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#### **Title**

*Spiderweb, & Bertrand Russel and the American Indians*

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09p6v68d>

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#### **Publication Date**

2020-10-01

Excerpts from the book *The Art of Memory - An Ethnographer's Journey* by Stefano Varese, Editorial A Contracorriente. Raleigh: North Carolina State University Press. 2020. In these few pages of my memoir I re-discover the circumstances that brought Jack Forbes, Víctor Montejo and me together in the Department of Native American Studies at UC Davis, where we joined Dave Risling, Sarah Hutchison, George Longfish and Inés Hernández-Avila. We were coming from different places of the Americas in search of a common ground on which to build a theory and practice of Native American/Indigenous studies with a hemispheric perspective.

## The Spiderweb

A few years back, my brother Luis published a collection of poems he titled *La telaraña de Dios* (God's Spiderweb). The great Brazilian poet Amadeu Thiago de Melo—friend of Pablo Neruda—liked the book a lot. He translated it into Portuguese and published it in Brazil. And so the exiled Peruvian poet Luis Varese, a fugitive in many lands, is better known in Brazil than in his native Peru, where the archives of the Secret Police are full of false accusations of revolutionary feats that would put Leon Trotsky to shame, but the bookstores don't carry his poetry or essays.

I like the spiderweb metaphor because, like the Amazon metaphor of the hammock, it reminds us that the multitude of knots that link our memories are coincidences, synchronies, contacts, and renewed contacts, the ebb and flow of what is near and what is far, junctures and separations that together make up the weave that holds all the thousands of beings that touched us or had something to do with our passage through time. Naturally at my age the spiderweb and hammock are denser, but they also contain some holes for which I hope I will be forgiven.

1979 can be considered a parting of the waters in the history of Latin American Indigenous movements, initiating as it did two decades of Indigenous activism on the world stage. After years of opposition and armed struggle against the dictator Anastasio Somoza, the Sandinista National Liberation Front of Nicaragua (FSLN) had managed to liberate the whole

country and extend its revolutionary socialist program to the Atlantic Coast inhabited by Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indigenous communities as well as Garífuna black creoles.

The history of relations between these native peoples of the Atlantic Coast and the Spanish-speaking *mestizos* of the rest of Nicaragua was marked from colonial times by open racism and a nationalist sense of superiority on the part of the *mestizo* peoples of the Pacific Coast and central part of the country. For the next ten years the Sandinistas were involved in a violent war with the Indigenous population and creole blacks of the Atlantic Coast, especially with the Miskitos who were supported militarily by the government of the United States in its continuous efforts to impede the establishment of social democracies with a popular base. At the same time, the Maya in Guatemala and the farmers and Indigenous peoples of El Salvador and Honduras endured genocidal wars in the name of “neo-liberal democracy,” with full backing and arms from the United States, and in the case of Guatemala, with the collaboration of the state of Israel. All Indigenous and *mestizo* Central America was in flames.

Towards the end of 1985, when the administration of President Ronald Reagan was fully involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, known in the United States as Irangate or Contragate, I was named—along with Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert, and Salomón Nahmad to be a member of the Latin American Studies Association-LASA’s commission to investigate the human rights

situation on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup> The mission had the dual goals of observing and eventually making public the situation of the human rights of the Indigenous, black creole and *mestizo* peoples of the Atlantic Coast, and at the same time calling attention to and condemning, especially in the United States, the serious abuses against academic freedom, freedom of the press, and freedom of opinion committed by President Ronald Reagan's second administration.

Martin Diskin and I traveled for almost two weeks. Diskin was an anthropology professor at MIT in Boston, whom I met up with again after years of separation after we'd been neighbors and friends in San Felipe del Agua on the outskirts of Oaxaca. Those days of travel, observation, and interviews with Miskito, Black Creole, Rama, Sumo, and Garífuna citizens was a profound experience for me, one filled with immense cultural and human richness. From Diskin, who was already suffering from an advanced cancer, I learned once more from his love of all the diverse forms in which life manifests itself in this world. With his great sense of humor—very typical of Jews from the eastern part of the United States—and at one and the same time his innate sympathy and profound critique, lightened by irony, I was able to learn more about the anthropology of human rights in a multi-ethnic society than in months of theoretical classes. I saw Martin Diskin again in Boston in 1991, when he invited me to his lovely colonial house on the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert, Solomóm Nahmad, and Stefano Varese, *Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: a Report of the LASA Task-force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom*. (A publication of the Latin American Studies Association, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, September 1986).

