

Silvert Reminiscences Project: A 50-Year Dialogue with Kal Silvert

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It was spring term 1962 at Dartmouth College, and I was sitting in the office of Professor Dick Sterling, who headed the International Relations (IR) program. I had finally been allowed to declare IR as my major (Dartmouth did not let students declare a major before the end of their sophomore year) and Sterling was advising me on my program for the next year. I had decided to spend the summer in a rural community development program in Mexico under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee, thereby initiating and indicating my interest in Latin America. Professor Sterling suggested that I take Government 49, Latin American Politics, with a new professor who was a noted expert on the region, Kalman Silvert. I resisted, thinking that perhaps it would be better to wait a year, but Sterling pointed out that there was no guarantee how long Silvert would be at Dartmouth. Strike while the iron was hot. So, I decided to take the course. I did not have the slightest clue as to the impression Kalman Silvert would make nor that I would begin an argument (discussion) with him that still engages me.

Fall 1962: We were seated in one of the larger lecture halls in the college, probably around a hundred young men. The hall was tiered like a theater. Below and in the front was a podium with a blackboard behind. The man who took his place at the podium was somewhat rotund, with a large head, balding; he was not much to look at. Professor Silvert had walked in with a couple of books, that was all. He started speaking and we were spellbound. We remained so for the next ten weeks as he interwove stories about Latin America with concepts about politics and U.S.–Latin American relations.

This was the fall of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Kal, who had been an informal

advisor to the Kennedy administration on Latin America, gave us his analysis of the event a week or so after it was over. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, he argued that although the risk of nuclear war had, indeed, arisen, it had not increased nearly as much as the conventional view thought it had. This was because, in Kal's analysis, the Soviets had knowingly crossed a line with regard to spheres of influence and were not likely to go to war over their own violation of a tacit international understanding. Was Kal right? I am not sure, but his perspective certainly adds depth to the traditional analysis and corresponds to what the USSR, as a rational actor, should have done.

Although his view of the Missile Crisis was classic realism, Kal was not a purist. The point he continually drummed into us in Government 49 was that politics was the result of the relationship between values, institutions, and power. In this, he was making what in IR would have been called an idealist argument (of the liberal variety), but Kal was essentially a comparativist and here his theoretical approach was somewhat unorthodox. The conventional comparative theory at the time was structural functionalism, which continues to be the dominant paradigm today. Nevertheless, Kal's approach challenged it and, while it was harder to use, showed far more promise in terms of being both explanatory and predictive. The problem was just how to operationalize it—something I have been wrestling with for 50 years and have never quite succeeded in doing. Despite this difficulty, the relationship between values, institutions, and power informs the way I see the world, even when I can't articulate it explicitly.

Kal applied this formulation of the overarching nature of politics to a number

of quite specific concepts. Democracy was one. His definition of democracy, while well within the mainstream of political science, is both clearer and more specific than most. It has three components: 1) Leaders are chosen in free, fair, competitive, and periodic elections in which the electorate consists of a majority of the adult population; 2) There must be sufficient freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly (organization) to organize and advocate for policies, parties, candidates, and ideologies to contest elections and influence policy decisions; 3) There must be an independent and impartial mechanism for the settlement of secular disputes; usually this is a court system. Fifty years later, I still use this definition and apply it in all my courses, both undergraduate and graduate. I have made one change and that is to remove the word "secular" from the final criterion, something I suspect that Kal would argue with me about.

One beauty of his definition of democracy is that it is clearly operational. A government is either democratic or it is not. But, as Kal would argue, if it was not democratic, then what it was became a really interesting question. Although he recognized significant variety among democracies, this variation was extraordinarily limited compared to the differences among nondemocratic states.

I took only one other course with Kal. Unlike the Latin American course, it was a seminar on development. The course met about the same time as Kal's superb edited volume, *Expectant Peoples: Nationalism and Development* (1963), was published. Kal brought in a number of his chapter authors, colleagues from the American Universities Field Staff, who offered differing but congruent perspectives on the subject. Among those Kal invited to speak

to us was Albert Ravenholt, who had written the chapter on the Philippines. In the discussion, someone made the comment that there are always opportunities to influence what is happening in the environment in which one finds oneself. It was something that Kal had always done and advice that I took to heart and applied during my field work in Peru as well as during duty as a staff officer in the U.S. Southern Command in Bolivia, Peru, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama.

In Kal's class, as in *Expectant Peoples*, Kal introduced us to the philosophical underpinnings of his view of nationalism, which he traced from Machiavelli through Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, and Marx, with a nod or two to Coke and the American Constitution. This approach so intrigued me that as a graduate student at Indiana University in political science, I retraced his steps in a major paper. It took me many years, but I finally made the link between Kal's concept of democracy and his concept of nationalism. The fact is that they are intimately related in his usual optimistic point of view. As I worked in an urban community development project in Mexico shortly after graduation from Dartmouth; or in Peruvian highland villages while researching my dissertation; or in trying to assist Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Panamanians in establishing and developing democratic institutions in the face of insurgencies and the aftermath of dictatorships, Kal's wisdom guided the things I attempted to accomplish. What I always looked for was something within the host culture that could be built on in ways that would advance what Kal called the "social value of nationalism" within the context of democracy as he had defined it.

After I graduated from Dartmouth and went off to Indiana, I saw Kal once at his home in Norwich, VT. He fixed us hot

dogs and graciously gave me permission to use in my own research the questionnaire he had developed for use in his studies of nationalism and developmental politics in Latin America. It was simply another example of his generosity in sharing all he had with colleagues and students—because I never ceased to be his student.

The last time I saw Kal was at LASA in San Francisco in 1974. I was giving a paper based on my research using his survey instrument in Peru, an aspect that had not made it into my dissertation. I was also in the queue to become the president of the North Central Council of Latin Americanists. One duty en route was to be program chair and to line up the principal speaker for the meetings. The 1976 meeting was to be held at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, where I was teaching, and I was sure Kal would be the perfect speaker. I discussed it with him and secured his tentative agreement.

As the meeting approached, I wrote to Kal to coordinate his visit to Wisconsin. By that time it was too late. I received a beautiful letter from Frieda, his wife, telling me that Kal had passed away. Yet, as far as I was concerned, he was still very much alive. I had not yet, and still have not, fully assimilated his thoughts. He remains after 50 years my intellectual mentor and sparring partner. ■