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Shelton H. Davis (1942 – 2010)



Shelton H. Davis was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1942. He received his undergraduate degree in Sociology and Anthropology at Antioch College (1965) and his Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Harvard University (1970). He did his doctoral research in Santa Eulalia, a Mayan community in the northwestern highlands of Guatemala, where he lived for two years (1967-1969). He also did special studies in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (1963 and 1964).

He taught at Harvard University, creating Harvard's first course on Native Americans in the United States. In 1973, he founded INDÍGENA, Inc., in Berkeley, California, the first documentation center in the United States on indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere. In 1975, he founded the Anthropology Resource Center—a public-interest research organization devoted to analysis of the effects of development policies on indigenous peoples and the environment in the Amazon and western United States. He and ARC are cited today as some of the founding advocates and exemplifiers of “public interest anthropology”—anthropology that, in Davis' words, “grows out of the democratic traditions of citizen activism” and holds that “the role of the intellectual is to work with citizens in promoting fundamental change.” During his time at ARC, Davis wrote *Victims of the Miracle*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1977, the first in-depth account by an anthropologist of the social and environmental impact—and human cost to the indigenous peoples—of the Brazilian Amazon

development program in the 1970s. *Victims of the Miracle* is a seminal work in cultural anthropology, is widely cited to this day, and is still used in anthropology classes.

A Spanish version of his doctoral dissertation, “Land of Our Ancestors: A Study of Land Tenure and Inheritance in the Highlands of Guatemala” was published by the *Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica*, Antigua, Guatemala, in 1997. He is also the author of *Land Rights and Indigenous Peoples: The Role of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights* (1988); the editor of *Indigenous Views of Land and Environment* (1993); co-editor of *Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Development* (1993); co-editor of a book published by the World Bank and FLACSO (Costa Rica) titled, *Desafíos del Desarrollo Social en Centroamérica* (2004); and co-authored with Robert O. Mathews, *The Geological Imperative: Anthropology and Development in the Amazon Basin of South America*. (1976).

He published numerous articles, reports, and book chapters, among the best known of which are the following: “The Maya Movement and National Culture in Guatemala” (2004); *Protecting Amerindian Lands: A Review of World Bank Experience with Indigenous Land Regularization Programs in Lowland South America* (1992, with Alaka Wali); and *Lessons of Indigenous Development in Latin America: The Proceedings of a World Bank Workshop on Indigenous Peoples’ Development* (2004).

Between 1984 and 1986, he was a visiting scholar at the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights where he conducted a study of international mechanisms for protecting the human rights of forest-dwelling Indian populations in lowland South America. He worked at the World Bank from 1987 to 2004, where he was a Sector Manager in the Social Development Unit, Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development, Latin America and Caribbean Region (LCSES). He was responsible for the Bank’s work on social development, including tribal and indigenous peoples, civil society, resettlement, etc. He was Principal Sociologist in the Social Development Department from its creation in 1997 to August 1998. Between 1991 and 1997, he served as Principal Sociologist in the World Bank’s central Environment Department; and before this, he worked in the Latin America and Caribbean Region’s Environment Division.

In the words of his coworkers at the Bank, he was one of indigenous peoples’ “staunchest advocates” from inside the Bank, where he spent his time taking on “the struggle for minority rights—territorial rights, linguistic rights, cultural rights—as his professional mission.” Davis firmly believed that the “best qualified experts” on what a community needs development-wise are the community members themselves, and thus worked actively to ensure that the Bank included the poor and indigenous in the development decision-making

process. As a result of his work “mainstreaming” social issues into Bank policy, social impact assessments and social inclusion of indigenous peoples during Bank project preparation became the norm. His colleagues write that he was an “indefatigable defender of indigenous peoples’ rights and an unshakable optimist,” and that “one could solidly count on Sandy whenever a battle for ‘Putting People First’ in development had to be carried out inside the Bank, or outside.”

Davis taught at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Harvard University, University of California-Berkeley, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, Clark University, the University of Massachusetts and from 1992-2008, he taught at Georgetown University’s Center for Latin American Studies, where he gave courses on sustainable development, poverty reduction and social inclusion in Latin America.

At Georgetown University, along with teaching graduate courses on “The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in Latin America” and “The Challenge of Social Development in Latin America,” Davis assisted the Center for Latin American Studies in preparing a new graduate-level teaching and research program on “Indigenous Peoples, Public Participation, and Democracy in Latin America.” He also assisted the Center for Latin American Studies in establishing a special Student Working Group on Indigenous Peoples and helped the Working Group to prepare two conferences at Georgetown. The first, held in December 2004, was on “Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: The Challenge of Poverty Reduction, Land Rights and Natural Resource Control” and the second, in April 2005, was on “The Challenges of Democratic Governance, Ethnic Politics and Development in Bolivia and Peru.”

-Edited by Peter Davis, 2011

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