Remembering Benjamin Kohl

NICOLE FABRICANT AND ANDREW CANESSA

O ALL WHO KNEW HIM, THE NEWS OF BENJAMIN Kohl’s passing came as a shock. The man who filled a room with laughter, vivacity, and passion was suddenly gone and the appalling irony was obvious: Benjamin Kohl led with his heart and it was his heart that failed him long before his time at the age of 59.

Ben was one of these rare intellectuals whose body of writing and activism were joined by deep political conviction. Ben’s intellectual work focused on the political economy of development, urban studies, neoliberalism, and resistance. He spent the last nine years working in Bolivia on questions of social and political change.

Ben’s personal history—growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, attending public schools, and later working as an auto mechanic and elevator engineer—shaped his intellectual commitment to understand race and class inequality. It was only in his forties that he pursued an academic career. There are very few people indeed, who move from this kind of background to becoming full university professor. He never lost the skill of working with his hands and, more importantly, could never be accused of living in an ivory tower. His gregarious personality and deep sensitivity allowed him to connect to people from very different backgrounds. Keenly aware of the day-to-day practical issues, as well as the imposing structural ones facing working people, he nurtured and deepened these social ties over the years, connecting friends living in the South and North around issues of justice. This combination of fierce intellectualism and deep connection to community informed his politics and academic life.

Ben and his wife, Linda Farthing, have together built a truly transnational activist community, with communal ties between Bolivia and the United States. They have worked to bring indigenous organizers to universities and organizations in the United States and built forums in Bolivia for political interaction and conversations across what has historically felt like an impassable geographic divide. Theirs was an extraordinary partnership in many ways, equally politically engaged with a shared passion, in particular, for Bolivia, and often writing together on a range of publications such as Impasse in Bolivia (Zed Books, 2006) which quickly became the key text for understanding Bolivia’s neoliberal transformations. Linda and Ben spent many months and years in Bolivia since the 1980s and their welcoming home was a center for scholars and activists and where, in fact, many of us met.

It is impossible to do justice to his body of work and life’s commitments in a short essay. Ben Kohl was one of the leading Bolivianistas: his most recent book From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist’s Life (University of Texas, 2011), also co-authored with Linda, traces the life history of indigenous activist Félix Muruchi. The text develops a narrative rich in data and insight about Muruchi’s organizing in the mines and then against neoliberal regimes. Perhaps, most importantly, it offers moving and timely analysis of the political and economic history of Bolivia and the vulnerability of activists who place their bodies on the line. They have organized a book tour this Fall with Muruchi across the northeast coast. This trip will give Félix the opportunity to share some of the struggles of indigenous peoples and activists in the South, while also connecting with activists in the North around issues of inequality and disenfranchisement in U.S. cities. Finally, some of Ben’s most recent scholarship looks at social movement strategies in Bolivia: thinking about the role collective memory plays in creating class consciousness and solidarity. Forthcoming in 2014 (Texas) is yet another book, entitled Evo’s Bolivia: Continuity and Change, coauthored with Linda on Bolivia.

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Ben constantly walked a balancing act, tracing broad-based political and economic theory, while helping to narrate the daily tales of movement activists. In this way, he was able to surface subtle and important connections between global political economic shifts and the daily challenges in Bolivia. Yet what he chose to emphasize in his public and private life stood apart from that of most political theorists because his intellectual work was defined by the daily struggles of the poor and their ability to organize amidst such difficult circumstances.

All the threads he constantly wove—community, politics, teaching, and academia—quilted not just a deep commitment to equality and justice in the present but ultimately the imagination of a different kind of future. CLR James once said that Revolution comes like a thief in the night. But as Marxist geographer Neil Smith (2009) argued, “if there is going to be a heist on capitalism, the thief needs to come with a few tools. Some tools are intellectual ideas; others are tools of the imagination about other possible worlds; still others are our human bodies, but most importantly they are social and political organization for a more humane future.” Ben Kohl knew about tools of all description; he was, moreover, that very rare person who not only understood the importance of each of these tools, never privileging one over another, in the name of an elite self-interest but also integrated them into his daily political practice.

And perhaps this is what Ben Kohl worked towards his whole life, building a toolkit for a more humane future. He never surrendered to the distant and elevated cynicism of the academy—each body of work laid the foundation for this “more humane future.” And so what he left behind is not only an extraordinary body of work but as well the hope that together we can build a more equal and just world, with the right intellectual and political tools. Never have we needed that hope more than we do today. As Benjamin Kohl and Goethe understood, “one earns one’s freedom and life when one takes them everyday by storm.” Let us continue to write, to think, and to act in the name of Benjamin Kohl and to take our freedom and life by storm, as he did every day of his life.

Benjamin Kohl is survived by his wife, Linda Farthing, and their children, Minka Farthing Kohl, and Maya Farthing Kohl. He is also survived by his Andean godchildren, Gavriel Cutipa Zorn, Luli Alarcon, and Clarita Caceres Ayala.

Erratum

A pre-copy-editing file of Kevin Young’s article “Washing U.S. Hands of the Dirty Wars,” (Vol. 46 No. 2, Summer 2013) was inadvertently sent to the printer instead of the corrected one, and a number of errors therefore appeared. The most important:

P. 58: THE SECOND SENTENCE OF PARAGRAPH 3 SHOULD read: “Although historians debate whether U.S. support was decisive in particular cases, all serious scholars agree that Washington played at least an important enabling role.” As published, the sentence incorrectly substitutes the word “active” for “decisive.”

P. 60: IN THE FIRST SENTENCE OF THE PARAGRAPH CITING Herman and Chomsky, “the crimes of U.S. allies” is the author’s wording, not theirs. The copy-edited version also identified the propaganda model by name. The sentence should read: “Coverage of Honduras illustrates what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky call the propaganda model: The crimes of U.S. allies are ignored, and violence and suffering merit attention only when U.S. enemies can be blamed (or when the crimes are safely in the past and the record of U.S. support for them can be forgotten).”

IN ADDITION, A NUMBER OF TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS appear in the footnotes to the article. Corrected notes can be found in the Web edition of the article: https://nacla.org/news/2013/7/22/washing-us-hands-dirty-wars-news-coverage-erases-washington’s-role-state-terror

NACLA regrets the errors and apologizes to the author.