PATTI TAMARA LENARD &
TIZIANA TORRESI

In Memory of Peter Balint

Abstract: The following editorial is in memory of Peter Balint, who passed away on January 15 2025. He was a founding member of the Global Justice Network and its associated journal. It is written by two members of the Network, Patti Tamara Lenard and Tiziana Torresi.

One of the great privileges of an academic life is the way it allows friendship and intellectual exchange to become intertwined. In losing Peter, many of us feel that truth with unusual force. He was not only a scholar of remarkable intellectual curiosity and a keen critical spirit, but also a cherished friend. He relished an argument, not for victory, but for insight, and our disagreements, often spirited and occasionally exasperating, were among the most rewarding experiences of collegial life.

Peter's work concentrated on the normative theory of liberal accommodation of cultural diversity. But his interests were always eclectic, and he was a co-founder, with close colleagues and friends, of the Global Justice Network a project that was born, characteristically, during a coffee catch-up in Oxford.

Peter received his PhD from the University of New South Wales' School of Social Sciences in 2009, after completing a first-class Honours degree in Science and Technology Studies, for which he also received the University Medal. By then he had already been living and working in Canberra for a year, as a lecturer at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force, leaving his beloved Sydney, but soon learning to love his new home with his characteristic positivity and passion for new adventures.

Peter contributed greatly to debates in contemporary political theory, including with respect to accounts of toleration, state neutrality, liberalism and multiculturalism. Peter's central concern was how best to organize and guide a society full of diversity of all kinds – in pursuit of this project, he defended an innovative account of toleration that partnered with a defence of state neutrality; he directed states to adopt an attitude he termed 'active indifference'; and correspondingly, argued against adopting minority accommodations in most circumstances, preferring strategies that dismantle advantages historically granted to majority communities. His last posthumously published work, co-

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authored with Patti Tamara Lenard, offered and then applied a conceptual account of cultural appropriation.

As Peter notes at the beginning of his book Respecting Toleration, it is somewhat conventional, both colloquially and theoretically, to treat toleration as having a negative valence: if I tolerate you, there is something I find distasteful or problematic about you, but I nevertheless go about my life without interfering with your choices (Balint, 2017). For Peter, though, toleration need not have this negative valence – specific, individual acts of tolerance may have a negative valence, but the 'general practice of toleration' does not require such an attitude. Rather, he says, a tolerant society just is not one where everyone's orientation towards others is imbued with negative evaluations. Rather, it is one where we adopt an attitude of 'live and let live' towards others in our society and act accordingly: 'most people and institutions in such a society do not really care about a great many things to which others would object, and consequently are relatively permissive' (Balint, 2017: 6). The result, he says, is that a politically tolerant society is one where 'people are freer to do or be what they want' (Balint, 2017: 2).

A way to misinterpret Peter's project would be to treat his commitment to toleration as implying therefore that a liberal state is in effect uninterested in how well citizens fare in pursuing their objectives within its boundaries, or that a liberal state's job is merely to provide a set of basic social and political conditions that enable people, at least in principle, to make their own choices and be held responsible for them. Peter does not, in other words, defend a traditional liberal state – the one that gets accused of false neutrality by minority rights advocates and therefore of disadvantaging or marginalizing minority citizens. Rather, Peter defends two additional claims that are aimed at protecting his account of political toleration from these kinds of critiques. The false neutrality of current democratic state institutions, which do in fact privilege majority communities in all kinds of ways, must be dismantled – in this he agrees with minority rights advocates. But Peter is serious about the focus on dismantling the privilege that is granted to majority communities – a politically tolerant state, which is truly neutral, is one that is attentive to where existing institutions privilege majorities and operates to dismantle these privileges. He writes, the focus must be on 'withdrawing support for favoured ways of life' (Balint, 2017: 53).

The attitude a state must adopt, to secure the right kind of neutrality, is one of 'active indifference.' This concept is among Peter's most creative proposals. In ordinary language, indifference is a kind of orientation that is in fact a non-orientation: if I am indifferent to you, then I have no attitude towards you at all. It looks like the most passive of orientations towards others. Peter explains,

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however, that such an attitude is one that orients a state towards creating the conditions under which it can be genuinely indifferent about the choices that citizens make; to get to the stage of genuine indifference, a state must adopt an active stance in which it identifies the privileges that are explicitly and implicitly granted to majority citizens, and which would undermine a state's claim to be indifferent (or neutral).

To repeat a claim described above, Peter's thought is that getting to the stage in which true neutrality or indifference is possible requires active work by a state to dismantle the conditions that deny neutrality or belie a state's claim to indifference among individuals. When states removed mandatory Sunday closure laws to allow citizens to choose their rest day of preference, they were demonstrating active indifference. The result of the policy change was to allow the state to be indifferent to the rest days that citizens and residents prefer; but active attention and policy change was required in order to achieve that indifference on fair terms.

