

On Mentors and Mentoring: A Memoir of Robert A. Dahl and Kalman H. Silvert

Daniel H. Levine, *University of Michigan*

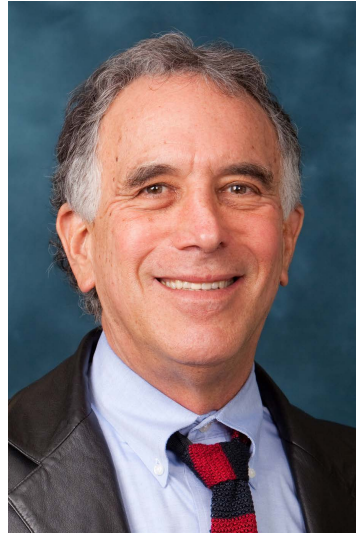
I had two great mentors in my professional life: Robert A. Dahl, who directed my doctoral dissertation, and Kalman H. Silvert, who directed my undergraduate thesis. I was fortunate to know and work with these two great scholars when they were in the prime of their career. Each man was a major influence in the way I approached my work, the issues that engaged me, and how I addressed them. Robert Dahl lived 99 years but Kalman Silvert died too young at age 55.¹

It is difficult to imagine two more different people: the intense, Jewish ping-pong playing Silvert and the tall, laid-back, Nordic Dahl (known to students as “the Viking”). With Silvert, I discussed my work over coffee and chocolate cake. Dahl took me sailing off Westerly, Rhode Island. They had distinct interests and different perspectives about social science, but both were generous critics and good friends. They strove not to create a disciple but rather to help me do what I wanted to do—but in a better, clearer, and more focused manner.

I remember well my first encounter with Dahl. After spending a year at the London School of Economics, I came to Yale for graduate work. During my first semester, I enrolled in his seminar, “Contemporary Democratic Theory.” The seminar was centered on discussion of a series of books. Our task as students was to initiate discussion with a critical presentation. Ironically, my assignment was one of Dahl’s early classics, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Dahl 1956); to my consternation, I hated the book. I thought it was too centered on the play of interests within democracy, without sufficient attention to who initially got into the game, who (and what) was excluded from the arena of liberal politics, and what the rules and costs of entry were in the first place. I was terrified: after all, who was I—a first-year graduate student—to criticize one of the most prominent works in contemporary democratic theory, with its author sitting right in front of me? Nevertheless, I screwed up all of my courage, gave my presentation, and articulated the reasoning for my criticisms. All I can say is that Dahl appeared to be charmed—delighted to have an occasion for debate and discussion. From that point on, he was always open to me, unfailingly generous, and kind.

That moment stands out when I think about what I learned from Robert Dahl. He was and remains my ideal of what a professor should be: open, engaging, happy to work on an equal basis with students, not looking for disciples but rather interlocutors. My scholarly work, particularly my early work on democracy (Levine 1973), was profoundly influenced by what I learned from him. However, his influence extended beyond specific ideas or concepts. From Dahl, I absorbed an approach to social science and a model of how to be a mentor and teacher, both of which have remained with me throughout my own career.

Daniel H. Levine is professor emeritus of political science at the University of Michigan. He can be reached at dhdylan@umich.edu.



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Dahl stimulated my enduring interest in democracy and democratization—not only how democracies work but also how they begin, consolidate, and sometimes collapse—the how and why. The “why” is important because Dahl always insisted that the goal of any study was explanation. He emphasized that typologies must be subordinate to theory and classification subordinate to explanation. This lesson is of particular significance given the penchant of much social-science work to classify, create categories, sort phenomena into boxes, and name things.

At the time of my encounter with him in 1965, Dahl was already one of the country’s most eminent political scientists. Many graduate students at Yale were intimidated by him. However, when I asked him to work with me on my thesis, he accepted with encouragement and support. My thesis concerned the creation and consolidation of democracy in Venezuela. I am certain that Dahl knew little or nothing about Venezuela but, of course, he was interested in democracy. His work recently had taken a more comparative turn, so he was open to new cases and to the possibility of new perspectives.² We corresponded regularly while I was in the field, exchanging long typewritten letters (this was before e-mail) and he was always helpful and supportive.

