

OBITUARY

IN MEMORIAM: *Elizabeth Dore (1946–2022)*

Elizabeth Dore, a lifelong friend, colleague, and activist-scholar, succumbed to cancer at her home in London on May 5. She left this world fighting against multiple illnesses so she could live long enough to complete her magnum opus on the oral history of the Cuban Revolution. Burdened by pain, and with only days left to live, Liz (as she preferred to be known) met with her editors in her home to put the final touches on the book project to which she had devoted many years of her life. This final act was emblematic of her courage and commitment during a lifetime of leftist politics, grassroots development projects, and historical scholarship that took her (often in the company of her late partner, the economist John Weeks) to Peru, Nicaragua, Cuba, England, and various regions of the United States.

Liz Dore was schooled in the radical politics of the late 1960s. After graduating from Vassar College, she briefly enrolled in a graduate program in Russian history at Tufts University. Disillusioned with the program, she moved to New York. In 1971, she enrolled in the doctoral program in Latin American History at Columbia University. Although the 1968 student uprising was long over, Columbia was still a hotbed of leftist ideas, and its Upper West Side neighborhood provided fertile ground for extracurricular political activism. While she lived in New York, Liz worked and published with the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), an organization deeply involved in anti-imperialist and solidarity work with Latin Americans. Marxist study groups sprouted everywhere, and Liz postponed her dissertation field trip to Peru for a year so she could read and discuss Marx's Talmudic tomes of *Das Kapital* with local comrades. She also made her first trip to Cuba, with a solidarity team of graduate students and professors.

Brooke Larson, Professor Emerita at Stony Brook University, is a historian of the Andean region, specializing in Bolivia.

After much reflection, Liz settled on a dissertation topic: the history of structural crisis and class conflict in Peru's mining industry, a topic she chose against the advice of her professors, who worried about her future job prospects. By 1974, John Weeks had joined Liz in Peru, where he launched an economic study of the mining industry. Together, they became involved in leftist politics in Lima, while engaging in a range of debates over the nature of economic backwardness, capitalist development, and the role of state policy. Liz's scholarship spoke to one of those Marxian polemics, namely, the binary debate over the "socioeconomic locus" of Third World forms of underdevelopment. Today, this abstract polemic seems esoteric, but at the time activist scholars, in both Latin American and the United States, were determined to locate the structural roots of underdevelopment—simply put, whether they grew within capitalist relations of unequal exchange or were anchored in pre-capitalist "modes of production".

From their different disciplinary vantage points, Dore and Weeks advanced the latter thesis, arguing that only the driving force of class struggle, at the point of production, would liberate the Peruvian economy from pre-capitalist forms of labor oppression and structural backwardness. They published a series of articles, often jointly authored, that appeared in the pages of *Latin American Perspectives*, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, and other journals. Liz's book-length study, *The Peruvian Mining Industry: Growth, Stagnation, and Crisis*, was published in two editions (Westview, 1988; Routledge, 2019), a rare honor for a study originating as a doctoral dissertation.

Latin America's shifting cartography of revolutionary activity beckoned, however, and Liz and John soon set out for Nicaragua. In 1981, they joined the new Sandinista government. Liz became a consultant to the Ministry of Information, where she worked on the Sandinistas' agrarian reform program, while John lent his expertise to the Ministry of Finance. During their two or three years in Nicaragua, the regime was still young, Sandinista socialism was vibrant, and life in Managua was exciting. But by 1983-84, the situation had deteriorated: government work was riven by sectarian policy debates; economic shortages were becoming acute; and the Iran/Contra war was in escalation. Eventually, Liz and John, with their toddler twins in tow, decided to move back to the United States, where John took a position in the Economics Department of American University.