Because the composition of beliefs and commitments among citizens and residents of a state is in constant flux, a state must remain vigilant (i.e., active) in securing conditions under which the state remains neutral. Peter is not defending a political and social environment in which 'anything goes', however. He defends both neutrality and tolerance as 'range' concepts, i.e., once justice sets out the range of permissible ways of life or values (for example, 'violence or theft against others, as well as denials are equal moral worth' are not permissible), then the priority is for a state to be neutral, or indifferent, among those choices that individuals make, so long as they are within boundaries of that range (Balint, 2017: Ch.2).

And so, on Peter's view, minority rights advocates are wrong to focus so strongly on defending the adding of rights for minorities to correct for the imposition of state disadvantage. There may be cause to accommodate minorities with special rights in some situations – Peter does not reject the possibility that at least practically, this may be the best way forward in some circumstances, but these cases are typically not in the domain of multiculturalism, i.e., with respect to the accommodation of distinctive cultural practices. Accommodative rights are more likely to be justified where other forms of injustice are present, for example, with respect to the historical treatment of Indigenous Peoples or in cases where we need remedies for racial or sex discrimination (Balint and Lenard, 2022: Ch. 10).

But for cultural minorities specifically, where institutional disadvantage is the main wrong, far better, says Peter, to focus on the removal of majority privilege

so that a state can in fact be genuinely neutral among the choices that its citizens make. Such a focus, he argues, has an additional salutary effect, namely creating greater freedom. For example, say a state opts to hold its elections on Saturday, and observant Jews object because that is their sabbath – Saturday elections mean they are effectively disenfranchised. One option might be, and this is the one Peter believes advocates of minority accommodation will defend, is to allow observant Jews to vote in advance or an alternative day. This solution, he says, would be a 'neutralizing alternative' and therefore is permissible (Balint, 2017: 65). But, it is not ideal – rather, Peter says, a better option is to identify an alternative, in this case advance voting, and open it to everyone who wishes to avail of it. All kinds of people will thereby be provided with 'greater freedom' – and the justification for such a policy change is that a state that adopts it is demonstrating neutrality towards 'more than just the current privileged way of life' (Balint, 2017: 68),

Peter brought his characteristic analytic capacities to his work on cultural appropriation, work which he carried out with one of the authors of this editorial In that work, our joint objective was to account for a phenomenon in public discourse that causes heated discussions and a good deal of anger, but the wrong of which had not (to our satisfaction) been properly articulated. In that work, we explain that 'cultural appropriation is the knowing or culpably ignorant taking of cultural symbols or practices, of significant value to others, without their consent, and often against their explicit request to do otherwise' (Lenard and Balint, 2026: 12). It is presumptively wrong, in the sense that when accusations of cultural appropriation are launched, a criticism of an action is intended. But, our hunch was, many acts of claimed cultural appropriation are trivial and not worthy of significant moral condemnation (and certainly not state intervention). Yet, some acts are significantly wrong, and we argued such is the case where power inequalities are present, and where profit from such acts goes to the appropriator. Our hope had not been to resolve once and for all which forms of appropriation merit criticism; rather it has been to outline a framework for evaluating cases that enables frank and productive discussion rather than the hurling of insults across cultural lines.

The contributions described above were significant, and a sadness for all of us is that Peter had so much more to say on all of these topics, which he was so passionate about. Yet to speak only of Peter's achievements is to capture only part of who he was. Peter was unfailingly supportive of colleagues, generous with his time, and deeply committed to mentoring early career scholars. He combined intellectual rigor with patience and encouragement, helping others to find their voice and confidence. He gave generously to the broader academic

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community, taking on senior leadership roles in his institution as well as outside of it. He co-founded the Australian Political Theory Association, and was Acting Head of School and Deputy Head within the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW Canberra. He was also an inspiring teacher, widely admired and genuinely loved by his students.

Beyond the seminar room, Peter brought the same curiosity and vitality to life itself. He loved adventure, delighted in the unexpected, and had a rare gift for making ordinary moments feel special. He was attentive, mischievous, quirky, and kind, someone in whose company one always felt both challenged and at ease.

His absence leaves a profound void that will never be filled. He will be remembered not only for his contributions to political theory, but for his generosity of spirit, his friendship, and the joy he brought to those around him. He will be enormously missed by all whose lives he touched.

Patti Tamara Lenard
Professor of Applied Ethics
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa
patti.lenard@uottawa.ca

Tiziana Torresi
Lecturer in International Politics
University of Adelaide
tiziana.torresi@adelaide.edu.au

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