In addition to his focus on the conditions that made democracy possible, Dahl was a famously excellent writer of English prose. Throughout his career, in all of the many books and articles he wrote, he was known for the clarity and directness of his writing style. He was the antithesis of the stereotypical jargon-laden professor. Clean and simple prose was his hallmark, with a minimum of new words (polyarchy is the notable exception). When he read early drafts of my dissertation, he was encouraging and supportive, but he told me that my Spanish was over-Latinizing my English and that I should strive for shorter words, shorter sentences, and shorter paragraphs. It was wonderful advice and I have tried to incorporate it in all of my work because it results in prose that is livelier, easier to read, and more engaging for the reader.³

My early work was focused on democracy and democratization. Later, I became deeply interested in religion, culture, and politics,

moving away from earlier issues, although they remained present—at least in part—as I explored aspects of the democratization of culture. When I returned after many years to thinking about political democracy—this time in terms of the quality of democracy—I was drawn again to Dahl who, as usual, provided guidance on how to think about the issues.⁴

Kalman H. Silvert also was a critically important mentor in my professional life. His influence is the reason that I went to graduate school rather than law school. He was the source of the engagement

that have meaning for them. This is what Max Weber meant by the concept of “following a rule”: pointing us to the rules people create and follow that give order and meaning to their lives (Weber 1978). These rules cannot be assumed simply from external indicators: they must be understood and addressed in meaningful contexts. We cannot simply ask the questions of interest to us without making a systematic effort to understand how the issues are framed and understood by the people we study. Complete analysis cannot be limited to the collection of aggregate data or the application of

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with Latin America that has enriched my life with experiences, lasting friendships, and values that I hold close. Silvert made the initial contacts that resulted in my coming to the University of Michigan, which was my first job and where I remained throughout my career. He generously shared his contacts and experiences as I prepared for fieldwork, first in Venezuela and later in Colombia and Guatemala. After I graduated from college, through graduate school, and in the early stages of my professional life, we remained in close contact until his early and untimely death.

By teaching and example, Silvert opened me to new intellectual worlds and helped me to craft a consistent point of view. He had a deep commitment to the truth—to scrupulous scholarship, to telling the truth about politics, and to calling things by their real names. He did not tolerate platitudes, euphemisms, lies, or misleading and shoddy work. He was a fierce competitor but always forthright, never backbiting or false. I have tried to follow these ideals throughout my career.

Silvert's influence on the specific content of my work was more indirect than direct, more about how to approach an issue than about the selection of a particular subject. What I learned from him, above all, was the importance of real empathy and sympathy for the people and cultures we study. He insisted that they are not simply a source of data, to be studied and then forgotten. They are real, active subjects with independent and valuable voices, and we have as much

statistical techniques; we also must address how meaning is created and how ideas are diffused.

Attention to this task of re-creating meaning is one of the core lessons I learned from Silvert. In my work on religion and politics, especially *Religion and Politics in Latin America* (Levine 1981) and *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Levine 1992),⁶ I worked diligently to understand how the world looks through the lens of religious faith as well as how faith and commitment find expression in organized social life. I believe that this effort provided new dimensions to the interviewing and life histories and that it greatly enriched the final results.

In my fieldwork, I also devoted significant time and effort to tracing the social history of ideas—where they originate, how pamphlets are produced and distributed, who delivers the message, and when and why they find a sympathetic hearing that results in changing individual and collective behavior. This type of work cannot be accomplished in a library or by using a databank. I have inhaled clouds of dust and waded through seas of mud. I have gone to places where “nobody goes” and obtained interviews that “nobody can get.” I have shared tables at city cafés and benches in rural buses with chickens running around my feet. The effort can be exhausting but the result, I think, is a much richer understanding of society, culture, and politics than is available through standard social-science methods. One learns what it means to say that ideas

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to learn as to study. This means that we cannot hope to understand their behavior without a systematic effort to understand the world as they see it, to grasp the categories they work with—which may or may not precisely match the questions that academic social science must ask.⁵

Throughout my career, I have advanced an argument about the need for a phenomenological approach to social analysis. Silvert's influence—and the sources he exposed me to—shaped the way I accomplished this work. The systematic use of qualitative methods—combining interviews, organizational studies, and life histories—is grounded in the conviction that all behavior is meaningful and that a central task of explanation is to understand meaning as experienced by those involved, working with contexts and connections

have social consequences and how they can take root and change lives and commitments.

