

# Vale Dr Peter Williams

14 November 1953-14 November 2015

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Peter Williams was an Editorial Board member (and later Advisory Board member) of *Southern Review*, which became *Communication, Politics & Culture*.

Despite blindness from the late 1990s, Peter continued to teach until November 2014, and was an active researcher until his death, co-writing a book on media and the government of populations (Palgrave, forthcoming).

**There are moments in a life, albeit incredibly rare ones, when someone comes along and shakes the ground under your feet.**

*Michael Dutton, Goldsmiths University of London*

Anyone who has read Pierre Bourdieu on biography will know the difficulty of writing even a brief note on a person's life. Held together only by a 'proper name' and the unity imposed upon biographies they are, at best, fragments. The fragment of Peter William's life I want to tell of is the life of a mind that touched and changed mine. This is but a shard of the life of Peter Williams refracted through my earliest memories of him. It is less the story of his life than the impression it left on mine. A first impression, an initial style of thought he showed me that led into the world of intellectual thought that, looking back, formed a very simple but eloquent equation: no Peter, no Michael. There are moments in a life, albeit incredibly rare ones, when someone comes along and shakes the ground under your feet, when you encounter world-shattering ideas that change the way you think about the world around you.

Peter Williams played that role in my life. Peter introduced me to theory. It was as simple as that. Yet the simplicity of the statement masks the complication of the task. With me, Peter encountered a student with raw, almost autodidactically formed political ideas, drawn more from snippets of knowledge gleaned through political activism rather than through thorough scholarly pursuit. Patchy, incomplete and often simply wrong, Peter built upon what little I had and, by the time our close working relationship concluded, he had left me with what Mao Zedong would once have called a capacity to 'walk on two legs'.

Quoting Mao may no longer be fashionable, but it both illustrates the gift that Peter gave me and shows the direction in which I would take that gift. I would, quite literally, take it to China. It was a gift that enabled me to join the dots and tie my interests in Marxist theory and China into something that would lead from a politically charged interest, into something of a vocation. Pete introduced me to this world, first via Althusser, then Foucault. With Althusserianism, that meant a political theory that was not only of use to activists' practices, but also one that embedded an intellectual style of thought that was unusually inter-disciplinary. Stretching across the economic theories of Charles Bettelheim, through the philosophy of Dominique Lacourt, onto theories of the state with Nicos Poulantzas and, also, into the world of literature, with Pierre Macherey, Althusserianism, seemed to provide an analysis heading toward total coverage.

More than anything, this was an Althusserianism that came to Australia already repackaged in its journey through the UK. It travelled a route that took it through the journal *Theoretical Practice* and into the early but seminal work of Hindess and Hurst. This Althusserian inspired canon demanded the adoption of a rigorously scriptural-like reading method that was almost Jesuitical in character. Based upon a close reading of Marx's work and politically buoyed by a sense of structural unity, Althusserianism was an ideal introduction to theory, yet with Pete, it was no textbook introduction. This is because he always tied theory to particular concrete problems we faced politically and always infused these theories with a little dash of Peter Williams' own cocktail of theorists who bent the theoretical frameworks in a particular direction. With Pete as my teacher, the Althusserian reading list would be supplemented by figures like Bertolt Brecht, Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács not to mention one of Peter's own major influences, Raymond Williams. Likewise, with Peter Williams as guide, the Foucauldianism, inherited from the later Hindess and Hurst critiques of Althusserianism structuralism would still have great political purchase when set alongside the 'culture turn' that led to new interdisciplinary formations such as media and communications and Cultural Studies. It was a Foucauldian approach still anchored to a left political agenda and infused with a sense of political engagement and urgency. For Pete, knowledge was never far removed from the spirit of Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach.

With his famous red shoes and shyness, Peter was part iconoclast, part teacher. He was a member of an exciting group of radical teachers attracted to Queensland's Griffith University's School of Humanities. They pioneered early inter-disciplinary forays into media and communication, cultural studies and television studies. Highly theoretical, and left-leaning, this form of interdisciplinarity stood in sharp contrast to the school from which I came, the school of Modern Asian Studies. Despite being 'area' not discipline-centric, and therefore intrinsically interdisciplinary, Asian Studies took a far more orthodox and rather more conservative

approach to the value of knowledge and while I might have been enrolled as a student of Modern Asian Studies, I was also a student Queensland in the era of Joh Bjelke-Peterson<sup>1</sup>. At that time, Asia seemed a long way away. It was at this time that I met Peter. He became my mentor, for it was Peter who showed me how to harness the passion for Marxist theory that activism had induced in me by bringing it into conversation with the China I was learning about and in which I would later live. He began to make the study of China into a larger political project by making ideas dance and intellectual work meaningful. Through countless bits of bureaucracy, he made co-supervision across Schools possible, and in so doing, opened the possibility of Asian Studies developing a form contoured by (largely, continental) theory. Many years later, a similar combination of left continental theory, non-western social forms and a political urgency would appear in scholarly literature under the rubric of postcolonialism.

The pathway Peter opened up for me, and after me, for many others, was simply ahead of its time. I failed to notice this about him at the time because I was mesmerised by his brilliance but, as time went on, and as my teacher became my friend, another side of Pete opened up to me as another chapter of my life began. Our paths continued to cross as we moved from Brisbane to Adelaide and finally to Melbourne. By that stage, we both had partners, and then kids. Throughout this entire period, Pete together with Cathy Greenfield, his partner, proved to be amazing generous pair of friends and a brilliant intellectual and teaching team. Together, at McGill in Adelaide, they set up South Australia's first Cultural Studies programme. Then they moved to Monash and did some remarkable distance education before finally going to RMIT University and joining the School of Media and Communication there.

Everywhere they went, Pete became a legendary teacher, showing the same patience and brilliance that he had shown toward me so many years earlier. Even when his eyesight failed and blindness set in, he still taught and still carried within him that ability to mesmerise by combining searing intellect with a slightly self-deprecating, somewhat dark, but always laconic sense of humour. Delivered dry, it was a quintessential Australian mixture and, with its political twist to the left, carried within it a different imagined Australia.

This imagined Australia was a fairer more equitable place. It was an Australia of land rights and of gender and class equality. It was a promise that briefly and very fleetingly and gingerly came into the realm of possibility with Whitlam<sup>2</sup>. It spawned a generation to the left of Whitlam's own vision. It was a politics without pretence and Pete was exemplary in that regard.

A brilliant intellectual who loved the footy, chain smoked, and had a VB with mates as he beat them at the pub quiz. Shy and with a self-deprecating wit, he had a piercing political wit and a wicked sense of humour. He could tie together a world of knowledge and offer a grounded analysis better than anyone.

He turned knowledge into a tool of change because, as I noted earlier, he lived the 11th thesis. It was a life lived in kindness and generosity, I miss you Peter Williams and the world is a lesser place without you.

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<sup>1</sup> Longest-serving Premier of Queensland (in office August 1968 to December 1987). Bjelke-Petersen was one of the best-known and most controversial political figures of 20th-century Australia. He was an uncompromising conservative with a domineering style that earned him the nickname of "the Hillbilly Dictator".

<sup>2</sup> Whitlam led his party to power for the first time in 23 years Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia and Leader of the Australian Labor Party December 1972 to November 1975. His government implemented a large number of new programs and policy changes, including the termination of military conscription, institution of universal health care and free university education.

## Author

**Michael Dutton** was formerly Professor of Political Cultures at the Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University. He is now Professor of Politics, Goldsmiths University of London. Dutton's research is characterised by a strong interest in contemporary social and cultural theory wed to a specific 'archive' called China.

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