

JUNE 2011

# LARRY PORTIS

LARRY PORTIS,  
Soudorgues,  
June 20, 2008



Dear member or friend of the Milan Group,

This is not the letter I was getting ready to write. Larry Portis has suddenly died as he loaded up his car to drive off and give a lecture in Toulouse. It was Larry, among the first to become a Milan Grouper back in the mid-'80s (his paper "The Twilight of Utopia in France: Amédée Catey's 'Universal Army of Workers' and the Rise of the Industrial State" closed our first Quaderno) who took on the financial and organizational problems of the Symposia when I retired in 2003 and we became the Milan/Montpellier Group.

Quite a few people shook their heads at the time – Larry was idealistic, impatient, no respecter of persons or institutions. If he believed something was right he could never be silent because it would be more useful. He would, they said, have neither the patience nor the organizational grit to take on the biennial symposium. But they were wrong. Larry found sponsors and venues, and colleagues and students – and even friends to lend their own homes for the traditional symposium cocktail. He actually found funds to hold the symposium dinner in "typical" restaurants, avoiding for four symposia the ever menaced "you're going to have to pay for your dinner this time – and maybe even the hotel!" And this he did

despite his views on bureaucracy and proper French academic procedure. A marvel indeed.

For each symposium – 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009 – Larry and I formed a theme and two presentations – we were as much at one at the ideal level as different in our approach and expression, though both of working class origin: he a Westerner from Montana; I a New Englander. His was the final format – and the program slowly became more contemporary over the years. But there always was a first 18th century session. During the symposia year he would call often – always at about 9 in the morning ("office hours"! – and we would talk and quip and settle the "high stuff" and a bit of the nuts and bolts stuff as well. It is hard to think that the phone is not going to ring again.

Larry had published the 2007 symposium papers in a volume edited with the collaboration of Joseph Zitomersky, *Terror and Its Representations. Studies in Social History and Cultural Expression in the United States and Beyond* (Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2008). With Joe and me, he was preparing a collection of papers from the 2009 symposium on conspiracy and consent.

We had also not given up the possibility of a further symposium. The problem was venue, since in 2010 Larry

too had retired to pursue his writing more intensely. Many suggestions were floated (perhaps Montpellier, though there were some problems; Turkey was proposed, but seemed too far and too difficult; Scotland a possibility [would groupers want to eschew Mediterranean warmth and wine?]). But we had sort of come to an agreement on the theme, rising both from the 2007 symposium on terror and the 2009 symposium on the problems of conspiracy and consent. It was to be something like "Meeting Nature, Seeking Human Nature, Stepping into the Contemporary World" – it was back to the 18th century "start" and, children of the people as we were, it was to "go boldly" into the realm of ordinary people's thought and experience. We felt no real pressure; we thought we had all the time in the world.

Larry was a steady point of light, deeply young and deeply hopeful, always ready to start off, look into, face forward. Those of us who knew him will find it difficult to accept that he is no longer with us.

Loretta

*If you want to write to Larry's wife, her address is:  
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