Silvert's influence also is visible in my consistent effort to bring levels of analysis together: joining the institutional with the popular, what leaders think and say with what rank-and-file members understand, and matching organizational histories and community studies with life histories. This is what C. Wright Mills (another author I encountered through Silvert) meant in *The Sociological Imagination* when he insisted that the prime area for sociological analysis was at the intersection of biography and history (Mills 1959). This is the intellectual and social space in which I have focused my work. Silvert also encouraged me to search for explanation with understanding and to seek the general in the particular without abandoning the

specific meaning of any event: that is, to generalize as much as possible while remaining faithful to the data. This is consonant with Dahl's injunction to put theory before classification, explanation before naming and categorizing things, and it is good advice to bear in mind in any research effort.

Together, Robert Dahl and Kalman Silvert gave me tools and an intellectual outlook that shaped my life and career. Their insights guided my research and their example guided my own approach to teaching and mentoring. They honored me with encouragement and warm friendship. I remember them both with great respect, admiration, and fondness, and I am grateful to have known them. ■

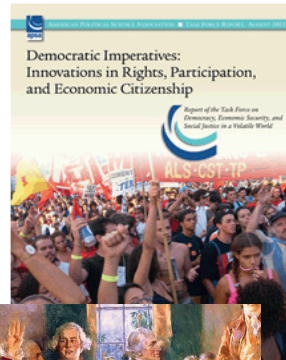
NOTES

1. Robert A. Dahl (born December 17, 1915; died February 5, 2014) and Kalman H. Silvert (born March 10, 1921; died June 15, 1976).
2. This comparative turn is evident in books such as *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966) and later in *Polyarchy Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).
3. Dahl's advice echoes comments of George Orwell in his classic essay on "Politics and the English Language." Orwell urged writers to avoid overly complex writing, never to use a long word when a short one would do, to use short English words (instead of technical jargon or "foreign phrases") and to prefer the active to the passive voice whenever possible. He had scorn for overly complicated writing. "The inflated style," he wrote, "itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details" (Orwell and Angus 1968, 166).
4. In *The Quality of Democracy in Latin America*, José Enrique Molina and I drew freely on Dahl's work for guidance in thinking about how to assess the quality of democracy (Levine and Molina 2011). We were especially influenced by *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (Dahl 2002).
5. I address these and other aspects of his work in "Theory and Method in the Scholarship of Kalman H. Silvert," in *Kalman H. Silvert: His Contributions, Legacy, and Continuing Relevance*, ed. Abraham Lowenthal and Martin Weinstein (forthcoming, 2016). Christopher Mitchell provides an overview of Silvert's publications in "Kalman Silvert's Scholarship and Impact on Social Science" (idem).
6. I address these issues in more general terms in *Creating Culture and Power in Latin America* (Levine 1993).

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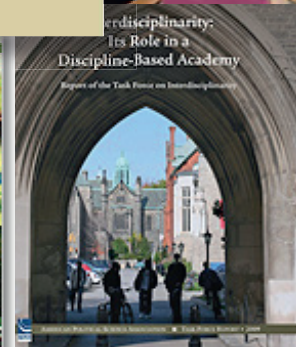
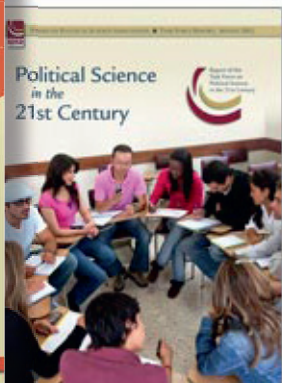
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