

On our Duty to Celebrate Oscar

by Matt Meyer

Introduction

Immediately following Obama's decision to commute the sentence of Oscar Lopez Rivera, social media was burning up with half-thought-out writings about the strategies, tactics, and process of the Oscar freedom campaign. Having served as a leading international associate of Dr. Luis Nieves Falcon and the Puerto Rican Human Rights Campaign since the late 1980s, and worked collaboratively with the National Boricua Human Rights Network since its inception, I have my own thoughts on what worked best and what mistakes were made along the way. There is, however, widespread agreement that—as I wrote on the fateful day of the announcement—Obama's decision was “based primarily on a consistently-held, vigorously-fought, simple but stalwart commitment to decades-long, door-to-door, community-to-community, email-to-email (or tweet to tweet) building of a massive, grassroots-led single-minded campaign.” Though important parts of the Campaign were carried out by the Puerto Rican Diaspora and in some of the world-wide work, the foundation was clearly centered on the island of Puerto Rico itself.

This personal commentary is written explicitly to spark conversation within the solidarity circles of the Old and New Project and my own Resistance in Brooklyn (RnB) local anti-imperialist collective. Some will know that a substantial portion of RnB, which formed in 1992, developed immediately after the demise of both the Free Puerto Rico Committee and the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee—and was founded by leading cadre from both of those groups. A number of us were involved years earlier, in the work to Free the Five Puerto Rican nationalist political prisoners, and in the New Movement for Puerto Rican Independence and Socialism; others were involved in War Resisters and Fellowship of Reconciliation circles, intently aware of our predecessors Ruth Reynolds and Jean Zwickel who provided (from within those groups) direct material solidarity to Don Pedro Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party of that earlier era. Fast forwarding to today, RnB comrades Elspeth Meyer and Toby Emmer and Old and New comrade Steve Bloom provided stalwart support to the Free Oscar efforts—led in New York City by Old and New affiliate Ana Lopez, who served as New York Coordinator of the Campaign. Young Lords member and long-time Puerto Rican radical artist and organizer Carlito Rovira also graces the Old and New Project leadership, thus making this an ideal on-line forum for frank conversation about what Oscar's freedom movement means in the context of Obama, Trump, Neoliberal America, and our end of empire times.

Surely one of the most challenging and frustrating points of view put forth immediately following the clemency announcement was a claim by some leftists that there was no real cause for celebration: that with Leonard Peltier and the many Black Panthers still incarcerated, the

freedom of Oscar does not constitute a victory. Even among some who agreed that there was reason to be happy, a generally negative attitude permeated some circles the week following the news.

This, then, is my responses to those sectarian, out-of-touch, and/or losing arguments, which I began writing the day after we learned that Oscar Lopez Rivera would soon be free.

Long Views and Immediate Reactions

It is late evening, January 18, 2017. Less than two hours ago, I got off the phone with my dear brother-mentor-comrade David Gilbert, one of the last remaining white anti-imperialist political prisoners, who has little chance of gaining release under the current political circumstances. His call came shortly after we all learned about the denial of clemency to Leonard Peltier. The mood of our conversation, however—based on decades of conversations and visits between us, and even more decades of his own deep, analytic, experiential, selfless, loving acts of solidarity—was fully joyous in every way possible. OSCAR LOPEZ RIVERA WILL BE FREE! A tremendous, extraordinary, hard-and-well-fought VICTORY! Living at a time and in the belly of an empire where very few victories come upon us, this is a time for celebration!

We were of course, happy about Chelsea Manning as well, and sobered about the expected but callous and criminal decision around Peltier (and “lack” of positive decisions around Mutulu Shakur, Veronza Bowers, Imam Jamil Al-Amin, Oso Blanco, Jaan Laaman, and so many others just among those held in federal facilities). But one lesson of past struggles which must be learned well is that if one doesn’t take time to celebrate victories and understand things in contextual perspective, then one doesn’t usually get to recognize those victories when they do come along. An inability or unwillingness to break out of a mode of accentuating the negative can also turn people away from the struggle itself, because defeatism is not a sustainable quality for the long-distance running required of revolutionary change.

In this period to come, we must prepare to be even more strategic warrior-freedom-fighters. For those who know David as I do, there is never any heartbreak when a fellow prisoner gets out. David could never survive and thrive behind the prison walls if he lived his life that way. How are we, with all the privileges and responsibilities of life “on the outside,” neglect ourselves to the point of not celebrating a victory? How can we learn the lessons of becoming more effective organizers if all we ever show the world outside of our small circles (and ever feel inside our circles) is dour, downcast, depression?

