



Eugene Kamenka

## Eugene Kamenka 1928–1994

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WITH THE DEATH ON 19 January 1994, of Eugene Kamenka, Professor of the History of Ideas in the Research School of Social Sciences, the Australian National University lost one of its earliest graduate students, this Academy a prominent advocate of its work, and Australia its most productive and widely known critic and historian of nineteenth and twentieth century social thought. Kamenka's academic writings, lectures, and conference participation over a period of thirty-five years made his name familiar to colleagues and students throughout this country, Europe, the Americas and Asia. Never more persuasive than when representing, both at home and abroad, what the History of Ideas Unit should stand for in intellectual life, he was the originator in Australia of the systematic historical study of general social concepts and theories.

Born in Cologne in 1928, Eugene Kamenka was the son of educated Russian Jews who moved to Germany in the chaotic aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The family arrived in Sydney when Eugene was aged nine and spoke only German and Russian. When he graduated from Sydney Technical High School he came first in English in the New South Wales leaving examination and entered the University of Sydney as a medical student. He soon transferred to the department of philosophy then led by John Anderson, and later became a prominent member of that group of Andersonians who advocated freedom of thought, personal intellectual enterprise, and the recognition of the conflicts between the interests and values of different social groups—conflicts that required public and critical discussion rather than the comfort of evasion and avoidance. The Andersonian emphasis on tracing ideological policies and social attitudes to their philosophical foundations was an essential feature of Kamenka's thought, and gave it a solid and systematic character that is displayed everywhere in his work, a character that is especially valuable in the innumerable radio talks, interviews, and invited addresses that he gave to a wide variety of non-academic audiences.

After graduation, Kamenka went to Israel as a Zionist sympathiser, and in 1951 became foreign editor of the *Jerusalem Post*. Returning to Australia in 1952, he became for two years a journalist on the *Sydney Morning Herald* and also, for a time, an editor of *Wheels*, the motoring magazine. Dissatisfied with the intellectual limitations of journalism, in 1955 he began a post-graduate degree in the philosophy department of the recently created Institute of Advanced Studies, Canberra. He interrupted his course in order

to lecture in philosophy for two years at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and then with his future wife, Alice Tay, a Singapore barrister, returned to Canberra to complete his PhD in philosophy.

For six years he worked in the Philosophy Department, but finding his chief interests were increasingly historical, he became head of a separate History of Ideas Unit in 1969, a year after he became professor, and for the next twenty-five years worked with unceasing energy to establish it as a centre for the study of major social, legal, and political ideas of the past two centuries. He did this by using the facilities of the Unit to bring to it a large and constant stream of the ablest foreign and Australian visitors to attend conferences organised by him, give seminars and public lectures; and in addition he attracted to the Unit a considerable number of talented graduate students. In turn, he made both the work of the Unit and the name of ANU known by his own publications, by his lectures at overseas universities, and by his numerous periods as visiting professor or fellow at such centres as Columbia University, Trinity College, Oxford, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Moscow State University. He also attended a great many conferences in Europe, North America, and Asia. With his wife he organised the World Congress of the Association for Philosophy of Law in Sydney in 1977. Most importantly, he was such a ready, worthwhile, and intelligent contributor to any meeting that he attended that participants became eager to visit Canberra and participate in the life of the Unit. He was elected to the Fellowship of this Academy in 1973.

Kamenka lived several lives simultaneously. During his almost four decades in the Institute he published hundreds of papers on Marxism, Soviet and German philosophy, revolutionary movements such as the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, human rights, and legal theory. He published four books—*The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (1962) which established his reputation as a scholarly but critical student of Marxism, *Marxism and Ethics* (1969), *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feurbach* (1970), the first full scale study in English of that philosopher, and *Bureaucracy* (1989)—and edited many more, to which he also contributed, on social and legal topics: for example, feudalism, nationalism, legal ideals, community, and justice. His one volume selection of Marx's works, the Penguin *Portable Karl Marx*, is a model of its kind. He produced countless book reviews and articles for the chief Australian papers, gave talks at high schools in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, held senior office in various professional organisations, including the Secretaryship of this Academy, 1976–81, for which he worked tirelessly and effectively. Although not religious, he aided Jewish causes everywhere for reasons of cultural affiliation, appealing especially for policies of moderation between Jews and Arabs in Israel and rejecting religious-fundamentalism of all kinds.

In later years he believed that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emancipation of Eastern Europe, Marxism was no longer either a major social force or a movement of continuing intellectual interest. His attention turned to the social and legal problems increasingly prominent in China and South-East Asia. On these problems, as with his previous work on Marxism, he worked closely with his wife, Alice Tay, Challis Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Sydney. Together they lectured extensively in China and South-East Asia on Western legal theory and practice, and they collaborated in writing many papers on current social and legal issues in that region. This was a field to whose intellectual importance they had long called attention, one that they had fostered, from the earliest years of the Unit, by a network of conferences, seminars, exchange of visitors, and personal correspondence. However, they never allowed themselves to confuse scholarly examination of the intellectual achievements of Eastern societies with sympathy to the ideological claims and political practices of their present regimes.

In character, Kamenka always commanded attention by his easy mastery of social exchange, by the rapidity with which he grasped the nature of the most various occasions, and by the amiability that he brought to relationships with other people. When provoked by wilful foolishness, insincerity, and callousness he could be severe, but even the objects of his anger did not claim that they had been unjustly treated. He was noted for his generosity and thoughtfulness, and was constantly turned to by a wide variety of acquaintances for advice and help. In ability, he was remarkable for his capacious and accurate memory, and for the depth of his understanding, but especially for the ease with which he was able, at a moment's notice, to develop a highly organised and consistent account of any topic that lay within his field of interest, and to do so with a fertility of ideas and skill of expression that were strikingly uncommon. His Canberra home, for several decades a centre of the most unstinting hospitality, was known for lively and thoughtful discussion among an endless variety of visitors and friends. It was there that Eugene Kamenka, courteous and keen-witted as always, chose to carry on working with his wife, despite severe physical handicaps, until a few days before his death from bone cancer at the age of 65.

*Robert Brown*