Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Andrew Levine

Andrew Levine, known to all as Andy, died at his home in Maryland on March 9th 2021. Having received his PhD from Columbia University in 1971, he taught for 3 years at the University of British Columbia, after which he moved to UW-Madison, where he worked from 1974 until retiring in 2004 in the Philosophy Department. After retiring he taught for some time at University of Maryland-College Park, while holding a fellowship at the Institute for Policy Studies, and writing, voluminously, for the left wing publication, Counterpunch.

In a time when a left-wing variant of liberalism dominated political philosophy, Andy was an iconoclast, who admired and was excited by the prevailing theory, but always skeptical of it, mainly from a Marxist standpoint. Unlike the Analytical Marxists whose work he anticipated, he was deeply engaged with the work of historical figures (Rousseau, Kant, Mill and, of course, Marx). But, like them, he respected and utilized – with great skill – the methods of his discipline, to address questions that dogged the Marxist tradition. His first book, The Politics of Autonomy (1976) develops a Kantian interpretation of Rousseau’s variant of social contract theory, and his second, Liberal Democracy: A Critique of Its Theory (1981) does exactly what the title suggests. Much of his subsequent work worries away at the justification of state power, while engaging, using guerilla tactics, in the project of showing that liberalism wasn’t adequate to the task it set itself.

Andy’s courses were mostly in social and political philosophy broadly speaking, though he also taught a wide-ranging course on the introduction to philosophy. His seminars looked closely at cutting edge new work in political philosophy across the political spectrum, including the analytical Marxists of course, but also the monumental liberal theories emerging in that time from left-liberal John Rawls, to libertarian Robert Nozick, and the importance of economist Kenneth Arrow’s work for democratic theory. Some philosophers do good work by focusing on their own narrow specialty with blinkers on, but Andy—despite a career-long discomfort with academia—was a true scholar, fascinated by the work of great historical figures, and wide-ranging enough in his expertise to contribute fruitfully to colloquium discussions in just about any area of philosophy. He was a much better teacher of undergraduates than he believed himself to be. Students appreciated his clear, graceful explanations of complex ideas, and his almost-instant, but detailed and thoughtful, written feedback on their papers: he was entirely capable of providing a full single-spaced page of comments for each of 25 papers in the class session after the one during which they had been handed in.

During his academic career Andy rarely strayed from political philosophy in his research or teaching, Andy was a well-rounded and incisive thinker far beyond his specialty. His questions and comments at department colloquia were appreciated on all topics, and in inter-disciplinary workshops and conferences he was able to engage with economists and sociologists productively on their own territory. A polyglot, and with a deep reading of history, as well as the history of philosophy, he was rare among philosophers in being able to engage broadly with the rest of eh humanities, as well as with the social sciences.

Andy was a socialist by commitment. But he was an anarchist by temperament, irritated by all power structures, from the Federal government to the UW-Madison parking bureau, reserving particular disdain for the City of Madison and the UW-Madison administration. Instinctively hostile to bureaucratic rules, even when he could see their point, and took great pleasure in
conflictual correspondence—indeed, even if amusingly recounted—contesting parking tickets and objecting to various by-laws designed to facilitate snow-clearing in the city. A letter to the parking board would meet the same exacting intellectual standards that he abided by in his teaching and research. He believed authority could be justified, but it is hard to believe he would ever have liked it.

He was also a contrarian. Like many on the left he was appalled by the emergence of Bill Clinton as Democratic presidential candidate in 1992. But few on the left joined him in voting for what he, as a socialist, saw as the lesser evil candidate, George H.W. Bush, in that election. Indeed, his informal organization, Socialists for Bush in 92, attracted only two other members, one of whom was not even eligible to vote.

In another possible world Andy could have been a star. He had a brush with real fame when the media got hold of his rare ability effortlessly to speak backwards. A friend, Lewis Leavitt, studied and published some research on this phenomenon, but not before Johnny Carson flew (and limo’d) Andy to California as a guest on The Tonight Show. He was charming and funny, and one fellow guest on the couch, the beautiful TV and film star Angie Dickinson, seemed to think it was the most entertaining thing she’d ever seen. The fame was worldwide but brief. Andy later reported that he was, “a huge hit in Japan,” and that “if it had led to a career on ‘Hollywood Squares’ or something, I would’ve stayed with it.”

Andy was indeed always skeptical of the academic profession, especially for its pernicious effects on political thought. He believed, and argued in print (most clearly in his piece in the Oxford Handbook in Political Philosophy (2013)), that without any constituency among the real people who were being theorized about, it was no surprise that the reality of their lives had scant influence on the work of academic philosophers. It made sense, then, that after leaving his 30-year stint at Madison, Andy embarked on a second phase of his career, writing more directly political articles and books (which, combined with his academic books, came to a total of twelve). He began a new intellectual life as a prolific political commentator, unsurprisingly witty and iconoclastic but now for the benefit of a wide following.

Andy’s social and political idealism (if not optimism) was present already in his graduate school years. He was active in Students for a Democratic Society during the politically intense late 1960’s at Columbia. In a 1968 New York Times letter replying to George Kennan, a top foreign policy figure who regularly denounced the student left, Andy concluded with this: “Without pretending to authority in these matters, I think it is reasonable to hold that institutions, if not perfectible, are at least improvable to a point where war and poverty, exploitation and racism can disappear. Once this is granted, it should not require too much withdrawn reflection in academic retreats to make the necessary intellectual connections.”. Those words, probably the earliest of his that were published, capture a spirit that endured, despite repeated setbacks to the ideals he championed, throughout his life and work.