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Obituary/Nachruf, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Herbert Gottweis

(February 8, 1958 – March 31, 2014)

On March 31, Herbert Gottweis, Professor in the Department of Political Science of the University of Vienna and Chair of the Life-Science-Governance Research Platform at the same university, sadly passed away. His death is a significant loss for his family, his friends, his collaborators and colleagues at the University of Vienna, and the international community.

Born in Vienna in 1958, Herbert Gottweis studied Political Science at the University of Vienna. He graduated in 1984 with a dissertation on the »World of Law Making« in Austria, which was published in 1987. In 1984, Herbert moved to the University of Salzburg, where he held the position of University Assistant until 1997. He took leave from that position to spend several years in the United States. On an Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship of the Austrian Science Fund (1989-1990), he was at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and subsequently joined the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT, also in Cambridge, as an Andrew Mellon Foundational Fellow (1992-1993). He was then Assistant Professor in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York (1993-1995). In those »American« years at Cornell and in Cambridge, he developed an interest in the research field – biotechnology and biomedicine – that would cut across two decades of his career. He also encountered new fields of inquiry, the already fairly established Science and Technology Studies, and the field of Critical or Interpretive Policy Analysis, which was only just emerging. Herbert was deeply influenced by both fields and by their major tenets – he combined an interest in science and technology with an interest in the ways in which power operates through discourses, narratives, and rhetoric. He also helped to institutionalize the field of Interpretive Policy Analysis. Yet he did not choose just one of these fields over the others. Instead, he chose to work in all them at once, without ever becoming territorial about any of them.

In 1995, at the age of 37, he returned to Austria. Although Herbert had encountered in the United States many of those elements that would define his professional identity in the upcoming years, the years in Austria after 1995 helped to crystalize his professional and personal identity.

First, in the first few years after his return, he wrote his second book, which was approved as his »habilitation« in 1997 and published by MIT Press the following year. *Governing Molecules* was pioneering at least from two perspectives—for the object with which this engaged and for the way in which this research object was explored. The book covered the politics of biotechnology, which at the time was virtually unexplored within

the Political Science field. The book was also pioneering for the way in which Herbert engaged with the politics of biotechnology. He developed and used what he called a »post-structuralist« approach, combining a Foucaultian interest in power with narrative analysis, using this approach to make sense of the politics of biotechnology in different countries, at once uncovering and explaining these differences. When I met him as a student at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna in 2004, he invited students to pay attention to the politics of meaning and to the ways in which phenomena started or were made to »signify.« One of his favorite questions was how a particular phenomenon was embedded in the »discursive economy« of a country.

Moreover, second, in the mid-1990s he met Ursula, who would become his wife. Over the coming years his wife Ursula and their three children, Theresa, Raphael and Clara, provided him with the emotional and personal stability that allowed him to venture into post-structuralist inquiries and to maneuver with ease in the academic world, which was then about to transform rapidly. Herbert did not see transformations – such as an increasing internationalization of universities, the emergence of mode-two science, and the related, ever-increasing importance of third-party-funding – as threats. Rather, he approached them as opportunities to be seized, inviting others – especially his junior fellows – to follow his example.

In 1998, at the age of forty, he was appointed Professor of Comparative Politics at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna. Herbert turned to third-party funding to build his research group, establishing first an informal group called »Transformations in Public Policy«, then joining forces with colleagues from the life sciences to found the interdisciplinary »Life-Science-Governance Research Platform«, a platform that he chaired until his death. From a distance he seemed to be a hierarchical person – one of the first conversations that I had with him was about the dress code at workshops. But in steering his group, he was anti-hierarchical, always encouraging members to articulate ideas regardless of their title or positions. He also strongly believed in and indeed modeled supporting people, giving them the space to develop their own intellectual ideas, not only allowing but at times also encouraging them to disagree with him.

Herbert was awarded several grants in the ELSA program of the Austrian Genome Program and participated in several consortia of the Sixth and Seventh Framework Program. Perhaps it is fair to separate these projects into two parts – a first part in which he studied the governance of the life sciences as well as the governance through the life science from an often critical distance, and a second part in which he began to engage with the life sciences and life scientists, often joining interdisciplinary projects in which he and his collaborators assumed responsibility for the ethical part in an otherwise predominantly scientific project consortium. He often led focus group research in order to develop an understanding of what publics thought about particular issues. This second part was also influenced by another position that he held from 2005 on, when he was the Vice-Chair of the Austrian Science Fund, which gave him responsibility for the social sciences and humanities in Austria. He held a clear vision of how the social sciences should work, often advocating for those ideas in which he believed strongly.

Tragically, his research topics became very personal in the last two years of his life. In spring 2012, he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. Consistent with the spirit he demonstrated in much of his professional life, he framed this new turn not as a fact of destiny but as a challenge to be fought. He modified his work schedule, traveled less than in previous years, and began a book manuscript with the working title »The Politics of Undecidability: Life, Death and Democracy.« He died on March 31, at the age of 57. He left so much to his collaborators and to the international research community, which makes this loss difficult to grasp.

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