

A Personal Tribute

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At Machu Pichu, Peru

The author co-edited The Post-Development Reader (Zed, 1997).

I first met Michael at an international conference on Marxism organised in 1964 by the Gramsci Institute in Rome. As far as I remember, Michael and I were the only English participants in the conference – Marxist studies were only slowly becoming fashionable in England at that time and Michael, as always, was at the forefront of new and independent left-wing thinking. As for me, I came from a very non-political family, but 15 months working in Sicily as a volunteer with Danilo Dolci and two years spent in New York had started to open my eyes, and I drank in all that Michael had to say. At the time I was doing a correspondence course in economics with London University, while earning my living at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and he gave me invaluable advice about books that were not exactly in line with those recommended by my course, for which I shall always be grateful. His *After Imperialism* had come out the year before and I remember how angry he was that the publisher had insisted on removing the question mark after ‘imperialism’ (in subsequent editions I noticed that the question mark had been re-inserted). This book had a profound influence on me – and no doubt on many others: Ernest Mandel described it, in 1964, as ‘undoubtedly one of the most important economic works recently published in English’. And for me, who already had a certain international experience in UN circles in New York, I was especially interested in the recently de-colonised countries of the Third World, as it was called at that time. I continued to work at FAO, finally obtaining a B.Sc (Econ.) from London University, but I never

returned to live in England. However, I paid frequent visits there and Robin Hood Farm in Derbyshire was a must on my travel itinerary round the country. How many hours did I spend with Michael in his large library, while he would pull out books and say ‘Have you read this?’ ‘You surely know that?’ I usually didn’t.

After the library session we would descend to the kitchen to join Eleanor – in the first years there was also Eileen, Michael’s lovely mother. We always had excellent meals, cooked by both Eleanor and Michael, and they invariably included home-grown fruit and vegetables from the Robin Hood Farm garden lovingly tended by Michael. (I was always impressed by their huge freezer containing scores of little packages of anything from gooseberries to broad beans, all neatly labelled and dated.) And how we talked! Intellectually isolated as I was, living in Italy and not in an academic milieu, it was heady stuff indeed. Nor was it all only about books. Michael had prodigious energy and liked to talk about the things he was always busy organising: if it wasn’t helping to set up, with Ken Coates, his very close friend, the Institute for Workers’ Control, and the Industrial Tutors’ Society, it was founding the Northern College for adult education and, in later years, TWIN and Twin Trading Ltd, promoting the products of small peasant co-operatives in Africa and Central America.

Myself being somewhat of a traveller (in the course of my work), I was always interested to hear of Michael’s sojourns abroad, usually to lecture on adult education at universities in countries such as India, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Japan, and as part of medical delegations with Eleanor, to China and Cuba. Always on his visits, Michael would go for his daily jog, as he did on his many visits to me in the south of France, where our rural setting was rather more suitable for running than some of the cities he stayed in, where traffic and pollution detracted from the pleasure. Always, also, Michael wrote a detailed account of what he had seen and heard, whom he had met, and his general impressions of the host country. He used to send copies to his friends and the writing was so vivid that you felt that you had actually been there yourself.

Michael also sent me copies of the many books he was writing, in between the organising, the teaching, the travelling. Several focused on economics, which was his main field and one of his books that I personally found especially useful was his *Models in Political Economy: A Guide to the Arguments*, which was published in 1984. I was delighted to learn, later, that it was known and cited in Italy and France. International trade was his speciality and this of course served as a background for his vigorous activities on behalf of fair trade.

Another of his books that was of special interest to me was *Africa's Choices: After 30 years of the World Bank*, which was published in 1995. In the 1970s and 80s, I had been closely following what had been happening in Africa and in reading the manuscript of this book I was able to make a number of suggestions that he adopted. I had been actively supporting (as far as one can in a UN organization!) the African liberation movements, the anti-apartheid campaigns and, in this connection, Michael introduced me to another good friend of his, Basil Davidson, the British historian on Africa who had been much involved with these movements, especially in the former Portuguese colonies. Subsequently, I worked for a year in Mozambique, in 1985, and a year in liberated Eritrea, in 1996. Like me, Michael became very interested in the heroic struggle of the Eritreans to free themselves from the yoke of neighbouring Ethiopia, which they finally won – only to find that an even greater struggle lay ahead if they were to be free to set their own economic and political policies. As, indeed, has been the case – and still is – for almost all ‘decolonised’ countries, a situation that Michael always strongly deplored and denounced.

There is so much that could be said to describe Michael’s activities during his long life, and this will be better done by people who have worked with him in England. Here I have concentrated more on his international connections because that is what we shared in common. There is no doubt that he had a tremendous influence on what I have done, not least with the FAO publication *Ideas and Action*, which I edited for so many years. When the bureaucrats finally got their way and decided to kill it, Michael was one of many who protested. As he wrote in the last issue, in 1987:

‘Innovation is a rare bird in any field ... At the international level, FAO’s bimonthly bulletin *Ideas and Action* would, on any count, have a place high up on the list [of innovations]. From its earliest numbers issued nearly 25 years ago, it has been more than just a bulletin describing any number of interesting experiments in rural development, mainly in the Third World. It has set out to be and has succeeded in being a sharp weapon in the continuing struggle of human beings the world over to free themselves, not only from hunger and ignorance, but from prejudice and apathy.’

If this was in fact the case, Michael Barratt Brown must take much of the credit.