

Kal Silvert: A Personal Appreciation

by TOMMIE SUE MONTGOMERY

que Kalman sustentaba en conversaciones, en artículos y en libros (ver, por ejemplo, *The Reason for Democracy*, 1977).

A raíz de mi incorporación en el Joint Committee del Social Research Council junto con Fernando Henrique Cardoso y Osvaldo Sunkel tuve oportunidad de reunirme en New York con Kalman y su colaborador, Joel Jutkowitz, continuando el intercambio relativo a la naturaleza de los problemas latinoamericanos y de sus posibles soluciones democráticas. Al tiempo que compartíamos con Frida y sus hijos no cesaba de advertir que cualquier solución autoritaria era contraria a la dignidad humana y tenía una deriva criminal, como lo mostraban las experiencias nazi-fascista y las versiones estalinistas.

En uno de esos viajes, la noticia de la muerte de Kalman Silvert me conmovió. Perdía un amigo y un valioso interlocutor con el que hoy podría seguir compartiendo ideas, proyectos y hasta esperanzas. ■

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Kalman Silvert was, at first, just one more name on a text that was required reading in a Latin American politics course at a southern university in the late 1960s. *The Conflict Society: Reaction and Revolution in Latin America* was an important introduction to the region and an antidote to the comparative-development tomes that were all the rage. This was a book that made Latin America and its people come alive in all their complexity rather than reducing them to numbers and generalizations about the extent to which they didn't meet Western (read North American) standards of progress and development—and probably never would. I kept *Conflict Society* close at hand.

In 1970, with my academic career on the verge of disaster, I looked for another graduate program at which to complete my doctorate. New York University offered the program of choice so I applied. Kal was at NYU by this time; he was close friends and colleagues with a senior individual from my current institution, and Kal argued for, indeed shepherded my application through to admission. If it weren't for Kal Silvert, I wouldn't have some fancy initials hanging after my name and I would not be writing this.

Kal welcomed me to NYU as though he had known me forever and made it clear that I should call on him for help and support as needed. It didn't take long. About six weeks into my first semester I was totally overwhelmed by a far more demanding program than I had left. Doubting whether I could make it, I called Kal and he invited me around to his famous apartment on the south side of Washington Square.

I don't remember much of the hour-long conversation, but I will never forget his words as I took my leave: "Remember,

Tommie Sue, your success is as much *our* responsibility as it is yours." That was the first—and only—time in my life that a teacher acknowledged his and his colleagues' role and responsibility in the academic success of their students. Heretofore my experience and observation was a dominant if not universal professorial attitude that "if you make it, it's your glory; if you fail, it's your fault."

I know, because Kal once told me, that I wasn't the only doctoral student he had "rescued" from a dysfunctional program. In this case, a doctoral candidate at Yale had the rug pulled out from under him during his dissertation defense. Kal participated in the oral review of the dissertation, under Yale's system, the only defense of a dissertation. The student's adviser gave a glowing review of the work to date. However, when the dissertation was presented in its final form, the same adviser refused to defend it and raised new issues that went to the heart of the dissertation and its thesis, framework, and analysis. For the professor in question the dissertation did not merit a pass and, indeed, was so flawed that revisions were out of the question. Kalman Silvert thought the action of the adviser was arrogant and his comportment unreasonable and unethical—and said so. Kal brought his student to NYU. Within a year the student had his doctorate and went on to a successful career.

It was clear from these experiences that Kal Silvert did not suffer fools; I was honored and delighted to be excluded from their company.

Later, in a course with him, I was continually impressed by the ways in which he drew students into the conversation of the day, getting all of us to think and to use our analytic abilities and improving them

as the semester continued. The course was a joy, but my only clear memory of that term has nothing to do with Latin America. It has to do with Kal's sartorial choices. Kal never wore a tie unless he had to; his preferred shirt (as I recall) was a mock turtleneck. But Kal always wore a shirt and tie to class. One afternoon a student asked him why. His answer surprised us: "It is my way of honoring the classroom," he said.

Man's Power: A Biased Guide to Political Thought and Action, published in 1970, was Kal's attempt to put down on paper his overarching theory of political action in the broadest sense. One sentence has remained with me: "Ideology," he wrote, "is the set of ideas around which people organize for political action." Ideology, then, is not just—or even—an "ism." In the 1970s this was (and still is) a refreshing idea. "Ideology" had been usurped by, and then confined to, "communism," "fascism," "socialism." Kal's point was that *all of us* have an ideology, which is informed by our values and worldview. In the United States, Democrats, Republicans, Tea Partiers, Greens, all take political action based on their ideology. One may quarrel with this formulation but its beauty is that it frees the analytical thinker from the strictures of a narrowly defined term.

In the few years I knew Kal Silvert I came to regard him as possibly the most moral man I had ever met. He wasn't rigid but there was no moral ambiguity in him. He knew right from wrong and, in Latin America, this meant knowing that human rights abuses, perpetrated by right-wing, often military, governments, were inexcusable and unforgivable. It meant knowing that people were not poor because of incompetence or sloth; they were poor because they lived in a system that kept them in poverty. And it meant

understanding that U.S. government policy in Latin America was perpetuating these conditions, not alleviating them. These weren't just soft-headed ideas; they were backed up by solid field research (especially in Chile, Venezuela, and Guatemala), rigorous analysis of the data, and the skill to report it in plain English.

Kal was one of two men in my life whose moral clarity was evident and unflinching. The other was the martyred archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero, whom I was privileged to know in the months before his March 1980 death. I like to think that Romero would have agreed with Silvert's analysis (much of what he wrote on Guatemala applied to El Salvador), and Silvert certainly would have appreciated Romero's unwavering ability to speak truth to power.

The relevance of Kal's writings endures to the present. In *The Reason for Democracy*, published after his death in 1976, Kal provided an eerily contemporary description of false patriots: "People who wrap themselves in the flag and proclaim the sanctity of the nation are usually racists, contemptuous of the poor and dedicated to keeping the community of 'ins' small and pure of blood, spirit and mind" (384). This prescient description of a too-large part of the United States' twenty-first-century body politic reminds us how much has been lost in civil discourse over the last quarter-century.

Kalman Silvert's spirit and wisdom are still with us.

Tommie Sue Montgomery received her PhD from NYU in 1977. Two years later she began doing research in El Salvador—and continued there for 25 years. She has held three Fulbrights, published three books and numerous articles on El Salvador, edited two other books, and written many other academic and nonacademic articles. In retirement she writes travel articles and is an award-winning photographer. She resides in Newcastle, Ontario. ■