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Obituary

In memoriam Bernardo García Martínez (1946–2017)

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Until recently, I had no idea that I shared an enthusiasm for trolley cars with Bernardo García Martínez (1946–2017), whose death deprived the world of one of its most eminent historical geographers. Since he was rarely given to self-revelatory discussion, there were many other things I did not know about him. Perhaps this was paradoxical for someone who was famous for honest, indeed, sometimes brutally honest evaluations. Asking Bernardo his opinion about a book or paper could be bracing; the same critical facilities could be directed at your work. Sometimes they were: Bernardo never hesitated to correct my mistakes, argue with my politics, or dismiss my interest in certain kinds of historical writing. He once observed that I had let a Mexican colleague off the hook too easily in a review. I was abashed because he was correct. Bernardo's near-legendary intolerance for foolishness was matched only by his perspicacity. This, in turn, framed an erudition that was, if anything, quite intimidating. And yet the erudition was unassuming, worn lightly, as they say. I knew Bernardo could not have possibly visited every Indian pueblo in Mexico, but I would have never put money on it. Much to my regret, I never travelled with him in Mexico. And now I never will.

The circumstances of our first meeting were inauspicious. It was following the 44th International Congress of Americanists in Manchester, UK, in 1982. We were introduced at the home of David Brading in Cambridge by Susan Deans-Smith, who was then Brading's student. Brading, I recall, tried valiantly to engage Bernardo in conversation, while he, as Susan put it, "stared at his shoes." I said little. My reserve was only heightened by my thinking that *this* Bernardo García Martínez could only be the son of the author of *El Marquesado del Valle* (1969), for surely, he was too young to have authored such an accomplished book, which was, in fact, his Master's thesis (1968) at the Colegio de México. When I got over my astonished confusion, which Bernardo regarded with suitable amusement, I began to sense I was in the presence of a scholar of a different order.

Bernardo never said as much. He never behaved that way. He grew visibly annoyed when I made any such suggestion. Not that there was any false modesty to Bernardo, because there was not. As I got to know him and his accomplished wife, Takako Sudo, herself a historian of great depth, humanity and learning, I found that Bernardo had a mischievous sense of humor and a wicked appreciation of irony. These were rarely on public display, but they could be employed when necessary to devastating effect.

While Bernardo was extraordinarily prolific, serving as Editor of *Historia Mexicana* (1974–1982); contributing repeatedly to the *Historia General de México* (various editions, 1976–2010: he was one of four authors to appear in each subsequent reedition), authoring numerous reviews, especially in

Historia Mexicana, and publishing a too little known synthetic account of Mexican history, *Historia de México* (1982), I regarded *Los Pueblos de la Sierra* (1987) as his masterpiece. Based on his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University (1980), *Los Pueblos de la Sierra* was a revelation.

Readers of this journal do not require a rehearsal of his findings there. I had never understood that the spatial conception of the pueblo was a radical European alteration of the altepetl, itself not primarily a spatial but an ethnic entity. I had vaguely understood this in relation to the congregación de indios, but its subtleties and revolutionary implications could easily be missed, particularly by an English-speaking student trained in the United States. Indeed, many of us were taught something very different in our graduate seminars, that is, the essential continuities of language, material culture and spiritual outlook, as if alterations in the concept of place, space, and most basically, of property rights themselves were somehow subordinate, or merely “institutional,” whatever that meant. In some sense, it required a *Mexican* scholar to get this right, and Bernardo did.

Reading Bernardo's work on Mexican regions, *Las Regiones de México* (2008), which he modestly subtitled a “breviario” is another one of those experiences that can only be described as humbling. Here one finds the outcome of a peripatetic career in which seeing was the key to knowing, that is, seeing at first hand. He does not say “I have been everywhere and am describing that I saw,” but that is the clear sense of the organization of the book into *recorridos*, which makes it very much of a vademecum that naturally puts one in mind of the work of Peter Gerhard or of Claude Bataillon. When he provided me with an advance copy of *Señoríos, pueblos y municipios: Banco preliminar de información* (2012), of which he was principal coauthor, I asked how, naively in retrospect, he was planning to convert the contents of the database into some kind of book, Bernardo replied simply, “I wouldn't know where to start.” And who would?

For this very reason, arguing with Bernardo about economic history or social science history American style was usually unprofitable. The urge to generalize or even to ignore realism in the application of some model inevitably ran into Bernardo's reflexive insistence on empirical falsification. Why this particular sort of argument was lost on some of my colleagues in economics could only be ascribed to the rigid dogmatism of which they customarily accused other disciplines. The only time I sensed true frustration in Bernardo was when I was trying to sell him on the merits of some new-fangled way of measuring, counting, or otherwise describing things that only ignorance (mine) would not discount as wrong-headed. In this sense, Bernardo may well have been a little “old fashioned.” Which is one way you might learn the merits of being old-fashioned.

Bernardo lost his beloved wife, Takako Sudo Shimamura, in 2005. Her loss affected him deeply although he never spoke of it. That was simply not his way. I know he had hoped to finish Taka's unpublished work on political thought in early nineteenth-century Mexico, for which he had great respect. Death took him too soon for that.

Bernardo is survived by his son, Alejandro García Sudo, an ethnomusicologist at UCLA. I know of no other immediate relatives in Mexico. His death is a major loss to Mexican history, to his colleagues, and to his friends. García Martínez' brilliant legacy is his work, which will endure.

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