outskirts of Cambridge to see his wife Vilunya and children Leah and Aaron again. They had played with my own children, Vanessa and André, in the gardens and patios of San Felipe del Agua. With great generosity, Martin invited me to lecture at MIT, where I spoke in an almost hallucinatory state brought on by an attack of vertigo that threatened to conspire against my “academic prestige.”<sup>2</sup>

In August 1997, at the age of 62, Diskin decided to cross the river and he left us with a terrible loneliness that was nevertheless filled with memories of his life. To Martin Diskin and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, who had left us six years earlier, I dedicated an Indigenous poem by the Mazatec poet Apolonio Bartolo Ronquillo as a tribute to the utopian imagination that was their final gift.<sup>3</sup> It reads as follows:

*Weaver of dreams*  
*teaching me to weave mine...*  
*how can I decipher the night,*  
*how can I understand the day...*  
*how many knots must I tie*  
*to connect with you...*  
*Tell me, weaver of dreams*  
*how to weave the path*

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<sup>2</sup> Stefano Varese, “The Ethnopolitics of Indian Resistance in Latin America.” A Working Paper for the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, January 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Stefano Varese, “Crítica de la razón distópica. Homenaje a la imaginación utópica de Martin Diskin y Guillermo Bonfil Batalla” (Critique of dystopic reason. Homage to the utopic imagination of Martin Diskin and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla), in *Desacatos. Revista de Antropología Social*, CIESAS, Mexico (fall-winter, 2002): 189-194.

*to connect with you.*

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Between 1984 and 1986 I bore direct witness to the genocidal policies directed against the Mayan peoples by Guatemala's military government. I made a few somewhat irresponsible family trips as well as long observational visits and did field work at the Guatemalan Maya refugee camps in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. There, under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the Colegio de México, and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid, along with researchers Sergio Aguayo, Hanne Christensen, and Laura O'Dogherty, I was able to observe the atrocities committed by the military government against Guatemala's civilian population. The children's drawings, their stories, and the histories I gathered from their parents were typical of the long list of atrocities that has accompanied the Indigenous peoples of all the Americas for 500 years.

I recognized a knot in my spiderweb years later when I realized that on one of my weeks-long trips through camps with more than 43,000 refugees there had been a young Maya Jacalteco from the region of the Juchumatanes who had managed to escape after having been tortured by the Guatemalan military and witnessing his brother's murder.<sup>4</sup> The young Víctor Montejo reappeared in my life years later at the University of California—Davis where

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<sup>4</sup> Víctor Montejo, *Testimony. Death of a Guatemalan Village* (New York: Curbstone Press, 1987).

he had a post graduate fellowship that I arranged on the recommendation of an anthropology colleague at a Midwestern university. Víctor Montejo reinvented himself as an anthropologist, intellectual, poet, novelist, cultural and political leader in two Mayan languages, English and Spanish, and as a professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of California—Davis. We accompanied one another during years of intellectual collaboration, creating a space for Mesoamerican and Mayan studies in that department.

In spite of my efforts as director of the Department of Indigenous Studies, I was unable to save Víctor from the deep ethnic-racial prejudices on the part of a Dean of Letters and Humanities during an administrative period rife with Eurocentrism; she could not understand the immense intellectual, artistic, and academic value of that wise Maya, who would later be appointed Minister of Peace and Reconciliation in Guatemala's first democratic government. That Dean, steeped in the bureaucracy and mediocrity of imported Eurocentrism wouldn't stretch the rules (rules that exist to be broken, as the poet monk Thomas Merton said), and wouldn't give the Maya professor Víctor Montejo, Minister of Peace in Guatemala, one more year off without pay in order to carry out his work in the construction of a new, democratic, and ultimately Mayan Guatemala.

Our relationship, invisible to begin with in the Mayan lands of Mesoamerica and transformed years later into a deep friendship in California, continues now that we are both retired from the University at California



Davis and one of us is growing coffee in Jacaltenango while the other is drinking that coffee ever more, often in celebration of one more knot in our hammock. Or is a spiderweb divine?

