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Obituary: Joseph A. Buttigieg (1947-2019)

Abstract

This is an obituary of Joseph A. Buttigieg by a long-time collaborator and friend of his, Professor Peter Mayo of the University of Malta, who apart from – and often overlapping with his Gramsci studies – carries out specialist research and teaching on educational matters.

Keywords

Buttigieg, Gramsci, literature, prison notebooks, culture, politics

Joseph Buttigieg (1947-2019)

Peter Mayo

We have received the devastating news of the passing away of a great friend and scholar of international repute: Professor Joseph A. Buttigieg, Emeritus Professor at the Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA and alumnus of the University of Malta, the Jesuit-run Heythrop College and SUNY at Binghamton.

The feeling right now is that of shock and disbelief. Only last week I tried skyping him to congratulate him on his son, Pete Buttigieg, Mayor of South Bend, Indiana who was globally in the news, speaking about his intentions to run for US President.

It was only in 1993 that I got to know him thanks to his brother Franco who was about to write a long essay under my supervision. I had just returned from Canada, working on my PhD. A year earlier, after having written my comprehensive exam, feeling great about having scoured the vast literature on Gramsci, I spotted a copy of his annotated and translated Vol. 1 of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in a prominent Toronto bookstore. My immediate reaction was "Darn! I missed this one." The surprise was even greater when I spotted the author's surname "Buttigieg." My immediate reaction was "This must be an American of Maltese descent" only to be told by Professor Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, months later, over here, that Joe Buttigieg is a graduate of our university who had visited Moscow in his research on Gramsci to meet the latter's son Delio. He therefore met Professor Schembri Bonaci, who was then Maltese Ambassador to the Soviet Union. I later discovered that Joe is the brother of a keen Manchester United supporter, John Buttigieg who I have known for many years. What a small world! Joe too was an avid United fan, by the way.

While John was close to Beckham, Ferguson and Neville (Gary), Joe, for his part, was close to a number of literary theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. He was ensconced at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana where he was William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English and Director of the Hesburgh-Yusko Scholars Program at the same university. In addition, he was a fellow in the University of Notre Dame's Nanovic Institute for European Studies

and Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies besides serving as the Director of the Stamps Scholars Program inside the same institution.

From that first meeting inside my then university office, in the presence of colleague and friend, Professor Ronald G. Sultana, a book project emerged involving another friend and colleague Professor Carmel Borg who I put in contact with Joe from Toronto where Carmel was studying. Together, Joe, Carmel and I edited *Gramsci and Education* published by Rowman & Littlefield (2002). Using our respective contacts, we attracted some of the top names in critical education and Gramscian scholarship. Of course Joe had produced other books including Vol II and III of his projected monumental five volume work in English based on the 4 volume Critical Edition of the *Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci (Columbia University Press) and *Portrait of the Artist in Different Perspective*, the latter on the aesthetics of James Joyce. In addition, he had numerous articles published in different journals, including the highly prestigious *Boundary II* and *Daedalus*, and in different languages.

He wrote extensively on literary and critical theory and the relationship between culture and politics.

We have lost a great scholar of the old school. He had broad background knowledge which extended well beyond Gramsci. He was one who not only absorbed and imparted knowledge but also produced it in top notch journals, books, periodicals and other outlets, including various recorded seminars which can be accessed online.

His departure at 71 marks a great loss for his Alma Mater, the University of Malta which he continued to serve in different ways: as External Examiner for PhD theses and as guest speaker at seminars, at least one of which can be accessed online. In 1994, he delivered two talks to large audiences at the University of Malta, one on Literary Theory and one on Gramsci in the USA. He came over from Rome as guest of the University's Department of English. The Gramsci in the USA talk, based on a paper subsequently published in a book edited by Eric Hobsbawm, was delivered at a Philosophy Society session. He was also a great commentator on current American politics about which he spoke publicly and even wrote articles in several international outlets, including *Critica Marxista*.

On a personal level he was affable, often smiling and cracking jokes. Nothing gave him more pleasure than seeing excellent cultural productions, especially books, coming out of people ensconced in his country of birth. Joe was always supportive of the efforts of fellow Maltese and very generous at opening doors for young and old alike. I can personally vouch for that he wrote a very generous endorsement to my early Gramsci and Freire book (Zed) and an insightful preface, with very generous comments, to my 2015 book *Hegemony and Education under Neoliberalism. Insights from Gramsci* (Routledge), the latter some months after one of our last meetings - his mother's funeral inside the Mosta Dome. We might have met later for probably one last time.

I shall never forget one anecdote he told me during our first meeting in 1993. He was about to leave for the USA to carry out doctoral work at SUNY. His former professor of English at the University of Malta apparently tried to dissuade him from going to the USA encouraging to remain here where he "will be a big fish in a small pond". These of course were different times in comparison to the last twenty years characterized by the island's connectivity that allows persons ensconced here to establish themselves internationally. Joseph's response to this suggestion was typical of the man's witticisms: "I'd rather be a medium fish in a large pond". We all know that Joe shirked no formidable international challenges. Indeed a medium or large fish he proved to be. Suffice to mention the tributes that have been pouring in from all parts of the world, also judging from the media coverage his passing attracted in his homeland's media. He was a big fish in both a large and small, albeit globally connected, pond.

My condolences go to his widow Anne, his son Pete, and his brothers, sisters and all those who worked closely with him. The Left has lost a great scholar of genuinely international acclaim; I have lost a great friend, collaborator and mentor. May he rest in peace.