

# The Guardian's Norman Geras obituary

Leftwing theorist and pioneer blogger with a mission to take on political

Wednesday 23 October 2013, by [GARRARD Eve](#) (Date first published: 20 October 2013).

Norman Geras - professor emeritus of government at Manchester University, philosopher, cricket fan, country music lover, Marxist, liberal socialist, democrat, political blogger behind the influential Normblog [1] - has died of cancer aged 70. His interests were rich and varied, but his thought and writings form an integrated whole. He was centrally and always a man of the left, but one who became a scourge of those parts of left/liberal opinion which, in his view, had slid away from commitment to the values of equality, justice and universal rights, and in so doing ended up by excusing or condoning racism and terrorism.

From his perspective, the response to the events of 11 September 2001 was appalling. He found the readiness of many to blame the US for bringing the terrorist attack down on its own head to be intellectually feeble and morally contemptible. He argued that this section of the left was betraying its own values by offering warm understanding to terrorists and cold neglect to their victims. He detested the drawing of an unsupported and insupportable moral equivalence between western democracies and real or proposed theocratic tyrannies in which liberty of thought and speech, and the protection of human rights, would play no part. Norm wanted to engage in this debate and not just with academics. So he went online, to provide himself with a space in which he could express these and other views, and Normblog was born.

It was a runaway success. Thousands of readers all over the world were drawn by Norm's mixture of serious political and philosophical reasoning, and more lighthearted pieces on cricket, Manchester United, country music, films, books - whatever he was currently interested in. The most striking feature of the blog was Norm's distinctive arguing style: independent, rigorous, fair to adversaries, exceptionally clear, always (well, almost always) civil - and that in a blogosphere noted for widespread vituperation and insult.

Although Norm did not abuse his intellectual or political adversaries, he could be scaldingly critical of arguments that in his opinion constituted an apologia for terrorism or tyranny, or one-sided attacks on what he thought was humanity's best shot yet at a just form of political life: the liberal democracies of the west, flawed and in need of reform though they are.

He was born in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He left to study at Oxford University and graduated from Pembroke College in 1965 with a first in philosophy, politics and economics. He met his future wife, Adele, at Oxford, and they married in 1967. In that year, too, he took up a post at Manchester University, where he remained throughout his working life, latterly as professor of government. He retired in 2003, and in 2010 he and Adele moved to Cambridge to live closer to their children and grandchildren.

Norm's original area of research was Marxist political theory and he produced some highly influential books in this area, including *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (1976) and *Marx and Human Nature* (1983), in which he argued, rather against the progressive orthodoxy of the time, that there is such a thing as a determinate human nature, and that Marx himself had recognised this. His work inspired a generation of Marxist scholars. His concern about human nature, especially its darker

elements, led him to explore the Holocaust: he was among the first to examine this terrible event from within the discipline of political theory.

Out of this research came his book *The Contract of Mutual Indifference* (1998), in which he argued that we owe a duty of help to those who are suffering under terrible oppression. He contrasted this duty with the practice of so many who observed the Nazis' genocidal activities and did nothing, suggesting that what we actually believe in is something like a contract of mutual non-assistance: I won't help you in your desperate straits, and I won't expect any help from you either. This, as Norm argued, is morally intolerable: our common humanity makes claims on us, to protect each other from catastrophe, if we can.

There was to be a direct intellectual line from this academic work to his later political blogging, in which he argued in favour of intervention in Iraq, on the grounds of the need to overthrow a tyrant who had been responsible for unspeakable atrocities against his own people and others, and had caused hundreds of thousands of deaths.

One of Normblog's constant targets was the deplorable spread of political double standards, notably in hostility to Jewish self-determination and self-defence, especially in the form of the state of Israel. Norm argued forcefully that some of what was presented as criticism of Israel was a thinly disguised form of antisemitism. Tolerance of this could be found in some of the main organs of liberal/left opinion, he felt, including what was once his own daily newspaper of choice, the *Guardian*.

He was not religious, but being Jewish was an important part of his identity, and he saw, particularly in the light of the European genocide, the need for a state in which Jews could determine their own future. He also thought that Palestinians needed a state of their own and was always prepared to voice his moral and political objection to Israel's presence in the West Bank, and in Gaza until the Israeli withdrawal.

Norm lost many erstwhile comrades on the left because of his hostility to terrorism and his support for Israel's existence, and this distressed, but didn't deflect, him. His concern about these and related issues led him to work with others in the drawing-up of the *Euston Manifesto*, published in 2006, a statement of principle calling for an alignment among liberals and the left of those who are committed to democracy and anti-totalitarianism, who unambiguously reject terrorism and tyranny, and who unequivocally support freedom of speech, political liberty and universal human rights. He was one of the four main authors of that document and his academic and blogging work was a major inspiration for it.

Norm's sane and balanced approach to the issues engaging him was a light in a dark time for many. It was once put to him that the provision of scrupulous arguments did not seem to be working too well and perhaps it should be abandoned. His reply was: "We have to continue. What else is there to do?"

Norm is survived by Adele, their daughters Sophie and Jenny, and three much-loved grandchildren.

## **Eve Garrard**

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• Norman Geras, political philosopher and blogger, born 25 August 1943; died 18 October 2013

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**P.S.**

\* The Guardian, Sunday 20 October 2013 17.39 BST:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/oct/20/norman-geras>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <http://normblog.typepad.com>