

MEMORIAL NOTICE

## In Memoriam: Kai Nielsen

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Kai Edward Nielsen, noted philosopher, member of the Royal Society of Canada, and cofounder of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, passed away on March 29, 2021, in Montréal at the age of ninety-four. Kai will be remembered as a passionate and brilliant philosopher, an attentive and inspiring teacher, a kind and gentle mentor, and an indefatigable man of the Left. He was a force. He is survived by his partner of many years, Jocelyne Couture, emerita professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, and a former president of the Canadian Philosophical Association.

Kai was born on May 15, 1926, in Marshall, Michigan, and grew up in Moline, Illinois—“Hick-town *par excellence*,” as he sometimes referred to it.<sup>1</sup> He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and in 1959 received his PhD in philosophy from Duke University for a dissertation on “Justification and Morals.” In addition to numerous visiting positions, Kai taught at Marshall, Amherst, SUNY Binghamton, and New York University. From there (and sparked in large part by his vehement opposition to the US-led war in Viet Nam) he moved to Canada, first to the University of Calgary where he was professor of philosophy for many years, and then finally to Concordia University, where he taught and conducted research as an emeritus professor. To say that Kai was prolific is a massive understatement. He was the author of some twenty-two books and more than four-hundred articles and book chapters on subjects ranging from the philosophy of religion to metaphilosophy, from Marxism and political philosophy to ethics and American pragmatism. Even in so-called retirement, Kai was ludicrously productive. His graduate students from those days at Concordia (myself included) will remember how new offprints of his articles and book chapters would magically appear in our departmental mailboxes—sometimes faster than we could read them.

Kai came of age during an era in professional philosophy that would be completely unrecognizable to younger people in the discipline. He was hired at NYU, or so he told the story, after having a casual lunch with department chair Sidney Hook. “I didn’t even know I was being interviewed,” Kai confessed.<sup>2</sup> Hook was apparently sufficiently impressed with the young professor that Kai was offered a job. That was it. Kai saw clearly—later on, certainly, if not back then—that this was an inappropriate way for academic departments to hire new faculty. And he knew that our current hiring and promotion practices—problematic and cumbersome though they still are in many ways—are much fairer and more inclusive than they once were.

Kai never sent or received an email. Nor did he use a computer or even a typewriter. His numerous books and articles were all written out by hand in that undecipherable scrawl of his. In old age, the fingers on his writing hand took on a gnarly shape from the literally millions of words he had written over the course of his life in the form of books, essays, and many, many letters.

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<sup>1</sup>See “Afterword: An Interview with Kai Nielsen on Political Philosophy.” In *Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: The Political Philosophy of Kai Nielsen*, edited by David Rondel and Alex Sager, 401–35; esp. 410. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>“Afterword: An Interview with Kai Nielsen,” 426.

I knew Kai to be jovial and playful. He was frequently smiling and always quick to giggle at a joke. He was also unusually sensitive to human suffering. He often got choked up—he would literally start crying—while reflecting on injustice or human hardship.

Kai's central and lifelong philosophical preoccupation concerned the development and articulation of a conception of a "meaningful and desirable life" for all. He sought, in his words, "a conception of a flourishing world for all where there will be no poor. I want such a world. I seek again and again in various ways to clearly ... articulate what this world would be like and how it could be achieved."<sup>3</sup> This was the preoccupation that undergirded Kai's atheism and naturalism, his radical egalitarian politics, his repudiation of capitalist globalization, and the internationalism and cosmopolitanism to which he was thoroughly committed. As he saw things, it was also what lay behind his strong support for Québec sovereignty. Kai was rightly suspicious of ethnic nationalisms, both on empirical-historical and philosophical grounds. But the argument for Québec sovereignty to which he frequently appealed was simple and innocuous on its face. Roughly: if one party in a marriage is unhappy and wants a divorce, that fact on its own is enough to make it legitimate.

I fondly recall many visits to Kai's home in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighborhood of Montréal. Passing an afternoon talking with Kai about philosophy and politics—copies of *le Monde Diplomatique* and the *New Left Review* strewn about his living room—drinking lots of coffee, the hours flying by. I will forever cherish those memories. Kai had a long and wonderful life. He will be deeply missed. The world is a poorer place without Kai in it.

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<sup>3</sup>See Kai Nielsen, "An Introduction to my Bibliography. Some Shocks." Unpublished manuscript. <https://www.kainielsen.org>.