

Patrick Riley (1941–2015): Some reminiscences and reflections on his life

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Whenever one met Patrick Riley, at whatever the time of the year, he would be sure to have two accoutrements with him, each of which possessed special significance for the man and the scholar. First, there was the traditional Harvard College scarf in crimson and cream, a visible expression of his lasting attachment to the institution where, in 1968, he gained his doctorate under the supervision of his adored and admired supervisors Judith Shklar and John Rawls.¹ Just the mention of these names in conversation would make him go watery eyed. Although for many years he held a full-time professorial position elsewhere, it was always Harvard that Patrick considered to be his true intellectual home. That scarf was emblematic of his true sense of belonging to his North American alma mater.

Second, there was his striking canary yellow conference bag which somehow managed to survive an uncountable number of airplane journeys which added up must have come to many circumnavigations of the Earth. It was the bag that the Hanover biscuit manufacturer Bahlsen, the old and established producers of *Leibniz-Keks*, had distributed to participants attending the Vth International Leibniz Congress in that city back in 1988. Of course, there had been others handed out at congresses since then, but none were quite like this one with the name ‘Leibniz’ boldly emblazoned on it in blue. That bag, simple, timeless, and unpretentious, stood for Patrick’s lifelong dedication to Leibniz scholarship. After all, Leibniz was for him not a figure exclusively for discussion within the walls of ancient seats of learning or in private meetings of refined academic circles, but was worthy of being made known to the wider public. Indirectly, the bag represented enduring commitment, expressed through his painstaking and intellectually incisive studies on Leibniz’s letters and writings on practical philosophy, political theory, and the philosophy of law. It represented, too, his unwavering support for the *Akademie-Ausgabe*, reflected amongst other things through his many, many reviews of volumes of Series I, II, and IV (*Allgemeiner und Historischer Briefwechsel*, *Philosophischer Briefwechsel*, *Politische Schriften*) for this journal. Finally, it stood for his fundamental belief that Leibniz had something of moral importance to say to us today. But, of course, this is not even to begin mentioning Patrick’s other academic commitments and responsibilities, his dedicated teaching of undergraduate and graduate students, his moral and practical support for young scholars, his work on a string of other authors, including Bossuet,² Hobbes,³ Rousseau,⁴ Kant,⁵ and Rawls.⁶ Leibniz’s practical philosophy with its core principle, charity of the wise (*caritas sapientis*)

was his ideal, it was the principle by which he sought to live. Nonetheless, for broadly applicable models of practical reason and state governance he always preferred Kant.

In many ways, Patrick was an academic nomad. For thirty-six years, from 1971 onwards, he taught political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he held a personal chair named in honour of his esteemed teacher at the London School of Economics, Michael Oakeshott. For much of the time, his family home being in Boston, Massachusetts, this meant almost weekly airplane travel halfway across the country – and this was no easy journey, too, for there were no direct flights. There were also frequent visits to Europe, sometimes for family reasons, but more often than not to attend conferences, meet up with publishers, or to plan his various academic projects, one of which, beyond his control, seemed to grow year by year. From the end of the 1980s he was what one might call a core member of an international community of Leibniz scholars which was at once extremely active and cohesive – to a degree which is scarcely imaginable today. Looking back, we find that in a relatively short space of time a whole series of high caliber Leibniz conferences could take place such as those at Houston (2003), Montreal (2004), Tel Aviv/Jerusalem (2005), and Atlanta (2006), punctuated every five years or so by the international Leibniz congresses, taking place in Hanover (1994, 2006) or Berlin (2001). All of those meetings brought together an exciting mix of established scholars and early career researchers. Newcomers to the field of Leibniz were sure to meet Patrick at one of them, unassuming and open to new ideas as he was. With his infectious warmth, good spirits, and sense of humour who could fail to enjoy his company? Regrettably, those halcyon days of incessant, vibrant meetings are no more. When Patrick attended the last Leibniz congress, in 2011, he found it a pale, sad reflection of those of earlier times.

I first met Patrick at a symposium commemorating the 350th birthday of Leibniz, which took place in Leipzig, in April 1996, under the rather grand title ‘Wissenschaft und Weltgestaltung’. As he reminded me years later, at the evening buffet I had warned him off trying some rather strange-looking meatballs. Little else of our meeting (or of that symposium) was memorable⁷, but our paths crossed again just two months later at a wonderful conference on Leibniz and Hobbes organized by Michel Fichant and Yves-Charles Zarka at Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. Both from an academic and a culinary point of view this was much more to Patrick’s and my taste. Alongside some well-known names (Duchesneau, Garber, Riley, Schepers) a number of younger scholars from across Europe with fresh ideas and perspectives were invited to speak. Not a few of that new generation have since gone on to enjoy academic success. It was typical of Patrick that he took evident delight at seeing younger scholars progress: not for him the stale Germanic formula of age

and rank. His forward looking attitude and kindness as an academic mentor was repaid by friendship and loyalty, as was to be found particularly among his former graduate students.

