

# obituary: professor paul hirst 1946 – 2003

*Paul Hirst, Professor of Social Theory at Birkbeck College, University of London, died on 16 June 2003 following a brain haemorrhage. He was fifty-seven.*

Paul was one of the most important social and political thinkers of his generation. But more than this, he was an energetic campaigner for practical reform. His tireless enthusiasm and commitment animated many intellectual and political projects: he was a founding signatory and Chair of the constitutional reform movement Charter 88, co-founder of the journal *Economy and Society*, and Chair of the *Political Quarterly* editorial board. He initiated The London Consortium PhD Programme, bringing together Birkbeck with the Architectural Association, The Tate and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and was its Director. He was more than a thinker, he was someone who provided the leadership, hard work, and determination with which political campaigns, intellectual achievement, and institutional reforms are sustained and advanced.

Paul was a polymath and prolific writer. He made important contributions to the analysis of social theory, law, architecture, military history, and philosophical debates in the social sciences. Through his early work on Louis Althusser, he both extended the

insights of structuralist analysis, and quickly came to challenge the coherence of the central categories of Marxist thought. In *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* and *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (1975, 1977, both with Barry Hindess), he contested the idea that 'historical materialism', conceived as a science of history, could comprise the core of Marxist intellectual practice. He engaged further with theories of history and historical writing in *Marxism and Historical Writing* (1985), and in *On Law and Ideology* (1979) argued that the distinction between the economic base and ideological superstructure was unsustainable: the concept of property key to the economic relations of capitalism could only be understood through examination of the ideological field of law. This work challenged intellectuals of the left to re-think their understanding of the relation between law and democratic practice, and to develop a reasoned and analytical understanding of the specific role of law in the constitution and maintenance of social order, something he himself advanced in *Law, Socialism and Democracy* (1986).

While Paul quickly left Althusser behind, his theoretical imagination and concern with politics flourished. In 1982 he published *Social Relations and Human Attributes* (with Penny Woolley), still one of the most cogent analyses of the biological and social aspects of personhood available. He eschewed the narrowness of conventional disciplinary boundaries. Against those who would pursue avowedly ideological arguments, and those determined to remain within a narrowly apolitical understanding of work in political studies, Paul took seriously the task of thinking both realistically and imaginatively about contemporary problems. This is evident in his work on democratic governance, globalisation, and war. In *Associative Democracy* (1994), *Representative Democracy and its Limits* (1990), and *After Thatcher* (1989), he focused on rethinking democracy in the face of the limits imposed by both traditional liberal democratic forms and state socialism. In his seminal contribution *Globalisation in Question* (1996 and 1999, with Grahame Thompson), he challenged the widely held belief in 'globalisation', and in *War and Power in the 21st Century* (2001), he argued that technological and climate change may lead to serious armed conflict. All of these books refuse wishful thinking, give bleak analyses of the current situation, and at the same time provide resources for engaging with the present in more effective ways. They demonstrate, above all, a capacity for judgement, something for which Paul appeals in the piece published here. At the time of his death he had almost completed a monograph on space and power, bringing together social theory, architecture, urban planning and the space of the new world order. It is hoped that this work will be published.

Paul's contribution to the development of academic and democratic

institutions was remarkable. This is most clearly borne out in his long-standing commitment to Birkbeck, which he joined in 1969, going on in 1972 to found the School of Politics and Sociology with Sir Bernard Crick and Sami Zubaida. But this commitment is evident also in his key role at Charter 88, and in the founding of the London Consortium. With regard to each of these institutions, Paul's insight, breadth of imagination, energy and determination made him a life force. At Birkbeck, he helped shape and give direction to distinctive degree programmes that refuse the narrowness of one discipline, while demanding that students engage with the most difficult of material. Just the most recent of these educational initiatives is the innovative PhD programme of the London Consortium, founded in 1995 to challenge the relativism of much work in cultural studies and to combine a commitment to theory with artistic practice. Having steered this from its beginning, he was about to step down as academic director of a flourishing programme in order to devote his time to the development of a new MSc in International Security at Birkbeck. He was also about to accept the role of Pro Vice-Master for teaching at Birkbeck, a role that would have enabled him to demonstrate still further his commitment to an egalitarian model of excellence.

He was the most inspiring of colleagues, offering academic leadership, intellectual generosity, seriousness, and humour. Perhaps the most important thing about Paul as a colleague was his capacity for intellectual comradeship; one could hurl anything at him and know that he would respond directly and honestly, whether one's concern was about political philosophy, the international

economy, the state of the university system, or whether to buy a flat. His enormous range of engagement, and sense of humour, made joy of even the most difficult of circumstances.

Teaching with him always meant one would have great fun with ideas, so that even the most abstract of topics would gain from his capacity to make them engaging. He would dive into quite specific and often bizarre observations – Immanuel Kant’s pool playing techniques, for example, that would leave everyone reeling.

His keenness to cultivate others, and time for others, was reflected in his continued commitment to teaching first year undergraduates, and in his willingness to read and comment on work of all of his colleagues. He had a precise and energetic intellect, but also determination to fight for the things and people to whom he was committed. He engaged fully with students, not just those who excelled academically, but also those who worked hard and struggled. He was egalitarian by nature. Paul cared not who you were, but what you thought and what you could do. He cared, and took delight in other people, and in their achievements.

Paul was, in the manner of someone with an enormous and sceptical intellect, capable of astute and pessimistic diagnoses of the present; but he was also always positive and practically engaged with the tasks of renewing our social and political landscapes, institutions, and relations, even in his recognition of the intractability of the problems to be faced. He offered extraordinary breadth and depth of engagement with the world, and he demanded this of others too. In always pursuing the work he thought most important, and by encouraging others to do the

same, he was exemplary.

The School of Politics and Sociology is planning a number of events to honour Paul Hirst: an international conference in 2004, the naming of the seminar room in 10 Gower Street, and a memorial fund to endow an annual lecture.

Britain has lost one of its foremost intellectuals. Colleagues and friends will miss him always.

He is survived by his wife Penny and son Jamie.

**Samantha Ashenden**

School of Politics and Sociology  
Birkbeck College