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In Remembrance: Deborah Cook (1954-2020)

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On Wednesday, October 7th, 2020, I was in my study at home getting ready for a department meeting. Our spring of remote working discontent had given way to an autumn of Teams meetings and classes. I decided to check my email before logging on to the meeting. Strangely, there was a message from the Toronto police. I opened the email, thinking it was some sort of hoax, but just to be sure I phoned the number in the message. The constable informed me that my friend and colleague, Deborah Cook, had died the day before.

I had spoken to Deborah about a week previously. During the summer months, the lockdown rules had been relaxed and she was able to stroll and stop for drinks and chats in her Riverdale neighborhood in Toronto. As the cold weather returned, she worried that she would face a lonely and isolated winter. November to March in Toronto is dreary and grey enough; a return to full lockdowns was a depressing thought. But we chatted about the situation with as much humor as we could muster. There was no indication that our phone call would be our last.

Deborah's death was completely unexpected. She smoked a few du Mauriers every day but loved long walks and was apparently in good health. But the heart is a fickle organ and hers gave out on October 6th.

The first time that I met Deborah, strangely enough, was during a video interview for a limited-term position in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Windsor. Deborah came to Windsor in 1989, after limited-term positions at Queen's and the University of Victoria. She also taught for one year in the CEGEP system in Quebec. In 1998 Skype or Teams did not exist, so I had to go to the University of Toronto, where a video link had been set up. I sat alone in a huge room while Deborah and two other members of the department interviewed me. I had just come back to Toronto from the University of Alberta where I had taught on contract for two years. I needed this job, so I worked hard to say whatever I thought they wanted to hear, including how well I could teach a class on medieval philosophy. Thinking back, I think I remember a little gleam in Deborah's eye, laughing to herself knowing I was, how should we say, stretching the scope of my competence.

But I got the job and Deborah and I became friends from the moment that I arrived in Windsor. For two years we would have dinner every Wednesday, drink wine, kvetch about the administration, and talk philosophy.

We had been friends and colleagues for a couple of months before I made the connection between the Deborah Cook I was now working with and the Deborah Cook who wrote *The Subject Finds a Voice*, a reappraisal of the late works of Foucault which I had read and used to help build part of the argument in my doctoral dissertation.

The Subject Finds a Voice (1993) was Deborah's first book. It was followed in 1996 by *The Culture Industry Revisited.* These two early works set out the poles within which her research would subsequently develop. Of her many contributions, perhaps none is more important than the surprising links that she was able to establish between Foucault and the Frankfurt School, and in particular, Adorno (*Adorno, Foucault and The Critique of the West*, 2018). *Adorno and Foucault* was her follow up book to *Adorno and Nature* (2011) and *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society* (2004). Deborah's reading of Adorno was notable for her championing of a more positive and hopeful interpretation against the generally prevailing view of him as a dour and pessimistic critic disengaged from the hopeful struggle for a better world. This interpretation had been foreshadowed by her argument in the 1996 book on the culture industry that there was a progressive dimension to popular culture which the main theorists of the first generation of the Frankfurt School understood and celebrated, but which was ignored by the standard interpretation of their works.

From the first to the last her work was defined by meticulous attention to textual detail and a knack for reading the works of seminal twentieth-century critical theorists against the grain. Her conclusions were controversial amongst Adorno scholars, but there can be no intellectual growth without conflict and argument. If there was anything that Deborah enjoyed, it was serious philosophical discussion and debate. Whether at conferences or in her classroom, Deborah exemplified the scholarly commitment to challenging established thinking while being willing to (graciously) defend her position against her critics.

Most of the philosophical world knew Deborah as a scholar, and she was rightfully proud of her achievements. But she was also a deeply committed teacher. While she could be intimidating to students, she also approached her teaching practice with a sense of its practical importance. "Ideas matter" she would tell her students: philosophers do interpret the world, but since we act on interpretations, we have to ensure that those we act upon are true. No student who stuck with her demanding classes would come away unchanged for the better (although perhaps not with as high a grade as they would have liked). She imparted the determination that carried her from London, ON, to doctoral studies at the Sorbonne to all of her students. Several of them have gone on to graduate school themselves and some are now making their mark as young scholars.

Deborah was a citizen of the intellectual world, and she brought that world to our peninsula at the southwestern end of Ontario. Her scholarship helped put Windsor on the philosophical map and her retirement was a huge loss for the department. However, for Deborah herself, retirement was a liberation from the grind of the institution. She looked forward to a newfound freedom that would give her more time to finish her latest manuscript, to travel, and to speak to the critical theory conferences she regularly attended.

Sadly, she only enjoyed a few months of retirement before her death.

She signed my copy of *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West* with the simple, yet poignant, inscription: "*ad infinitum*." Good materialist that she was, she knew that our time on earth is finite, but that ideas live on. They open new doors as they inhabit new minds who put them to work in new contexts, stretching their effects across the open-ended future of the human project. Her books and her lectures live on in the minds of scholars and students, and her mischievous humor, sharp wit and, I might add, her spirit lives on in those of us who were fortunate to count her not only as a colleague but as a friend.

Jeff Noonan is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor. He is the author of *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference* (2003), *Democratic Society and Human Needs* (2006), *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value* (2012), *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life* (2018), *The Troubles with Democracy* (2019), and *Embodied Humanism* (2022). He has published dozens of peer reviewed articles and book chapters. He also writes regularly for alternative and progressive websites in Canada and abroad and maintains an active blog at www.jeffnoonan.org.