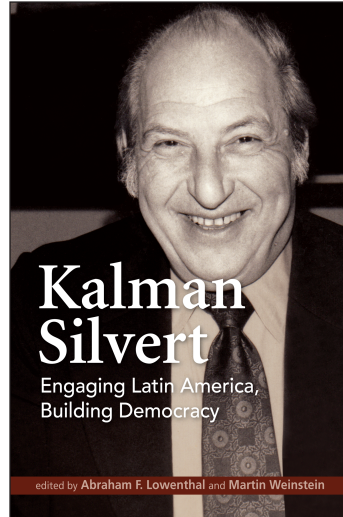


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# Kalman Silvert: Engaging Latin America, Building Democracy

edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal  
and Martin Weinstein

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Prologue	
Kalman Silvert: An Appreciation <i>Ricardo Lagos</i>	1
1 Silvert's Wide-Ranging Contributions and Legacy <i>Abraham F. Lowenthal and Martin Weinstein</i>	7
2 Silvert's Probing and Committed Scholarship <i>Christopher Mitchell</i>	15
3 Silvert's Approach and Methods <i>Daniel H. Levine</i>	41
4 Silvert and Democratic Theory <i>Joel Jutkowitz</i>	55
5 Mentoring a Generation <i>Martin Weinstein</i>	75
6 Nurturing a Transnational Scholarly Community <i>Jorge Balán</i>	83
7 Striving to Improve US–Latin American Relations <i>Abraham F. Lowenthal</i>	91
8 Bringing Vision, Mission, and Values to Philanthropy <i>Peter S. Cleaves and Richard W. Dye</i>	107
9 Combining Ideas and Action <i>Julio Cotler</i>	137

<b>10</b>	Silvert and the “American Dream”	143
	<i>Louis W. Goodman</i>	
<b>11</b>	Silvert as a Public Intellectual	155
	<i>Morris Blachman and Kenneth Sharpe</i>	
	Epilogue	
	Kalman Silvert and Latin American Studies Today	175
	<i>Gilbert M. Joseph</i>	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	181
	<i>The Contributors</i>	187
	<i>Index</i>	189
	<i>About the Book</i>	195

## Prologue

# Kalman Silvert: An Appreciation

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*Ricardo Lagos*

**I do not remember exactly when first I met Kalman Silvert** because one begins to know a social scientist of his stature through his writings and the references of colleagues. I do know that it was sometime between 1971 and 1973, when I was secretary general of the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO). In that capacity, I received an invitation from Kal Silvert to participate in a seminar at the Rockefeller Foundation's conference center in Bellagio, Italy, that Silvert had organized.

I was asked to make a presentation on the development of the social sciences in Latin America. Silvert opened the discussion, inviting us to discuss two points that had emerged in the opening session of the conference. The first was that the social sciences are never completely autonomous, nor should they be completely inverted to look at themselves or be completely integrated with other institutions. Rather, it is a question of nuances (and not of absolutes) in favor of one aspect or another. The second point was that social sciences are never completely national or international, but to a certain degree there is a continuum between both. What is done on a national level slips invariably into the international arena and vice versa.

This way of creating a seminar on social sciences as a system integrated by autonomous and complementary aspects, national and international, illustrates the way Kal Silvert understood the development of the social sciences and how and to what extent they could come to constitute a system within international affairs. Was there a cultural specificity to social sciences, or were they based on universal qualities, as Max Weber argued? Could we infer valid norms for everyone, or is it necessary to pass norms through the filter of regional or national realities?



Taking these questions as a point of departure, I initiated the debate about social sciences in Latin America, alluding to three periods that we could observe in the development of regional social sciences: the most traditional period, when it was somewhat less than professional at best; the scientific period, which I attributed to the contact Latin American social scientists had with what they learned in Europe or the United States; and finally the period of the beginning of the 1970s, of dissatisfaction because such a large portion of mainstream social sciences applied more to the realities of the developed world of the United States and Europe and therefore had to pass through the filter of Latin American reality to see how much was applicable.

