

## Obituary: Brian Barry (1936–2009)

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Brian Barry was a phenomenon: a character almost larger than life; a big bear of a man who could delight and intimidate at almost the same moment. A man full of ferocity because he believed everything he wrote and said; about reason, about justice, about equality, about our duties to others now and in the future. He despised hypocrisy and railed against inefficiency and stupidity which he saw, perhaps too often, all around him. But he was also generous in thought and deed; and never confused his friends with those who happened to agree with him.

He was born in 1936 in London. He read J. S. Mill when still at school, and at the time thought that Mill had pretty well sorted out what the principles of liberalism are. He read PPE at Queen's College, Oxford, staying on to complete a doctorate under the supervision of H. L. A. Hart. His doctorate became *Political Argument* (1965) which contains the seeds of almost everything he subsequently wrote.

In his third year of doctoral work Brian spent a year at Harvard largely because he wanted to meet John Rawls who was then at MIT. Rawls lent Brian an early draft of *A Theory of Justice* (and remember this was before the days of photocopiers). It must have influenced Brian, though he wrote later that he did not get much from Rawls at that time that he could not have got from reading his extant work 'Justice as Fairness' and 'Two Concepts of Rules'. More influential were the lectures he attended, notably Edward Banfield's course on Political Economising, an introduction to the new field of public choice, and Thomas Schelling's course on game theory. Brian introduced public or rational choice theory to many of us in his 1970 book *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* with its sympathetic critique of Downs and Olson, and its more devastating critique of Parsons (the latter originally composed during his doctoral days).

*Political Argument* (1965) introduced the new political theory that was about to break open the academy, most dramatically with Rawls' *Theory* six years later. It is an unusual book, wide-ranging, combining the careful philosophy of Oxford reasoning with insights derived from the economic approach. Thrusting aside political philosophy as the simple maximising of utility, or the dry analysis of moral and political vocabulary, it argued for, and sustained an argument within, the defence of political values. As Brian soon realised, Rawls transformed liberal

thought with the Marxian understanding that the subject of political philosophy is the structure of society. Brian's destruction of Pareto optimality as a fundamental principle of constitutional political economy in the last two chapters of *Political Argument* would have, had more notice been taken of it, destroyed the underlying basis of the 'new right' fifteen years before it even arose.

Ironically, given he wrote the most sustained critique of Rawls' *Theory* in his *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (1973), Brian can be seen as the fundamentalist Rawlsian. In *Theories of Justice* (1989) he produces (Appendix C) the strongest defence of the Difference Principle, the one element that leads the egalitarian away from straight equality. *Justice as Impartiality* (1995), the second of what was originally planned as a three-volume Treatise on Justice, can be seen as the height of Rawlsianism – that is, the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice*. John Rawls himself thought so. Brian once showed me a letter from Rawls, handwritten on that old-fashioned small note-paper. I trust the letter survives in his effects for it is of supreme importance in the history of ideas. I cannot quote verbatim, of course, but Rawls wrote to the effect that reading *Justice as Impartiality* made him think he may have given up some positions rather sooner than he should. It defends universal principles of justice, equality and liberty, within a framework of impartiality between reasonably held different moral values.

The third volume was never written. Brian realised it was too hard for one person to write. It was going to be the working through of the nature of justice that he had defended in terms of practical institutions and laws. I think he also realised that whilst the fundamental principles of liberal justice are universal, there is not necessarily a single way of institutionalising those principles. Different societies and cultures can realise them in different ways. Instead he turned to what perhaps he did best: critique. In *Culture and Equality* (2001) he lambasts the multiculturalists who had weakened liberalism, leaving it wide open to attack from the right. Of course Brian recognised that cultures are different; that is why universal principles of justice cannot be applied in institutionally identical ways in all places. However, that does not mean that the principles of reason or the values of democracy or equality are not applicable across them. And further, it means that different cultures are different, entailing that there are principles such as 'this is the way we do things around here'. Whilst of course different cultural practices can co-exist within a society, they can only do so if they do not conflict at the level of fundamental value. Furthermore, some cultural practices simply are not liberal and cannot be sustained within a just liberal society. In this book Brian's full ferocity can be seen in print for perhaps the first time. To be sure, he lambasts and lampoons in earlier writings, particularly in reviews such as that of Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, which he believed to be a work of little merit, and was forever puzzled and somewhat alarmed that others, especially those on the left, should take it so seriously. But in *Culture and Equality* his ferocity appears on virtually every page to a degree unmatched until his last book *Why Social Justice Matters* (2005).

