

2013 LASA/OXFAM AMERICA MARTIN DISKIN LECTURE

# Eulogy of Utopian Praxis: From Dystopian Reality to the Research of Hope

by STEFANO VARESE | University of California, Davis | svarese@ucdavis.edu

I am grateful and extremely honored to have been named recipient of the LASA/Oxfam America 2013 Martin Diskin Memorial Lectureship. I am very pleased by this honor because of my long-standing and loyal membership and participation in LASA, one of the best professional associations of social studies and the humanities in the hemisphere. I thank the members of the Selection Committee: Chair Aldo Panfichi Huamán, of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (my alma mater); Peter H. Smith, of the University of California, San Diego; Richard O. Snyder, of Brown University; and Gabrielle Watson, of Oxfam America. I also thank Milagros Pereyra, Executive Director of LASA, and the friends and audience gathered here. Special abrazos cariñosos to Vilunya, Leah, and Aaron Diskin, in celebration of those years spent in San Felipe del Agua, Oaxaca, playing and dreaming in Spanish and English.

In the fall of 1998 at the 21st LASA meeting held in Chicago I delivered a brief tribute to two friends and colleagues who had left an irreplaceable emptiness in the Latin American anthropology community, in the community of hope, and in the personal life of innumerable indigenous people, peasants, the poor, and—why not—scholars. Martin Diskin and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla knew each other well since the 1970s, when Oaxaca had become the home of Martin Diskin and his family—his wife Vilunya and children Leah and Aaron—and when Mexican anthropology was being swept by the innovative initiatives of Guillermo Bonfil, who, as director of the INAH, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, was decentralizing the institution, sending teams of social scientists to the *Méjico profundo* that lay hidden under the official mirage of modernization and the expansion of the corporate market economy.

Later, I published the short homage in Spanish as an article in *Desacatos*, the scholarly journal of CIESAS-Istmo of Oaxaca (the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social).<sup>1</sup> What I intended to do in that homage, besides retracing the parallel anthropological paths of Diskin and Bonfil, was to ask why in the past one hundred years of anthropology in the Americas, especially in the United States, we have seen so few examples of sociopolitically committed activist anthropologists such as Martin Diskin and Guillermo Bonfil. Why was it so hard to find names and life histories of scholars and intellectuals that would resonate among the poor, the underprivileged, the commoners, the peasants, and the indigenous people as much as the lives of Diskin and Bonfil did? I realize that in our age of impersonal globalization, anonymous transit through existence as one more commodity or as a mercantile electronic persona living the illusion of world fame through a computer monitor, it is becoming increasingly difficult to extricate real people from the cyber net of the anonymous and famous impersonators. Books, articles, written documents, declarations, poems, and especially popular oral storytelling are still the sources through which we must reconstruct the life histories and intellectual journeys of stubborn thinkers and obstinate activists like Diskin and Bonfil. These names and their memories are living in the Miskito and Creole communities of Nicaragua and in the Zapotec, Mixtec, Maya, Pur'epacha and dozens of other indigenous and *mestizo* pueblos of Mexico, Central America, and the United States as proof of Antonio Gramsci's assertion that popular memory is true and therefore always revolutionary.

Having aged in synchrony with Diskin and Bonfil, at their premature deaths I started

to feel what one Spanish philosopher (Unamuno or Ortega y Gasset?) called “generational solitude”—that mystical sentiment that makes it difficult for me to remove from my address book names and addresses (even e-mail addresses) of friends and colleagues that have crossed the river and left us behind to wonder about the mysteries of cosmic justice. I find a profound sense of justice in the progressive loss of vital energy that establishes the natural chronology of biological decay of each one of us in the company of all our relatives: the animals, birds, fish, insects, amoebas, and all other entities tangible and intangible that constitute our precious cosmology. What I find more difficult to grasp and accept is the arbitrary and capricious early death—by car accident and by chronic disease—of two intellectual activists whose longer lives and political and social activities would have bettered the world for all of us.

