

Norman Feltes, 1932-2000: An OCAP Appreciation

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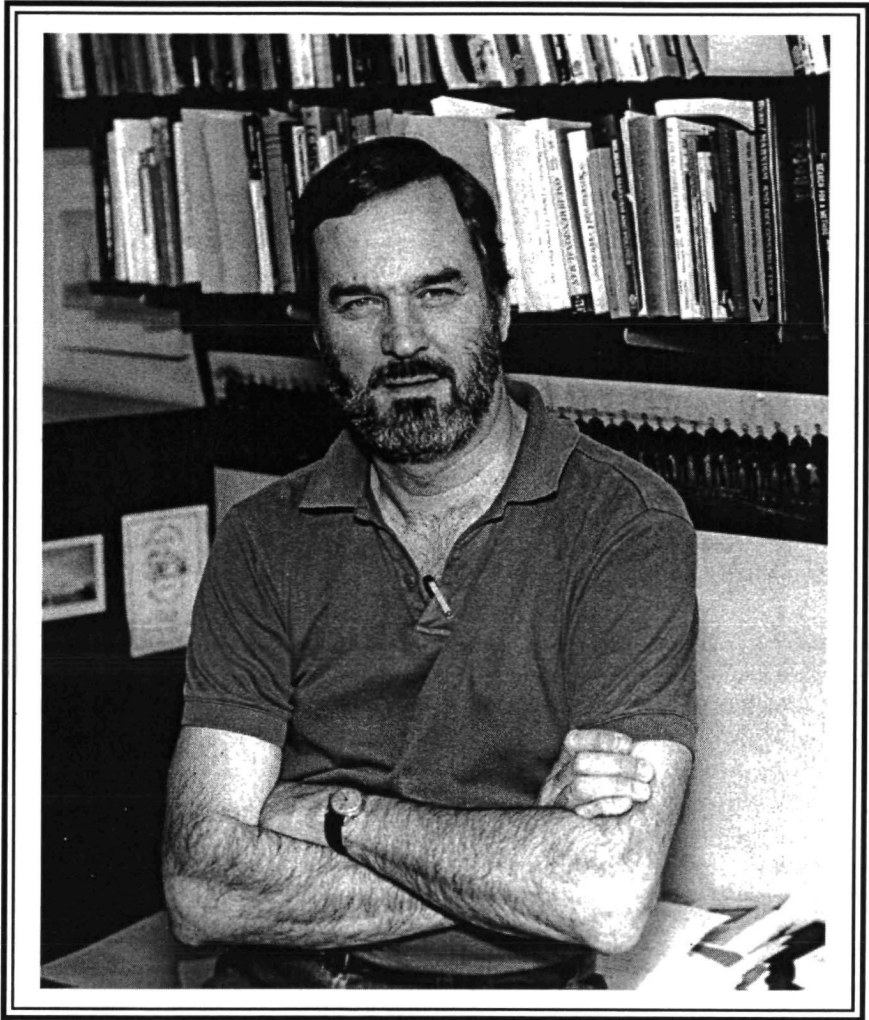
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Norman N. Feltes
1932-2000

Norman Feltes: An OCAP Appreciation

John Clarke

SOON AFTER NORM discovered that he was dying, he told me that he was quite ready for the event and intended to “die like an historical materialist.” He admitted that he would have to work up some notes on just what that involved, but one tentative notion was to “go” on the same day as our June 15 March on the Ontario Legislature. He actually died in the early hours of June 16 with the dust having barely settled on an event he realized would be a turning point for us.

During the last few years of his life, taking a route not exactly standard for retired English Literature professors, Norm threw himself into the work of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). The members of OCAP loved and respected him more than I can say. He valued his place in the organization because he found in it the serious struggle that he saw as the vital factor necessary to translating theoretical insights into meaningful practice. Because of his academic background, Norm agonized far too much about the legitimacy of his contribution. This uncertainty was utterly groundless because we all appreciated him as a comrade and respected greatly his courage and determination.

This is not to say that Norm’s background never showed. We all laughed a great deal at his expense at the time when the police were called to intervene at one of our actions and he held the door open for them. On the bus to and from our Parliament Hill Ottawa protest, Norm was beside himself at the raucous behaviour of some ‘squeegee kids,’ whom the driver complained were going to cause an accident or worse. Norm, his sense of disciplined protocol violated, tried to quiet the crowd, and was teased mercilessly by the rowdy ranks. He took it all in stride, and with the return trip to Toronto, the homeless hungry and destitute, Norm bought the bus lunch at a roadside stop. He was the only one with a credit card.

One of our members once told Norm that he was too polite and should learn to tell people to “Fuck off.” After he had been diagnosed with cancer and was in the hospital, a social worker came by and suggested he should think positively about the possibility of recovery. Norm explained that his condition was obviously

terminal and his ability to face this was far more important to him. When she persisted with her stupid advice, Norm looked her in the eye and said, "I'm told that my social conditioning makes it almost impossible to tell people to 'fuck off' but today could be the day."

The truth is that Norm, by way of his own modesty and the admiration he had for the poor people around OCAP, did actually underestimate the contribution he was able to make exactly because of his academic training. He brought a body of knowledge and a method of analysis into our activism that was enormously important. His study of the "housing question" in the downtown east area of Toronto armed us in our struggle against developers, yuppie colonists, and the forces of gentrification. Once he had decided to betray his own class, the skills he brought over with him came in very useful.

Without taking away anything from what I have just written, however, Norm's greatest contribution was the degree to which he embodied courage and compassion. He cared about the victims of the war on the poor, he hated those waging that war, he loathed the system that produced them, and he was ready to stand up and be counted when the time came to fight back. When our "Safe Park" for the homeless was broken up by the cops, Norm intervened to defend another OCAP member. He was taken to the 51 Division, where he spoke out against the overtly racist treatment of a black prisoner. Though his charge was relatively minor, and would have usually resulted in a quick release, the police retaliated to Norm's accusations of their racist misconduct with the vindictive claim that he had refused to sign his conditions of release. They shipped him off to the Don Jail in an act of retribution. Norm had never seen conditions like those in the decrepit Don, and he found the experience quite disturbing. Visibly upset and irate in his protests, Norm was judged at risk by the jail's medical staff, who worried about his blood pressure. They tried to convince Norm, whom they recognized as someone with the wherewithal to "pull some strings" through lawyers and the like, to do what he could to get himself "sprung." Norm insisted that he would "come out when his comrades did."

At a Memorial for Norm last summer, his son Nick said that he hoped we would not be offended if he let it be known that the "starting point for me is the love between my father and my mother." It was not very surprising that someone raised by Norm Feltes would feel that way. His desire to contribute to working-class struggle and social revolution could find its expression in justified confrontation and could prompt painstaking analysis. At root, however, it was compassion, love, and a desire to elevate the human personality that shaped Norm and his life. That life points the way forward and, in OCAP, we will never forget him or lose sight of those things that he left us.