Old Library

October 1978. After a year in Berkeley I'm back in Oxford to complete my DPhil. I look at the lecture programme for Michaelmas term and what do I see? A seminar on Historical Materialism, by Professor C. Taylor and Mr G.A. Cohen. Never heard of this G.A. Cohen, but should be interesting, I thought.

I was not the only one. On Friday 20 October 1978 at 5p.m., I was sitting on the floor in the packed Old Library seminar room of All Souls' College, along with a crowd of other people, including Charles Taylor himself, waiting for this Mr G.A. Cohen,
waiting, waiting. He finally appeared half an hour late. The train from London was late. He had run all the way from the station. Puffing and sweating, he soon undertook to give a glimpse of the main claims in his then forthcoming first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, the galley proofs of which were going to serve as the basic text of the seminar.

I cannot say that I had already guessed on that evening that no one would have a more formidable impact on my intellectual life than this young Reader at UCL with abundant grey hair, who was struggling to recover his breath while explaining that the central propositions of Marx's theory of history could only make sense as functional explanations. But it took me few minutes to realize that there was something very congenial going on here, an impression soon confirmed by our first exchanges.

After the second session, the shy foreign student I was felt bold enough to send him a note I had written shortly before, which strongly resembled what I had just heard. I received by return of post the first of many letters I was to receive from Jerry over the next 30 years. It starts as follows, in a typical Jerry style, which many here will recognize.

*University College London*

*Nov 2, 1978*

*Dear Mr Van Parijs [crossed out by hand and replaced by "Philippe"],*

*I have just read your discussion note, and I cannot tell you how delighted I am. Our views on functional explanation are not similar, unless identity is a form of similarity. We are sensitive to exactly the same considerations, we have exactly the same intuitions, and we formalize them in (pretty well) exactly the same way. You and I are animated by the same demon. And I am sure there is between us the further agreement that what explains the agreements already listed is that we are both right. [...]*

*September Group*

Subsequently, Jerry became the external examiner of my DPhil thesis. He put me in touch with the publisher of my first book. I received from him a huge amount of extraordinarily detailed and generous typewritten feedback on my work, typically starting with "Think of each page as being divided into 4 parts, called 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd'.". Above all, he took the initiative, jointly with Jon Elster and John Roemer, of founding what became known as the "No[n?] Bullshit Marxist Group", or, less narrowly and less arrogantly, the "September Group", an exhilarating intellectual adventure that has now been going for three decades and has involved in addition, from the start, Eric Olin Wright, Robert van der Veen, Hillel Steiner, and later also Pranab Bardhan, Sam Bowles, Josh Cohen and Seana Shiffrin, all present here today.

1 Mark Philp and Michael Rosen first met Jerry on the same occasion and have now corrected my memories. The seminar was scheduled in the Wharton Room, and that is where we first waited (with Charles Taylor on the floor). As more people kept trying to find their way into the packed room, we moved to the Old Library, and that is where Jerry entered our lives.
Jerry was not only uncontroversially the wittiest member of the group and therefore the centrepiece of its group dynamics, he was also among us the most untiring prosecutor of sloppy writing and lazy thinking, and the member of the group best at imposing upon himself and upon others the discipline required to keep such a group going for so long. Thus in 1989, Jerry was the convenor, and we all received the following stern message, on paper with the September Group's letterhead (including its motto *Marxismus sine stercore tauri*).

April 13, 1989

Dear Member,

I write further to mine of September 1 last, about next September's meeting.

I very much regret that most of you have not responded to the request expressed in the last paragraph of the September letter, where I asked you to say whether or not you wanted to give a paper at the next meeting. At the moment there are three paper-givers, and we need one more. Whoever volunteers first will be that one more. The three to hand are [...]."
Obsessional perfectionist

The first sentence of a quick response I sent a few days later ("Thank you for the September group circular, characteristically unindulgent with the weaknesses of human nature.") triggered, a few months later, a reaction I had not anticipated.

London, July 29 1989

Dear Philippe,

In a letter to me of some months ago, which is in Oxford and therefore not to hand as I write, you thanked me for a circular NBMG letter, which, you remarked, showed my usual lack of indulgence towards weaknesses in human nature.

