

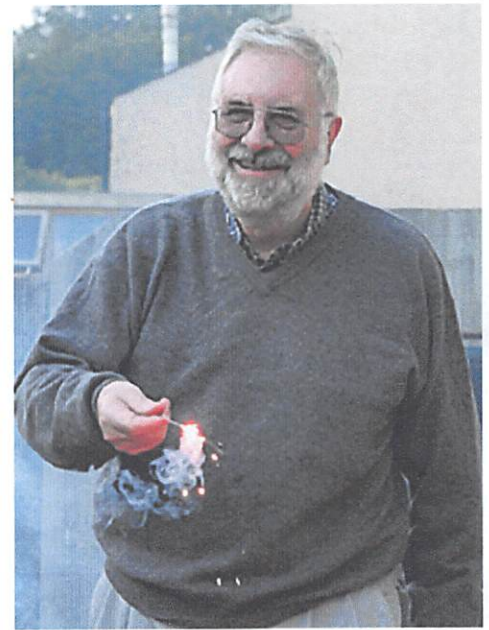
Professor Brian Barry

Professor Brian Barry, who died on March 10 aged 73, was one of the leading political and social philosophers of his generation and a man with a great zest for academic brawls.

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Barry figured centrally in contemporary debates on both democratic theory and theories of social justice, which had traditionally been treated as separate disciplines. The political theorist, in his view, should be philosophically informed but located firmly within the social sciences and engaged with contemporary social problems.

Barry's doctoral thesis, published as *Political Argument* (1965), helped to stimulate the renaissance of analytical political theory in the 1960s, and his influential early critique of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (*Liberal Theory of Justice*, 1973) remains the most trenchant in print.



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He extended these critiques in a multi-volume project, *Treatise on Social Justice*, comprising his *Theories of Social Justice* (1989), *Justice as Impartiality* (1995) and *Why Social Justice Matters* (2005), in which he brought together current social justice theory with the findings of social science in a polemic on government social policies from Margaret Thatcher to Blair.

He also contributed to democratic theory with *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (1970) and *Democracy, Power and Justice* (1989).

Barry was in the tradition of philosophical radicalism of the 19th-century utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and JS Mill, and his political philosophy can best be described as egalitarian liberalism – the view that, along with protecting traditional liberal freedoms, the "just" state must promote economic redistribution from rich to poor and provide equality of access to public services.

Equality of opportunity, in Barry's view, was not compatible with such institutions as private education or private medicine. Genuine equality of opportunity exists only when outcomes depend exclusively on people's choices and decisions, not on factors which are influenced by social class, race or family background.

This put Barry, philosophically, well to the left of Tony Blair, whom he described as "an ambitious middle-class parent" and held in utter contempt for his abandonment of social democratic principles and the way in which he had "maintained (even in some respects intensified)" the policies of Mrs Thatcher. Colleagues felt it was no accident that in 1998 Barry left the London School of Economics for Columbia University soon after "third way" academic Anthony Giddens took over at the LSE.

Barry was famously pugnacious in argument and uninhibited in his criticisms of those with whom he did not see eye to eye. Colleagues who bought his books would quickly pass over prefatory tributes to Gertie the cat and go to the index to discover the identities of his latest victims. Terms such as "astonishingly crass", "obscurantist", "cavalier" or "complete rubbish" were characteristic put-downs.

If Barry sometimes had a tendency to prefer comprehensive demolition to calm reasoned critique, his reviews were never less than entertaining. Of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (in which the libertarian philosopher had argued for a state "limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on"), Barry observed "a sort of cuteness that would be wearing in a graduate student and seems to me quite indecent in someone who, from the lofty heights of a professorial chair, is proposing to starve or humiliate 10 per cent or so of his fellow citizens."

He went on to entertain the tongue-in-cheek hypothesis that in putting forward as a "Utopia" a society based on "the repeal of even the Elizabethan Poor Law" Nozick had written a masterful satire on contemporary America. Unfortunately, he concluded, there was no sign that Nozick, "jokiness personified in other respects", was capable of seeing the funny side.

Brian Michael Barry was born on January 13 1936 and educated at Taunton's School, Southampton, and at Queen's College, Oxford, where he remained to take a doctorate under the direction of HLA Hart. After a series of teaching posts at Birmingham, Keele and Southampton, he returned to Oxford in 1965 as tutorial fellow at University College, then official fellow at Nuffield College. Appointed professor at Essex University in 1969, Barry served as dean of Social Studies in 1971-72. In the mid-1970s he moved to America, holding professorial chairs successively at the Universities of British Columbia, Chicago and the California Institute of Technology, where he established a Philosophy programme.

He returned to Britain in 1987 to take up the chair in political science at the LSE and was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Columbia University, New York, in 1998.

Judging by his obiter dicta about Reagan, Mrs Thatcher, the monarchy, foxhunting and taxation, Barry's political sympathies were unmistakably of the Left. Yet he was not easily pigeonholed. In *Culture and Equality* (2000) he provided a critique of the ideology of multiculturalism, which was all the more devastating for coming from a Left-liberal perspective.

Multiculturalism, he argued, is deeply flawed because it militates against policies aimed at income distribution and is guilty of self-contradictory moral relativism – as seen, for example, in laws giving gipsies the right to deprive their own children of a proper education or the claimed right of parents from certain cultures to inflict genital mutilation on their daughters. Noel Malcolm described the book as "one of the most stimulating books of political theory published in recent years".

As well as his own writings, Barry made important contributions as an editor of academic journals. In the 1970s he was founding editor of the *Journal of Political Science* and was one of the main movers in the revitalisation of the Political Studies Association. From 1979 to 1982 he edited *Ethics*, establishing it as the leading journal of moral and political philosophy.

Though Barry never suffered fools gladly, he was supportive of younger scholars and kindly and patient with students. The political philosopher Stuart White recalled an occasion when, through a mix-up of dates, he (White) had failed to turn up to give a paper at the LSE criticising Barry's work. In his absence, Barry read the paper out on his behalf and led a discussion of it.

Barry was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the British Academy. He won the WJM Mackenzie Prize of the Political Studies Association on three occasions, and in 2000 the association presented him with an award for Lifetime Achievement in Political Studies. In 2001 he was awarded the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science – one of political science's highest honours.

Brian Barry married first, in 1960 (dissolved 1988), Joanna Scroggs, and secondly, in 1990, Anni Parker, who survives him with a son of his first marriage.

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