



Collectively Remembering

Professor Denis Hilton, 1955-2021

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Denis Hilton passed away on February 11, 2021, in the arms of his wife Anna, after a protracted fight with cancer. He is survived by Anna and their daughter Victoria. Anna told us that he passed away as he lived, with a knowing smile when she whispered to him in French, an Englishman of European aspects to the very end. He loved his work: doing research, teaching online, and supervising students at University of Toulouse II throughout 2020, even as he was enduring chemotherapy, surgery, and the pandemic. Denis made important contributions to research in causal reasoning, behavioural economics, and collective remembering, where his ability to read widely across disparate domains catalysed an open-minded and original approach. He was exceptionally generous and kind, giving of his time and his spirit in an open-hearted way that brought people together.

In the 1980s, Denis was a student working on attribution with Jos Jaspars and others at Oxford. Denis applied sharp insights from language (Grice), philosophy (Mackie) and legal theory (Hart and Honoré) to causal attribution, where he and Ben Slugoski published their abnormal conditions focus model in *Psychological Review*. This work provided a simple elegant theory to challenge the more cluttered models that previously dominated attribution theory. Denis continued to work at this top level though his career. Although he was based in England and France, he built a global network of collaborators through post-doctoral studies in the USA, as a Humboldt Fellow in Germany, and as a visiting scholar to New Zealand, where he continued working on attribution theory with Oxford classmate John McClure, and on collective memory with James Liu. Denis made strong contributions to behavioural economics, especially in the areas of judgment and decision. He was invited to advise finance professionals and showed how people's biases contributed to financial losses, recessions, - and more recently to sustainable lifestyles.

Denis was always keen to talk about history, in which he was exceptionally well read. He was open to interpretations from many different perspectives - social cognition, decision making, anthropology or linguistics. This made conversations with Denis a sublime intellectual experience. At the same time, he was highly ironic and this allowed him to maintain proper intellectual distance to politically loaded issues. Once Denis took John to Albi, a small French

town with a massive cathedral. When John asked how such a small town could afford such a large structure, Denis replied that when the Cathar heresy emerged in Albi in the 12th century, the Pope sent in an aircraft carrier.

For many young scholars in Europe, Denis was both a friend and a mentor. At conferences, workshops and seminars he spent hours commenting on research ideas, even the most premature ones. He would go far beyond mere conventions of politeness to listen to and discuss these ideas. Having such conversations with such a sharp mind was very stimulating. His critiques were sometimes sharp, too, but always constructive and benevolent. These conversations continued at evening parties, where discussion ranged from causal attribution to real tennis (*courte-paume*); from rock'n'roll to European identities. Denis had a “presence” that was all the more imposing because of his discretion.

One time when he visited Pécs, graduate students had learned the "Abnormal conditions focus model" and János László introduced him. They were pleased to meet the author of the model, but even more so when Denis spoke the Hungarian name of the model: "Normálistól eltérő feltétel modellje" with excellent pronunciation!

Denis was instrumental in organizing the remarkable 2004 EAESP Small Group Meeting on “Collective remembering, collective emotions and shared representations of history” in Aix-en-Provence. In retrospect, this meeting was seminal for stimulating a European movement in social psychology to enter into the dialogue already established on collective memory from sociology and history. The forces coalescing around Darío Páez and Bernard Rimé, around János László and Wolfgang Wagner, and around Hilton and Liu all came together. Denis was inspiring for young scholars like Michał Bilewicz, Rosa Cabecinhas, Olivier Klein, and Laurent Licata, each of whom became independent scholars in this area. He assisted Laurent to realize János László's dream, as Cost Action is1205 "Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union", a massive international project.

Denis was a formidable host and true bon vivant. In 2002, James was visiting Denis in Toulouse, and Brazil was playing England in an early morning World Cup quarterfinal. We got out of bed and saw Michael Owen racing to score the first goal at the 23rd minute. Denis, a veteran of English World Cup disappointments, surprised football novice James by immediately opening a celebratory bottle of champagne! Soon enough, twenty minutes later Brazil equalized, and then won the game in the second half. Denis Hilton was a man who savored life as a glass half full, rather than half empty. He shared this joy with others around him.