Martin Diskin and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla belong to the same generation as Mexican and Latin American anthropologist-activists Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Salomón Nahmad, Nemesio Rodríguez Mitchell, and myself, and engaged North American social anthropologist Michael Kearney. We were all born between 1930 and 1940 in Latin America, Europe, or the United States. We grew up in the highly contested post-WWII Pax Americana, we were all subjected to anticommunist brainwashing and its miseducational process, and we all had to sort out in our early reading between the bourgeois interpretation of the world and the socialist (Marxist) rewriting of history. We had to build our cosmology in the contested, bipolar, and contradictory domains of the utopian hopefulness of socialism and the dystopian resignation of liberal capitalism. We were strongly influenced by the previous generation of thinkers born in the decade 1920–1930:

C. Wright Mills and Noam Chomsky in the United States, Darcy Ribeiro and Paulo Freire in Brazil, and Ivan Illich in Europe, Latin America, and Mexico. We recognized that these intellectuals were also and most importantly political activists who were willing to risk their academic stability and their professional lives to put into action what they had understood in theory.

I believe that the Marxist idea of *praxis* began to make sense to our generation precisely when we stepped into fieldwork (or should I say into the minefield of working with the rural and urban poor). This research was supposed to be objective, neutral, empirically disinfected, and focused on discrete socio-geographical spaces: the community, maybe the surrounding region, but never the country and its nation-state, and absolutely by no means the larger continental and world dimensions.

I speak in plural precisely because as a social scientist and a humanist I am obliged to acknowledge that ideas and practices are always social and collective and very seldom the personal possessions of the single individual. Praxis became for us literally free action, the activity and creativity exercised in freedom, without the restraining conceptual devices of our conformist and conventional discipline. Praxis, therefore, as free creative activity for our generation, aimed at changing and shaping ethical, social, political, and economic life in the direction of a more just, egalitarian, and humanistic world community. Some of us chose the party, others the labor movement, others social movements, others occasionally ended up working for revolutionary or at least reformist governments. And eventually, in Latin America since the 1960s, my generation of activist-anthropologists landed in jail or were deported or in

voluntary exile. The two decades of 1960 and 1980 were lost in Latin America for any open, progressive social movement. Military dictatorships ruling by torture, death, and disappearances took brutal control of two-thirds of the continent and millions of human beings, putting on a silver plate the resources and the subjugated labor forces of our countries to be used by corporate capital and the various Republican or Democrat administrations of the United States. The Pax Americana already stained by the war in Vietnam became unbearably bloody in Latin America.

In the early 1980s I accompanied Martin Diskin to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in a fact-finding mission of a LASA Task Force charged with analyzing the human rights situation of the indigenous and creole communities.<sup>2</sup> The military actions of the Contras, supported and financed by the Reagan administration, had wound down and the Sandinista government was reshaping the relations of the central revolutionary government of Nicaragua with the emerging indigenous forces seeking the regional autonomy of the Atlantic Coast. In my somewhat arrogant naiveté as an activist anthropologist who had worked for the revolutionary government of Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru of the early 1970s, and with a younger brother who had fought as an “internationalist” with the Sandinista insurgents and reached a high-ranking military position in the Sandinista Army, I thought that there was very little that I could learn about activist anthropology from this “gringo” friend from MIT and Oaxaca. Now, after 30 years, I can easily confess my condescension—so Latin American, so stereotyped, so unfair, and especially so confused. Martin Diskin guided me through the roughest and most troubled ethnic/racial political waters of

postwar Nicaragua with a profound sense of humanity, justice, unprejudiced dialogic ability, and a down-to-earth and elegant sense of humor that I later identified as part of his Jewish heritage. What I saw in Diskin in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua was praxis at large in the true original Aristotelian sense: *praxeis* supported by *theoria* and *poiesis*. Knowledge in its three basic kinds: theoretical, practical, and poietic (the production of something, in this case the superb LASA Report on the human rights situation in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua).

