

Memories of M-L¹

Mariza Peirano

It is a common fact that graduate students and their teachers always develop a special bond throughout the writing of theses and dissertations, whether positive or negative. In the case of anthropology this relationship often produces special moments and experiences in which the discipline's theoretical orientation is put into practice by means of exchanges that are at the same time intellectual, personal, and emotional. From a sociological perspective, the process of advising new generations is the basis for the formation of academic and intellectual lineages. For better or for worse, I believe that the student-advisor relationship never ends, and instead continues, even if only in the background, throughout one's career.

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I first met David Maybury-Lewis in July 1975, in Rio de Janeiro, soon after being accepted as a Harvard Ph.D. student. He and Pia were in Brazil, guests at the home of their friend Bruce Bushey, the representative of the Ford Foundation, from which I had received an overseas scholarship. At that first meeting I learned that David would be my advisor.

At the time, I was quite surprised. At the Universidade de Brasília, where I had done my master's, the choice of an advisor was a two-way process, an agreement that would be woven throughout the classes of the first semester. Later, I came to

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understand that, in the United States, in those days, and indeed still today, it was a usual practice for the advisor to be assigned according to areas of geographic/-cultural interest. So, it was only natural that David should be my advisor.

Of course, this was not an inalterable situation. Many Brazilian colleagues changed advisors when they had reached a clearer definition of their research topics. In my case, after my first year at Harvard, that is, after attending the two required courses on social theory, both taught by David, it became clear to me that I wanted him as my adviser, *no matter what*. There was a central reason for this decision: the high standards to which he held his students were unbeatable. I was pursuing intellectual challenges; David was offering them relentlessly. I think I have always trusted more challenging demands rather than condescension, since they give us parameters in which we can find our own freedom; condescension confuses. And David was exacting in everything: very critical, very firm, very sharp, very subtle, and very difficult to please. Another trait of his personality that attracted me was that David did not impose a specific orientation in the discipline (despite having one quite well defined), and did not even believe that anthropology could be taught. For him, an anthropologist became qualified on his/her own, counting on individual resources, and by means of a solid intellectual background. He used to supervise and guide his students in all this process, but without further interference; he presented challenges and it was up to us to respond to them — if we could.

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In the first few years, David was "M-L" for the students. This was a game that we started to play when it became clear how senior colleagues referred to the old anthropologists who carried hyphenated surnames: thus "R-B" for Radcliffe-Brown, "E-P" for Evans-Pritchard or "L-S" for Lévi-Strauss. Not wishing to differ from the others, I also referred to him in this manner. But there were two versions of the same "M-L", which arose in the two courses he taught in the first year. One version was the M-L of the seminar on theory and history of anthropology, the famous "205a", the required theoretical course for the Ph.D. students of social anthropology but also attended by archaeology and biological anthropology first year students. The class was small — eight reading social anthropology, and a few from the other areas.

In this seminar, David did not actively participate. Instead, he used to listen to us. It was up to us to keep up the pace of discussion for an hour and fifty minutes, the duration of the seminar. Only in the final minutes would David manifest himself,

making a general round-up of the main points. Exceptions in this conduct used to occur when somebody made a theoretical or historical blunder, or, more appallingly, when a student did not participate in the discussion. Subdued presence was a privilege of the professor. The result was that David's silence was of an immense eloquence, and his sparse comments reason for apprehensive anticipation. There were other little implicit rules, namely that reference to secondary sources and critical commentary of the authors discussed would not be welcome; students were expected to provide critical readings of the primary texts themselves without relying on the interpretation of others. With this requirement hovered a certain orientation that suggested not only a pedagogic strategy but a democratizing equalizer — there was no room for anybody to show one was better informed than his/her colleagues. In short, there was no place for tricks.