In many ways *Why Social Justice Matters* could hardly have been more different from *Political Argument*. Where the latter was rather staid and academic, not only with all the references required of a doctoral thesis but also 26 notes, or rather short appendices with Brian's thoughts on various topics he could not squeeze into the main body of the text, *Social Justice Matters* is a coruscating critique of New Labour and the left literature around it. Many academics were a bit puzzled by the book, expecting a more academic tome. One said to me that it was very good, but wondered why Brian had written it. In a personal dedication in my copy, Brian wrote 'I hope you like the book – I don't know how many other people will but it was the book I wanted to write anyway'. It was written out of irritation that somehow 'responsibility' rather than equality had taken over as the major social discourse on the left as well as the right. It was obvious to Brian that responsibility for deprivation, ill-health and social ills lies mostly, if not exclusively, with capitalists, regulators and political elites, and not with the poor themselves. He was frustrated that egalitarians had bought comprehensively into the nitty gritty of the role of responsibility, when it is obvious that those largely responsible for our condition avoid those responsibilities by blaming others. He thought the role of political philosophers was to point out that fraud and spend less time on their own navel-gazing accounts of how to marry equality and choice. That last book is a joy to read, combining the wit and ferocity he could display in seminars or at the dinner table, together with his analytic care. Beware: do not assume that the book is less analytic than his others just because it is less obviously so. And whilst it does not attack many political philosophers directly, keep in mind all that has been written about 'equality of what?' in recent years as you make your way through it.

The list of his books suggests an increasing output as he got older, which is only partially corrected when taking into consideration his myriad journal articles and book chapters. In fact, I do not think he wrote more as he got older; and if he did, it was the rewriting and redrafting that increased. Rather, a lot of what he did write was never published and I trust that *Why Social Justice Matters* will not be his last published work. I understand his handwritten Southampton lectures from the 1960s on the history of political thought would provide robust competition for Plamenatz's two volumes from the same era, as well as for more recent additions to that oeuvre. His book on voting schemes – essentially an extended critique of Dummett's *Voting Procedures* – never saw the light of day; nor did his 1980 manuscript on global justice, *Rich Countries and Poor Countries* (though some articles from that project did). And a wonderful little book on game theory and political theory drafted in the late 1990s is certainly worth publishing.

He had good and less good reasons for not publishing these works. The book on voting is too much tied to Dummett and the UK debate. His game theory book did not cover some recent pertinent results from that field. However, his book on global justice is every bit as good as the raft of books written and published since. His less good reasons relate, I believe, to the bi-polarism from which he suffered

all his life. He was always on a high when completing a book, excited and dominant, full of life and cheer. But as weeks passed from completion he would slowly descend, not always to the depths that he could reach, but down far enough to make him query the worth of his efforts. When he did finish, publication would always cheer him too, and then he would plan the next project whilst delighting and being frustrated in equal measure by defending the last.

He was elected to fellowships of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1976) and the British Academy (1988). The PSA three times awarded him the W.J.M. Mackenzie prize for the best book published in the previous year, as well as recognising his lifetime achievement in Political Studies in 2000. He had been, indeed, a key player in the history of the PSA. Together with Jim Sharpe he orchestrated a revolution in 1975 that overthrew the old guard then running it. Whilst he did not take an executive position himself, he organised a slate to run against the Executive, forcing the first election in the PSA's history. He co-founded the *British Journal of Political Science*, whilst his editorship of *Ethics* is credited with saving it as a top political philosophy journal. He was awarded probably the highest achievement for a political scientist in 2001 when he won the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science, the only British honorand to date. The prize committee stated his award was 'for his profound contribution to normative political theory performed with passion as well as clarity in the grand tradition from the Enlightenment'.

Following his death, many who never knew him personally commented on websites what a joy it was to read Brian's work: its clarity and style were widely appreciated. That style did not come as easily as might be thought. He would draft and redraft ten or twenty times on occasion to get the result he wanted; and copy-editors who thought they knew better where the comma should go would soon be taught, in no uncertain terms, the basic principles of grammar. The real mark of how good his writing is comes when you try to critique it. It is only when you're checking him against the criticisms you are trying to make that you realise that it is actually important to his point that he has used a semi-colon and not a comma; whilst the subordinate clause is not just an aside but a serious response to the point you were intending to make.

Brian was loved by many of his colleagues and all those of his students who could last the course. He was an academic wanderer, holding positions at the Universities of Birmingham, Keele, Southampton, Oxford and Essex, before moving to positions in Canada and the United States at British Columbia, Chicago, and the California Institute of Technology. After a short stay at the European University Institute, Florence, he returned to England to spend eleven years at the London School of Economics. In many ways the LSE provided his true intellectual home and it, together with the stability and loving support provided by his second wife Anni, enabled him to produce some of his most important work. In 1998 he took up a last appointment at Columbia University in New York, returning to London to their old flat in Bloomsbury on retirement. In those last three years of his life

Brian suffered health problems that, for periods, made life difficult for those close to him, especially of course, Anni; though even on his most difficult days his intellect and his humanity shone through, whether it was through conversations analytically cogent or heartfelt statements about those he loved most.

Brian remained true to his beliefs from first to last. You may not agree with everything he wrote; you may have been the subject of one of his tirades; but you cannot fault his honesty or the analytic rigour that made him one of the greatest political theorists of the modern age. With Brian Barry's death, liberalism has lost one of its most stalwart defenders and passionate proponents.

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