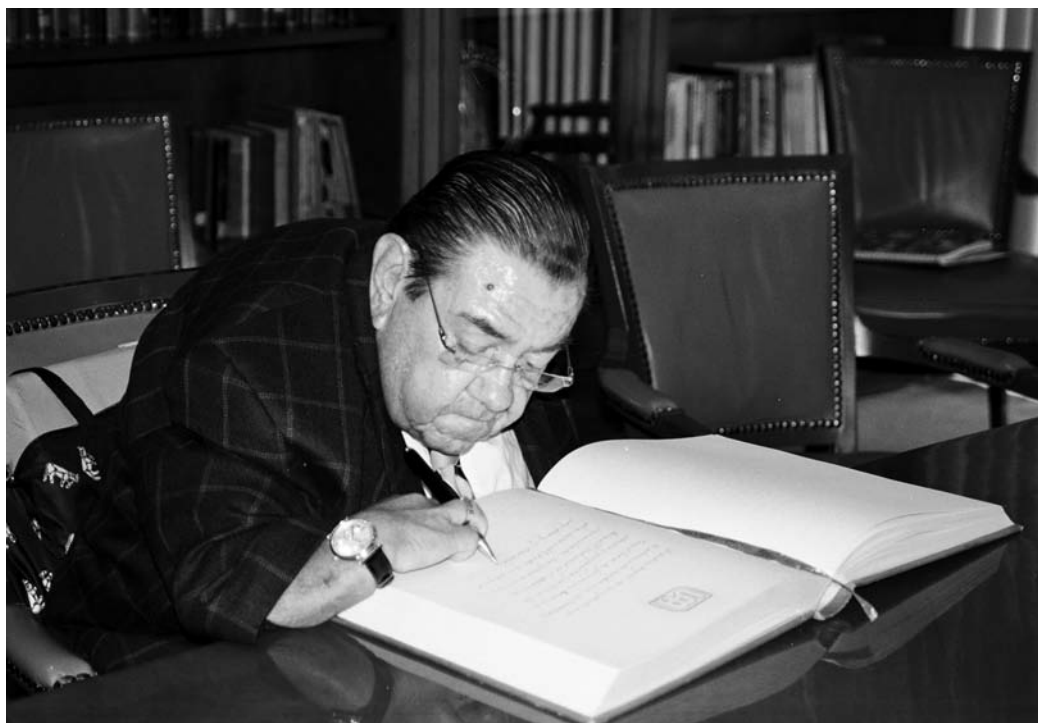


# Gilberto Rincón Gallardo

## The *Decent* Bolshevik

Jesús Rodríguez Zepeda\*



Antonio Saavedra / Courtesy of CONIPRED

[1939-2008]

On August 31, 2008, Gilberto Rincón Gallardo y Meltis died at the age of 69. He was one of the pillars of Mexico's transition to democracy, and one of the most lucid minds in the Mexican left in recent decades.

Rincón Gallardo had a Bolshevik's stubborn nature, a liberal's doubts about power and an aristocrat's manners. His commitment to social democracy during the last decade of his life reflected an uncommon path in left politics —where the temptation is always to play the victim or rely on

demagogy. Although he was a genuine victim of a ferociously authoritarian regime, he never presented himself as a victim whose experience granted him moral superiority over others, and he never attempted to justify his political errors by using the pretext of heroism —which he certainly could have claimed.

When he spoke publicly of his experience as a political prisoner, his aim was to unmask those who had recently joined the opposition, but had previously been —even minimally— complacent in the face of authoritarianism. Many of us still remember his participation in the first debate among presidential candidates in the 2000 elections (the other candidates did not allow him to

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\* Political philosopher. Professor of the Metropolitan Autonomous University.

participate in any other debate, for fear he would gain support). At that debate, he said clearly, “I’ve been fighting against the PRI’s authoritarianism for 40 years. I’ve always been in the opposition. In the ‘freedom-less’ Mexico of four decades ago, I was detained 32 times for my commitment to democratic change. The last time I was imprisoned was for three and a half years. It was 1968, and I suffered this injustice together with thousands of students who were demanding democratic freedoms. I never benefited from the government, from the regime that is fortunately coming to an end today. Which of those here tonight experienced first hand the repression from the authoritarian regime that many of us were confronting at that time? Although some would like to think so, democratic change is not achieved through careers in the bureaucracy.”

