

Peter Baehr

Introductory notes on his Inaugural Lecture at Lingnan University. JS, 8/10/09

It is with some trepidation that I stand here to introduce Professor Peter Baehr to this audience, because most of you have known Peter for much longer than the humble three years that I have been fortunate to call him my friend and colleague. But then, even if you have known him for twice that period, or again twice more, I am sure that I have one or two interesting things to tell you. Because Peter is a very private man. And it is only on an opportunity like this one that one begins to dig things about him. And to be amazed by what one finds.

The punch-line, let me say, is that Peter is the epitome of the **Liberal Arts man and scholar**. And before you accuse me of throwing our favourite cliché at you – *Liberal Arts*, in an inaugural lecture at Lingnan – let me explain what I am saying.

First of all Peter is the embodiment of **internationalism**: in his genes, his upbringing, his life, in his mind-frame. Like President Obama, he was born in the Pacific to parents who came from the two sides of the Atlantic. But then he was in fact born further afield, a true Asian: in Kuala Lumpur where he lived for his first 9 years, to then continue his education in England, where he then stayed as a young Lecturer. From England he moved for a period to Scotland, taught for a number of years in Newfoundland (Canada), and then came to Hong Kong a decade ago.

To his international person and outlook, let me add his intense and rich **humanism**: a man who has written extensively on the Classics, on totalitarianism and democracy, on the holocaust and terrorism, and on a range of topics in sociological and political theory including key work he has produced on Max Weber and Hanna Arendt. But beyond his passion and distinction in a wide range of areas in the humanities, I have dubbed him a **humanist** for a much more important reason, which is the human qualities that he brings to his analysis and views, indeed to his life. I believe I am a decent person, and a human and humane person. But these attributes have little to do with the work that I have done as a professional, which has occupied a separate part of my mind and of my heart. In the case of Peter there is none of this: *his intellect, his ethics and his morality are not only big and powerful, but are **one**, intimately bundled together.*

Don't be surprised then to know that last year he spent his summer teaching a course on "Dictatorship and Democracy" in Afghanistan of all places. And why did he put himself perhaps in harm's way going to Afghanistan? Rumour has it that having supported the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – because a right-winger he is, the most decent right winger ever – and having later found out that things were getting and remaining difficult for so long for the populations, he wanted to contribute to the region himself, which he did in a wonderful way with that mission. He is the most *integral and humane humanist* that there is.

Finally, in this portrait of Peter as the embodiment of our Liberal Arts ethos, let me refer to the **teaching**. He is famous for the quality of his teaching, for the preparation he puts into it and his deliverance *to* the task. Of course he is a stellar researcher if we have one at Lingnan. But while all the other very strong research professionals that we have spend their time trying to find ways to be able to do more research and to release our time and our potential to do research, Peter is often the *fly in the soup in our meetings on research*, reminding us with his trademark oratory and passion that our mission is the teaching. For those of you who didn't know it, Peter Baehr is without doubt the leading conscience on this issue among the senior ranks at Lingnan, and indeed the chief advocate for the interests of our students.

Nevertheless I have bad news for Peter. And this is that a great teacher as he is, it is for his research that he is famous. And very famous, filling us with great pride at Lingnan that we are here today to celebrate. Let me just give you a few paint-strokes of who Peter is as a scholar.

He has in his bag over a dozen books, with top publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Stanford University Press, Transaction Publishers, and, yes, Penguin Books, plus innumerable scholarly articles in all the top journals in the profession. But although that would be plenty to put Peter in the position that he holds, what is really impressive is not the quantity of top publications he has and continues to generate, but *the quality and the recognition* that they carry.

I have in my office a special catalogue by **Transaction**, which is a major top tier publisher in the social sciences. This is a *Special Classics Catalogue: 1962-2010* that they have issued, bringing together the top names in their portfolio in the last half century. The collection's heading or theme is "*the survivors of cultural wars of past and present*". In that highly select club they have either one-page or half-a-page entries on each of the the big names they present, from Joseph Schumpeter, Thorstein Veblen and Max Weber to Raymond Aron, Gunnar Myrdal and even Milton Friedman; and in that company we proudly have one full page on Lingnan, in the person and work of Professor Peter Baehr.

His first book on *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World* was an "Outstanding Book of 1997", as judged by the American Librarians' Association journal; his 2000 co-translated book on *Weber's Protestant Ethic* writings was nominated for the Wolff Translation Prize; an article he wrote in 2004 on totalitarianism was the most read article for almost two years in the European Journal of Political Theory; and another article he wrote on unprecedented events, published in the American Sociological Review, is equally widely cited. Peter's work has been translated into six languages.

Perhaps more striking, for your economist commentator, is the curious fact that Bill Knight, the Deputy Chairman of Council of Lloyd's of London, chose one of Peter's books to answer a question *on what reading inspires him*.

I've said enough about the work and let me just say a word more on the man.

I already told you that he spent his early years growing up in Malaysia, and then boarding in England. But let me expand on that. At school, at least at first, he seems not to have been very interested or dedicated. In fact he had a hard time passing his "O" levels. At one point he was briefly expelled from school, for refusing to disclose the whereabouts of a friend who had run away from his abusive parents. That's *honour*, and I think we can recognize that young man. He was forced to change schools, and at one point in his late teens he actually considered becoming a professional musician – and a fine musician he was and remains. But he continued at school and then went on to do very well in his "A" levels. Nevertheless he decided not to go to university and instead got into a sequence of not great jobs. It is his mother, it seems, that we should all thank for having encouraged and convinced and even made the arrangements for him to go to university. That if any was the magic wand that took him from school failure to Chair Professor – indeed a curious trajectory.

This long and unique trajectory as a boy and as a student may perhaps be what lies behind the tremendous intensity and passion that Peter brings into his work. Or maybe not. Perhaps the student's intensity and our colleague's depth and passion are both very simply in his genes. But *amazingly deep and passionate he surely is*. As a student in search of a thesis topic he once became interested in interviewing Hitler's architect Albert Speer, who had just been freed from jail – and of course there he went all the way to Heidelberg and interviewed the man – which the *Playboy Magazine* went on to do as well. He wanted to learn about the Middle East and do something for its innocent civilians, and he went and taught in Afghanistan.

And then just looking at his work, discussing no-matter-what with him, or reading his emails, is often a treat, for the care and eloquence with which he puts across his arguments, and for the subtle but ironic sense of humour he can express. When he extends his research interests into new areas he is methodical, careful, extremely systematic, making sure he reads and thinks about the new issues with the dedication and intensity that we all put into our PhD research as students, curiosity and freshness that Peter manages to bring into his work at each step of his way.

An outstanding scholar. A devoted teacher. Warm, sometimes even funny. But above all, unboundedly passionate and honest. A great pride for Lingnan, and a joy to have as a colleague.

Peter Baehr.