

Book Review: Hugo Blanco's Revolutionary Life

Saturday 2 May 2020, by [RAPPAPORT Joanne](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2020).

***Hugo Blanco: A Revolutionary for Life.* By Derek Wall. London: Merlin Press/Resistance Books, 2018, 143 pages, 9 plates. \$25 paperback.**

HUGO BLANCO IS probably best known for his work in the late-1950s and early 1960s in La Convención, a region near Cusco, Peru, where indigenous peasants eager for employment were allotted small plots of land to till in exchange for unrelenting labor and brutal mistreatment.

Blanco, who grew up speaking Quechua (the indigenous language of the Peruvian highlands), had embraced Trotskyism during several years as an urban activist. He signed on as a sub-renter on a large hacienda in La Convención at the invitation of local peasant unions who were already organizing against the abuses of the landlords by filing legal claims and organizing strikes.

The movement eventually turned to armed resistance, as the actions of the landowners and the police allied with them became increasingly violent in response to peasant calls for agrarian reform. Blanco was captured in 1963, spending the next seven years in prison, but the peasant movement eventually achieved its goal of ending the hacienda system in La Convención.

I met Hugo Blanco during his 1977-1978 tour of the United States, when he gave a talk in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. The years have blurred my memory of his public presentation, but I remember that we held a welcoming party for him at my house, and that we stayed up all night in conversation after he helped me wash the dishes.

At the time I was a graduate student in anthropology focusing on Andean history and culture, with plans to conduct fieldwork in the Colombian highlands.

I was a student activist, and I had read Blanco's then-recently published *Land or Death!* (Pathfinder, 1977), so I remember that we had a great deal in common and he had a great deal to teach me in those hours before I had to rush off to class.

Derek Wall, a Green Party activist and former British MP, as well as an academic economist and writer, came into contact with Hugo Blanco in 2010 and since then has entered into sustained conversation with him over their shared commitment to ecosocialism.

Wall is the author of numerous books on environmental politics. His biography of Hugo Blanco is geared to an activist readership; this lucidly written narrative is based on Wall's conversations with Blanco and with his former partner Gunilla Berglund, as well as a broad survey of the literature published in English on the Latin American left and on Hugo Blanco's role in Peruvian politics since the late 1950s as a student protestor, peasant organizer, officeholder, and environmental activist.

Wall leads readers through Blanco's experiences in the years before he joined the peasant struggle in La Convención, carefully detailing not only his activism, but also the labyrinthine history of

Peruvian leftist groups with which he was in some cases associated, or in other cases in the opposition.

Wall also provides highlights about the indigenous history of Cusco, since indigenous culture was as influential as Marxism in the development of Blanco's ideas.

Blanco endured a long period of incarceration after his 1963 capture, coinciding in its last years with the introduction of a limited agrarian reform by the military government of General Juan Velasco, who seized power in 1968.

This historical moment provides Wall with a frame for distinguishing between the agrarian socialism that Blanco was seeking and the liberal reforms of the government. A lengthy exile began in 1970, until 1979: Mexico, Argentina, Chile — just before the 1973 coup — and finally, Sweden.

Blanco's time abroad was punctuated by brief periods in Peru during which he was dedicated to organizing workers, followed by subsequent expulsions. In addition to his union work, Blanco was instrumental in unifying the Peruvian left into a short-lived electoral movement; he was elected to Congress and as a senator, providing Wall with a canvas on which to paint a portrait leftist electoral activity in Peru.

Toward "Deep Green Marxism"

It was during the later years of his Senate career, in the early 1990s, that Blanco was attracted to environmentalist causes, principally those related to mining and fisheries, which were not only damaging to the environment but plagued by inequities in labor arrangements.

Peru's extractivist economy depends on large-scale mining, while its coastal location has given rise to commercial fishing enterprises, both of which have come into conflict with organized peasants and workers.

This period coincided with the rise of the Shining Path guerrilla movement, which targeted peasant leaders, Blanco among them. The expansion of Shining Path was countered by an equally bloodthirsty campaign by the Fujimori government, which targeted the general population as presumed guerrillas.

Forced once again into exile, Blanco settled in Mexico from 1992 to 1997, where the Zapatista movement made him increasingly aware of the possibilities of peasants organizing along ethnic lines to create a more just society from the bottom up.

Upon his return to Peru, he began to write from an indigenous perspective and to support movements against mining enterprises and for water rights.

Wall observes that during this period, Blanco transformed himself from a Trotskyist to an ecosocialist; he told Wall that he best saw his efforts in the present as reflected in an Andean cosmivision harnessed to the struggles of workers and indigenous people against capitalism and neoliberalism, more than in the more strictly class-based analysis of reality that had driven his activism in the past.

The final part of this biography abandons Wall's documentation of Blanco's political activities and travels, to reflect instead on the concept of ecosocialism, which both he and Blanco embrace.

Wall calls this "deep green Marxism," a politics that at once appeals to indigenous forms of knowledge and to Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, and that goes beyond the defense of the human

community to guard and preserve the earth in all its complexity.

This final portion of the book inquires deeply into the philosophies that inform Hugo Blanco's current activities and writings: how they articulate with other thinkers and how they can become guides for action in an era of climate change and of continuing inequalities.

Hugo Blanco: A Revolutionary for Life documents the evolution of a major Latin American revolutionary whose experiences were always informed by the needs, concerns and social conditions of rural laborers and urban workers, and by a sustained practice of listening to people at the grass roots and of recognizing their political wisdom and their leadership.

Wall is careful to describe in depth the ideological, political and economic contexts of Blanco's practice. More than a biography, this book inspires activism; it does not provide a recipe for action, but paints a series of scenarios in which readers become familiar with Hugo Blanco's deep-seated philosophy of politics from the bottom up and how it has developed over his lifetime.

Joanne Rappaport

P.S.

- Against the Current 206, May-June 2020:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/206/hugo-blanco/>