

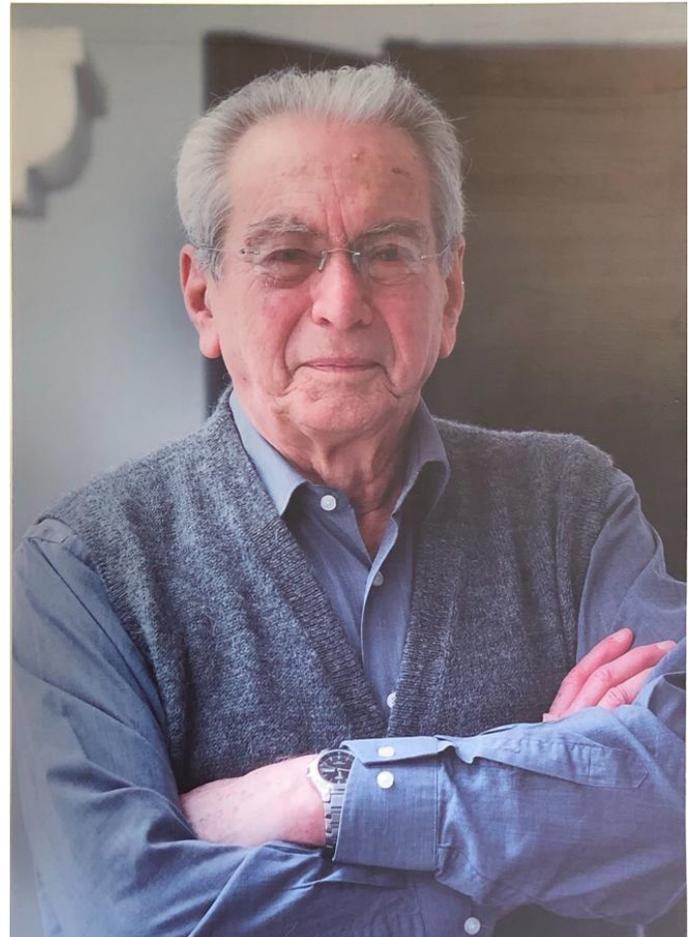
Julio Cotler (1932–2019)

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Julio Cotler, Peru's foremost social scientist of the last 50 years, one of its most esteemed public intellectuals, and a leading figure in the inter-American intellectual community, passed away in Lima on April 5, 2019. Cotler's writings, especially *Clases, estado y nación en el Perú* (1978); his earlier classics on rural Peru; his acerbic analyses of Peru's "Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces" in the 1970s; and his later contributions on the decay of democracy in Peru, on Peru's transition from military rule to democratic governance, on the bases for authoritarian and democratic tendencies in Peru, and on drugs and politics there provide a lasting contribution that will remain a touchstone for all who try to understand Cotler's enigmatic country.

As a social scientist, Cotler recurrently analyzed and emphasized Peru's colonial heritage, its unique structures of power and class, its ethnic composition and conflicting values, its clientelism, and its embedded racism. His concept of the "triangle without a base"—the tendency of marginal groups to establish relations with power in order to gain privileges, but not to associate with each other to promote their own rights—is one of the foundational ideas of the literature on Peru.

Beyond his social science writings, Julio Cotler became and remained for 40 years an indispensable, independent, and critical commentator on his country's society and politics. His periodic media interviews, consistent intellectual honesty, wry wit, and persistent skepticism, combined with eternal underlying hope, made him an iconic and widely respected figure in a fragmented nation. He was often out of step with volatile Peruvian public opinion, but he very often turned out to be right in warning against new conventional wisdoms. In 2006, when Jane Jaquette and I asked a cross-section of Peruvian interlocutors an open-ended question about who



both merited and received broad respect across Peru's multiple divisions, Cotler ranked as one of the three persons most often cited, together with the provisional president who restored democracy after Fujimori's rule and the Catholic University rector who presided over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Cotler was also a region-wide intellectual leader in a generation of Latin American social scientists who began their careers sharply focused on social and economic injustices and were passionately committed to helping overcome these, but who

