

Introduction of Recipient, Stefano Varese

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Washington, DC, June 1, 2013

On rare occasions the opportunity arises to introduce someone in a professional setting who is in equal parts inspirational colleague and dear friend. This makes the task a special honor, but also a formidable challenge. The prestigious Diskin Lectureship is certainly not about objectivity with a capital O but is meant to celebrate our fullest capacities of critical reflection. Some might argue that these capacities lose their edge under the influence of memories spanning some 25 years of companionship, entwined families, weekend adventures, and pauses for serious analysis followed by a burst of irreverence, another *copa*, and laughter—always lots of laughter. This introduction will advance the counterargument and leave it to you to decide.

It is especially fitting that Stefano Varese has received this award, because he is among a dwindling but hardy crew who knew Martin Diskin personally and worked closely with him. I have the strong sense that they were kindred spirits. Although the lectureship was founded to recognize extraordinary lifelong commitments to activist scholarship, Martin had an even more bedrock quality, of which Stefano is also a master connoisseur: the sage ability to maintain both an intense reverence for the weight of history and an abundant appreciation for the dance of life. Stefano's generosity, kindness, and mild-mannered ways are legendary—so much so that at times the other side of his character can take you by surprise. I have a vivid memory, from early in our time together at UC Davis, when a visiting Peruvian intellectual gave a presentation framed by racially tinged premises of criollo arrogance; Stefano took him on with eloquent vehemence, delivering a powerful *précis* on the weight of Peruvian history which, he suggested, his esteemed colleague would do well to learn.

His steely critique was a bit of a conversation stopper, and everyone did seem slightly taken aback; but I am sure the quiet also expressed deep admiration.

In the good tradition of Mariátegui, Stefano is a committed historical materialist. A rigorous political economy lens shapes his view of the world and frames his scholarly analysis. Here, that same balance comes into play in a slightly different way. It is no secret that indigenous and native peoples of the Americas have suffered considerably from various political projects of Marxist inspiration and generally harbor almost as much distrust for their Marxist “allies” as their adversaries on the right. For nearly a half century, Stefano has navigated this contradiction with a creative sensitivity that makes his approach to indigenous cultural politics unique, challenging, and always provocative. From early on, he advanced sharp criticism of the racism and developmentalism that Marxists so often have taken on as baggage, and he forged deep ties of commonality and shared vision with indigenous communities throughout the Americas. Throughout, he also maintained a sophisticated *longue durée* Marxist analysis of capitalism, and in so doing brought together ideas and people that in most settings would remain separate. Theoretical virtuosity? Certainly. But perhaps more fundamentally, this balance is best understood as a theoretical expression of how he has chosen to lead his life.

What an extraordinary record of scholarly *acompañamiento*, of “witness to sovereignty” (to borrow the title of Stefano's most recent book) these four decades have produced. It is a symphony in three movements, an *obra de teatro campesino* in three acts, with a special coda yet to come. The first movement took

place in his native Peru, where Stefano took his doctorate from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú; taught at the renowned San Marcos University, where he served briefly as chair of the department of anthropology; and soon thereafter began work as director of the División de Comunidades Nativas de la Selva, in the government of Juan Velasco Alvarado, to conceive and implement a program of recognition of indigenous rights to territory in the *selva*. His principal credential for this job was his dissertation on the Ashaninka scholarship that yielded an early, prescient break with the dominant tradition of community studies—which depicted indigenous peoples as frozen in their own premodern space-time—and instead analyzed Ashaninka engagements with broader political economic forces. This work, later published as *La sal de los cerros*, became a classic, translated into English and reprinted numerous times.

The second movement took place in Oaxaca, Mexico, where Stefano and his wife Linda lived for a decade and where he headed the Ministry of Education entity for indigenous development, called Culturas Populares, under the national leadership of the visionary Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. Here Stefano founded and advanced a wide range of projects, from bilingual-bicultural education, to artisan production, to novel forms of political organization, subverting the state-centered ideology of *indigenismo* and replacing it with an approach that came to be known as “ethno-development,” which emphasized cultural integrity and political autonomy. In Oaxaca he continued the established pattern of carrying forward an intensely productive research program on indigenous Oaxaca, which ran parallel to the ethno-development projects that he led.

In the mid-1980s the third movement began when the family moved to California. Stefano eventually joined the faculty at UC Davis and played a formative role in building the premier department of Native American studies in the country, which defends a truly hemispheric approach to the field. Here Stefano's research program expanded yet again, fully taking on the diasporic dimensions of indigenous cultural politics, accompanying the binational Zapotec organization Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB) from its founding days with a documentary film as well as a prodigious record of scholarship on transnational indigenous identity, demography, and most recently, epistemology. The Native American Studies department at Davis also took full advantage of his well-honed skills as political organizer and diplomat: he served as chair for many years and invested heart and soul in the vision of a program of Native American/indigenous studies that would stay true to its revolutionary roots while transcending the deeply entrenched North-South boundaries.

All three movements were cumulative in topic and scholarly focus. Stefano stayed fully engaged in Oaxaca scholarship while living in California, and in recent years he has been drawn back to Peru to revisit work with his Ashaninka *compañeros* of some 40 years past. Three features of remarkable continuity mark these engagements over a half century. First, a striking number of these scholarly projects over the years have been collective (including the LASA-sponsored study he carried out with Martin on Miskitu-Sandinista relations in Nicaragua), and for anyone who knows Stefano it is simple to understand why: they are conceived with a social purpose that attracts others, and his charisma seals the attraction. I can hardly think of a conversation shared with Stefano

since I met him in the early 1980s that did not generate spontaneous energy and excitement for some project or another. Second, Stefano, though in many ways the consummate scholar, has always made practical political engagement an integral component of his scholarship. (This commitment is what first brought us together: in my rabble-rousing graduate student days at Stanford, Stefano had just moved from Mexico to the Bay Area, and we had read his work. "This was the kind of anthropology we wanted to learn! We want him here, *carajo!*") From 1971, when he formed part of the visionary group of intellectuals who signed the first Declaration of Barbados, to his later participation in the historic Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Human Rights of the Indians of the Americas, to the anthropology-inspired initiatives of *Culturas Populares*, to his association with transnational indigenous organizing in "Oaxacalifornia," to his bureaucratic trench warfare at Davis undertaken with skill and acuity that would have earned an approving nod from the Maestro Gramsci—in each space and phase, his work as a scholar has reached its fullest expression when immersed in, and mutually informed by, social and political action. That is the essence of the lectureship for which we are honoring him this afternoon. A final element is Stefano's deep generosity of spirit and contagious enthusiasm for the dance of life. This may well be the key to everything else: it provides a daily reminder of the utopian ideals of social change to which he has devoted his career; and it is most certainly collective, depending on the full participation of others, especially Linda, his lifelong dance partner, who always keeps him focused on what really matters most.

But this last part is just my speculation. Soon we'll have the full story from Stefano himself. Rumor has it that the coda, still in the works, is a memoir, in which Stefano will provide his own reflections on an extraordinary life and an inspiring life's work. Let this public announcement be a further inducement: we are waiting to read these reflections! And in the meantime, perhaps we'll hear an early installment, as we congratulate the 14th recipient of the LASA/Oxfam America Martin Diskin Memorial Lectureship, and welcome Stefano Varese to the podium. ■