

Guillermo O'Donnell: A Remembrance

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Guillermo O'Donnell died in November 2011 at the age of seventy-five. He had returned to Buenos Aires after many years of teaching and research abroad, in particular at the Kellogg Institute of the University of Notre Dame. Although a versatile and cosmopolitan citizen of the world—on a short visit to Ireland he rediscovered a forgotten identity as William of Donegal—he was also and ultimately a true *porteño*.

I first met him at the Wilson Center, in Washington D.C. when he was on the academic council of the Latin American Program, which was beginning to set up what became the famous “Transitions from Authoritarian Rule” project. He was already internationally celebrated for his writings about the bureaucratic authoritarian state and for his leadership of the Center for Studies of State and Society (CEDES) in Buenos Aires. But by the end of the 1970s the “dirty war” had made critical scholarship work in Argentina ever more impossible, and the best social scientists of the Southern Cone were being forced into exile and scattered around the western hemisphere. The Carter administration had taken up the cause of human rights, and—at least for a while—parts of Washington seemed to provide something of a shelter.

In the beginning the “transitions” project was more about “thoughtful wishing” than hard evidence based analysis. There were some historical and theoretical reference points, of course, and the post-Franco creation of a Spanish constitution was a particular source of encouragement. But no one knew whether even Spanish democracy would prove durable, and there were good reasons for doubting whether any lessons from Madrid would prove readily transferable to Buenos Aires or Santiago. In a pattern that was to be

repeated throughout his career, Guillermo allowed his theorizing to run ahead of the facts, imagining possible scenarios that other less gifted analysts might have dismissed as fanciful. He encouraged well-grounded thought experiments that were driven by what he could persuade himself was possible and desirable, rather than limiting his model-building to what might seem firmly predictable. That is why the celebrated green fourth volume of the “Transitions” project (written jointly with Philippe Schmitter during a period that the three of us spent together in Florence in 1984) was entitled “Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies.”

Some might think that imagining possible scenarios that one would like to see realized would be a recipe for fantasy and self-deception, and indeed there are many examples of just such a pitfall. But Guillermo was no naïve idealist. He had been through a rough and tumble of Argentine politics ever since his teenage years at the wrong end of the Perón regime. He had learnt his comparative politics from such judicious authorities as Robert Dahl and David Apter. And he had seen how utopian illusions had misled his Popular Unity friends in Chile. So the scenarios he imagined were well grounded in experience, and attuned to some underlying standards of decency that were perhaps better embedded outside the political arena than within it.

To illustrate this theme one incident particularly sticks in my memory. To the best of my recollection, at the beginning of April 1982 he phoned me about the Transitions book project. “Have you heard the promising news?” he asked me. I was all too aware that Mrs. Thatcher had just authorized the dispatch of a naval mission to retake the Falkland Islands/Malvinas from General Galtieri, a venture that

I regarded as perilous in the extreme. “You seem to think this is good news,” I commented, perhaps feeling less confident than he was about how such a confrontation must unfold. “Because Mrs. Thatcher will bring democracy to Argentina,” he replied without hesitation. (Even then my enthusiasm was less than his. In that case, I replied, “Argentina will probably bring a decade of Thatcherism to the UK.”)

Throughout a versatile and fecund lifetime career Guillermo produced many striking analytical insights, sometimes identifying phenomena before they were fully realized. For example, his “delegative democracy” article can be seen as a precursor of Chavismo in Venezuela. Indeed I have teased him with the suggestion that the Venezuelan ruler must have studied his article carefully in order to conform so closely to its specifications. But this analytical skill was not just the product of exceptionally broad comparative experience and a brilliant intelligence. It was also grounded in some deep personal commitments. He was instinctively opposed to the bully. It may be that his own physical disability (he had polio as a child, and always had to cope with one very weak leg) reinforced that trait. That may help to explain the underlying structure of his imaginative thinking.

Again, an example may be pertinent. As President of The International Political Science Association (IPSA) he was presented with a particularly delicate political dilemma. It would have been a great coup to recruit mainland China into the fold—this was, I think, shortly before the 1989 crackdown. But Beijing would not countenance any such move unless Taiwan was expelled from the association. I doubt whether Guillermo had that much prior knowledge of the intricacies of

Chinese internal politics, and I suspect that the KMT regime was not particularly to his liking. But as he explained it to me subsequently, the issue was straightforward. Whatever the secondary arguments, it was essential to stand up to the bully. Taiwan could not be expelled if it was not at fault, simply because a more powerful actor demanded obeisance.

Many years later Guillermo and I visited President Chen Shui-bian in his palace in Taipei. The democratic ruler seemed remarkably similar to the authoritarian predecessors who had sat in the same chair. He had little time to take advice from us visiting experts in comparative democratization (an urgent appointment with Ambassador John Bolton cut short our time before Guillermo could deliver his full remarks). It was not to curry favor with the Taiwanese, or out of any illusions about the quality of their democratic commitments, that Guillermo had taken his stance. It was simply a duty to resist intimidation.

Although he is best known for his large scale and theoretically elaborated works in macro-comparative politics, at least one of his early writings should be highlighted here to demonstrate the range and diversity of his talents. “¿Y a mí, qué me importa?” *Notas sobre sociabilidad y política en Argentina y Brasil* (Estudios CEDES, Buenos Aires, 1984) does not appear in the bibliography of his final magnum opus, but it is—in my opinion—a minor jewel and a clue to his sources of inspiration.

Fortunately he lived long enough to see the publication of his final book, *Democracy, Agency and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent*, (Oxford Studies in Democratization, 2010). This took up most of his energies in the last few years of his life, and draws together the major

themes he had worked on for so long. This is not the place for an extended review of that major volume, which I was privileged to help produce. It may suffice to quote one sentence of conclusion that can stand as a testimony to his standpoint:

If my life is enriched by a diverse social context, I should recognize that it is my interest that all individuals, or as many as possible, have the necessary conditions for freely choosing their own functioning under the conditions established by law of an (at least) partially democratized state.

A thoughtful wish, worth imagining—but not one that has been realized as yet. ■