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Obituary

Brian Barry

A formidable, robust philosopher, he was author of the influential *Political Argument*

Paul Kelly
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With his seminal *Political Argument* (1965) and subsequent work, Brian Barry, who has died of a heart attack aged 72, re-established the urgency and intellectual respectability of a tradition of political philosophy rooted in the work of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume in the 18th century, and John Stuart Mill in the 19th. Barry was Lieber professor of political philosophy at Columbia University, New York (1998-2005), and professor of political science at the London School of Economics (1987-98). With Bertrand Russell, GE Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, 20th-century philosophy had lost interest in politics. *Political Argument* put that interest back.

Barry challenged the prejudice that there was nothing to be said about political values and principles, and sought to explain and justify how we might reach reasonable conclusions about them. Forty-four years on, *Political Argument* remains a compendium of how we conceptualise, analyse and defend claims about democracy, power and justice.

Six years after *Political Argument* was published came John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Thus did Barry's initially marginal interests become central to English-speaking political philosophy. Barry had met Rawls while a Rockefeller fellow (1961-62) at Harvard University. Their friendship was to withstand a stormy intellectual relationship.

When Rawls's work was first published, Barry's review of it became his third book, *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (1972), still one of the best discussions of Rawls's theory. Subsequent books such as *Theories of Social Justice* (1989) and *Justice as Impartiality* (1995) continued this critical engagement. Barry was often critical of the subsequent direction of Rawls's work but they retained a warm, touchingly respectful correspondence. In the end they were on the same side in supporting equal civil and political rights and an egalitarian income distribution.

Barry's political theory reflected 1960s left-liberalism; the squandered promise of Harold Wilson's Labour governments and President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society". Subsequent philosophers such as Robert Nozick, co-opted by the new right in the 1970s and 80s, were treated with less respect. A famous 1975 Barry review, in *Political Theory*, of Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* - a rejoinder to Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* - exploded with moral indignation at a theory that entailed consigning millions to poverty. This anger could often be turned to effect in the treatment of peers who he felt should have had thicker skins.

Why *Social Justice Matters* (2005) directed that disapproval at both New Labour and political philosophy for failing to engage with political science and social policy. As the

world moved to the right, Barry stayed where he was. He saw part of his vocation as the defence of that position from communitarianism and multiculturalism, the latter of which had been the subject of *Culture and Equality* (2000).

Barry was an inventor of the professional role of political theorist, combining philosophical argument with the lessons of the social sciences. His interests were social policy, social and rational-choice theory, voting systems and democratic politics. All of this also goes back to *Political Argument* and his influential second book, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (1970).

Born in London and educated at Taunton's grammar school in Southampton, Barry took a first in politics, philosophy and economics at Queen's College, Oxford, in 1958. His DPhil (1964) was supervised by Herbert (HLA) Hart, the Oxford professor of jurisprudence, at a time when doctorates were the exception among philosophers and political scientists in Britain, and it provided the basis for *Political Argument*.

In 1960 he joined Birmingham University's philosophy department. Then came Harvard. Back in Britain, he lectured at the universities of Keele (1962-63) and Southampton (1963-65). He then moved to University College, Oxford (1965-66), before becoming an official fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford (1966-69 and 1972-75). In 1969 he was appointed professor of government at Essex University, served as dean of social studies (1971-72) and co-founded in 1971, with Tony King, the *British Journal of Political Science*, whose first issues he edited.

He was professor at the University of British Columbia (1975-76) before becoming a fellow at the centre for advanced study in the behavioural sciences at Stanford University (1976-77). While at the University of Chicago (1977-82), he was the editor (1979-82) who saved the journal *Ethics*.

After time at the California Institute of Technology (1982-86) and the European University Institute in Florence, Barry's appointment as the LSE's professor of political science came in the wake of marital break-up and his subsequent happy marriage to Anni Parker. A decade at an institution that perhaps best reflected his interests followed. He trained and inspired a generation of political scientists and philosophers. In 1998 came his final post at Columbia. He was emeritus there, and at the LSE.

Brian suffered from bipolar disorder and succumbed to a major breakdown in 2006. He was supported by Anni and his friends, and seemed to have recovered, but feared he had lost his intellectual powers, a view not shared by those who knew him. In 2001, he became the only British political scientist honoured with Uppsala University's Johan Skytte prize for political science.

Loyal to friends and generous to strangers, Barry helped professionalise political theory - and reminded us of the power of reason as a force for good.

He is survived by Anni and by a son, Austin, from his first marriage, to Joanna.

Steven Lukes writes: I knew Brian Barry from 1963 when we were colleagues at Keele. He was rough-edged and formidable even then and thoroughly enjoyed attacking the prevailing practice of political philosophy. He was working on *Political Argument*, and I recall his insisting, with the clear intention to provoke, that all political theorists before 1945 were "defunct chaps" - apart from Jeremy Bentham and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

We were colleagues at Oxford, where he did much to awaken colleagues and students to developments in political theory, and played an important part in developing the teaching of political sociology, along the lines of his *Sociologists, Economists and*

Democracy (1970).

I succeeded him as professor of political and social theory in Florence, where, though his time there was troubled, he left behind the memory, and the admiration of many, for being a teller of uncomfortable truths. He once called me an "obscurantist" in a review of a book of mine. The charge still rankles, but the challenge of his critique still troubles me. And in New York he was a colleague, abrasive as ever, whose mix of intellectual acuteness and straight-forward, old-style English left labourism I never ceased to value.

I once spent a wonderful weekend in Lisbon with Brian and Anni at a conference and saw a warm and generous side to him with which, unfortunately for me, I never subsequently engaged.

• Brian Barry, philosopher and political scientist, born 7 August 1936; died 10 March 2009

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