
IN MEMORIAM

William “Bill” DiFazio, 1947-2020

This past year ended many lives prematurely although most of these losses could have been prevented by coherent and creative public health policies alongside rebuilding a health care infrastructure worthy of providing real attentive and significant care. Our comrade, Bill DiFazio was a victim of the lack of outpatient care for the last couple years of his life and as a result of a culture of neglect, we have lost a very significant and active force on the Left. Bill was truly an organic intellectual, a thinker from the emergent working class, one who took seriously the full movement of theory and practice in all aspects of his life and within the lives of others. In his moment, Bill deeply touched many students, fellow Marxists, a wide audience of listeners on his WBAI *City Watch* program and was one never to shy from heated polemics around the central issues our time. He viscerally understood the rentier class economy of full neglect and never stopped both on his radio program and in his classes calling out the criminality and idiocy of the “hyper-industrial, neo-liberal “paradigm, and to never participate in the politesse of liberal politics through banal perspectivism and partial sell-outs. In this sense, Bill was exemplary of the old school that could not be compromised by any of Capital’s subtleties and so-called ironies. He succinctly encapsulated Capital as a movement of rackets.

Bill began his activism in the 1960s as a member of SNCC, deeply influenced by this movement’s ability to mobilize both in theoretical debate and on the ground praxis. The latter Bill practiced through his participation in the St. John’s soup kitchen in the days of Bed-Sty, Do or Die, and the theoretical debates were explicated clearly and with passion in his last book, *Ordinary Poverty: A Little Food and Cold Storage* (2005). Bill never forgot the fundamental lessons of the 1960’s and stayed the course for his entire life. His early work, *Longshoremen: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn Waterfront* was a living testament to his father’s life and struggles and remains a classic in the field of theoretical ethnography. This was his dissertation at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York directed by Stanley Aronowitz and Bill Kornblum, both of whom became lifelong friends and comrades. At that time, the “grad center “as it was affectionately called was a place of great intellectual energy and ferment and this passion was taken up by Bill for the remainder of his life. Never complacent nor satisfied, he continued to struggle with ideas until his last days and was working on another ethnography on everyday life issues based on his conversations with working class persons in Greenpoint diners. His sensitive grasp of people’s lives as a multiplicity of forces was extraordinary. Although gravitas is considered a bourgeois character trait, Bill showed this anachronistic stance time and time again as a mensch without pretension. In his life and work, he never succumbed to reductionist one dimensionality.

For me, the loss of Bill brings immeasurable sadness and a profound sense of despair. This despair is elicited by the lack of long-term vision in the struggle towards real human individuation. Bill was excellent in theorizing about the fact that capitalism does not facilitate or allow for individuality and that it is only by radical process that this can be achieved, that is outside of the box of regularized human relations. He dreamed and lived the idea of the whole person, the one whose humanity was empowered, not obstructed and thwarted by the dominant powers that be. My fondest memories, and there are so many, are of Bill talking of the rackets that everyday life must face. In this he possessed the rather natural ability to describe the conditions of daily alienation and exploitation but never denying the possibility of transcending them. This was a gift of his, a class instinct that was never fooled. In *The Jobless Future*, a work co-authored with Aronowitz, this gift was clearly manifest in its deep understanding of new forms of alienated labor and the emergent service economy. This book was one of prophetic value that charted the changing face of work in the nascent period of uberization, clearly anticipated as early as 1995. Although criticized by both traditional and Left economists as lacking in facts, the book has stood the test of time, being much more than an occasional analysis of a paradigm shift in the dogma of work insofar as it engages the questions of what new frameworks are needed to engage the virtual, informal and part-time economy.

However, what I will miss the most is Bill's range of interests. We could talk (New York style) about Major league baseball all night as well as reflect on the NFL on any given Sunday. He would call me to talk about the New Orleans Saints, knowing of my New Orleans interest; this was part of his character, to practice without pretense connections with his friends' interests. It was always genuine. Another memorable moment was a meeting with the film expert and communication theorist, Will Straw in Montreal. Bill and Will overwhelmed us throughout an evening with knowledge and riffs on "minor" actors in films from the 1930's-1950's. For me, his knowledge of jazz was extensive and heartfelt. Again, Bill was a figure with the widest of intellectual range and a base of knowledge connected to life and the struggles of the working class and their place in a de-skilled society of paper pushers and "suits."

We deeply miss you, comrade and may we continue your exemplary work and practice in paying homage and respect to the working-class hero you were and are in our historical and personal memory. You were taken from us during a crucial time in human history and this is our tragedy: not to have your voice on *City Watch*, your interventions at Left Forum and the soup kitchen, the contributions to *Situations* and your general presence in a great time of need.

—*Michael Pelias (for the Situations collective)*