For many of us, the tension was great. And all looked forward to the happy-hour that followed the seminar every Wednesday in the 4th floor lounge of William James Hall, where we would meet other students, colleagues, and professors. One day, an archaeology student (who was taking the course with us) came up with an idea that most of us considered brilliant: we would take a bottle of wine to the seminar, as if just anticipating the following fraternization with the hope that, as a consequence, the seminar discussion would be more relaxed and participation freer. Having received the approval of the professor at the start of the class, each one of us received a glass of wine. By the end of the seminar, everyone had sipped some of the wine; the only glass untouched was that of M-L. The lesson was clear: David was not going to mix teaching with entertainment, even less accept the insinuation that the seminar made us tense. The experiment was never repeated. And we continued to fear Wednesdays.

David's objective of having students immerse themselves in ethnographic monographs in depth was evident from the first day of class. Clearly we were there to either swim or sink; swimming, we would develop our own approaches to the discipline. From the professor we received just a simple sheet of mimeographed paper, with a list, single spaced, of approximately twenty book titles with the authors and date of first publication, aligned with dates of the weekly seminar. Nothing else. Twenty books, twenty lines. In most cases, this meant one book per week; some weeks, more than one. And it was like this, steeped in the classics, with neither props nor crutches, that we became anthropologists.

Another facet of M-L would emerge in another required course, to be taken in the same semester: the expository course about social theory, the "173". Unlike the seminar, this took place in the auditorium in the basement of the William James Hall, packed with graduate and post-graduate students. It was when I learned that a class on social theory, with a reading list that began, if I'm not mistaken, with Comte, could not only be interesting, but extremely elegant, well constructed, argued and presented, and apparently improvised from a few annotations. David was an exceptional lecturer of unsurpassed elegance. Co-taught with another professor, Nur Yalman, the course consisted of fifty-minute expository lectures, twice a week. The two teachers alternated, depending on the theme and authors addressed. If, for example, Lévi-Strauss was the theme of one of David's classes, Nur Yalman would follow with a lecture about Louis Dumont. And, in this way, the theoretical preferences of each would be subtly revealed to us. I remember that David used to make a *sui generis* entrance: at exactly 7 minutes past 11, he would enter with great and rapid strides, via one of the sides of the auditorium, at times wearing his sporty parka over an academic style blazer, and climb the steps to the stage, where he would immediately assume the posture of the lecturer behind the lecturn, speaking in a sonorous and musical voice with a British accent the students adored. At noon on the dot, the class would end.

Unlike the theory seminar, in which his position regarding the authors seemed an enigma, in this course David let flourish not only his erudition, but also, even if always in a subtle form, his own perspective regarding various issues of concern in the social sciences. There was always a plot that was unraveled in the exposition and held our attention. As, at times, we would read two books by the same author only weeks apart — one of them for the 205a seminar, the other for the 173 course — the brighter students sought to pick up any slight sign of the professor's orientation in the expository classes to guide them in the following seminar (not that this would help much). Reflecting back upon our experience of "205a" and "173", the complex game that informed David's relationship to the new students is clear to me. In the postgraduate seminar, the proximity afforded by being around the same table was accompanied by the professor's almost total silence; if, in the 173 lecture course, we were more in contact with his theoretical orientation, the spatial separation was well defined: he, on the stage, we, in the audience.

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Till then, David had been "M-L" for all of us. I had been made aware, while still in Brazil, of the fact that if David had done research there, if he was a close friend of

many former professors of mine, and if he spoke impeccable Portuguese, all this did not authorize any assumption, on my part, of a greater familiarity. In Brazil, David was different, I was told. Addressing him in Portuguese in the context of Harvard — no way! Thus, all of us, including myself, used to feel rather intimidated in the presence of this brilliant, slightly formal professor, and of course fearful of his judgment. One word from him had an incalculable value, for better or for worse. Little by little, however, this distant M-L was transformed, for me, into "David", close and friendly. It was then that I discovered that Portuguese was no longer a forbidden language between us. On the contrary, it was the language reserved for relaxation and fun, and it had its place when we could not find the English equivalent for the better Portuguese expression, or at the moment David greeted us as we entered his home, or, even, when he signed off in a letter in an endearing manner, with a big hug ("um grande abraço") or a warm embrace ("um abraço afetuoso"). Portuguese was the secret language of intimacy.