Put another way, I observed a kind of intellectual dissatisfaction with the capacity for real transformation of knowledge imported from so-called first world countries to confront our reality. It was precisely on this point that Silvert's perspective proved so illuminating and constructive. I believe that he accepted the post of senior social science program advisor at the Ford Foundation largely because from there he could influence the construction of a perspective that was at once global and regional. With this perspective, it would be possible to explore whether social sciences could have the ability to help explain different realities.

In this seminar in Bellagio I met and came to perceive the human qualities of Kalman Silvert as I came from Chile, which in 1973 was profoundly divided. Chile was then torn between the project of constructing a socialist society through a democratic process—something that had never been achieved—and those who strongly opposed this project. Obviously the division of Chilean society also reached the social sciences, and therefore the theme of the autonomy of social science was at the crux of the discussions, not just for Chile but for many countries in the 1970s. Silvert knew quite a bit about these themes because of his lengthy stay in my country during the 1960s.

In 1975, Silvert decided to continue the conversations of Bellagio, now with a plan that he was carrying out within the Ford Foundation and with the support of other academic entities. For that project he chose to bring together a strong nucleus of social scientists who had the opportunity to study his drafts and comment on them in extensive day-long meetings throughout a year in New York. We had, if I remember correctly, some ten meetings. At that time, after the Chilean coup, I was a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; from there I traveled once a month to the meetings, which began punctually at 11 at the headquarters of the Council on Foreign Relations on Park Avenue. Another colleague was Osvaldo Sunkel, who was then at

the University of Texas, Austin. The seminar was an illuminating experience; Silvert organized those meetings and pushed for probing discussions on key points.

During those years I became acquainted with another facet of Kalman Silvert. From the Ford Foundation, he hurriedly organized a seminar in Lima in October or November 1973 to see how Ford could collaborate and help respond to the fall of the democracies of the Southern Cone, of which Chile was unfortunately the prime example—how the foundation could help keep alive scientific thought under these adverse circumstances.

I recall with strong emotion his role in the Ford Foundation, which was indispensable in supporting and helping many scholars leave their country in the face of grave danger. The role that Peter Bell played was also fundamental; he was the representative of the Ford Foundation in Chile at the time of the coup and was urged by the foundation to abandon the country, but he stayed for a while to take charge of these important efforts. This began a difficult period because several people in the foundation lacked understanding, but with Silvert's help the foundation came to realize the necessity of maintaining the flame by supporting autonomous and critical thought during the authoritarian period.

Argentina joined the “club of the dictatorships” in the Southern Cone in March 1976, and Silvert's programs gained strength because he became the leader within the Ford Foundation in carrying out two tasks—helping social scientists leave their countries when necessary, and supporting those who stayed so they could continue their intellectual work, which had been abruptly interrupted by the military intervention and the military's atavistic scorn for the academy and intellectualism in general. Some critical programs began to develop in Chile and the Southern Cone: CIEPLAN and FLACSO in Chile, the DiTella Institute and CEDES in Argentina, and CEBRAP and other centers of research in Brazil. Silvert's role as an eminent intellectual behind these efforts was enormous. Because it was possible for the Ford Foundation to take the leading role on this path, many doors were opened. His ability to engage the president of the foundation at that time, McGeorge Bundy, was decisive.

I have no doubt that in many sectors of Latin America, especially those with an ideology that today we would classify as neoliberal, there was opposition to the approaches that were being formulated by the Ford Foundation with Silvert's influence. But when I see what was accomplished during his nine years at the foundation, I feel tremendous respect for how he managed to maintain and support autonomous intel-

lectual work in the Southern Cone during the worst moments of the dictatorships.

