

OBITUARY

Adolfo Gilly, Great Latin American Left Intellectual, Dead at 94

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Adolfo Gilly, one of the great Latin American left intellectuals of his time, has died at the age of 94. He lived his life on the left as an activist and analyst offering his interpretation of the most important events in Latin America and especially in Mexico. As Tony Wood writes in the recently published *Adolfo Gilly, Paths of Revolution: Selected Essays*, a book that provides an excellent overview of his career, “Adolfo Gilly has lived many lives: leftist militant, journalist, political prisoner, public intellectual, historian.” And, we might add, led them all well. While he began as a Trotskyist revolutionary, Gilly later became a supporter and advocate of mass movements, political and social, from from below, but throughout his life maintained his humanistic, democratic, and radical ideals.

Born in Argentina in 1928, Gilly helped create the Workers’ Revolutionary Movement (MOR), but at the end of the 1940s he moved toward the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI). In Latin America, the FI was dominated by the tenacious, daring, and later in his life, rather bizarre figure of Juan Posadas. The FI sent Gilly to Bolivia in 1956, shortly after the Bolivian Revolution of 1952 in which the Trotskyists of the Revolutionary Workers Party (POR) had played a central if ultimately disappointing role. From 1960 to 1962 he worked for the FI in Europe, mostly in Italy. Then in 1962, following the Revolution of 1959 he was sent to Cuba, but he became persona non grata because of his critical articles. From 1964-1966 he was in the Guatemalan Revolutionary Movement November 13 (MR-13), but the government’s fierce repression forced him to flee to Mexico to save his own life, but shortly after his arrival he was arrested, tried and imprisoned by the Mexican government. He was held from 1966 to 1972 in Lecumberri Prison where he wrote his Marxist history of the Mexican Revolution, *La revolución interrumpida* (The Interrupted Revolution) [1], the book that won him the reputation of Marxist historian of Mexico and first rate intellectual.

When released from prison, Gilly went to Europe and worked for the FI there, but as he writes in an autobiographical essay, he found the work alienating. Disillusioned with Posadas, he returned to Mexico and joined the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), a quite exciting small but growing left party in the late 1970s and 1980s. But when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the legendary president Lázaro Cárdenas, broke with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Gilly supported his presidential campaign and then with the founding of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, he became an advisor to Cárdenas. When the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) led the Chiapas Rebellion in 1994, Gilly became a supporter of the movement and interpreter of the events. An academic in Mexico, Gilly’s professional career has been as peripatetic and as stellar as his revolutionary experience, teaching at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and at the University of Chicago, Columbia, NYU, Stanford, Yale, and the National Humanities Center.

I remember when in June of 1971 I picked up Gilly’s *La Revolución interrumpida* in El Sótano

bookstore on the Alameda Central in Mexico City and then read it on the bus back to San Diego, California where I then lived. I found the book's analysis of the revolution, footnoted throughout with references to Karl Marx and other socialists, to be a revelation.] I was not the only one. Octavia Paz, the great leftist Mexican poet shared the same view, that Gilly had made a major contribution. Only later did I learn that Gilly had written *La Revolución interrumpida* while he was in prison. Fifty years later it remains for me—on the shelf with a dozen other excellent histories—the most important book on the subject. It turned me into a lifelong reader of and admirer of Gilly, even when I sometimes disagreed with him.

Gilly wrote two other major books on the Mexican Revolution and its history. For Gilly, the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) represented the end of the revolution. His book *El cardenismo, una utopía mexicana* (Cardenism, a Mexican Utopia) explains and examines Cárdenas' attempt to create a kind of state-supported peasant socialism in Mexico. While it does not have the magisterial character of *La Revolución interrumpida*, *El Cardenismo* is full of interesting anecdotes and raises important questions. Finally, in this trinity of his major books, his monumental *Felipe Ángeles, el estratega* (Felipe Ángeles, the Strategist), a biography of the Mexican general who served the revolution. Gilly was fascinated with this *hombre congruente*, that is, this man of integrity, who though himself not a revolutionary, placed himself at its service. Beyond these three major histories of the Mexican Revolution Gilly wrote constantly, essays on the revolutionary movement in Central America in the 1980, on Mexican politics, and later on the Zapatistas in the 1990s and beyond.

Through these writings in *Paths of Revolution* you can see his evolution from Trotskyist revolutionary, to enthusiast for Lázaro's and Cuauhtémoc's left-nationalist populism, to champion and advocate of the Zapatista indigenous rebellion. His political evolution, I think, can be explained by the fact that for the first fifty years of his political life—from 1928 to 1979—revolution seemed on the agenda or at least a possibility, while from 1980s until today, though there have been many important social upheavals, neoliberal, conservative, reactionary, or authoritarian regimes have predominated. So, it seems that Gilly made the decision to support movements, parties, and leaders who might advance the radical social and political movements as long as no new revolutionary opportunity presented itself, or until it did.

There is much more to say about Gilly and his work, hundreds of articles and various other books, but for now we say: Adolfo, thank you, we salute, and we will miss you.

Dan La Botz

Sources

Adolfo Gilly, *Paths of Revolution: Selected Essays*. Edited with an Introduction by Tony Wood
Translated by Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Verso, 2022).

Francis Mulhern, *Lives on the Left: A Group Portrait* (New York: Verso, 2011). Adolfo Gilly, "What Exists Cannot Be True," pp. 167-184.

P.S.

- New Politics. July 5, 2023:

<https://newpol.org/adolfo-gilly-great-latin-american-left-intellectual-dead-at-94/>

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