John E. Chiaradia, 1926 – 2017: Political Activist

written by Ribelli André Chiaradia | December 2, 2017

John E. Chiaradia was a longtime reader and sometime contributor to New Politics.

How does one come to political activism? Are we influenced by the times, by our personal experiences, by some innate quality within us, or are each of these just the necessary ingredients of activism? John (Giovanni) Emilio Chiaradia left Italy as a child, a political refugee from mid-20th-century Italian fascism. His family escaped the turmoil engulfing their country for the welcoming haven of the United States, landing in New York City and eventually settling in central California. There they were once again confronted by nationalist politics and uprooted from their home. They were compelled to leave California following the bombing of Pearl Harbor as John's mother, Antoinette, was not yet a naturalized citizen. In the wake of the war, the US government deemed all non-naturalized people from Axis countries, and even citizens in the case of Japanese Americans, to be potential threats to national security. They were commanded to vacate a 100-mile exclusion zone from the west coast. The family was forced to leave what few possessions they had and return to the Bronx.

The son of a stonemason and a seamstress, John struggled through the poverty of the Great Depression, finding relief by enlisting in the army. Coming into the war near its end, he first saw action at the battle for Okinawa. Following the Japanese surrender, he was mobilized as part of the military occupation of South Korea. To understand how he found himself in Korea: Korea was part of Imperial Japan's colonial empire, and at the end of World War II, U.S. forces occupied the southern portion of the country while the Soviet Union occupied the north. In a preamble to the coming cold war, the Korean peninsula was bifurcated in the same fashion as Germany.

Still in his teens, John watched firsthand as a newly installed Korean government and its American overseers turned a blind eye to corruption and the violent clashes for control and the suppression of ideas contrary to the ruling authority. He watched as the political aspirations of many Koreans for rule by an independent government composed of Koreans was crushed. The occupying U.S. force justified its complicit attitude to this oppression with a policy that was later known euphemistically as, "they may be bastards, but they are our bastards."

Returning home at the completion of his service, John made good use of the GI Bill and attended City College. There he found a hotbed of radical and progressive thinking that gelled his political activism and colored his views for the rest of his life. At that time, City College was filled with young men and women who had experienced war, traveled the world, and survived the Great Depression. In this post-war environment, these energized individuals learned a common language that

articulated their ideas, expressed their insights, and voiced their burgeoning progressive ideology. It was here that John's political activism was fully born.

Educational aspirations led John to a master's degree from Columbia University and then a doctorate from New York University. His chosen profession was that of an educator. He spent most of his career in New York City high schools such as Bronx Vocational (now Alfred E. Smith High School) and George Washington High School in Manhattan. He lived between New Paltz, NY and New York City. He was a strident supporter of the professionalization of teachers and initially an advocate for the teacher's union (United Federation of Teachers). He changed this stance when the United Federation of Teachers moved away from putting educators in the forefront of teaching and mandating content over educational outcomes. He was known for raising his voice in dissent within the UFT when he felt it swayed from its commitment to the classroom teacher.

John was responsible for the importation into the United States of film footage showing the devastating after effects of the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. At the time, the U.S. government was suppressing the documentary footage of the bomb's aftermath. This action earned John both an FBI and a CIA file. When he obtained these files, via a FOIA request, they were heavily redacted. Based upon the information he was able to read, he surmised that there was a personal acquaintance that informed the agencies about his whereabouts and activities. He never knew who that was.

In the early 1960s he brought Oliver Tambo to the Bronx to speak with the students at Bronx Vocational High School. From my understanding this was way before the African National Congress became a *cause celebre*. I recall he told me that the school wouldn't pay the $25 honorarium that Mr. Tambo asked for, so John paid for it out of his own pocket.

In true iconoclast tradition, John spoke at the Antonio Gramsci Project of the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn. This participatory sculpture/complex was built within a courtyard of a South Bronx housing development in 2013. There, he gave a talk about Amadeo Bordiga, an early Italian Marxist and contemporary of Gramsci. Bordiga's contribution has gone mostly underappreciated, as he was extremely critical of the move by Italian Communists, like Gramsci, to embrace Soviet ideology. It was Bordiga's assessment that such a shift was a step away from fundamental Marxist thought.

John was a member of the Green Party towards the end of his life. He also ran for political office as a Democrat. Ulster County, NY, is a very conservative county (apart from the Village of New Paltz), where even a Democrat is considered far to the left.

While it would be nice to believe that our struggles result in heroic achievements and revolutionary actions, in reality we must accept that social change – between historic moments – is realized by incremental steps. Each of us must do our part, invest our energies, and exploit opportunities, to advance socially worthy causes and ideas. My parents insisted that their children accompany them (sometimes dragging them) to anti-war demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s, to participate in civil actions to protest nuclear armaments in the 1980s, or to support candidates with progressive legislative agendas. They did this, if for no other reason than to offer an alternative narrative to those that are popularly held. As the son of an activist, I was regularly reminded that I have a responsibility to do my part and raise my voice whenever and wherever it is called for. This is what I try to do as a parent for my children as well.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had my father for as long as I did. He lived independently up until the very last few months of his life. Having him present in my life for so long meant that there were constant ongoing discussions and debates about political analyses and worldly events. It is here that I found the value of *New Politics*. It is those debates and discussions

that I will miss most.

John married a likeminded woman, Marcia Stein, a special education teacher from Brooklyn, and started a family in the Bronx. His political activism never diminished with time. He was an adjunct professor of European history, ran two unsuccessful campaigns to be an Ulster County legislator, and was always generous with money and time to the social causes in which he believed. His progressivism is shared by his two sons, André and Pier, their wives, his eight grandchildren, and three great grandchildren. John died peacefully at his home a few days past his 91st birthday.

– Ribelli André Chiaradia