

## CLASSICS REVISITED: Edelberto Torres-Rivas and Central American Thought

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### The Significance of Edelberto Torres Rivas in Central America – A Review of His Academic Life and Work

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Edelberto Torres-Rivas was born in Guatemala in 1930, a member of the generation that came of age during the Guatemalan Spring of the two revolutionary presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Árbenz (1944-1954). His family members were progressive intellectuals who took a firm stance against the Central American dictatorships. As a result, the family had to move from Nicaragua to Guatemala. Edelberto, his father, and sisters are mentioned in the Central American diaries of Ernesto Che Guevara who lived, after the 1954 CIA coup against Árbenz, in the Argentine embassy in Guatemala City for several months, among many of Guatemala's political refugees. The ten years of democracy of the Arévalo-Árbenz period and the decades of military dictatorship and civil war have deeply influenced both his research themes and his many essays, aimed at a more general public.

Edelberto studied Law and was the secretary general of the student movement of the Guatemalan Communist Party; during those years he was forced into exile in Mexico. He would be a political exile for many decades

of his life. He studied Sociology in Santiago de Chile at the Escuela Latinoamericana de Sociología of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO). During this time he participated, first as a student, then as a young scholar, in the Tuesday Seminars of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, witnessing the foundation of Dependency Theory. The result of his involvement in the many discussions and analyses of the roots of Latin America's underdevelopment was his seminal "Interpretación del desarrollo social centroamericano" (San José: EDUCA, 1971), a book that was re-edited twelve times between 1971 and 1990 and established his reputation as an outstanding Latin American scholar and the founder of the Central American social sciences.

Afterwards, he studied at the University of Essex and then found a good place for reflection and academic activities in Costa Rica, a country that permitted so many Central American political refugees to settle down and work. For the next 25 years, he was an ever-conscientious organizer of conferences, seminars, inter-university working groups, and editorial activities, also

being elected general secretary of the entire FLACSO system two times. His next position took him to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), where he worked as a senior consultant. His many talents were used and misused as an interviewer of many Central American presidents, ministers, politicians, and power brokers; as a ghost-writer of many of the analytical chapters of the most important local and regional UNDP reports of the last twenty years; and as a general interpreter of Central America's history, economy, society, political systems, and cultures for the leading United Nations (UN) functionaries that came and went during those last two decades.

Edelberto is both an intellectual and a scholar. During his 50-plus years of publishing academic studies and sociological-historical essays several themes have been continuously interwoven. His academic interests were and are broad: Central American history, its economy, class structure, oligarchy and political elites, its military and political parties, and – above all – the possibility of long-term democracy and democratic development and a continuous reflection on the possibility of the (armed and parliamentarian) Left in government. His books, edited volumes, chapters, articles, UNDP reports, and other publications are very numerous: Edelberto authored at least 150 articles in Spanish, English, Portuguese and also some in German and Catalan; he produced at least twelve co-authored edited volumes; and more than 25 single- or co-authored books. He wrote so many prologues, prefacios and introductions to

works of others that he once jokingly called himself a “prefacista.”

Of his many books and edited volumes, I have chosen five others besides his already mentioned “Interpretación del desarrollo social centroamericano” (1971), which I consider to be representative for the entire work and interests of Edelberto. In the following, I will highlight some central aspects of each one of these works with a particular emphasis on their current relevance.

Edelberto was the general coordinator of the academic “mega-project” “Historia general de Centroamérica” (Madrid: Comisión Estatal para el Quinto Centenario/FLACSO/ Comunidad Europea, 1993, six volumes). He acted as the editor of the last volume titled “Historia inmediata”, a sort of critical balance of the years 1978-1990 and an attempt to offer a prospection for the coming post-conflict years in the region. Taken together, the six volumes are the best and most extensive standard work on Central America's history, economy, and society from the first civilizations to the beginning of the 21st century; an obligatory reference for historians, social scientists, and humanities scholars who want to understand the roots of Central America's development.