came to believe that liberal democratic ideas and institutions provide a better path to achieve these goals than revolutionary zeal and violence. His contributions in this vein, in Peru and across the region, were among the reasons the Latin American Studies Association honored Cotler with its Kalman Silvert Award for lifetime contributions to Latin American Studies in 2012. Together with others who have won that award, including Guillermo O'Donnell, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Albert O. Hirschman, and Edelberto Torres Rivas—and with Kalman Silvert himself—Cotler embodied a deep commitment to recognizing the rights and roles of all citizens in building a polity founded on respect, and to resisting the impulse, whether on the right or on the left, to impose one's own values and beliefs on others.

I met Julio in 1969, only a few weeks after I began working in Lima as a Ford Foundation officer. From the start, he was open and engaging, as he was with many international social scientists, to whom he asked almost as many questions as he answered.¹ We began to talk frequently—often over *café glacé* and a *cortado*—exchanging impressions about the nature, sources, and likely trajectory and meaning of the Velasco Alvarado military regime, thought by many at that time to be something new under the sun, a strongly reformist if not outright revolutionary agent of radical change. We discussed the messianic colonels and their civilian advisors, who were at the heart of Velasco's undertaking, and the uneasy relationship between fundamental military concepts of authority and the notions of “full participation” they claimed to be implementing. With his gift for the pungent phrase, Cotler pointed out that the military concept of “participation” was that of a military parade, and that the Velasco government's apparent aim to find an authoritarian path to democracy was an inherent contradiction. I sensed Julio's ambivalence, as the seductive efforts of key leftists to mobilize him into their political activities against the regime drew him briefly into uncharacteristic polemics, which led directly to his deportation in 1973 and forced him to live abroad with his family for several years.

I would underline Julio's self-conscious evolution over time—as a social scientist, as a public intellectual, and as an international professional—toward a strong commitment to liberal democracy. He came to understand and value its checks and balances, procedural designs and underlying attitudes, and how these can enable consensus building, compromise, and incremental progress and can restrain ideological imposition and repression from any quarter. He emphasized throughout the decades, and not just in the current environment, that the quotidian practice of effective democratic governance is always challenging, not only in Peru and Latin America but also in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, and he was deeply concerned about what is happening in the United States today.

Julio's evolving approach emerged from what he characterized as a life full of serendipitous “accidents and contradictions,” but it was also grounded upon core ethical values, particularly commitments to social equity, individual freedom of expression, and respect for others. He imbibed these values in part from his family's cultural traditions and their lived personal experiences, including his father's eight or nine years of constant migration—from Bessarabia (Moldova), to Shanghai, San Francisco, New York, Brazil, back to Europe, and finally to Peru. He also developed these from his youth as the only family member of his generation born in Peru, and the only one educated in a secular private school. As a teenager, he was a student leader in the Jewish community, but then, leaving that community, he engaged in the intense student debates and politics of San Marcos University and subsequently in Arequipa, where he was imprisoned for a time for his radical activities.

From an early age, as José Luis Rénique has astutely noted, Cotler sought to understand Peru, both from inside and with passion, and as an external observer. He was at first quite attracted to Marxist concepts and doctrines but came to observe and criticize how these actually functioned in practice. He was allergic to arrogant utopianism and condescending manipulation of the underclass, traits he criticized in Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara, just as he berated the presumptuous sense of superiority of Peru's oligarchy. His attitudes were

also strongly shaped by his fieldwork in rural Peru, then among urban popular movements, and later as an internationally connected and increasingly cosmopolitan intellectual.