I do not know for sure if the LASA Report was taken seriously into consideration by the Sandinista government. I know that sometime later I met briefly Comandante Tomás Borges and other Sandinista officials, and that the attitude of the Nicaraguans from the Pacific Coast regarding the indigenous and creole peoples of the Atlantic had gone through a radical change, admitting a series of misjudgments and ethnopolitical errors committed by the Sandinistas due to their ignorance of the anthropological reality of the Atlantic Coast. Here I must stop for a moment and make a special tribute to two younger activist anthropologists who played a fundamental role in promoting a democratic political process of ethnic plurality in Nicaragua (and other parts of Latin America): Charles Hale and Edmund Gordon (both at the University of Texas, Austin, and both activist members of LASA).

Nicaragua in the 1980s—like Peru and Chile in the 1970s, El Salvador in the 1980s and 1990s, and the four decades of genocidal war in Guatemala—became a testing ground for anthropologists and other social scientists to choose between social justice and cultural and political democracy or the professional rewards of

ethical indifference and the theoretical abstractions of mainstream academia. A limited number of anthropologists throughout the Americas would read and find in the tortured history of the peoples of Latin America the obligation to commit to popular causes and disregard the allure of academic fame, instead investing time, intellect, emotions, and imagination in the task of transforming the cool analytical discipline of observation into the burning and often muddy peoples' struggle for their own liberation. As in the case of the interdisciplinary programs of ethnic studies that had their origin in the social and civil rights movement of the 1960s, conceptual and ethical innovation and liberation of conscience emerged from the praxis of the people's struggle and not precisely from the monastic cloister of the conservative university, where professional merits are accumulated in proportion to the distance that scientists establish from the people's cause. I am a witness of this existential transformation, having migrated early in my academic life from anthropology in Peru, to 25 years of activism in Peru and Mexico, to return to nonmainstream academia in California as professor of Native American/indigenous studies at UC Davis.

I would argue that the small minority of anthropologists who have chosen activism are ideologically, politically, and conceptually connected to the various ethnic agencies that since the civil rights struggle of the 1960s have constituted themselves into interdisciplinary programs and departments and have infiltrated the rigid and outdated structure of the university. To use a United Nations metaphor, ethnic studies programs are increasingly becoming "refugee camps" of "indigenous" researchers/instructors who otherwise would have been marginalized and excluded by fundamentally

ethnocentric and Eurocentric institutions. In a sense we can say that activist anthropologists and indigenous intellectuals have met on a common ground of ideas and action coming from two different ways of counterhegemonic construction. The intercrossing boundaries of the different disciplines and humanities that are brought to life by ethnic studies and activist anthropology are radically reconfiguring the epistemology of the new decolonized social science, a science that puts at the center of research and social practice the multiple histories and aspirations of the people rather than the reiterated domination of a Euro-American mode of knowledge.

The long and tortuous process of decolonization in the Americas began almost immediately after the European invasion. More than four hundred years ago the Andean Indian intellectual and Quechua speaker Guamán Poma de Ayala wrote the famous letter to the Spanish King Philip III, a manuscript of more than a thousand folios and hundreds of drawings in which Guamán launches the first critique of European colonialism and proposes a "buen gobierno" that would restore Inca social justice and cosmological order. At the same time in Mexico the Nahua intellectual Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin was writing the history of Mexico in Spanish and Nahuatl, comparing his native society with that of the European invaders. Those critical indigenous narratives did not vanish throughout five centuries of European colonial occupation; they went underground or morphed into metaphors and symbolic rituals, or reconfigured as adapted cosmologies and new utopian aspirations. These are the narratives and cultural heritage that today constitute the core of Native American/indigenous studies in the Americas: an ancient and new

multidisciplinary field of critical knowledge and alternative epistemology where dozens of intellectuals like Vine Deloria Jr. and Robert Warrior, colleagues like Jack Forbes, David Risling, Inés Hernández-Avila, Victor Montejo, and Guillermo Delgado, and old friends from Amazonia, the Andes, and Mexico and Guatemala are testimony to the endurance and intellectual sovereignty of ancient and yet truly contemporary people.