His book “La piel de Centroamérica (una visión epidérmica de setenta y cinco años de su historia)” (Ciudad de Guatemala: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales FLACSO, 2006) is a kind of vivisection of Central America's society in its transformations over many decades of the 20th century. The work provides a holistic,

regional point of view on the intersections between economy, society, and politics. A must for those scholars who want to analyze Central America's elites and complicated class-ethnicity structures.

In "Encrucijadas e incertezas en la izquierda centroamericana (ensayo preliminar de interpretación)" (Ciudad de Guatemala: FLACSO, 1996, also published as "La izquierda centroamericana en la encrucijada", San José: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, 1998), Edelberto analyses the hopes and failures of the Central American Left in its struggles to come to power. It is an elegantly-written, but sad story about lost possibilities and chances never taken.

In fact, it is a conceptual prologue to his last work of 2011, "Revoluciones sin cambios revolucionarios. Ensayos sobre la crisis en Centroamérica" (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2011). This is Edelberto's second masterpiece, the fruit of many years of reflection and a very balanced account of the tragic Central American civil wars, shattered hope (to use the term of Piero Gleijeses), and meagre outcomes that resulted instead of the dearly-needed profound social changes generations of Central American citizens had expected. He wrote this book at age 81, a synthesis of history, sociological explanation, and rueful looking-back at decades of tragedy, suffering, and depressing consequences (see José Luis Rocha's review in this issue).

Finally, during his long years of affiliation to UNDP Edelberto performed a leading role in nearly all important UN reports and minor studies. The most important has been,

without any doubt, the report "Guatemala: Causas y orígenes del enfrentamiento armado interno (con un prólogo de Torres-Rivas)" (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2000.), published by the UN Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH). CEH was created in 1994 to investigate the numerous human rights violations perpetrated by the state and the guerrillas in the country's armed conflict. Edelberto wrote, in fact, the better part of the first, analytical volume of the report, which is a synthesis of the entire report. He also produced a substantial and beautiful introduction to this more popular edition of the official version, which is better known as "Memory of Silence."

Especially the CEH publication shows that Edelberto— one of the greatest sociologists, historians, and interpreters of Central America in the second half of the 20th century — has a special affinity for Guatemala. After many exiles, he finally decided to settle down in his country in the mid-1990s, just before the signing of the peace agreements in 1996. There, he organized FLACSO's Central America's doctorate studies program. He continues to write at least one book or larger essay per year and has acted as the tutor of the new generation of post-war social scientists for fifteen years. Some years ago he donated his enormous library and archive to the FLACSO Institute, whose library and documentation center are named after Edelberto.

In 2010, Edelberto was honored with the Kalman Silvert Award of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) for his entire

work. His “Revoluciones sin cambios revolucionarios” was also awarded the LASA Premio Iberoamericano for best book in 2013. Many of his studies and certainly the five works mentioned here are indispensable references both for the beginning student and the reputed elder scholar on Central America.

As a personal note, I would like to add that I owe many of the facts on Edelberto’s life and time to Jorge Rovira Mas. He published “Edelberto Torres-Rivas: La perspectiva centroamericana”, in *Centroamérica: Entre revoluciones y democracia. Antología de Edelberto Torres Rivas* (Buenos Aires/Bogotá: CLACSO/Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2008, pp. 9 – 29), and interviewed him largely, together with Rovira Mas, Marcia Rivera, Emir Sader and Marco A. Gandásegui, h. (see “Edelberto Torres Rivas: Dependencia, marxismo, revolución y democracia. La perspectiva desde la periferia”, in *Crítica y Emancipación. Revista latinoamericana de ciencias sociales*, Año I (2), primer semestre 2009, pp. 27 – 76). When he wrote a preface to my *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America*, Edelberto commented that “Dirk ... probably has been the person who has interviewed me the most throughout my long life. He managed to accomplish this by a number of different strategies. We have co-authored various studies; I was the editor of two of his books; we have taken part in a succession of academic events, and we have eaten numerous meals together – meals that were always accompanied by fine wine. Last but not least, we have shared many of the same deep yet transient passions during our

respective life journeys.” Edelberto is still going strong.