

# Wal Suchting, 1931–1997

In March of this year, I received the sad news of the passing of Wal Suchting the previous January. I never met Wal in person. But, from a correspondence of some hundreds of pages stretching over five or six years, I felt I had come to know him and I thought of him as a friend. A fair part of our correspondence consisted of commiserations over the debased politics of academic life and the difficulties of pursuing a Marxian-oriented research agenda in an intellectual conjuncture dominated by neo-liberal dogma and ‘postmodern’ dilettantism. Though writing from different continents (North America and Australia) and occupying opposite ends of the academic cycle of experience (at the inception of our correspondence, I was still in the process of finishing my Ph.D., whereas Wal had just accepted early retirement from his post at the University of Sydney, declaring himself on the occasion ‘*vogfrei*’), Wal would assure me that upon reading my description of some academic horror story or another he could ‘imaginatively place himself in the situation immediately’. What followed was always sound advice, often returning in the most intractable circumstances to the recommendation given by Virgil to Dante when encountering the ‘lukewarm’ in Dante’s *Inferno*: ‘let us not speak of them, but look and pass on’.

Wal was one of the authors of a new translation of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia Logic*, although he took issue with some of his co-workers’ translating conventions in a separate preface to the volume (Indianapolis: Hackett 1991). As a philosopher, he defended a hypothesis which he himself conceded might appear to many ‘quite strange and even far-fetched’: namely, that Hegel’s logic – which *prima facie* would seem to belong to the broad movement of romantic reaction against modern science – in fact represents a sustained, if only ‘semi-conscious’ (Wal used here a Freudian interpretive model, distinguishing the ‘latent content’ of Hegel’s text from its ‘manifest content’), engagement with the protocols of the ‘new’ – that is, ‘Galilean’ – science. I myself never became convinced of this point as concerns Hegel. But it mattered little – since the substantive guiding thread of Wal’s research in the last years of his life was, in any case, the character of the ‘new’ science *itself*, and its distinctiveness from an older ‘Aristotelian’ conception of science which continued to hold sway in much philosophical discourse *about* science even long after it had ceased to play any role in scientific practice proper. Wal was, in effect – even if Hegel should turn out not to have been – a passionate defender of the scientific revolution. Wal was a socialist, and indeed in a far stronger and more traditional sense than that which is usually attached to this word nowadays. Hence, he was especially distressed to find epistemological relativism gaining ground in ostensibly ‘Marxist’ circles or even being marketed to a completely unknowing student public as a characteristically ‘Marxist’ ‘epistemological position’. As far as Wal was concerned, the superiority of Marx’s theoretical output, more specifically of his political economy, consisted not in its serviceability to political interests whose angelic character could be safely assumed *a priori*, but rather in its superior *cognitive* value in enabling us to grasp the nature of capitalist economic reality.

The last package I received from Wal, around the New Year, contained a long typescript on ‘The Concept of Materialism in Althusser’s Later Thinking’. Althusser was a constant source of inspiration for Wal – though in a rather unique way, sharing nothing in common with the ‘Althusserianism’ which still makes the rounds, in various permutations, in the Anglophone academy today. As readers of his autobiographical writings will

know, Althusser often despaired of the limits of his learning and self-consciously belittled the significance of narrowly philosophical education – and indeed, it must be said, he often did so with good reason. Wal's erudition, by contrast, was massively imposing: being both encyclopedic, spanning the physical sciences, mathematics and the humanistic disciplines, and cosmopolitan, inasmuch as Wal regularly read and drew upon resources in all the major modern European languages of scholarship plus ancient Greek and Latin. Whereas Althusser's style, moreover, tended towards the lapidary, Wal preferred what he himself called, following Hume, the 'tedious lingering method', a single concept or proposition being increasingly refined over the course of many pages of analysis, in the light of various 'tests' or anticipated objections and in continual (often sharply critical) dialogue with the results obtained by other scholars in the relevant field or fields. In this sense, it can be said – though Wal was too modest to have said so himself – that he often improved upon those suggestions of Althusser which he found most fruitful or gave them a grounding that they lacked in Althusser's original. In Althusser, he once wrote, 'the argument would appear to be not that claims to knowledge are justified because they are in working-class interests, but rather, conversely, justified claims to knowledge are in working-class interests'.

This was surely Wal's conviction: more simply put, that knowledge is progressive – or at least is more likely to be so in the long run than its opposite. This is not to say that Wal had any illusions about the efficacy in general of theoretical work. He once remarked wryly that he might as well have placed his writings in bottles and thrown the latter off a bridge for all the impact publishing them had had. In fact, apart from his many articles and two books, Wal left behind a large volume of unpublished typescripts. It could only serve the cause of enlightenment – which, if Wal was right, is still a just cause – if these gradually found their way into print.

**John Rosenthal**