

Kalman H. Silvert: Teacher, Mentor, Friend

Daniel H. Levine

Anything I write about Kalman Silvert has to be both personal and professional. As teacher, mentor and friend, he had a major influence on the shape of my life and helped launch my scholarly career and give it direction. We first met when I was an undergraduate at Dartmouth College, where he was teaching at the time. At Dartmouth I was a Senior Fellow, which meant that I was excused from classes and other obligations during my senior year to do independent research. The work I did with Kal for my senior honors thesis, on the sociology of knowledge, set the intellectual agenda for much of my professional career. With Kal as my guide, I took a year long bath in great ideas, immersing myself in Marx, Weber, Mannheim, Tonnies, Cassirer and others who have contributed to understanding why ideas arise and have an impact on society and culture at particular times and places, and why they do not. The phenomenological perspective, the search for meaning as an essential part of social analysis, and a concern with the relation between ideas and institutions, agents and audiences, have remained constant themes in all my work, whether the subject be democratic politicians, liberation theologians, Catholic bishops, or activists in social movements.

Kalman Silvert was a critically important mentor in my professional life. His influence is the reason I went to graduate school and not to law school. He was the source of the engagement with Latin America that has enriched my life with experiences, lasting friendships, and values that I hold close. He made the initial contacts that

resulted in my coming to Michigan, which was my first job, and where I have remained throughout my career. He generously shared his contacts and experiences as I prepared for field work, first in Venezuela, later in Colombia and Guatemala. After I graduated college, through graduate school and in the early stages of my professional life, we remained in close contact until his early and untimely death.

By teaching and example, Kalman Silvert opened me to new intellectual worlds and helped me to craft a consistent point of view. He had a deep commitment to the truth—to scrupulous scholarship, to telling the truth about politics, and calling things by their real names. He did not tolerate platitudes, euphemisms, lies, or misleading and shoddy work. He was a fierce competitor, but always forthright, never back biting or untrue. These are ideals I have tried to follow in my career.

His influence on the specific content of my work was more indirect than direct. I always associate him with ideas about modernization and development, which have never attracted or convinced me very much. What I learned from him was, above all, the importance of real empathy and real sympathy with the people and cultures we study. He insisted that they are not just a source of data, to be studied and forgotten. They are real, active subjects with independent and valuable voices, and we have as much to learn as to study. This means that we cannot hope to understand their behavior without a systematic effort to understand the world as they see it, to grasp the categories they work with—which may or may not match up neatly with the questions that academic social science has to ask. Attending to this task of recreating meaning is one of the core lessons I learned from Kal Silvert. In my work on religion and politics, especially *Religion and Politics in Latin America* and *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism*, I worked

hard to understand how the world looks through the lens of religious faith, and how faith and commitment find expression in organized social life. I believe that this effort gave new dimensions to the interviewing and life histories and greatly enriched the final results.

Throughout my work I have advanced an argument about the need for a phenomenological approach to social analysis. Kal's influence, and the sources he exposed me to, shaped the way I went about this work. The systematic use of qualitative methods, combining interviews, organizational studies and life histories, is grounded on the conviction that all behavior is meaningful, and that a central task of explanation is to understand meaning as experienced by those involved, working with contexts and connections that have meaning for them. This is what Max Weber meant by the concept of "following a rule", pointing us to the rules people create and follow that give order and meaning to their lives. These rules cannot be just assumed from external indicators: they must be understood and addressed in meaningful contexts. We cannot simply ask the questions of interest to us without making a systematic effort to understand how the issues are framed and understood by those we study. This means that complete analysis cannot be limited to the collection of aggregate data or the application of statistical techniques. We must also address how meaning is created and how ideas are diffused.

In my field work I have also devoted a great deal of time and effort to tracing the social history of ideas—where ideas come from, how pamphlets are produced and distributed, who delivers the message and when and why ideas find a sympathetic hearing and end up changing individual and collective behavior. This kind of work cannot be done from a library or a data bank. To do my work I have swallowed clouds of

dust and waded through seas of mud. I have gone to places where “nobody goes” and I have gotten interviews that “nobody can get”. I have shared tables at city cafes and benches in rural buses with chickens around my feet. The effort can be exhausting but the result is, I think, a much richer understanding of society, culture, and politics than is available through standard social science methods. One learns what it really means to say that ideas have social consequences, how they can take root and change lives and commitments.

Kalman Silvert’s influence is also visible in my work in a consistent effort to bring levels of analysis together, joining the institutional with the popular, what leaders think and say with what rank and file members understand, matching organizational histories and community studies with life histories. This is what C Wright Mills (another author I met through Kal) meant in *The Sociological Imagination* when he insisted that the prime area for sociological analysis was at the intersect of biography and history. That is the intellectual and social space where I have tried to pitch my work. Kal also pushed me to search for explanation *with* understanding, and to seek the general in the particular without abandoning the specific meaning of any event: to generalize as much as possible while remaining faithful to the data.

Kalman Silvert was a valued personal friend as well as a teacher and mentor. I was married while at Dartmouth, and he and Frieda were always warm and welcoming to my wife and to me, in New Hampshire and later in New York. The wedding present they gave to us—a limited edition print by the great Argentine artist Antonio Berni—still hangs in my study. By word and example he helped me learn how to value friends and hold them close. He was a steadfast friend. He helped me learn how to change and to

accept change. As his student and friend I was opened to broader elements of culture—good food, literature, and music. One of my favorite photos has Kal with a violin under his chin. He is ever present in my memory.

Daniel H. Levine

Professor of Political Science, Emeritus

University of Michigan