I often have asked myself this question: Can we abandon dystopia? When did we start to neglect utopia and assume dystopia? When did we begin to take for granted that the world we live in is irremediably unchangeable, that it is a good world the way it is, with a few hundred thousand people living in imperial luxury and billions of human beings (and other beings) barely surviving or becoming extinct? When did we start to accept as normal that 1,300 international corporations with a concentrated and politically articulated nucleus of 147 companies—the "centralized elite of power," the 1 percent of the world population—can rule at will over the rest of us, the billions of humans and other beings that constitute our world?<sup>3</sup> Can we, members of the local and global civil society, continue to be blind to the fact that this transnational corporate class protects its international capital, its indecently acquired wealth, with the concentrated power of the military empire increasingly denationalized and privatized?

In the last 50 years the rules of the game have changed radically. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, class and anticolonial struggles had clearly demarcated dividing lines between the oppressor and the oppressed, between capital and labor, between empire and colonial subjects, between political society

and civil society. Hegel's idea that the civil society was a valuable and inevitable aspect of modern social life, a counterbalance to the power of the state and the political society, was still functional. In the last few decades the idea and practice of civil society has become increasingly blurred and vague to the point that nowadays in Latin America we accept that nongovernmental and grassroots organizations can be financed by governments and political parties in power or foundations linked to transnational corporations of the global North. Our margins of independence and autonomy as local and global citizens are becoming increasingly narrow and uncertain, and so are our fundamental rights to choose and shape our political society. We are asked to participate in a cyclical electoral ceremony, a kind of imprecise and commoditized gambling game that is conducive inevitably to slight changes of the guard within the same monolithic and impenetrable club of the "rich, famous, and corrupted" elite.

Let me go back almost 20 decades in Euro-American history and present a central argument that I would like to consider as the premise to a larger discussion about social and political activism in anthropology. Almost 170 years ago three anonymous editions of a short pamphlet titled *Manifesto of the Communist Party* were published in London. Marx's and Engels's names appeared only 24 years later in the Leipzig edition of 1872, when the title was changed to *Communist Manifesto*. Starting with the *Manifesto* and the following construction of Marxism as a discipline for social theory and practice, the long-standing utopian tradition of the Mediterranean/European world, which had become lethargic since the Renaissance and almost died out with the Enlightenment, reappears with a central role in the European social imaginary. The

ideal of a better world, or an upside-down world of peasants and popular imaginations, a world that can be recomposed, reorganized to improve the living conditions of each member of humanity, becomes now not only the catalyzing idea of popular hope but also a consubstantial part of the social sciences and humanistic intellectual work. While liberal humanism and sciences insist on interpreting the world (and accepting it), post-Marxist humanism and social sciences aspire to know the world in order to change it and make it better.

The socialist project proposes a theory of knowledge and a science that operates on the implicit assumption that the world must be changed and that the intellectual (natural or organic) has an active role in this enterprise, a role that goes beyond observation and "objective" theorization of the phenomenon. The Cartesian "cogito, ergo sum" is being complemented and finally eroded by a new dictum, "I act, thus I exist"—act as expression of praxis, as creative action and production. Or as in the "existentialist" words of André Malraux referring to the anticolonial struggle in Algeria: "I resist, thus we are."