## **Bertrand Russell and American Indians**

I didn't find those days at the end of November 1980 in Rotterdam particularly cold, considering the fact that I'd arrived by plane from the suffocating heat of Veracruz and the autumn breezes of Oaxaca. I knew that Guillemos Bonfil Batalla would be coming from Mexico City and that my other friend, Robert Jaulin, would be arriving by train from Paris. During the long flight from Mexico I'd been comforted by the idea that with this surprising invitation to serve as a member of the jury at the Fourth Bertrand Russell Tribunal, "Los derechos de los pueblos indios de las Américas" (The Rights of the Indian Peoples of the Americas) I would be sharing the task with these two friends.

All the members of the Jury—I think we were eleven in all—met, got to know one another, or renew our friendships just hours before the Tribunal's inauguration. For the first time I could look into Eduardo Galeano's blue eyes and acknowledge the beauty of his writing and truth of his words. An absence of formality quickly linked Guillermo Bonfil, Darcy Ribeiro, Eduardo Galeano, and me in a quartet of joyous irony, critical revision, and lofty propositions that we hoped to bring to the Tribunal as a contribution of the Indo-American utopian tradition.

At that moment we weren't that clear about the magnitude of this international peoples' tribunal founded years before by philosophers

Bertrand Russel and Jean Paul Sartre with the goal of confronting the power of the State—in all its democratic or authoritarian incarnations—and of the market with the ethical force of the world's millions of poor and oppressed.

The following morning, in an enormous auditorium, the Dutch organizers and hosts invited us up to the Tribunal before which thousands of people of every age, university students and workers, mixed with hundreds of Indigenous delegates and representatives from North, Central and South America.

The following days were exhausting. Long hours of day and night listening to oral testimonies in Indigenous languages translated into English, Spanish, and Portuguese by interpreters. Hours of reading reports and denunciations of massacres and all sort of abuses, and long interviews with Indigenous individuals and groups, left little time for reflection and rekindling of old friendships and nourishment of new ones.

There was a man of a certain casual elegance at the event. He was wearing a tweed jacket, blue jeans, and a long ponytail, and he turned out to be the great anthropological historian Jack Forbes, whom I knew from references as founder of the DQU Indigenous university in California. We talked a lot, or rather I listened at length, as he told his illustrated stories of the Indigenous reality in the United States. His testimonies before the Tribunal revealed his deep knowledge of “official U.S. Indian history” and the “history of the Indigenous peoples and nations.” These brief moments of volatile friendship with Jack Forbes remained with me until they reemerged

some ten years later when Indigenous professors Sarah Hutchison and David Risling of the University of California—Davis invited me to give a talk in the Program of Native Studies and I remembered that the director of the program—at the time on a sabbatical in Europe—was the same Jack Forbes I'd met at the Russell Tribunal in Rotterdam.

I'd encountered Eduardo Galeano several more times: through reading and writings when, in 1984, I asked him to sign a letter I was circulating in support of my brother Luis who was imprisoned at the time in Peru, accused of terrorism. It's hard to know, but Eduardo Galeano's name and prestige may have had some influence, if not with the officials of State Intelligence—illiterate by definition—with President Alan García, who a few months later had something to do with Luis's liberation and exile. In time, and in my position as a professor and Director of the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of California—Davis, I was able to extend an official invitation to Eduardo, asking him to deliver a guest lecture at the university. More than 500 students crowded into the small classroom and listened in fascination to that famous narrator tell fantastic stories of a beloved continent and its peoples of all colors forever threatened by the gray monotony of a sad and decadent empire. On another occasion he came to San Francisco. I went to pick him up and take him to see the pine and sequoia forests, those temples of the Miwok and Pomo peoples about which he wanted to know everything, and I was unable to satisfy his curiosity. We ended up at my home in Davis where I had to grab his cigarette for a

moment so Linda could take a picture in which Eduardo Galeano and Stefano appeared along with Lalu, our cat of Oaxacan origin. Years later, when I felt our farewell was near, with immense generosity he wrote a few lines that will forever be inscribed on the back cover of *Selva Vida*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Stefano Varese, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, and Roger Rumrill, coords., *Selva vida—De la destrucción de la Amazonía al paradigma de la regeneración* (Copenhagen, Mexico and La Habana: IWGIA, UNAM and Casa de las Américas. 2013).