

Obituaries

Daniel Nugent (1954–1997)

In tears of rage, tears of grief I must report on the sudden death of Daniel Nugent, the remarkable young historical anthropologist of Mexico. In Daniel, Latin American historians have lost an inspired voice.

Daniel was no conventional “academic”; it is hard to construct, being loyal to his spirit, a conventional eulogy. Nor can I feign objectivity about one of my most cherished friends and colleagues. While the heart wants to chant for Daniel his restful Kaddish, it is drowned out by the angered cries of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” instead:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked, . . .
Who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating
Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war
Who were expelled from the academies for crazy . . .

Daniel was an extraordinarily complex soul who provoked in others the most varied and contrary of impressions. Brilliant. Provocateur. Vulnerable. Abrasive. Sweet. Radical. Doctrinaire. Mensch. Free spirit. Rascally. Dreamer. Iconoclast. Earthy. Coarse. Unpretentious. Contentious. Serene. Agitated. Electrical wit. Silly. Loving husband of Eva. Hippie. Family man. Scruffy. Beatific. Selfless. Flippant. Idiosyncratic. Exemplary. Whatever. . . . Daniel touched people deeply. By his warmth alone, Daniel retrieved sinking souls, as I once learned firsthand. To his many close friends—here, in Mexico, in Britain, and in Canada—Daniel was an incomparably gentle and generous man. Not just special, but *blessed*.

Daniel’s biblical namesake was the vision-dreamer who spoke fearlessly truth to power. But I find him even closer to the fiery Hebrew prophets—*Nevi'im*—like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Elijah. Neither saints nor martyrs, these holy-men were fiercely impolite and impolitic to boot. Daniel excoriated. He struggled passionately, incessantly against social injustice. He poked fun at professionalism, academic climbing, intellectual opportunism and the trendy arts of self-promotion. He scoffed at the everyday forms of hypocrisy. Daniel,

in short, was meant to keep us honest. He practiced his preaching, too. I recall, characteristically, how as an editor of the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Daniel always insisted on publishing the marginal, the offbeat, the really interesting works of struggling grad students over the big-name academic “star.” One didn’t need to share Daniel’s politics or style to grasp this morality. His proudest achievement during these last stressed-out years was not his widely admired books, but forays into political theater: the famed San Francisco Mime Troupe was doing his collaborative play on the adventures of Subcomandante Marcos.

The intellectual biography. Daniel was a curious but obvious product of the University of Chicago, where I befriended him one dark long-ago Hyde Park eve. A brief stint at Oxford convinced him that British social anthropology was not his thing and so he returned to Chicago to work with radical anthropologists Terry Turner and John Comaroff. Moving closer and closer to Friedrich Katz, Daniel was evolving as a historian, in a bond both would forever cherish. From 1983 to 1985 Daniel went off to the famously northern revolutionary town of Namiquipa, Chihuahua, where he and Ana Alonso accomplished a prodigious and now-legendary combination of fieldwork and archival diggings. Daniel’s weathered pickup truck became a fixture of the Chihuahuan landscape. Over the next few years, after the thesis, Daniel moved around a lot (San Diego and Texas to be precise) yet produced two state-of-the-art collections, one about working-class cultures, the other an *avant la lettre* look at the transnational reaches of Mexican social movements. (A refurbished, updated version of this is about to appear with Duke University Press.)

Daniel’s beautiful research monograph, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution* (Chicago, 1993) is vividly ethnographic and historical, placing Namiquipa’s unrelenting *revoltosos* in a great arch, rising though two centuries of clouded memories, of their relationships to the land and alienating states. This will surely remain a Mexican classic. But perhaps Daniel is best known for the powerful “theoretical statement” made with Gil Joseph in their collaborative volume *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (Durham, 1994). This stunning synthesis of postpopulist, postrevisionist interpretations of the Mexican Revolution established living ways of thinking about the nexus between popular cultures and problematically grounded states—not only in Mexico, but across Latin America. For our graduate students, everywhere, this became the Ur-text of the nineties. Even Daniel’s polemics were instructive: a recent piece put to rest the fantasy-laden “postmodern” interpretation of Chiapas’s Zapatistas, sensibly arguing how even they fit into Mexico’s long *historical* traditions of revolts for agrarian and local justice. Generally, Daniel chafed at

merely theorizing about the marriage of history and anthropology; he insisted on “just getting on with the work” of advancing it. Daniel’s other hope, as he put it, was to remind folks of the *political* getting left out of now-in-vogue “imagined communities.” While exceedingly productive (*and* a professional), this Daniel was more the intellectual than the mere academic, working against the facile, the clichéd, the artificial—against the grain. When Daniel fell, a new Guggenheim proposal was found lying on his desk, a final sign of our tragic creative loss.

The end of Daniel Nugent’s life was sullied or even hastened by an indecent battle over academic tenure. His friends urged him to try to let it go. Move on. But Daniel’s struggling spirit, like his admired fighting Nami-quipans, prevailed, for he was enraged by the injustice, mistruths, and Machiavellian politics that enveloped his case. He felt committed, as well, to stay close to his amazing son Carlos and newborn daughter Gabriela. Under a barrage of institutional false witness, the insipid damage to Daniel’s reputation only spread. But Daniel was fighting, as he saw fit, not for himself but for intellectual integrity everywhere. Self-preservation and preserving a career dictated otherwise, and his comrades worried that Daniel’s quest might end up destroying him. As apparently it did, on the twelfth of October 1997.

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Victor O. Story (1955–1998)

Two weeks into the new year, my friend Victor hanged himself. He was a complex man, haunted and conflicted. He had a keen mind and a highly developed sense of the absurd. He was a lifelong populist, and his red-clay Georgia accent waxed whenever he encountered intellectual ee-leet-ism, which he despised, and his style of guerrilla scholarship and debate punctured conceit and brought consternation and delight (and energy) to many e-lists and to Kutztown University, where he was an assistant professor. He became interested in the 1910 Mexican revolution as a student at Armstrong State College and made his way to North Carolina State University, where he got his M.A. under Bill Beezley, and then to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for his Ph.D. under Gil Joseph and Joseph Tulchin. While completing his dissertation, “The Genesis of the Revolution in the Tamaulipas Sierra: Campesinos and Shopkeepers in the Carrera Torres Uprising, 1906–1913,” he taught government and economics at the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen, Texas, and U.S. history at Texas Southmost College in Browns-