

Tablet

Political Theorist Benjamin Barber Dies at 77

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The death of the widely influential political scientist Benjamin Barber after a months-long battle with pancreatic cancer could not have come at a less auspicious moment. Though the prolific public intellectual, activist, and think tanker will doubtless be remembered by future generations of political scientist and thinkers for his 1995 book *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*, his role as an activist is the one that came to the forefront toward the end of his career. His most famous book would widely be declared “prophetic” and become a sort of ur-text for popular understanding of the social forces that led to 9/11; at the time it seemed as if every fifth person walking around New York was carrying a copy. A mark of its explanatory sophistication is that 20 years later most of its conceptual armature has been entirely assimilated into the received wisdom of the way we think about the intersection of globalization and archaic reactionary social forces. He was an incisive commentator on the potential of urban communities to democratically oppose the anti-globalism of Trump administration.

Barber was 77 years old at the time of his death. Reported *The New York Times*, Barber’s father was the director of the New York unit of the Federal Theater Project and his mother, Doris Frankel, was a playwright and television writer.

He grew up in Greenwich Village and attended the Stockbridge School, a progressive boarding school in Massachusetts founded in the late 1940s by Hans Maeder, a German socialist refugee. After a year studying at the Albert Schweitzer College in Churwalden, Switzerland, he enrolled at Grinnell College in Iowa. On his way to earning a bachelor’s degree in political science in 1960, he studied for a year at the London School of Economics.

At Harvard, he was awarded a master’s degree in government in 1963 and a doctorate in 1966. In 1969, he began teaching political science at Rutgers, where for many years he was the director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy. In 2001, he joined the University of Maryland as the Kekst Professor of Civil Society.

Barber held to a theory of expansive social interdependence that was intertwined with a keen sense of need for a stronger participatory democracy—his thinking was most concerned with the democratic deficit and with restoring civic faith in the functioning of institutions. While Barber’s ideas about participatory democracy found their home on the progressive end of the political spectrum but Barber was intellectually agile enough to be rapturously eulogized by both *The Nation* and the Cato Institute. Barber’s conception of “strong democracy,” which he juxtaposed to more traditional political science models of representative democracy, was spiritually

descended from relations between citizens in Greek city-states. He envisioned a polity where participatory involvement in politics was routine and akin to a daily duty (though not an all-encompassing one), but unlike many communitarian critics of liberal theory, he never jettisoned liberalism's basic tenets. It was entirely logical that he would turn in his late career to adumbrating connections between global and local political forces and heralding the idea that cities might offer solutions to contemporary global problems. It would be the malleable city-state rather than national governments that would drive the development of progress.

Barber envisioned the cityscape as the natural backdrop and scale for democratic life, and that focus on a localist mode of living had significant followers among conservatives. It is characteristic of Barber's suppleness as a thinker, that the only lefty who grappled with the work of the libertarian-conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott was the Marxist Perry Anderson. His essential insight about life under the age of Trump was that as the nationalist government turned toward a parochial nationalism that buttressed the backlash to globalism, the natural home of opposition would be on the level of local governance. A pair of articles that he wrote for *The Nation* published recently encapsulated his vision of a vigorous and localist response to the election of Donald Trump: "Can Cities Counter the Power of President-Elect Donald Trump?" and "In the Age of Donald Trump, the Resistance Will Be Localized." After publishing *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* in 2013, he founded the Global Parliament of Mayors which met in Holland last year for its inaugural secession. Barber died a week after the publication of his latest work of syncretic urbanism, "Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming," published by Yale University Press.

An unfortunate late life controversy involved Barber's defense of Saif Gaddafi al-Islam, on the international board of whose foundation Barber served and from which he received consulting fees. Barber was forced to publicly defend his stained reputation in multiple articles after Muammar Gaddafi's son "fooled the West."

Still, Barber was well known for his principled (and understandable) disdain for small-minded in-fighting of academia, and this fact was coupled with his incredible sales and great talent for explaining his ambitious, world-spanning ideas in pellucid prose likely earned him few friends within academia. Unlike many public intellectuals, he was a very rare and fecund generator of ideas who also had the organizational skills to inspire the building of political communities to implement them.

The political philosopher Josh Cherniss, a professor at Georgetown, told Tablet that "as a young man, [Barber] played a role in the conceptual analysis of totalitarianism." Barber also seriously engaged with feminism, publishing *Liberating Feminism*, in 1976. "This is surely a testament to an open mind," said Cherniss, and an astute sense of what was important in the world."