

Silvert Reminiscences Project: Kalman Silvert as a Colleague at New York University

by CHRISTOPHER MITCHELL | New York University | chris.mitchell@nyu.edu

I was Kalman Silvert's colleague in the New York University Politics Department for five years, from my arrival at the university in the fall of 1971 until Kal's death in the summer of 1976. I was a junior assistant professor, and Kal was an academic star with 20 years' experience: full professor, author or editor of a half-dozen books, founding president of the Latin American Studies Association, and a leader in international social science. He directed NYU's federally funded Ibero-American Language and Area Center (IALAC), which granted an interdisciplinary master's degree in Latin American studies. For the first two years that we shared at NYU, I taught at NYU's University Heights campus in the Bronx. Nonetheless, I saw Kal quite often at the university's main Washington Square campus—at department and committee meetings, at events sponsored by IALAC, at graduate oral exams, and on social occasions. From 1973 until 1976, we both worked at Washington Square.

In the Politics Department and at the Latin American center, Kal was a formidable presence: attracting, teaching, and mentoring graduate students, organizing speakers' series and conferences on Latin America, debating university policies with colleagues, and linking the university with his international network of individual scholars, associations, journals, and foundations. I had known Kal only through his work before I came to NYU, but he welcomed me cordially and drew me quickly into the interdisciplinary work and the outreach activities of IALAC. I rapidly grasped the elements of his profile: gregarious, learned, opinionated, energetic, focused on broad social trends and consequences, and far more alert to moral and ethical concerns than most scholars (then or now). Kal never put on airs based on his rank or professional prominence. Instead, he focused on what colleagues at

any rank were planning and learning, and he was always ready to use his prestige as leverage to assist a junior colleague's grant application or fellowship request.

In New York, Kal Silvert had multiple professional responsibilities. At NYU, he was both professor of politics and director of IALAC, which received so-called Title VI government grant funds, based on peer-reviewed competitions. Simultaneously, Kal served as social science adviser at the Ford Foundation. In the years I knew him, Kal taught exclusively graduate students. To simplify his teaching schedule, he arranged for his two courses per semester to be scheduled back-to-back on a single evening each week. Kal's work at Ford required considerable travel, in addition to meetings and extensive paperwork at East 43rd Street. Beyond all this, Silvert maintained an active research agenda that led to several new books in the mid-1970s.

Most scholars and teachers would be fortunate to perform effectively in two or three of these roles; Kal excelled in four or five of them at a time. In addition, he tried to protect his time with his family, amid calls to attend research conferences and to make foundation-related site visits abroad. I recall how, in one of the first years that I knew him, he remarked that he had turned down an invitation to a symposium abroad that was slated to take place over Thanksgiving. "There just *have* to be limits," he observed.

As an adjunct to his diverse roles, Kal and Frieda Silvert and their sons maintained, in effect, a social and intellectual salon, combining the social and the intellectual with a strong focus on the Western Hemisphere. In what may have been an index of the university's interest in attracting Kal to Washington Square, he and his family enjoyed a double-sized

apartment in Silver Towers, an I. M. Pei-designed high-rise building on the NYU campus. Two (large) standard units had been connected to make a single apartment, providing panoramic views facing both east and west across lower Manhattan. On an evening, one was likely to meet visiting scholars or political leaders from Chile, Argentina, Europe, or Mexico. The varied elements in Kal's network thus strengthened and drew sustenance from one another. He also maintained a group of warm friendships within the Politics Department, including specialists in fields that were distant from his own.

Kal Silvert's relationship with students was especially in the foreground in New York in the early 1970s. He had attracted a dedicated circle of aspiring Latin Americanists, and his graduate teaching centered on sharpening their awareness of social theory and on preparing them for field research. When, occasionally, his travel schedule made him miss a teaching week in New York, Kal would often arrange for a major figure in political science or sociology as a guest leader in his seminars; I remember one week when Gabriel Almond was called on to fill that role. Kal also had a special gift for turning oral examinations into tutorials: the traditional semi-adversarial interface between candidate and committee was almost entirely replaced by a cordial, thoughtful, shared intellectual search, in which students came close to being treated as full colleagues.

