

### Ian Craib, 1945–2002

**O**an Craib, who has died at the age of fifty-seven, had a long association with *Radical Philosophy*. He wrote extensively for the journal in the early years, especially through his reviews, and was a member of the editorial group in those days. He was appointed as a lecturer in sociology at Essex University in 1973, and was promoted to a chair in 1997. Despite his personal modesty, the continuous stream of books, articles and reviews which he authored over more than twenty-five years



earned great respect both in and beyond the academy. A mark of his originality was his commitment to asking the large and important questions which necessarily transgress disciplinary boundaries. In Ian's case, philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis and social theory were all called upon in the making of his contribution. He considered himself to be at the margins of sociology, but perhaps because of this he had a deeper understanding than most of both its indispensability and its limitations. His early work – most notably his first book, *Existentialism and Sociology* – explored the relationships between philosophy and sociology, a connection to which he remained committed throughout his career. Through the 1970s his advocacy of a

humanist Marxism, inspired by Sartre's existentialism, sustained his political activism, first in the International Socialists, and then (uncomfortably) within the Labour Party. In his work as a sociology teacher and writer, he resisted the tide of structuralist thought which swept the humanities and social science disciplines at that time. In a characteristic critique of one T. Benton, he argued:

The power of theory is its ability to transform consciousness, to change people not necessarily by intellectual conviction but by enabling them to grasp their own world and their own experience in a radically new way and to become aware of ways of changing the world. If Marxist theory is to do this, then it must be able to live inside everyday representations of the world, to take them as the starting point of its argument, and it must be able to transform those representations into an adequate understanding of the world. (*RP* 10, Spring 1975, p. 29)

By the end of the 1970s, a combination of personal difficulties and political despair had provoked a retreat from organized politics into a prolonged personal and intellectual engagement with psychoanalysis.

In the mid-1980s Ian became a trainee psychotherapist, but he still did not abandon his commitment to social theorizing. The first synthesis of these twin engagements was his *Psychoanalysis and Social Theory* (1989). It was the subtitle of this work – 'The Limits of Sociology' – that signalled Ian's most abiding sociological argument. The shift from existentialism to psychoanalysis turned out to be a way of bringing new intellectual resources to maintain the central concern of his earlier humanism: the claim of the inner life of individuals to be respected and defended from reductive simplifications. Using an image offered by one of his patients, he acknowledged that we might eventually be able, as sociologists, to

explain the 'hand of cards' each of us is dealt in life. But much depends on how that hand is played, and there is something imponderable and wonderful about the creativity individuals show in surviving against the odds. Intellectual approaches which fail to recognize this are to be opposed because they threaten to close down human possibilities.

The 1980s saw Ian swimming against powerful currents of thought. In the face of fashionable denunciations of large-scale theorizing and avant-garde dismissals of the sociological classics, he published extensively on sociological theory. His *Modern Social Theory* (1984) was an outstanding example of his ability to communicate complex and difficult ideas in a direct and accessible way, but still conveying the sense of excitement and bewilderment of never quite grasping them. Intended as student texts, they were immensely successful and valued as such, but they were also more than is commonly understood by that. Ian both demonstrated and argued for the importance of engaging with the major thinkers of the past if we are to understand both the present and its thought. His *Classical Social Theory* (1997) made this case eloquently. But these were more than just textbooks in another important sense: they were an extension of Ian's central commitment to his role as a teacher. In them one gets a glimpse of his distinctive, challenging but still empathic educational philosophy.

At the same time, Ian's interest in psychoanalysis deepened. He trained as a group psychotherapist, qualifying in 1986, and continuing to work as a psychotherapist in the local NHS alongside his job as university teacher. His therapeutic practice was also a source of inspiration for his thinking about the relationship between psychoanalysis and social thought, and he began to make distinctive contributions both to the specialist psychoanalytic literature, and to the understanding of critical interconnections between the two disciplines. Written through his first diagnosis and operation for cancer, *The Importance of Disappointment* (1994) was and remains Ian's deepest and most personal statement.

But this public presence, significant as it has been, is perhaps not what Ian would most wish to have recalled. He came to Essex University in the mid-1970s and could hardly have found a more stimulating or congenial environment. He latterly paid tribute to the policy of a department unafraid to recruit staff from its 'fringes' and from other disciplines. He engaged passionately in the political and theoretical debates of the time, and the subsequent retreat from organized politics was not an abandonment of politics as such. He recently recognized that while trying to be a 'serious Marxist' he had always been a 'very unserious Marxist': closer, perhaps, to anarcho-syndicalism (though, typically Ian, he added that he wasn't quite sure what this meant!). True to his early humanism, his politics expressed itself in his later years in his devotion to teaching and to his therapeutic work, as well as in his writing. For him, the insistence on 'opposition, argument and thought' were what had given us such limited freedoms as we enjoy, and it was in evoking and educating these capacities in himself and others that his political values continued to express themselves.

He stressed the importance, in therapy, as well as in the process of becoming a sociologist, of learning to 'tolerate anxiety, contradiction, paradox and uncertainty and inner conflict and to make something of it all'. His teaching was a process of challenging, sometimes disconcerting, exploration of possibilities. He could not have been more at odds with the prevailing ethos of higher education under New Labour, according to which its value is defined in terms of enhanced lifetime earnings, and every course must have its predetermined aims, objects and outcomes. Paradoxically, for one who insisted on the unachievability of 'identity', Ian was always and inimitably himself, a colleague of unfaltering integrity: implacably rigorous, usually iconoclastic, wickedly insightful, but uniquely honourable, generous and forgiving. His characteristically impish, subversive chuckle never left him, even in the dark days of his final illness.

**Ted Benton**