From 1999 to 2001, Patrick was involved in a collaborative Spanish-German workshop devoted to exploring philosophical, political, and scientific aspects of the broad topic of 'Leibniz and Europe'. Regular meetings, organized jointly by Concha Roldan in Madrid and Hans Poser in Berlin, were held alternately in those two cities. He was a regular participant, too, in numerous meetings and symposia organized by Hartmut Rudolph and others at the Potsdam Centre of the Leibniz Edition, where work on the Series IV of the *Akademie-Ausgabe* is carried out. On one such occasion, in December 2004, besides delivering a major public lecture to mark the publication of volume five of that series, he also took part in a workshop with Rudolph and other members of the Potsdam team to discuss concrete editorial problems which had arisen in day to day work in that series. Such editorial meetings became a regular institution. Earlier that same year he had given a talk at the symposium on 'Leibniz und das Judentum', which must count as one of his best. Speaking on 'the Greeks as founders of sacred philosophy', he argued that for Leibniz the concept of natural immortality had its roots in ancient Greek tradition and specifically that it was Platonic before it became part of Christian doctrine. With typical clarity and precision, he set out the further evidence he had found for his central tenet that the roots of Leibniz's metaphysical philosophy are Platonic, when inspecting a previously unpublished lecture which Leibniz had delivered in Vienna in 1714. For the subsequent publication, Patrick produced an edition of the Vienna lecture according to the principles of the *Akademie-Ausgabe* and published it as an appendix to his article.⁸ In 2009, he took part in another Potsdam symposium, this time devoted to the topic 'Leibniz und die Ökumene'. Taking up the central theme of his most recently published book on Leibniz,⁹ he spoke on 'Natural law and charity as bases of Leibniz's ecumenism'. Again, this talk was later published.¹⁰ The list could be continued almost indefinitely.

One of the advantages accruing from Patrick's regular journeys to Europe was the ability to combine academic work with his love of music – he had, earlier in his career, started training as a conductor at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. One of his first tasks when arriving in Berlin, Milan, or Paris was always to check out what was happening in the local opera houses and concert halls. Many an evening he would spend listening to and watching performances of Wagner or Verdi at the Berliner Staatsoper, La Scala, the Bastille or the Palais Garnier. He regularly made pilgrimages to Leipzig, too, where his favourite haunts were the Thomas-Kirche and the café in the former Nikolai-Schule, which Leibniz had attended as a boy. The surviving Latin inscriptions on the walls allowed him to create a mental bridge

to times past, for surely, he would say, the schoolboy Leibniz would have known them, too. He also had a penchant for a homely little tea shop in the churchyard of the Thomas-Kirche called Café Concerto where one could while away any remaining time watching the world go by before catching the train back to Berlin. Perhaps at no other time did I see his face light up more than once during an evensong of Bach motets in the Thomas-Kirche sung by the Thomaner Choir. But complete enchantment could just as easily change a moment later to jocularity, for it turned out on that occasion that the minister officiating was a certain Christian Wolff.

I last saw Patrick at a much less auspicious place, at London's Heathrow Airport, in July 2008. I was about to give an interview to the BBC and he was en route from Berlin to Boston. Looking drained and exhausted, he told me the latest news from the world of Leibniz scholarship, gave a progress report on his last major project, a history of jurisprudence from Grotius to Rawls, as well as a detailed account of a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* under Barenboim he had recently enjoyed at the Staatsoper. After we had said our heartiest good-byes, he shuffled off in typical fashion through the departure gate, his left hand firmly grasping that Leibniz bag stuffed full with papers given to him in Potsdam which he was to continue reading on the next stage of his journey. I wondered how long he would be able to continue such a punishing travel schedule. As he vanished into the crowd, that flash of yellow was still visible, just.

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Notes

¹ For more information on Patrick's relation to Shklar and Rawls see the accompanying obituary by David Williams.

² *Bossuet: Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture*, ed. P. Riley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999.

³ P. Riley, *Will and Legitimacy: A Critical Exposition of Social Contract Theory in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1982.

⁴ *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. P. Riley, Cambridge: Cambridge

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University Press 2001; P. Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014.

⁵ P. Riley, *Kant's Political Philosophy*, Totawa, NJ: Rowan & Littlefield 1983.

⁶ P. Riley, *The Philosophers' Philosophy of Law from the Seventeenth Century to our Days*, Dordrecht: Springer 2009.

⁷ The proceedings were published under the title *Wissenschaft und Weltgestaltung*, ed. K. Novak and H. Poser, Hildesheim: Olms 1999.

⁸ P. Riley, Leibniz, 'Platonism, and Judaism: The 1714 Vienna Lecture on the Greeks as Founders of a Sacred Philosophy', in: *Leibniz und das Judentum*, ed. D. J. Cook, H. Rudolph, and C. Schulte, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 2008, 95-113.

⁹ P. Riley, *Leibniz's Universal Jurisprudence. Justice as Charity of the Wise*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1996.

¹⁰ Published as P. Riley, 'The ecumenical Leibniz: religious conciliation through wise charity', in: *Leibniz und die Ökumene*, ed. W. Li, H. Poser, and H. Rudolph, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 2013, 159-70.