kalman Silvert Award for Lifetime Achievement, given every 18 months by the Latin American Studies Association. He was president of the International Political Science Association from 1988 to 1991, and also served as vice-president of the American Political Science Association from 1999 to 2000. In 2006, he won the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Political Science Association. He was the recipient of countless other fellowships and awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship.

At the University of Notre Dame, O'Donnell played a pivotal role in creating and developing the Kellogg Institute for International Studies. As Kellogg's first academic director, he defined an exciting research agenda for the institute and built an outstanding program of visiting fellows.

Indicative of the nearly global reach of O'Donnell's work, it has been translated into Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, and of course, English. In recent years, several leading Latin American universities awarded him honorary PhDs.

O'Donnell was born in Buenos Aires in 1936. He received his law degree from the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1958 and his Ph.D. from Yale in 1988. He left Argentina in 1979 as his country experienced its most repressive dictatorship of the twentieth century and moved to Brazil, where he worked at the University

Research Institute of Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ) in Rio de Janeiro from 1980 until 1982 and at the Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP) in São Paulo from 1983 until 1991.

O'Donnell was a person of deep passions and commitments. From 1966 on, he despised military dictatorships, and he also had contempt for quotidian abuses of power. He had great insights into the foibles of his own country even though he was in many respects a world citizen. From the 1990s on, he was critical of mainstream U.S. political science, just as he had been in his pioneering *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*; he believed that the quest for scientific rigor had sometimes led to neglecting great questions and focusing on the less important. He had a refreshing ability to change his thinking. Having been the pioneer in thinking about issues of democratic consolidation, he later rejected the concept.⁴

Throughout his career, O'Donnell posed fascinating new theoretical questions about tremendously important developments in the contemporary world. He was a deeply learned person who always drew upon the antecedent scholarship, yet one of his extraordinary gifts was recognizing new questions and new problems that had not hitherto been addressed. He stands as one of the most important thinkers about democracy and dictatorships in the history of political science.⁵

A similar version of this tribute appears in the April issue of PS: Political Science & Politics.

Notas

- ¹ *Journal of Development Studies* 15 No. 1 (October 1978): 3-33.
- ² Three of these essays were published as chapters 3, 4, and 5 in O'Donnell's *Counterpoints: Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).
- ³ For example, see Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, eds., *Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
- ⁴ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7 No. 2: 34-51.
- ⁵ For O'Donnell's perspectives on authoritarianism, democracy, political science, and his own work, see the lengthy interview with him published in Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder, eds., *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), pp. 273-304. ■