

Marta Harnecker, presente!

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Marta Harnecker passed away on June 14.

The international left has lost one of its most lucid intellectual, pedagogical educators and determined activists with the passing of Marta Harnecker on June 14, aged 82.

Marta will forever be remembered as one of the most influential and prolific writers on the Latin American left, having written almost 90 books covering a wide array of topics and debates on the left. Her collected works in many ways serve as insights into her lifelong commitment to learning, educating and defending the revolutionary cause throughout the continent.

Born in Chile, Harnecker began her activism in the early 1960s as a Catholic student activist before moving to France, where she studied under Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser.

Returning to her home country as a committed Marxist, Marta dedicated herself to popularising these ideas by producing numerous pamphlets such as *Exploited and Exploited*, *Capitalist Exploitation*, *Social Classes and Class Struggle* and *Capitalism and Socialism*.

Together with arguably her most famous work, *Elementary Concepts of Historical Materialism*, which was based on notes she prepared for Latin American students studying Althusser, these texts quickly became almost obligatory reading for leftists across the region.

Marta also threw herself into supporting the newly-elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, particularly in her role as editor of the political weekly *Chile Hoy*.

Forced to seek refuge from the military dictatorship that followed Allende's overthrow, Marta left for Cuba, which had captured her attention when she first visited it shortly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

In Cuba, Marta married her first husband, Manuel Piñeiro — Comandante “Red Beard” — a leading figure in the Cuban Revolution. Together they had a daughter, Camila, before his untimely death in a car accident in 1998.

There she also published *Cuba: Democracy or Dictatorship?* a collection of testimonies and experiences of popular power she documented.

Her constant quest to both learn from others and transmit these lessons as widely as possible led Marta to spend much of the next two decades collecting extensive interviews with key figures from the Latin American left, starting with guerrilla commanders from Central America and Colombia in the 1980s and leaders of some of the emergent left forces in South America in the '90s.

In these interviews, which were later published in various testimonials, Marta sought to draw out the lessons of defeats suffered, the strengths and weaknesses of differing tactics and strategies, the challenges of left unity and how revolutionary forces could begin to rebuild themselves and

accumulate the forces required to turn ideas into reality.

Marta also set up the Popular Latin American Memory Centre of Investigations (MEPLA) in Cuba to study and disseminate real-life experiences of communities working to build a better world.

The lessons Marta extracted from these interviews and experiences, combined with her own original contributions and ideas on topics such as globalisation and the collapse of the Soviet Union, became the basis for *The Left on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Making the Impossible Possible*.

Published in 1999, the book came out just as Hugo Chávez was elected in Venezuela — the first of what became a string of progressive presidents elected in the region.

For the next two decades Marta devoted herself to studying these experiences, steadfastly defending them while never being afraid to express her criticisms. She collated many invaluable lessons learnt along the way, firstly in *Rebuilding the Left*, and then *A World to Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism*.

After reading *The Left on the Threshold*, Chávez granted Marta an extensive interview, in which Marta — in her customary manner — challenged and probed him like few dared to do. The experience led Chavez to ask Marta to come and work with him, where she continued to challenge him whenever she disagreed.

Marta moved to Venezuela with Michael Lebowitz, her second husband, who, like her, had dedicated his life to enriching Marxist ideas. Together they shared a profound belief in the revolutionary potential and creativity of ordinary people engaged in struggle, along with a deep love for each other.

They helped organise two international solidarity gatherings in Caracas, in 2004 and 2005, and were fundamental to the establishment of the Miranda International Centre (CIM) in 2006 as a space for Venezuelan and international intellectuals to contribute their ideas to the process.

In between giving workshops in communities and workplaces and constant meetings with activists seeking advice, or simply wanting to discuss politics, Marta continued to collect testimonies from anyone she felt others could learn from.

As part of her work in CIM, she organised a series of panels bringing together key figures from the new left in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and Ecuador, during which she would conduct a collective interview with the aim of encouraging comradely discussion and debate between the participants.

She always sought to include all voices in these panels, believing everyone had something to contribute and that by opening such space we could learn from each other. Participants often commented that such encounters seemed almost impossible at home but were of great value, helping bridge seemingly unbridgeable divides.

As a result of these interviews, Marta published a series of unique books chronicling the rise and challenges of these new left parties, encompassing their differing viewpoints.

Marta was able to do all this while dedicating much of her time to highlighting various experiences in popular participation at the community level, travelling across Venezuela to listen and debate with local activists.

These community experiments became of intense interest and concern for Marta, who saw in them not just the embryos of local self-government but everyday schools that could foster the

revolutionary subject required to push the process forward.

Through this work Marta played a critical role in bringing the Venezuelan government's attention to various experiences in building communal councils. Chávez would go on to embrace the communal councils and then the communes as central to his emancipatory project of 21st Century Socialism and asked Marta to become an advisor for the new Ministry of Popular Participation, which he created in 2005.

Becoming acutely aware of some of the negative state practices that were undermining this process, Marta publicly spoke out about them, even when it earned her the ire of some in government.

The lessons she obtained from the communal councils and communes, together with other experiences she studied in Kerala, India and Porto Alegre, Brazil, nourished the ideas she outlines in *Planning from Below: A Decentralized Participatory Planning Proposal*, which is due to come out just weeks after Marta lost her battle with cancer.

Without doubt, Marta will forever have a place among the key left thinkers of the past century. Her extensive collection of books, pamphlets and articles will serve as invaluable tools for activists, young and old, new and experienced, for many years to come.

For those like me, who had the pleasure of working with her, and countless others who had the opportunity to meet her, she will always be remembered as much more.

She will forever be that Marta who always wanted to listen and learn from others, who always had an encouraging word to say, who believed everyone had something to contribute, and whose profound and unwavering belief in humanity was not simply something she preached, but something she practiced every day of her life.

Compañera Marta Harnecker, presente! Now and forever!

Federico Fuentes

P.S.

• GLW, Issue 1226, June 21, 2019:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/marta-harnecker-presente>