

George A. Collier (1942-2023)

Committed Anthropologist and Bridge with Latin American Critical Thinking

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George Allen Collier died on Tuesday, November 14th in Oakland, California. He was a North American anthropologist specialist in Chiapas, a representative of critical North American anthropology, and an intellectual and political bridge with Latin American theoretical traditions.

As an undergraduate student at Harvard University, he went to Chiapas, in the Mexican Southeast, for the first time in 1960, and since then created an academic and close bond with this territory and its people, that he maintained for forty years. His ethnographic window to understand the Indigenous reality of Chiapas was the Tzotzil municipality of Zinacantan where he lived, worked, and created bonds of ritual kinship. His research contributed to the critique of the culturalist and functionalist perspectives on Indigenous communities that hegemonized Anglo-American anthropology in those years. In many ways, he was ahead of his time, methodologically and theoretically, pointing out in the 1960s the importance of locating Indigenous populations in the global economic processes and analyzing cultural dynamics from a historical perspective. In this way his work made a bridge between the Latin American theories on internal colonialism and the ethnographic work on community characteristics of the Harvard Chiapas Project, by documenting how national economic and global processes influence the social and cultural dynamics of the Tzotzil world (Collier 1975, 1976, 1989, 1990). This openness to theoretical and political dialogues with Latin America characterized his anthropological research and teaching career.

Before knowing him personally, I had read about his research during my undergraduate studies in the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico City (ENAH) in the classic book of Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara *Anthropological*



Photo by Jane Collier

Perspectives on Rural Mexico (1984) in which she reviews distinct perspectives of the Mexican peasant, revealing the theoretical influences of the authors, generally from the other side of the Atlantic or across the Northern Border. Maybe, while not intending it, the author made a very colonial representation of Mexican social sciences, always influenced by the Global North's theories. However, in this book, there was an author who reversed that trend: George Collier, whom she described as influenced by the Latin American Dependency Theories and in dialogue with the work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1973). In contrast with many other North American anthropologists, for George Collier, Mexico was not only a place to do fieldwork but a space of theoretical and political learning. When I had the privilege of having him as my professor at Stanford University, he was the only one who included in his teaching programs authors such as Arturo Warman, Lourdes Arizpe, Hector Díaz Polanco, and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, inviting his non-Spanish speaking students to use dictionaries or to work in a team with those of us who spoke Spanish, in order to enrich these debates. It was because

of his interest in maintaining these academic dialogues that all his books have been published in English as well as in Spanish.

Because he was concerned with making bridges with historians, he co-edited with his colleague Renato Rosaldo and with the historian John Wirth the book *Inca and Aztec States, 1400-1800: Anthropology and History* (1982) that helps us locate contemporary dynamics of Indigenous peoples in long historical processes. Without using the language in fashion today of “decolonizing the curriculum” his teaching always had the intention of opening the epistemic horizons beyond Western knowledge. Because of this concern, he taught with his colleagues in the history department at Stanford the course “The World Outside of the West.” He also taught an introductory course for freshmen called “Encounters” in which he questioned the monocultural origin of the United States, covering its internal diversity and recognizing the internal colonialism that continued dominating the lives of Native American, Afro American, Mexican-American peoples, among others. I was lucky to be his assistant on that course, to learn from his dynamic and irreverent form of teaching and utilizing diverse materials such as audiovisuals, graphic art, poetry, and opera.

His Latin American vocation would be exercised fully when he was the Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Stanford (CLAS) (1983-1990), converting the Bolivar House into a space for theoretical and political debates with visiting professors such as Rodolfo Stavenhagen. As director of the Anthropology Department (1990-1994), he promoted the application to the program among Latin American students and strengthened the bond with CLAS so that the students could be exposed to theoretical debates from other regions of the world.

In a time when many Mexican Marxist anthropologists had opted to do economic research to understand at a macro level the impact of capitalism on Indigenous communities, George Collier recuperated his abilities as an ethnographer to document these impacts on cultural and social daily life practices. Together

with Jan Rus (1995) and Robert Wassestrom (1984), he broke with the ahistorical perspectives of his teacher Evon Vogt, to reconstruct the domination and power networks that the Mexican state had constructed to control the Indigenous peoples. Also in contrast to the idealized perspectives of the Indigenous communities that some Mexican critical anthropologists had, George Collier and his longtime colleague Jan Rus (1995) documented the political and economic power networks of the indigenous world. Their power ethnographies were fundamental to understanding the formation of Indigenous *cacicazgos* (*chiefdom*), the displacements, and dispossessions that gave origin to the present-day urban Indigenous communities in Chiapas. Maybe due to the influence of the feminist perspectives of his life partner, Jane Collier, he also documented the economic transformations that influenced the changes in gender relations and the loss of political and ritual power of women in Tzotzil communities (Collier 1994).

At the methodological level, he also was ahead of his time by using computers IBM and aerial maps – in a time when this technology was not of common use – in order to demonstrate the relation between kinship relations, the internal stratification of the indigenous communities, the formation of indigenous *cacicazgos*, and the transformation in land ownership.

In 1994, when the Zapatista uprising occurred, his studies on political economy and power in the Chiapas Highlands allowed him to contextualize the roots of this Indigenous movement within the framework of broader processes of domination and resistance in his book *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (1994), which was published in English the same year of the uprising, and in Spanish a year later (1995).

This same interest in locating community studies in history and the global economy led him to analyze the impacts of *Francoism* in an Andalusian community in the Sierra de Arcena in Southern Spain. Through meticulous archival work and oral history, he reconstructed the experience of the Andalusian socialists before

the war, and its almost total extermination during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) as well as the repression towards their families during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975) in his book *Socialists of Rural Andalusia: Unacknowledged Revolutionaries of the Second Republic* published originally in English in 1987, and in Spanish in 1992. This pioneering work on rural socialism documented the disappearance or murder of 90 militants in a community of 600 people, showing the world the bloody legacy of Franco at a time when the pact of silence continued to prevail in Spain.

Although his academic work inspired the anthropological research of many of his students, it was his generosity and commitment to building academic communities that most deeply marked those of us who had the privilege of having him as a teacher. Confronting the individualistic culture that neoliberal academia promoted in the 1990s, George and Jane Collier invited us to work collectively, to support each other in writing and do field work together, when this was possible, as was the case with my colleague and friend Liliana Suárez-Návaz and I when we did research with North African migrants in Granada. It was in 1990, within the framework of this fieldwork, that Liliana, Ramón González Ponciano, and I were able to visit George and Jane, Linares de la Sierra, the community that they call in their books “Los Olivos” and witness the affection and respect that these Andalusian peasants had for our professors, decades after their first fieldwork in the area in the 1960s. Their strategies for building community extended beyond the classroom, sharing and connecting their diverse worlds.

His house in San Francisco became a meeting space where George cooked Spanish recipes for his students with a love and skill that made those culinary memories one of the most endearing remembrances of our generation. In these monthly meals, we built an academic and emotional community, which 34 years later continues to connect us from Saint Petersburg, Chennai, Madrid, Mexico, Irvine, and Boston. Today there are many of us who mourn his departure, but we also celebrate his life and are grateful for how he marked our trajectories. Jane

Collier, his life partner of more than sixty years, is accompanied in this mourning by her daughter Lucy and her grandchildren, Owen, Mary Fiona, Scarlett, and Kamron, but also by the large transnational family that they both built.

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