The establishment in Latin America of praxis as the methodological fulcrum of activist anthropological research created a watershed between two scientific humanistic and value systems: on one side the positivist, unlinked, objective mode of knowledge that is basically unconcerned with the social and political consequences of research, focusing more on the advancement of social theory; on the other side research programs that put at the center of their activity the goal of intentionally transforming social reality through praxis. I could argue that Latin America social science was better positioned than the social sciences from

Euro-America and other Third World/peripheral regions to accept a nonconformist, less conventional, and more progressive use of anthropology. From the end of the nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth century, anarchism and socialism played important roles in the construction of a utopian, revolutionary social consciousness. I can mention only a few names: anarchist Manuel González Prada and socialists José Carlos Mariátegui, Víctor Haya de la Torre, Luis E. Valcárcel, and Hildebrando Castro Pozo in Peru; indigenous Quechua-Aymara intellectual Fausto Reinaga in Bolivia; postrevolutionary Mexican intellectuals Vicente Lombardo Toledano and young Manuel Gamio; indigenous political leader Quintin Lame in Colombia; and Peru's Quechua poet and anthropologist José María Arguedas. All these and other intellectuals, most of them of indigenous ancestry, created an environment in which we young Latin American anthropologists in the 1960s understood clearly that the theory and practice of anthropology were founded on the ethical premise and the epistemological imperative that this was the science of the people, at the service of people and their causes and for the architecture of the new social utopia.

By the time that modernization theory, under the leadership of Harvard University sociologist Talcott Parsons and Kennedy political appointee Walt Rostow, arrived in Latin America with all the prestige of "the northern wind of innovation," Latin American anthropologists had developed strong antibodies by reading Marxism and decolonization texts. We had absorbed the writings of Amílcar Cabral and understood his position on the fundamental role of culture in the national liberation movement; we had read Franz Fanon's and Albert Memmi's critiques of colonial ethnic discrimination and racism; we had enjoyed

Aimé Césaire's poetry of liberation and understood Jean-Paul Sartre's analyses of French colonialism. We were becoming familiar with all those young European ethnologists trained in critical theory and post-Marxism such as Maurice Godelier, Claude Meillassoux, Pierre-Philippe Rey, and Georges Balandier. But we were also following the debates taking place in U.S. academia about the role of anthropologists in the Vietnam War and the imperial use of anthropologists in Latin America and South East Asia. Gerald Berreman, Kathleen Gough, and Noam Chomsky became part of our vocabulary. Armed with these ideas and ideals we were ready to analyze and discuss the validity of modernization theory, which stated that the rural poor and the indigenous people were poor because they were obsolete; they were not modern; they lived at the margins of the market economy and thus were unable to take advantage of modernity.

You may remember that during the JFK administration the ideas of modernization of Talcott Parsons and Walt Rostow were put into practice by creating the Peace Corps as a kind of mission of modernity. We in Latin America, at the receiving end of these ideas and practices, were astonished at their naiveté. Where was the class analysis? Where were the attempts to understand economic exploitation, political oppression, and racial and ethnic discrimination? The indigenous peasants are not poor because of their culture, they are not powerless because they organize their social life according to their cultural heritage and therefore they must abandon their way of life and turn themselves in an impoverished carbon copy of the urban lower middle class or proletariat. The irony of this period of our common history—for those of us from the global South and the young U.S. Peace Corps members from the global North—is that

most of those from the North became like us from the South. On a personal note I can say that some of my best friends and colleagues, progressive and socially conscientious social scientists and activists, were trained not by the Peace Corps program but rather by the appalling Latin America social reality. This confirms that it is praxis that does the trick. It is praxis as an exercise that verifies knowledge and becomes proof of truthfulness.

In June 1971 a dozen Latin American anthropologists accompanied by a U.S. ethnologist expatriate to Mexico and an Austrian social scientist met on the island of Barbados under the sponsorship of the World Council of Churches to discuss the situation of the indigenous people of Latin America. The Barbados I meeting, as it became known, produced an impressive volume of denunciations of human and ethnic rights abuses by governments, missionaries, the private sector, and even social scientists, together with a short declaration that soon became a banner for some of the emerging indigenous organizations of Mexico and Central and South America. The Spanish edition of the book, published in Montevideo, never reached the shelves of bookstores: it was burned by the Uruguayan military dictatorship. This was a curious act of racist zeal and political conservatism, since Uruguay is one of the few countries of Latin America that does not have a substantial indigenous population. No indigenous people were present at the meeting of Barbados I. It would take another six years for the Barbados group to convene a larger second meeting of 35 participants, 18 of whom this time were active militants of the indigenous Latin American movement. Some of the indigenous members of Barbados II traveled to the island clandestinely. The Guatemalan Maya and the Colombian