Cotler was exposed to, engaged with, and learned from many diverse European intellectuals during his university days at Bordeaux, structural sociologists and modernization theorists with whom he worked in Caracas and at MIT, and other Latin American social scientists whom he met in exile, at conferences, in numerous stints as a visiting scholar at foreign universities, and on their visits to Peru. He worked closely with other members of the Joint Committee for Latin American Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council on Learned Societies, including Hirschman, Cardoso, O'Donnell, and Osvaldo Sunkel. His deep knowledge of Peru and increasingly of other Andean countries, together with his growing comparative experience, made Cotler keenly aware of the importance of deep history and of path dependency. He focused on the role of strong political institutions as a means of securing effective popular participation in governance. "The democratization of society" could not produce democratic politics without stronger state and political institutions, he pointed out.

Although Cotler himself was very much an individual scholar and sometimes an iconoclast, he also understood the importance of building institutions for critical inquiry. He worked with his brother-in-law, José Matos Mar, to co-found and persistently strengthen the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos as his country's major social science research center, and an important space for civic dialogue and debate. He also came to greatly appreciate the work of the Catholic University in Lima, from which he received an honorary degree in 2010, prompting him to offer moving reflections on that university's role.

Julio was devoted to Leonor and their four children and basked in their companionship and achievements. He was a wonderful colleague and friend, loyal and perceptive. A marvelous raconteur and an enthusiastic participant in

irreverent repartee, Julio also greatly enjoyed exchanging theoretical ideas and identifying unrecognized trends.

Our own friendship was enriched when Julio became increasingly interested in international relations, trying to understand how the United States exerted its influence in the Western Hemisphere. After a landmark SSRC conference on US-Latin American relations, co-chaired at the Instituto by Cotler and Richard Fagen of Stanford, Julio and I exchanged several letters about the debates at the conference between a "Latin American bloc" that focused on what they saw as the intrinsically imperialist nature of the United States and dependent nature of Latin America, and a "Harvard bloc," from the United States, influenced by Graham Allison, that emphasized bureaucratic mechanisms and diffuse power centers that they believed shaped courses of action that Latin Americans saw as purposeful and aimed at domination. We came to agree that "no unitary rational actor mastermind determines US policy, but neither does it result usually from chaos and disorder; social and economic forces and entrenched mindsets give rise to recurrent and consistent policies by structuring and constraining the consideration of possible alternatives," as I summarized our agreement, which Julio teasingly called our "Summa Theologica."

Julio had an exceptional capacity to capture large truths by calling attention to small incongruences. An anecdote captures this and other qualities. We were the principal foreign speakers at an annual meeting of the German Association of Latin American Studies in Berlin. During a coffee break, an earnest young Bolivian participant joined us in a conversation and asked me how the US government would react to the possible presidential candidacy of a specific Bolivian figure he named. In an offhand way, I told him that I had no idea how the Carter administration would respond, nor was I sure that *it* had any idea, as its officials had to focus on so many different countries. As the Bolivian walked away, Julio grabbed my shoulder and scolded me with a perfect combination of controlled anger and sparkling good humor. He advised me that I needed to learn what power I had and how to handle it; he pointed

out that our Bolivian colleague would probably infer from my flip response that his preferred candidate would be vetoed by Washington!

Although in his last years, Julio's health gave way, his mind continued to be vibrant, rethinking texts by others and by himself that he was rereading and commenting on in the light of experience and reflection. In every conversation he had something new and interesting to say.

Julio Cotler was *fuera de serie*. May his memory be a blessing and inspiration for many years to come.

Note

- ¹ Cotler's self-described habit of "selecting friendships" from an early age is one of many insightful self-reflections that he shared in remarkable interviews with Martín Tanaka in October and December 2013. In writing this appreciation, I have drawn on many conversations with Julio over half a century, our numerous written and more recently Skype exchanges, Julio's published writings, and the Tanaka interview, which is to be published in a volume of interviews with Latin American political scientists and sociologists, edited by Gerardo Munck and Tanaka. A particularly interesting essay is Cotler's "Combining Ideas and Action," an appreciation of Kalman Silvert published in Abraham F. Lowenthal and Martin Weinstein, eds., *Kalman Silvert: Engaging Latin America, Building Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2016). //