I was very struck by that remark, which I saw, immediately, was very much to the point, but which nevertheless conveyed news to me. You were, of course, right, but I had not been aware of this feature of mine before you said it, and I am grateful to you for pointing it out so that I can curb its operation. What is more, I read your remark as having been composed in a generous and at most teasing spirit, rather than in a stern and admonishing one. That is, I readily recognized that you, for your part, were indulging my weakness of rigidity, or whatever we should call it.

I am very hard on myself. I am an obsessional perfectionist, and that is no doubt part of the reason for the largely approving judgement that my work receives: its virtues aren't all wholly due to special talent. And I slip easily into being equally hard on others. But, admonished by you, I now hope to have that tendency under control.

That is prelude to my assuring you that I am not blaming anybody for the events which have led me, as I now announce, to decide not to come to the conference next month, a decision for which, having read my explanation, I hope you, in turn, will not blame me. […]"

Then followed an explanation for why he had decided not to attend a conference I had organized in Louvain-la-Neuve, for a combination of reasons in which the his family's "right to a relaxed Jerry for 3 weeks" played a crucial role. Among the countless letters and messages you receive in your life, this is the sort of letter you never forget, because of its specific contents, but above because of this so characteristically Jerry-like way of trying to get things straight, both morally and intellectually.

Promises to keep

Even more than his letters, most of them directly work-related, many personal conversations I had with Jerry - and conversations with Jerry could easily become very personal - are unforgettable for me. I shall mention just one such conversation, one of the last ones, still very vivid (and somewhat sore) in my memory, which ended leaving us both with tears in our eyes.

First a brief word about the context. Both before and after his retirement, several of our conversations touched upon his succession at the Chichele Chair. As several of you know, Jerry would have liked me to apply and gently insisted on several occasions that I
should. As some of you know, there is no academic position in the world in which I would have been more tempted to show interest than this one, for a number of diverse reasons, including the fact that the first holder of the Chair, G.D.H. Cole, was the first academic advocate of an unconditional basic income, or the fact that I met my wife just across the wall in the Nun's Garden of Queen's College, but above all because of my great admiration and deep affection for Jerry himself. Yet I would not apply and Jerry understood my reasons and sympathized with them.

The last time we talked about it he was taking me to the bus stop on Cowley Road. As the bus approached, Jerry summarized my reasons by reciting the end of a poem no doubt familiar to most of you but unknown to me at the time. Because I didn't know it, Jerry cut it out of some book a couple of days later and posted it to me. It goes like this:

\[\text{The woods are lovely, dark and deep.} \\
\text{But I have promises to keep,} \\
\text{And miles to go before I sleep,} \\
\text{And miles to go before I sleep.}\]

Jerry suddenly went to sleep last summer when many miles, we thought, were left for him to go, and with many promises we wish he had been able to keep. But the demanding yet tender Jerry is still with us. He lives on with Michèle, with his children, with her children, with their families. With the many students he supervised, taught, inspired. He lives on with each of us in the September group. With some Marxists, with some ex-Marxists, with many not-Marxist-at-all. With the non-bullshitters and those who honestly try. He will live on with the readers of his first book to appear - very soon - in French: Si tu es pour l'égalité, pourquoi es-tu si riche? And with a bunch of fishermen in a Greek island. And with half the Asian shopkeepers on Cowley Road.

For many of us, the strength of Jerry's meticulous writings, for all of us the power of his radiant personality, will enable us to go many more miles, to keep many more promises, than we would have managed without him.

Thank you, Jerry, for all you've been, for all you've meant, for all you've done for me — and for so many of us in this room today.

Philippe Van Parijs

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2 Robert Frost, "Stopping by woods on a snowy evening". After the memorial event, Pranab Bardhan and Sam Bowles told me that Jawaharlal Nehru had these verses next to his desk and, later, next to his death bed. Did Jerry — fascinated as he was by India — know this? (Jerry's striking account of his first trip to India will be published in volume II of his posthumous writings edited by Michael Otsuka.)