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Some say Rincón Gallardo was in jail more times than any other Mexican political prisoner. When he was imprisoned, it was due to his political opposition to the regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The longest imprisonment was indeed three and a half years due to his political activity in 1968, when the PRI government decided to use all means—except the rule of law—to fight the opposition. Rincón Gallardo was never legally condemned or exonerated, and up to the day he died, his legal status was still “released on his own recognizance,” although the amnesty granted in the 1970s ended the legal persecution against him. More than once he recalled with bitter humor that a judge had sent him to jail with the accusation that he had set streetcars on fire by “skillfully throwing Molotov bombs.” The physical disability affecting his upper

limbs prevented him from even grasping a round glass—but even more importantly, he had consistently opposed violence as a political tactic.

Perhaps it was the physical disability he had lived with since his birth that helped him develop such perseverance. During his long political life, however, he never used his disability as a pretext. And he even said that only once in a while, when he looked in the mirror, was he reminded of the disability affecting him.

He was a *rara avis* in the Mexican left, moving against the tide of those tending to subordinate themselves to one *caudillo* (political leader) or another, as recently witnessed in Mexico. His efforts were aimed at building a project within the left that would survive beyond individuals and building a policy of dialogue and reaching agreements—to bring us closer to the democratic socialism that was flourishing in countries like Chile and Spain.

His commitment to dialogue and negotiation was not accidental or opportunist. When he learned that a group of comrades in the Communist Party had decided to take up arms to fight against the government in that fateful decade, the 1970s, he sought out his old comrade, the legendary guerrilla leader Lucio Cabañas, to convince him to put down his arms. His belief was that the democratic left could not engage in a policy of death for its comrades or its adversaries. He could not convince Cabañas, and he suffered even more believing that a generation of nonconformist youth—eventually annihilated by a repressive, murderous state—had given their lives for a mistaken idea. The defeat of the armed struggle in Mexico proved he was right. But even so, during his last years, he was forced to tolerate the demagoguery of many “upstarts” in the left, who had established themselves and enriched themselves within the ranks of the PRI and never risked their lives when the regimen was systematically repressive, speaking pompously of a revolution that existed only in their rhetoric.

At the time of his death, Rincón Gallardo was already outside the life of political parties. This was strange for someone who, since his early youth,

had made membership in a political party an aspect of his everyday life. After a brief early encounter with the National Action Party (PAN) during the Luis H. Álvarez campaign, he joined the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) in 1963. By 1972, he was a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee, and in 1977, when the party took advantage of a minimal political opening in the PRI's authoritarian regime, he became one of its first legislators in the Chamber of Deputies. One of the things the Communists defended there against a consistently overwhelming majority was the first bill proposing to legalize voluntary termination of pregnancy. This same group of legislators distanced themselves from the Soviet Union after its aggression against Czechoslovakia, and became dissatisfied with the authoritarian shift taken by Castro's regime in Cuba. From that time on, Rincón Gallardo never abandoned the conviction that a leftist policy could only be compatible with democracy if fought in the electoral and parliamentary sphere. Consequently, his political work was aimed at unifying left forces, building a party capable of reforming the authoritarian regime, and at the same time, reforming itself from a democratic perspective.