In addition, too many in the infantile and under-developed U.S. left (most especially the self-segregated semi-conscious white left) engage in magical thinking, essentially being caught up in the system’s twists and turns, wholly unable to forge our own way and understand the difference between shallow reformist crumbs and those reforms which can possibly build towards something greater. A sour, dour, and “all-or-nothing” left cannot think outside the system-created boxes of hopelessness, a narrow view of “correct” tactics which is obsessed with and

trapped in defeat. There can be no incorrect tactics on a theoretical level, just as there can be no incorrect hammers; these are tools to choose from and the only errors arrive when an ineffective tool is used for a situation calling for a different one.

Amilcar Cabral was one of the 20th century's most brilliant and effective strategists, one who understood the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, winning and losing, militarism and militancy, and so much more. Famous for the phrase "claim no easy victories," he had an equally profound understanding of the error of claiming no victories at all until all of one's goals have been won. Strategic advances in particular parts of the organization, development, or region of the struggle were recognized as such and built upon. Apropos of understanding advances in the midst of terrible times, of holding up and onto even small victories despite the larger battle still ahead, of this moment and Oscar, here's an excerpt of Cabral on "Practical problems and tactics"

"In spite of the fact that we still live in poverty, in spite of the fact that we still do not have enough clothing and our diet lacks vitamins, fresh foods, and even meat and other protein foods—all this a part of the colonial heritage and our state of underdevelopment—a great transformation is going on in many places. And you must have found the new man, the new man who is emerging in our country, the new woman who is emerging in our country. And, if you had the opportunity to speak to the children, you would see that even our schoolchildren are already politically and patriotically aware and desire the independence of our country. They have an awareness of mutual understanding, of national unity and of unity on the African continent."

Oscar: the Man and the Movement

For those who know Oscar well, it is clear that he is already freer than many of us, and has been for some time. Of course, we're joyous that he's coming home soon, but that may well be more for us than for him. He is sharper and clearer than most of us about the coming work which needs to be done, more determined than ever to do it correctly. I have little doubt, reading Leonard Peltier's message from January 2017 and the many he has written over the decades, that Leonard's extraordinary strength—waning at times though it may be, due to age and health—is nevertheless filled with a similar fighting spirit.

Assata wrote, and the Movement for Black Lives repeats, "It is our duty to win!" If one studies revolutionary movements the world over and throughout history, one will clearly note that revolutions do not come in one single moment, in one all-encompassing victory where the interconnected beasts of racism and white supremacy; sexism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy; settler-colonial and neocolonial imperialism; militarism, anti-Semitism, and the barbarous beast of capitalism are all felled in one triumphant swoop! Revolutions and the strategic reforms which help build them are part of the larger human process of building resilient resistance structures, transforming our lives and institutions so that all the people of the planet live the fullest

existences possible, with no one ever again able to oppress the beings, “beasts” and planet around us.

Thirty-five years ago, Oscar Lopez Rivera was a hardly-known community activist; today he is the indisputable symbol of an entire people, a unifying figure who personifies a defiant spirit of cultural integrity, justice for all, grassroots participatory democracy, and the power of love. In many ways, his new transcendent status—based his own reflections while in prison and on the movements built in his name—have made him much more than a rhetorical reflection of the "Mandela of the Americas" which so many people are now calling him. Oscar himself is well aware of this, and contemplating how his victory (and our collective future work) can be more than simply centered on a single individual's release.

It is true that the granting of clemency to one man after 35 years behind bars can itself be no more than a mildly reformist act. But we must all understand, as many in the Oscar campaign do, that this movement was about the organizing of a nation. We know that Oscar's release has far-reaching implications, as Oscar the man has become the definitive symbol and champion voice of Puerto Rico. More than any Puerto Rican, he personifies a special unity which values cultural integrity, justice for all, grassroots participatory democracy, and the power of love.

So raise a glass for Oscar Lopez Rivera, and for Chelsea, Mutulu, Veronza, David, and Leonard—for Sundiata and Mumia and Seth Hayes and all the others as well. Let us work harder to build freedom movements which can truly free great masses of people in the all many, diverse, and resplendent ways in which we need to be free.

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