Liz worked briefly in the Chile program of the Inter-American Foundation, but her relationship to Nicaragua deepened over the next few years. While working on agrarian reform, she carved out a research project on the history of the *municipio* of Diriomo, in the province of Granada, during the height of the coffee boom

(1870–1930). Combining analyses of local class and gender hierarchies, Liz Dore’s research project exposed the deep and tangled roots of peonage, power, property, and patriarchy—the same issues that had challenged the Sandinistas, as they tried (and largely failed) to orchestrate an egalitarian agrarian reform policy in the 1980s. Liz documented how, and why, the coffee boom, the local “land revolution” that privatized property, and debt peonage foreclosed the possibility of rural capitalist development and reinforced the patriarchal structures of power, at both the top and bottom of the class hierarchy. Her book *The Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua, 1870–1930* (Duke University Press, 2006) accrued accolades, including words of high praise from the political scientist James Scott, who called it as “ideal [a] combination of fine-grained, historically rich ethnography; astute political economy; and powerful feminist scholarship as one could possibly hope for” and “a standard to emulate.”

As Liz’s research took her deep into the gendered history of rural Nicaragua, it also opened transnational horizons of gender analysis and theory. She became very active in critiquing narrow Marxist scholarship that privileged issues of political economy over sociocultural issues of gender inequality, politics, and consciousness. Once back in the United States, and later in England, Liz helped organize a series of international conferences that yielded several articles and two important volumes on gender theories and politics: *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice* (Monthly Review Press, 1997), and *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, co-edited with Maxine Molyneux (Duke University Press, 2000).

By that time, the family had resettled in England, where Liz taught a range of interdisciplinary courses on Latin America at Portsmouth and Southampton Universities, while commuting between London and the south of England. Once again, in the early 2000s, an exciting new research project materialized. Out of what seemed serendipity, an officer of the Ford Foundation recruited Liz to lead a binational research team of British and Cuban scholars on an oral history of the Cuban Revolution. For obvious reasons, Liz would be the only US scholar on this ambitious multiyear project, a privilege made available to her only because of her permanent residency in England. The aim of the research was to shatter the wall of silence by collecting in-depth life histories from interviews of men and women, young and old, across the political spectrum, and from different parts of the island. This bold endeavor involved the collaboration of a dozen Cuban social scientists and several British colleagues, plus staff support and funding from several foundations besides the Ford Foundation.

The team of researchers recorded and transcribed 110 life-history interviews between 2004 and 2010. Contrary to expectations, Dore wrote, Cubans “frequently defied the official narrative of the Revolution. Despite initial apprehension, most people told their life story with considerable candour, describing the pleasures and difficulties of life in communist Cuba.”¹ That this extraordinary project flourished, and was eventually published in a posthumous book, is largely the product of Liz Dore’s collaborative skills, egalitarian ethos, and commitment to the cause of social justice. And there was more to her effort: her deft ability to deal with politically fickle Cuban authorities, and, not least, her battle against recurring illness over the past decade, both circumstances under which other people might have failed to persevere.

Some of the Cuba research project has already seen the light of day, thanks to Liz’s many talks, BBC interviews, and preliminary articles on her findings, as well as her illuminating insights into the art and craft of oral history.² Having gathered “voices from the Cuban Revolution,” her book explores the politics of lived experience, emotion, and memory in a country where to remember is sometimes to assume grave personal risk. But memories reflect the pain and the joy of living the revolution and its traumatic aftermath in an island nation still at the mercy of its northern neighbor. The book’s subjects are unnamed, of course, but that Liz and her team were able to generate such a wealth and variety of candid testimony is a remarkable testament to the power that can come from oral remembrance, once trust has been achieved.

In short, in *How Things Fall Apart: What Happened to the Cuban Revolution* (London: Head of Zeus, under the Apollo imprint, 2022), Liz Dore brings the epic history of Cuba down to earth by listening to and reporting people’s poignant life stories, sharp opinions, and aspirations for a better future. The book represents the culmination of Liz’s lifetime commitment to social justice, her exuberant love of Latin America, and her courage in the face of adversity. Liz lived a remarkably full and adventurous life, both inside and beyond the walls of academia. Her warmth, enthusiasm, and optimism will be sorely missed by her beloved children Matt and Rachel, her grandchildren, and her large circle of friends and colleagues.

Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York
brooke.larson@stonybrook.edu

BROOKE LARSON

1. “Cubans’ Life Stories: The Pains and Pleasures of Living in a Communist Society,” *Oral History* 40:1 (Spring 2013): 35.

2. Elizabeth Dore, Project Director, *Cuban Oral History: Memories of the Cuban Revolution*, <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/cuban-oral-history>, accessed October 5, 2022.