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But looking back over time I wonder if, to some extent, David was not aware of the immediate reaction he provoked in the new students, and, moreover, if to some degree he was not conscious of the two faces: the formal and the emotional.

I think of this when I remember that David had work rooms on both sides of the stair landing on the third floor of the Peabody Museum, to which we had access going up from the second to the third, or going down from the fourth, given that the door that linked this landing to the museum exhibition always remained locked. On the right for those going up, we reached David's office by passing through his secretary's chamber. She arranged the times advisees would be received at the beginning of each semester to discuss the courses being offered and obtain David's signature on the registration card. Upon entering his office from the secretary's, the immediate change was that of luminosity, due to the windows in the walls to the left and to the front. It was not a very big office, but very cozy, the tone of which was dominated by the light brown wooden bookshelves, perhaps of mahogany. It was always well heated in the winter and perfectly cooled in the summer. In front of his desk, near the window immediately on the left, there was a chair for the visitor. David would be on the opposite side, with his back to bookshelves and the front window.

To the right of the seated student, glued to the chest of drawers and slightly facing him/her, an enlarged drawing by Steinberg suggested that the student should be attentive. It seemed to be an alert, but it revealed an unknown: what exactly did

David want to say to us? Did his verbal elegance hide a message as simple as it was disturbing, a simple "no" which would only be perceived if we were sufficiently sophisticated to read the sum total beyond the elegant words and sentences? And if,

on the contrary, how might we know he meant "yes"?



That drawing always intrigued me. Years afterwards, I was told that it had been given to David by a former student. But, without doubt, it was he who had chosen the right place to put it — not in front of us, but right at the periphery of our eyes.

As of a certain moment, I stopped going to this office. When I began to be directed by the secretary to the opposite room, on the same third floor, this was the sign of an important change in the advisor-advisee relationship. While the office for the recently arrived was public — David was then head of the Department — this other office was reserved for the initiated: David's work room, where he used to read and write. Very ample, it was not so cozy as the former, nor so harmonious, had less luminosity, black wood instead of mahogany, but with all the signs of a place of intense work: the walls were covered up to the ceiling with bookshelves (on which, at a quick glance, we could distinguish books and collections by Brazilian authors). On the opposite wall, various steel filing cabinets stored manuscripts of articles and books, copies of articles, folders of courses offered. Of course, I only know of these treasures because, at some moment, David opened these folders to show me something, or to search for notes. On the large desk, and spread on the chairs, piles of books indicated production in progress. This was the scenario in which, as of the second year, I began to find my advisor, and in which, after presenting questions or obtaining a signature, at times I heard some revelations from David that sounded surprising, such as his plans for the next year, or his difficulty in finishing a book, like that ever impossible one about kinship.

Today, in remembering these two offices, it is impossible not to link them to David's structuralist spirit (in fact, only now am I capable of perceiving this dimension). Structuralism was fundamental in David's intellectual production and in his academic career. In these two rooms, it seems he used to put clear oppositions into action, whether consciously or not (and we know that this does not matter): on the one hand, the formality, the protocol, the rationality, the contained elegance and the professional side — that used to dominate the small mahogany office; on the other, the informality, the vulnerable human being, the misalignment of the work in progress, the creativity and the affection — which used to dominate the larger, dark wood office.

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This friendliness was developed at a growing pace throughout the five years of the Ph.D. program, to the point of my discovering, in my last year, that there was also a third place for academic exchanges, for it was in the office at his home, in Bowdoin Street, that we discussed various chapters of my thesis.

Going to David's home was something usual for the students. Every first weekend of the month, invariably David and Pia used to invite professors and students (and their significant others, as announced in a small poster that stated the day and time) for the open house, an occasion on which Pia was responsible for the fantastic food, David for the great wine, and one could be certain to meet new guests passing through Cambridge. These informal receptions always used to happen against a background of Brazilian music, in the various rooms adorned with brightly colored paintings, many of them by Brazilian artists. Brazil was an important subtext in David's private life. Besides the invitations to the open houses, when a certain level of academic and intellectual relationship developed, I was invited to go to his home to discuss chapters of my thesis, generally at night. I thus move to our interchanges during the thesis writing.