The federal Title VI program began operations in 1966, two years before Kal came to NYU. During his years at the head of IALAC, he was helping to invent the role of international studies center director. In doing so, he created an academic and collegial legacy for his successors in IALAC (which was renamed the Center for Latin

American and Caribbean Studies, CLACS, in the mid-1970s). Within IALAC, as elsewhere, Kal espoused interdisciplinary and international scholarship and teaching, maintaining strong ties with the humanists at Washington Square as well as with researchers from diverse Western Hemisphere nations. This approach recruited allies for the center in varied academic units at NYU and in numerous U.S. universities, foundations, and research centers abroad. Though I never heard him articulate this view formally, Kal clearly understood that area studies centers are a structurally endangered species in the U.S. academy, since they usually lack tenure lines and large budgets. By forming strong links to a diverse transnational network, Title VI programs can both fulfill their missions and gain needed resources and prestige that assist them in competing for campus resources. In later years, many of us at CLACS found ourselves asking, “What would Kal have done in today’s circumstances?” and usually finding very constructive answers. The center today is a vibrant contributor both to NYU and to Latin American and Caribbean studies internationally.

Kal’s responsibilities as a colleague at New York University were particularly tested during the university’s financial crisis in 1972. NYU in the early 1970s was pressured by societal circumstances and by its own internal dynamics. Huge and sprawling, with more than 40,000 full- and part-time students, twelve schools, and five campuses in two city boroughs, the university was both tuition-driven and ambition-driven. A traditional ladder for social mobility that relied heavily on part-time students, even in PhD programs, the institution was also a member of the research-oriented Association of American Universities (AAU) and set its academic sights high. It borrowed to expand and

modernize its facilities, especially to build a flagship library covering a small city block in Greenwich Village.

Beginning in 1968, economic recession and reductions in draft deferments spurred a drop in NYU student enrollments, while inflation added to the university’s costs. These pressures, which brought on chronic deficits that lasted until 1974, painfully revealed the contradictions in NYU’s improvement-on-a-shoestring strategy. The institution’s countermeasures stressed budget cutbacks, posing dilemmas for many faculty members, including Kalman Silvert.

Academic year 1971–1972 was exceptionally stressful for Kal. IALAC’s federal funding was not renewed (this was reversed in later decades), and he determined to step down as center director. Early in the spring semester, the NYU administration announced plans to sell the University Heights campus in the Bronx to New York State in order to cut deficits and replenish the endowment; departments were soon asked to recommend deep cuts among junior faculty as well. Kal was a member of the Politics Department’s powerful Personnel and Planning (P&P) Committee, which spent many hours going over the résumés of instructors and assistant professors in political science.

This was a tense and taxing period for faculty members at all ranks: the dean of arts and sciences at University Heights, for example, wept openly at the meeting where the campus’s sale was revealed. Sometime in April or May, Kal circulated a letter to department members in which he resigned from P&P in protest against its assignment to single out many junior colleagues to lose their jobs. In a department meeting held soon after his letter was released, he decried the damage that would be done to

emerging careers, and referred to the university in notably harsh terms.

At an almost surreal meeting in July 1972, the P&P Committee recommended that five (unnamed) junior department members be terminated, as part of measures to achieve a staggering 24 percent reduction in the unit’s budget. Along with a minority of colleagues in Politics, Kal protested. His passion for effective civic participation was aroused, applied in this instance to the academic community. Kal stated that he would no longer vote in department meetings, since policy was being dictated by the administration in an atmosphere where faculty participation was lacking. The slate of firings (whose content was widely known informally) was reluctantly accepted by the department’s majority; ultimately a sixth colleague was also discharged when two early retirements could not be negotiated.

Possibly Kal’s severity was warranted at that juncture. His defiant refusal to conform did not prevent fully two-thirds of the Politics junior staff from losing their positions. However, the spirit of his bold stance may have helped to bolster a determination—which has been effective until now, in decades when NYU has both developed and prospered—that such an event must never happen again.