From the Latin American Council for the Social Sciences (CLACSO) in Buenos Aires, I directed, jointly with UNESCO, a program to strengthen postgraduate programs in the social sciences in Latin America. I worked on this task from June 1975 to the middle of 1978. I traveled intensively to the different centers of investigation of Latin America, exploring the possibilities of having a few modest projects to start postgraduate programs of study and also some research projects. I recall seminars held in Costa Rica about reshaping the curriculum for graduate study in economics. Here, too, the support of the Ford Foundation was essential. Thanks to the foundation, relationships were formed with the United Nations Program for Development and international financial institutions. In all of that, Silvert played a tremendously effective role, both from the intellectual point of view, and because of his commitment to support those who were in trouble, at a time when the dictatorships considered the social sciences dangerously subversive. Later, the Ford Foundation's example helped stimulate support of social science research by other agencies: the International Development Research Centre of Canada, the Swedish International Development Agency, and the various German political foundations, as well as many nongovernmental organizations from the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.

In the context of all these efforts, many concrete issues were raised, such as how to help social scientists leave their countries after dictatorships initiated persecutions. I remember the number of seminars that were organized in Argentina so that Chilean scientists could be invited to attend as a more expeditious way to leave Chile. At a later stage, programs were developed to send professionals back to their countries when that was possible, organized by the World University Service (WUS) of Canada and the United Kingdom.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the minister of cooperation of that time, Judith Hart, approved an important program of cooperation with the government of Salvador Allende in 1973. Once the coup took place, the British government decided that these resources would be channeled to generate postgraduate scholarships so that Chileans could continue their studies in England. This became a program of enormous significance. Subsequently another eminent social scientist, Dudley Sears of the United Kingdom, organized a program from England to help those Chileans who wanted to return to Chile and be integrated into local research. In 1978, when I was able to return to Chile to work with the United Nations, Dudley asked me to organize a subsidiary of the

WUS in Chile to support the return of the social scientists. Many of those who returned with the initial support of the WUS were able to continue until the end of the 1970s with the support that they were given by the Ford Foundation. This was a combined effort, made from distinct angles, but in those angles the presence, thought, and actions of Kalman Silvert were decisive.

I have often thought that when one talks of relatively successful cases of countries in the postdictatorship stage, to a great degree Chile's success and that of the Southern Cone countries were due to Silvert's interest and important work in recovering democracy, which had such a positive impact on the transitions of the 1980s and 1990s. He understood the need to maintain social thought in very difficult conditions to help scholars think about how to prepare for the postdictatorship stage. That helped make possible the influence of social scientists in the different processes of Latin America's democratic transitions. The principal advisers of those who led the democratic transitions included many people who had participated in the meetings that Silvert and other social scientists organized, social scientists who also understood that the commitment to social sciences was also a commitment to human rights. Was this insight at the very core of Kal Silvert? Did he take this approach in part because of the horrors of World War II?

We owe a great deal to Kalman Silvert. Among other things, we owe him gratitude for the affectionate welcome he and Frieda gave to many of us in their apartment in the Village. I think that they were among the first to introduce a spacious and sizable loft in those old apartments by knocking down walls. That is something that Silvert knew how to do: knock down the walls of intransigence so that the ideas that produce thought could flow through the debris, for he had the unshakeable conviction that it was possible through thought to improve the societies in which one lived. He also had the conviction that the man of action must have, first, a set of ideas to carry out action. Without ideas and vision, action is sterile.

Silvert's push to create a Latin American Studies Association was a consequence of his conviction that such an association would bring together ideas, concepts, and policies between the North and the South of this American hemisphere. He was correct.

All of us, both intellectuals and practitioners, owe a great deal to Kal Silvert. He was an intellectual in the broadest sense of the word, one of those who leave a mark through thought and capacity to deal with the historical moment with fascinating lucidity, in his case precisely when the dictatorships were emerging. Thanks to him, social sciences

reclaimed their relevant role in Latin America in recovering democracy, and then, with democracy recovered, to help develop reasonable social policies that had at their core the dignity of the human being. That was Silvert's great message—that knowledge should serve to make all human beings equal in dignity.