Therefore, in 1981 he sought the dissolution of the Communist Party in order to establish, together with other left forces, the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), in which he served as secretary of external affairs. Following the same emphasis on making the Mexican left larger and more competitive—but especially more democratic—he supported the dissolution of the new party, in order to create, in 1986, the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), of which he became general secretary. After the infamous 1988 presidential elections, when the left suffered a historic electoral fraud, he fought for resolving the political crisis by building a new party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), founded in 1989.

Rincón Gallardo was one of the outstanding players in the Mexican left, throughout all its ups and downs. He was also a victim of its prevailing dogmatism and *caudillismo* (or tendency to be dominated by a strong leader). Thus, in 1995, he re-

signed from the party, with great dignity and without a scandal. His exit was a sign that the democratic, educated, reasonable left—already flourishing in Spain and Chile—had no space in a party that, among other factors, had not even been inspired to abandon the language of revolution, and since then, had imitated the discourse of the PRI's revolutionary nationalism.

And so, abandoning the revolution was one of his obsessions. Rincón Gallardo believed the Mexican left's democratic identity could only be affirmed by genuinely reconciling the myth of revolution, in any of its forms, whether the socialist revolution or even the Mexican revolution. As he told me in an interview several years ago, "I'm not a revolutionary. I'm a reformist. Revolutionaries seek the elimination of others, and I don't seek to eliminate anyone. That's why an open, trans-

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parent act of renouncing revolution is the most difficult part, the most complicated and perhaps the most traumatic aspect in the left's reform process...What concerns me and what I don't accept is precisely the reference to the use of violence and not accepting the idea of social transformation...In Mexico no one asks us to take a stand in relation to the revolution, but this definition is absolutely necessary in the process of changing the left's identity."<sup>1</sup>

Rincón Gallardo attempted twice more, with differing results, to create a democratic party of the left. In 1999 he founded and was president of the Social Democracy party, and then ran as the party's presidential candidate in the 2000 elections. Many citizens, unfamiliar with the history of the Mexican left, heard of him for the first time during that race. And many considered him the best



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candidate, but since the most urgent political necessity at that time was to defeat the PRI, the social democratic project in Mexico had to be postponed. In 2001, he made another commitment to building Social Democracy, creating the “Party of the Rose,” but an unwise decision by electoral authorities cancelled the party’s registration.

During his last years, although he stayed away from the life of political parties, Rincón Gallardo solidified his role as a genuine statesman. Between 2001 and 2008, he led the efforts of many social groups to establish both legislation and a public

institution in Mexico designed to fight all forms of discrimination. In 2001 the right to non-discrimination was introduced into the Mexican Constitution. Then, in 2003, as a result of a bill that he played a leading role in developing, the Federal Law for Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination was approved. This law established the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (Conapred), a governmental body that he headed from 2003 to 2008, the year he died. At that time, he was Mexico’s candidate for presiding over the United Nations Committee charged with overseeing the implementation of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Rincón Gallardo had fought during his last years to make this international norm a reality. He used his negotiating skills to forge an agreement among many nations on an international standard of justice. His political life cannot, of course, be reduced to his achievements during these final years, but it is clear that his prominence as a statesman brought him in closer touch with Mexican citizens.

Rincón Gallardo never ceased to be a *decent* Bolshevik, words I have borrowed from our mutual friend, Luis Salazar. In fact, with a classical Bolshevik spirit, he invested all his energy in professional politics, however as a *decent* man, he knew how to respond to the call for justice, tolerance and decency. He was a paradoxical Bolshevik, since he had renounced revolution —but in the end he was indeed Bolshevik, as he worked from within a minority to achieve goals that others believed were unreachable.

With his death, Rincón Gallardo has left some of us feeling a bit like orphans, those of us who believe that social justice, individual freedoms and generous, intelligent politics should be the hallmarks of the left. May he rest in peace. **VM**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, “Razones de una izquierda democrática,” *A contracorriente*, Jesús Rodríguez Zepeda, ed. and interviewer (Mexico: Centro de Estudios para la Reforma del Estado, 1999).