Though the financial emergency perhaps contributed to Kal’s decision to leave New York four years later, his critical attitude did not undercut his standing with departmental colleagues. His strong sense of departmental patriotism and his keen ambition for the university were amply on view a few years later, when the New York State Department of Education reviewed all New York doctoral programs in political science. The Education Department has the power to terminate any university degree

Section Reports

program in New York, and the NYU administration was apprehensive about how the Politics Department would fare in the state evaluation. Kal would have none of it: “We must go in with our dukes up,” he argued, helping to energize a department that, as matters proved, scored very well in the official assessment.

Kal also helped to launch an effort at NYU that brought together his commitments to intellectual freedom, Latin American democracy, and human rights. Following Pinochet’s coup in Chile, Silvert assisted in setting up a network to obtain academic positions in the United States for Southern Cone scholars who had been forced into exile. New York was an ideal central location for such an undertaking. IALAC, under director Juan Corradi, provided office space and some staff, and Bryce Wood stepped in to administer the project.

Kalman Silvert, in summary, was an accomplished, memorable, and creative colleague at New York University. Avoiding any factional allegiance within departmental politics, he was modest, unselfish, energetic, and steadfast enough to censure the institution when he believed it was in the wrong. For colleagues at all ranks, but especially for younger ones, he provided an example to be emulated. Pressures that tend to erode collegiality have never been lacking, and revisiting Kal’s standard of academic conduct reminds us of what colleagues can and should achieve together. ■

Asia and the Americas

Adrian H. Hearn, Chair

On May 30, 2013, at 7 p.m., the Section for Asia and the Americas held its business meeting. This was the second meeting since the Section changed its name from “Latin America and the Pacific Rim” at the 2010 LASA Congress and the first since Adrian Hearn (University of Sydney) was elected Section Chair in 2012. During the meeting, Kathleen López (Rutgers University) and Adrian Hearn were elected to serve as Co-chairs for the period 2013–2014, and the following Executive Committee was elected: Vladimir Rouvinski, Treasurer (Universidad Icesi), Sean Burgess (Australian National University), Monica Dehart (University of Puget Sound), Enrique Dussel Peters (UNAM), R. Evan Ellis (National Defense University), Junyoung Verónica Kim (University of Iowa), and Zelideth Rivas (Marshall University). The chair informed the meeting’s attendees about the Section’s activities over the preceding 12 months:

On May 29 the Section hosted a pre-Congress workshop in partnership with the Inter-American Dialogue, entitled “China, Latin America, and the Changing Architecture of Transpacific Engagement.”

The Section website has been frequently updated with announcements of events related to Asia-Americas connections and information about members’ activities and publications. The Section has grown to 82 members, a satisfying outcome considering that many other sections have contracted in size.

In preparation for LASA2013, panel proposals were coordinated via e-mail for those interested in presenting on the topic of Asia and the Americas. Shortly before the Congress, e-mails were sent to the

member list with details of all such panels. The Section will continue to offer its members these services ahead of LASA2014.

Bolivia

Guillermo Delgado P., Chair

Este XXXI Congreso Internacional de LASA ha sido en general muy fructífero en cuanto a los paneles organizados por la sección. Se presentaron, a lo largo del congreso, más de cincuenta ponencias con temas bolivianos. La sección fue acreedora de seis becas de viaje lo que hizo posible la presentación de dos paneles, ambos apoyados por miembros de la Sección. LASA colaboró en diseminar la información correcta de la sección en el programa, así como efectivizar la presencia de los ponentes y becarios invitados. Otro panel organizado por Núria Vilanova, en la que uno de los becarios de la Sección contribuyó como panelista (Mauricio Souza) fue muy concurrido. La Sección acordó organizar un panel pre-congreso, realizado en la sede de la Universidad de California (UC-DC) cuya Directora la Prof. Melanie DuPuis (colega de Guillermo Delgado), nos ofreció un espacio para que muchos miembros de la sección pudieran conocerse, conocer a los panelistas, e intercambiar intereses comunes. LASA colaboró anunciando este evento en el programa general. La sesión pre-congreso se utilizó como un espacio para presentar a los becarios de la Sección quienes ofrecieron versiones cortas de sus ponencias al público en general. También se aprovechó ese momento para socializar e intercambiar saludos entre congresistas, y para ofrecer publicaciones que los panelistas trajeron a la reunión. Este evento fue útil ya que hubiera sido imposible que todos los congresistas asistieran a todos los paneles