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David was an attentive, rigorous, open and generous advisor. Once again, I can recall two phases. The first corresponded to the preparation for the research, and preceded the defense of the project before a panel of five professors. Since there was no public defense of the thesis at Harvard, the defense of the research project was the most difficult rite of passage of a student's way towards the "ABD"(All But Dissertation) status, meaning all requirements minus the thesis had been completed.

From this phase, I possess a long correspondence we exchanged in the academic year 1977-8, when David was in Cambridge, England, on sabbatical leave. These letters, mine and his, on thin airmail paper, typed with a carbon copy, reflect the intense dialogue and rich exchange of ideas, David's commitment and vigilant attitude that, today, I can better appreciate since they had certainly demanded of him precious leave time.

The letters started with the account of my frustrated trip to Guinea-Bissau — an exploratory journey for a future research project that would have substituted for his invitation to study dual organizations in Ethiopia. The process of moving from dual organizations to processes of nation-building in Guinea-Bissau, and then to the investigation of anthropology in Brazil was accomplished in a few months, and the letters certainly hint at the disappointment I caused him by not doing fieldwork in the traditional style.

But with the new theme consolidated, it was the moment to turn it into a viable project. David used to issue direct warnings in his letters: at times, warning of the perils of seeing myself caught within a "cultural" perspective, searching for a "national tradition" in Brazil. At others, he was concerned with the severe problem of delimiting the research. At one moment, David reacted to an outline by pointing out the complexity in trying to describe the graduate programs in existence then in Brazil. At other times, he drew attention to the risk of writing a historical thesis, and not an anthropological one. The care to avoid jargon is an ever present alert, and he often presented questions that required precise and thoughtful answers. I did not escape from the experience of boundless intellectual pretension, which David sought to control: "I still find your proposal too ambitious and too sweeping. ... Too much. for a life's work — but not for your doctorate" (22nd March 1978). These advices and warnings were indispensable in helping me to give form and content to the dissertation. Reviewing these letters today, and confronting them with what ultimately came to be my thesis, I believe that I tried to follow the perspective that he describes in a passage thus: "Note that I rephrased your notion slightly, to read *the problems of anthropology in Brazil*. ... It may or may not be that there is a distinctively Brazilian anthropological tradition and that it is distinctively Brazilian because it is influenced by certain aspects of Brazilian culture. Let that emerge from your enquiry. If it does, so much the better. If it does not, then there is no harm done" (1st December 1977). This confidence in the ethnographic data was one of the most precious gifts I received from David.

Once the project had been defended, a second phase of orientation started, but totally opposed to the first. If, in the definition of the project, David had kept alert, vigilant and attentive to the smallest questions, once the moment to write it arrived, he granted me total freedom. Carte blanche. It was as if he had played his part; now it was my turn. As I delivered the chapters to him, we had review sessions at his home, or in the "work office" at the Peabody Museum, in which he elaborated the notes he had taken as we went through the text.

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Here I conclude the memories. Upon reviewing the correspondence that preceded the writing of the thesis, I discovered that David had influenced me even more than I could have imagined. My students know my reaction to the easy labels, the ones that impoverish the rich experience of the development of anthropology. This passage from one of David's letters, dated 25th January 1978, that is, more than 30 years ago, could not have been more eloquent of his influence (or of our affinity):

"Note that I still insist on speaking of anthropology in Brazil rather than Brazilian anthropology. I continue to be dubious about national styles of anthropology — in the sense of a sort of Volksgeist — and would prefer to see you concentrate on national traditions — in the sense of the ongoing activity in a particular place. I do not find American or British anthropology terribly useful either, by the way. One of the remarkable things about [anthropology in Brazil] furthermore appears to be its eclecticism. So I would not try to force it into categorical pigeonholes for the sake of a simple thesis."

It is not only in the memories that an adviser remains present in the trajectory of his former students; it is in our own view of anthropology that the advisers at times hide.

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In July 1980, after concluding the thesis, I bade farewell to David before returning to Brazil. It was a ritual moment. He received me in the formal office, the small one with the mahogany bookshelves I had got to know first.