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Following David Cesarani (1956–2015): A Personal Reflection

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Following David Cesarani (1956–2015): A Personal Reflection

“Don’t you want to know *everything!*?” This was David Cesarani in the 1980s at one of his annual (or was it biannual or triannual?) parties at Greencroft Gardens (seeing how many people can fit into a one-bedroom flat in West Hampstead without getting overly intimate). The disappointment in his voice at my lack of intellectual curiosity has stayed with me as an inspiration and a challenge for more than three decades. His memorable, facile, nuanced (oddly rhythmical) voice (the magical conduit for his passionate intellect and his wicked, twinkling, astringent humour) has been an inspiration to generations of students and colleagues.

The parties at Greencroft Gardens (the first of a series of parties that he hosted at regular intervals throughout his life) were made up mainly of his Cambridge undergraduate friends from the late 1970s. Why some in this group, like Cesarani, chose to write their doctorates on Jewish history was met with nothing less than disbelief by those who tutored him at Cambridge. His doctorate, completed in Oxford in the early 1980s, helped to reconceive the history of Anglo-Zionism as a form of diaspora nationalism in Western Europe which revolutionized the field. It was the first time that Jewish history in Britain was treated with the seriousness and dispassion of any other kind of modern history.

I first met David as a postgraduate student working on racial images of Jews in literature. Along with David Feldman at Cambridge and Tony Kushner (at Sheffield with myself) and a host of other third-generation British Jews – Anne Kershen, Rickie Burman, Mark Levene – professional Jewish studies came to our shores. There were some notable American presences such as Arthur Hertzberg (with whom Cesarani worked at Columbia while completing his MA in Jewish history) and Steven Zipperstein then at Oxford. But it remains a mystery why, in the early 1980s, about a dozen or more individuals should, for the first time, start their doctoral work on different aspects of Jewish history and culture. Perhaps it was the growth of multi-culturalism or perhaps it was the fact that as undergraduates many of us encountered a sustained attempt to ban university Jewish societies which, at the very least, raised our consciousness as Jews. Whatever the exact reason, Cesarani played a

leading part in speaking on behalf of this new generation who were no longer assimilated; who no longer kept their heads down.

We were the “young Turks” (as we were indeed called). The great historian of Russian Jewry, Jonathan Frankel, came up to a few of us after a London conference and asked, “Did you think you were storming the Winter Palace?” We were deemed rather too bolshie as we rejected conventional Anglo-Jewish historiography with its apologetic stress on “Jewish contributions to European civilization” and untroubled acculturation. Cesarani’s edited volume, *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (1990) summed up this early work of critique and opened up new kinds of research, which told a much less rosy story, based around class, gender, politics, and culture (the subheadings of his collection). By this time, Cesarani was beginning to find his public voice. He led the campaign against Jim Allen’s play *Perdition* (1987), an attempt to popularize Nazi/Zionist equivalence, which was the first of many *causes célèbres* throughout his life.

A sea-change in his intellectual interests took place after he left Leeds in 1986 for London for his first job as a lecturer at Queen Mary, University of London. He was made the researcher from 1987 to 1991 of the All-Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group which responded to allegations that Britain sheltered war criminals after 1945. *Justice Delayed: How Britain became a Refuge for Nazi War Criminals* (1992) came out of this work and coincided with legislation on war criminals. The history of Nazism became an increasingly prominent (but not exclusive) part of Cesarani’s intellectual landscape. This interest led to his directorship of the Wiener Library throughout the 1990s and to his prize-winning book, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (2004).

In thirty-five years of friendship it was my great good fortune to work with David Cesarani for nearly half that time. This started with our Adult Education teaching as postgraduates and included voluntary work at the *Jewish Quarterly* journal and the founding of the British Friends of Peace Now (which supports those who promote peace in Israel/Palestine). Our academic roles coincided at the University of Leeds, the Parkes Institute at Southampton, and Queen Mary, University of London. When I followed him into a postdoctoral Jewish Studies Fellowship at Leeds, Cesarani gave me a twenty-page document listing his range of activities over three years. These included speaking in prisons, to local history groups, to Jewish communal organizations, to many schools, as well as organizing conferences to include the general public. It was a fantastic template for

a young postdoctoral fellow but my first thought was that if I was able to achieve half of what my predecessor had achieved I would be doing well. Cesarani understood what it was to make an impact before “making an impact” was turned into a metric nightmare.

My regular game of badminton with Cesarani (what he called “bad-ders”) was the highlight of the week for me. He was a marathon runner but, although I am exceedingly unfit, I had played the game since my youth so we were a good match. As he rushed about the court covering every single inch of it, I put the shuttlecock to the left, to the right, to the back, and to the front, and invariably won the point. In retrospect, I now regard our weekly games of badminton as a metaphor for our differences. Cesarani covered every inch of space with verve, dynamism, and resilience; I was the mere tactical specialist playing a few key shots like all academic specialists (who know more and more about less and less). And that was the difference between us. Cesarani was interested in everything and had an extraordinarily broad range of interests. He aspired to know and change as much as he could and succeeded in this task, whether it was the introduction of war crimes legislation; or the Imperial War Museum’s permanent Holocaust exhibition; or the speeding up of the claims of those who had property stolen by the Nazis (some of these claims are only now being processed). Capping all this will be the planned Holocaust commemoration and educational facility in central London, on which Cesarani also advised and which will be built over the coming years. He was, *par excellence*, a public intellectual, which meant that his boundless talents were not confined merely to the academy.

That is the problem with institutions. Cesarani enriched all those fortunate enough to know him, or to be taught by him, beyond measure. But institutions, not least universities, like nothing more than measuring things, turning what we do into metrics. It would have amused him (perhaps resulting in a memorable belly-laugh) that the fate now awaiting his afterlife is his transformation into an institution. Lectures will be named after him; conferences will take place in his name; his book launches will happen without him; and memorials will be proposed. There are, obviously, much worse fates than this. But such a transformation (however ironic for such a mercurial and expansive intellectual) will only be a blessing if it offers some comfort to his wife, Dawn Waterman, and their children, Daniel and Hannah.

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