Nasa/Páez participants were actually risking their lives by being at the conference. Finally in 1993 the Barbados group (III) met in Rio de Janeiro, 23 years after the first meeting, to mourn the death of one of its most enlightened members, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, and to address again old indigenous issues of neocolonialism, wars, land eviction, genocide, human rights abuses, and cultural destruction, now implemented by the transnational community of capital and presented as the inevitable price to be paid by the weak to allow for the globalization of the economy and the establishment of a "new world order."

The three Barbados meetings can be read as a synopsis of 25 years of intellectual activity and praxis of a minority of Latin American anthropologists accompanying the indigenous peoples' movement of liberation. The declaration of Barbados I, "For the Liberation of the Indigenous People" (1971) was a strong denunciation and demand to the state, the church, the private sector, and social scientists to satisfy the basic human and ethnic rights of the indigenous people. Barbados II (1977) reflected both the Indians' and anthropologists' activism and direct involvement in the social movement of liberation, assuming all the risks of such a decision. Some of the indigenous participants and some of the anthropologists were already living either clandestinely in their own countries or in exile. The declaration of Barbados III, "The Articulation of Diversity" (1993), evaluates the last 25 years of Latin American anthropology and its contributions to the Indian struggle of decolonization. There is little optimism in this assessment, which recognizes the ethical distortions of contemporary theoretical meandering and the self-gratifying solipsism that disguises the lack of commitment of academic

anthropology to indigenous peoples' liberation struggles, and for that matter to the struggles of the oppressed. Finally Barbados III recognizes that, at the end of the century, the Indian movement of the Americas is a fundamental factor on the international scene that will have to be taken into consideration in any major decision regarding world peace and development.

Just a few weeks after the meeting of Barbados III, on January 1, 1994, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Chol, Tojolabal, and Zoque Maya Indians of Chiapas organized into the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) and declared war on the Mexican government, quickly establishing the military occupation of four major municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico. An indigenous army of eight hundred combatants occupied the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, seized the municipal palace, proclaimed their opposition to the "undeclared genocidal war against our people by the dictators," and described their "struggle for work, land, shelter, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace." The Maya Zapatista movement, which has survived and grown for almost 20 years, has had a tremendous influence on the rest of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas and the world. I also believe that the Maya people from Mexico and Guatemala and all the other indigenous peoples of the Americas mobilized against oppression and exploitation have forced anthropologists and social scientists to reconfigure their assumptions about indigenous peoples/Native Americans and their own commitments to their struggle for ethnic liberation and political sovereignty.

At the end of this talk I would like to argue that activist anthropology does not emerge necessarily from the proverbial ivory tower of universities; rather it takes shape and is constantly reformulated through social, cultural, political, and ethical praxis. As in the case of Martin Diskin, activist anthropology is formed by walking together—anthropologist and the people (indigenous or not)—the long, winding, and always contradictory collective journey through the dystopian reality toward our common utopian world.

#### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Stefano Varese, "Crítica de la razón distópica: Homenaje a la imaginación utópica de Martin Diskin y Guillermo Bonfil Batalla," *Desacatos, Revista de Antropología Social*, no. 10 (2002): 189–194.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert, Salomón Nahmad S., and Stefano Varese, *Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: A Report of the LASA Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom* (Pittsburgh, PA: Latin American Studies Association, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Nemesio J. Rodríguez, "Pueblos indígenas amazónicos: Apuntes para una utopía discreta," in *Selva vida: De la destrucción de la Amazonía al paradigma de la regeneración*, edited by Stefano Varese, Frédérique Appel-Marglin, and Róger Rumrill (forthcoming), chap. 10. ■