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Review

A revolutionary for life

- Reviews section -

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Hugo Blanco is an inspiration to revolutionary ecosocialists. Born in Cusco, once capital of Tawantinsuyu and now in Peru, in 1934, his first struggles were school protests. He travelled to Argentina, where he abandoned university to work in a meat-packing factory in La Plata, and his encounter with the Fourth International eventually led him back to Peru where he became a factory and then peasant organiser.

He was arrested in 1963, and was in prison in Peru in the notorious El Frontón prison off the coast until 1970. After some years in exile, in Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Sweden, he returned to Peru to be elected to the Constituent Assembly there. He was deported to Argentina, to return and stand for the Peruvian Presidency, elected to Peruvian Congress where he served from 1980 to 1985. The years since he has been actively involved in land struggles, escaping government and Shining Path assassination attempts, publishing the activist magazine *Lucha Indígena*, and recently leading street protests against amnesty for Fujimori in the streets of Lima.

This man is beaten back and then up he pops again; he has been a tireless militant, building many radical movements against exploitation and oppression, uniting industrial and rural workers in joint struggle. I still have a poster of him that I had on my wall as a student, of him angrily resisting court officials after one of his many arrests, this one after his participation as a member of the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores in a broader organisation Frente Obrero, Campesino, Estudiantil, y Popular. FOCEP had gained 11% of the vote in the elections and the Peruvian state was determined that Blanco pay for that. Now we have a book that honours this life of enduring struggle, and honours it by telling us of the unfolding political context and the role of organisations Blanco helped build in order to further resistance. This is a book to marvel at and learn from. This is Blanco's history, but also our history as part of a revolutionary tradition that has traced a parallel path, a path we should be proud to say connects with his at many crucial points.

I have set out the very brief version of his political biography here. What Derek Wall does is to flesh that out with details of his life that draw attention not only to the incredibly diverse kinds of struggle that Blanco has been involved with around the world but also aspects of his personal life. These details enrich the narrative. We learn, for example, not only of the role of the Fourth International in the international campaign to release him from prison – that I knew when I had the poster pinned up – but also of the later financial appeals for medical treatment, operations Blanco needed after lingering injuries to his head and back, results of severe beatings by police and army and prison guards. It is a miracle he has survived so long; he is, as Wall points out, someone with more than a cat's nine lives.

The book is packed with anecdotes that have a strong political charge; did you know, for example, that Blanco was in Chile during the coup against Allende, and that he managed to escape because he was not on a death list, not on a death list because he was critical of the regime as reformist rather than one of its supporters? The accidents and ironies of history are traced with a steady hand in this book that allows us to see better how political lives are necessarily entwined with personal experience and personal costs.

You will be awestruck as you read this book, it is the kind of book you can give as a present to someone beginning to learn about politics as an introduction to what ecosocialism is about in practice, and you will sometimes laugh too, bitter radical humour. We learn something about the influence of Leon Trotsky, but also about José MarÃ-a Arguedas and José Carlos Mariátegui (from whom the phrase 'shining path' comes) and, why Blanco 'viewed the collectivist nature of the Inca Empire, despite its undemocratic character, as an inspiration for the creation of communism in Peru'. And we learn how important women's resistance to patriarchy has been to Blanco as well as indigenous resistance to despoliation of their land. Wall quotes Eduardo Galeano writing that one of his fourteen hunger strikes, when Blanco could go on no longer 'the government was so moved it sent him a coffin as a

present'.

This book is beautifully written, with some great turns of phrase which sum up key debates; speaking of Blanco's interest in alternative systems of political organisation, that of the ayllu in pre-colonial times, Wall pits this against a false choice often posed to us in which 'One alternative is the purity of inaction' and 'the other is action that reforms a system so as to conserve it'. Hugo Blanco is about action, action linked to genuine transformative change.

This must have been an extraordinarily difficult to write, for Wall has a triple-task here; to tell us about the life of Hugo Blanco, yes of course, but also to tell us about the history of Latin America, from the arrival of the conquistadors to the new imperialist subjugation of the continent, and, more, to tell us how revolutionary traditions and organisations of resistance, including groups affiliated to the Fourth International were built and how they split, and sometimes merged again. What drives this book forward is that Wall wants to explain, is a passionate and thoughtful author, takes pains to neatly sidetrack into some doctrinal disputes, but always in order to return us to the same question; what is to be done, and what did Blanco do in those different situations.

Another strength is that the writing of this book, it is clear, has also been as collaborative as the political life of its subject. Those who have followed Wall's postings and pleas for help on social media over the last year will know this well. Blanco refuses honours that are directed to him alone, always preferring to draw attention to collective organisation, to others who were also co-workers. He knows that he owes his life to this common struggle; Wall describes an occasion when he was arrested, when peasants blockaded the bus he was being taken away in, forcing his release. And, the flipside of his, we see him on trial claiming responsibility for deaths in an exchange of fire with officers when the ballistics evidence says otherwise; Blanco is protecting his comrades. Wall too has drawn on the expertise of others to piece together this account, and has been very lucky to also be able to draw on Blanco's own memories.

As Wall points out, many of the indigenous, peasant and ecological struggles that are at the heart of Hugo Blanco's life, and reason why he left the Fourth International, actually prefigure many of the political developments inside the Fourth International in recent years; Wall writes that 'Both the Trotskyist and the indigenous elements of his politics have fuelled his resistance.' This book is the best of green and red politics. Few political figures have managed to trace a path that is true to both. Hugo Blanco did that, and so does this book.

You can order the book, which is just out [here](#).