



Eric B. Ross

February 21, 2018



November 24, 1946–December 20, 2017

Eric Barry Ross died on December 20, 2017, in Kensington, Maryland. With his passing anthropology has lost a brilliant analytical mind, a kind heart with a wonderful sense of humor, and a Marxist visionary. He was a rare academic, whose critical analysis combined theory and political analysis, while always remaining focused on the human needs of others.

Ross was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1946. He was raised by radical parents and had a happy childhood growing up in Massapequa, Long Island, where he excelled at school. Eric studied anthropology as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, where he undertook his first fieldwork on a prehistoric archaeology site in Alaska's Brooks Range. He then began his graduate work at Columbia University in 1968. A course with Michael Harner on the Indians of Amazonia planted the seeds of his doctoral fieldwork, conducted with fellow graduate student, then wife, Jane Bennett Ross (d. 1990), during which they studied the human ecology, health, and warfare of the Achuarä in the Peruvian Amazon.

He subsequently collaborated with Marvin Harris on two books, co-authoring *Death, Sex, and Fertility: Population Regulation in Preindustrial and Developing Societies* (1987) and co-editing *Food and Evolution: Toward a Theory of Human Food Habits* (1987). He published articles on topics ranging from violence to Cold War anthropology, the Green Revolution, witchcraft and religion, the Virgin of Knock, the Irish Famine, food taboos, and the fate of peasants. In these and other publications, Ross's analysis always drew on a wealth of critical materialist theory to account for the complexities of politics, history, and culture. His edited volume, *Beyond the Myths of Culture: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1980), demonstrates his range of interests and the early development of his thinking.

After his doctorate at Columbia, Ross taught at Mount Holyoke College, Columbia University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Florida, before moving to the University of Huddersfield's Human Ecology program in the late 1980s. In 1992, he became a professor in population, poverty and social development at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, where, for the next 15 years, he deeply influenced graduate students from all over the world, as he continued to write works of critical importance. In 2007, Ross retired to the Washington, DC, area, where he briefly lectured at The George Washington University.

Ross's scholarly and political concerns throughout his career focused on the material conditions of human life and the uses and misuses of anthropology by governments and global elites. His 1998 book, *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development*, demonstrated how unchallenged Malthusian notions of population fed international development schemes, themselves embedded in Cold War political processes. During the last decade, Ross worked tirelessly on a book manuscript, left nearly completed, challenging traditional anthropological notions of peasants and focusing on the political context of twentieth-century peasant ethnographies.

Eric Ross is survived by his wife, Zoë Brenner, his son, Reuben Ross, and daughter, Mimi Ross, and generations of anthropologists and students influenced by him and his work. (*David H. Price, William P. Mitchell, Karen Rosenberg*).

Cite as: Price, David H., William P. Mitchell, and Karen Rosenberg. 2018. "Eric B. Ross." *Anthropology News* website, February 21, 2018. DOI: 10.1111/AN.780

Related Categories

Related Tags

◀ 106

Comments

Helen Hintjens says:
March 2, 2018 at 5:40 am

Thanks for this wonderful tribute to Eric. It is fair and balanced, yet heart-felt. He would have loved it.

15563502, 2018, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/AN.780 by David Price - American Anthropological Assoc. Wiley Online Library on [16/10/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Reply

Commenting Disclaimer 

© 2018 American Anthropological Association • 2300 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 1301 • Arlington, VA • 22201 • TEL (703) 528-1902 • FAX (703) 528-3546