

William Outhwaite

Luke Martell

William Outhwaite, Professor of Sociology, who was Convenor of the Social and Political Thought programme, Director of the Centre for Critical Social Theory and member of the Editorial group for *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, has left the University of Sussex after thirty four years for a post at Newcastle University.

William studied as an undergraduate at Oxford and came to Sussex for his postgraduate work, becoming a lecturer in 1973. He convened the Social and Political Thought graduate programme for many years, as well as teaching SPT courses including Recent Social Theory and Sociology of Knowledge.

In the sociology department William lectured on the first year course Themes and Perspectives in Sociology, and taught courses such as Political Sociology, Contemporary Social Theory and Sociology of Knowledge.

William is a keen Europeanist and in the days when Sussex was an interdisciplinary institution with interdisciplinary schools he was a longstanding member of the School of European Studies and taught courses on modern and contemporary European society.

William was also editor of *Current Sociology* from 1987-93, a deputy editor of *Sociology* 1985-88 and a member of the editorial board of the *European Journal of Social Theory* from 1997. I can personally vouch for William's excellent copy-editing skills from the times when he has been kind enough to read the odd article I have written!

William was justifiably one of Sussex's most well known and internationally prestigious academics; his world class work, fluently and compactly written, stands out in his fields and he attracted PhD students from around the world, often supervising a dozen or so at any one time. Due to his affable charac-

ter, modesty and lack of pretension his world stature often went unnoticed and under-recognised by the university, but not by those in his department or by those who worked in his areas of expertise.

One of William's main interests is in the philosophy of social science and his first book *Understanding Social Life* (Allen and Unwin, 1975), on Weber's *Verstehen*, is a challenging, original work which pushed developments in this field forward. He is author of *Concept Formation in Social Science* (Routledge, 1983) and his influential *New Philosophies of Social Science* (Macmillan, 1987) put William among the world's leading critical realists. He was a regular at Critical Realism conferences and argues here for a realist, as opposed to social constructionist, view of the objective character of social structures and processes. William was joined at the realism conferences by others such as Ted Benton, Andrew Sayer, Roy Bhaskar, and Andrew Collier. William is also a co-editor and contributor to *Defending Objectivity: Essays in honour of Andrew Collier* (Routledge, 2004).

During these years William was a leading member of the interdisciplinary group at Sussex, which established the major international graduate programme in Social and Political Thought. This programme continues to attract students in part on the basis of the reputation established by William and other leading international social and political theorists at Sussex including Istvan Meszaros, Chris Arthur, Gillian Rose, Mary Farmer, and William's friend and former supervisor Tom Bottomore with whom he was co-editor of *The Blackwell Dictionary of Social Thought* (latest edition 2006) and for whom he co-edited *Social Theory and Social Criticism: Essays for Tom Bottomore* (Blackwell, 1987). Core interests for William and many of the sociologists in this programme included critical theory and the Frankfurt School.

William is one of the world's leading Habermas experts, if not the foremost authority in the area; he is author of *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, 1994) and editor of *The Habermas Reader* (Polity, 1996). His work on Habermas covers both concisely and clearly Habermas' early writings on the public sphere up to more recent works on law and the state; his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas' analysis of the works of Foucault, Derrida and others, and his defence of the Enlightenment project, something William has also argued for, as in his article 'The Myth of Modernist Method' (*European Journal of Social Theory*, 2, 1, 1999).

Despite his criticism of over-empiricism William is not a social theorist with his head in the clouds: his work is distinguished by its combination of his philosophy of social science and social theory with an interest in modern and contemporary economic, social and political processes and structures. William is a political sociologist as well as social theorist, and, as mentioned above, has a particular interest in European society and Europe as a social space. This is facilitated by his ability with languages, rare in UK sociology, which he seems able to pick up with ease: he is especially fluent in French and German.

William is co-editor of *The Sociology of Politics* (Elgar, 1998) and co-author with Larry Ray of *Social Theory and Post-Communism* (Blackwell, 2004). The latter, like his excellent most recent book *The Future of Society* (Blackwell, 2005), demonstrates William's ability to link social theory with empirical developments: it looks at the implications of the end of communism for social theory on issues such as state/civil society relations, globalisation, the future of modernity, and post-socialism. Similarly *The Future of Society* defends the idea of society in sociology and social theory against challenges from postmodernism, neoliberalism, globalisation and in the light of transnational developments such as the growth of Europe as a post-national social space. William is critical of such perspectives but in a sympathetic open-minded way.

William's combination of theory with more concrete sociology and the combination of his different areas of interest continues with the new *Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology* (2007) edited with Stephen Turner and with his long-awaited and excellent Polity book on contemporary Europe, due out soon. In the meantime a book on Germany is in preparation and William has been awarded a three year Leverhulme award to work on Europe in the post-Communist decade after 1989.

While at Sussex William was legendary for the piles of papers and books that precariously filled his office. There were too many of these to take with him and some remain in the department at Sussex, a pleasant reminder of William's role and offering reading for those waiting in the corridor for an appointment with members of faculty!

William is an easy-going, mild-mannered colleague, always easy to get on with, supportive to colleagues in his own quiet way, as I discovered and appreciated throughout his time at Sussex, and supportive to the types of sociolo-

gy he holds dear. At the same time he does not lack a critical bite: this was occasionally shown in his expressions of views regarding the management of the university and those approaches in sociology he had less than full sympathy for!

VC Alasdair Smith, a one time colleague of William's in the School of European Studies, finished his appreciation at William's farewell conference with the recognition that, in addition to his wide-ranging intellectual contributions and teaching, William is above all and most importantly a very nice man, well-liked by those that know him. The affection with which he is held was shown by the packed attendance at this farewell conference in June 2007, contributors included former PhD students and colleagues from throughout his career: Chris Arthur, John Holmwood, Larry Ray, Gurminder Bhambra, Chris Rumford, Gerard Delanty, Mary Kaldor, Mark Smith and Martin Albrow, who provided contributions across William's areas of interest in social theory, philosophy of social science, critical realism and Europe.

For many years William lived in a beautiful spot in the Sussex countryside, until moving to Brighton with Laura where they lived with their son Daniel. It is with them that he moved to Edinburgh in 2007. William's personality, teaching and intellectual contribution are already sorely missed at Sussex but are Newcastle's gain. There William is Chair of Sociology in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology and we wish him well!

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