

Remembering Peter Euben - 5/25/2018

May 29, 2018

From <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/blog/remembering-peter-euben/>



The faculty, staff, and students of the Kenan Institute for Ethics are saddened at the news of the passing of J. Peter Euben, beloved Research Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics. Peter Euben was one of KIE's founding faculty members, as well as the architect and inaugural director of the Ethics and Society Certificate program.

"Peter brought his remarkable spirit to the Kenan Institute in the early days and helped to shape it," said Ruth Grant, Senior Fellow, Kenan Institute for Ethics. "He taught with humor and with love. And those of us who were his colleagues and students remain very much in his debt."

Dr. Euben received his PhD from UC Berkeley in 1968 and had a 34-year career teaching at UC Santa Cruz before coming to Duke in 2002 to become the Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics, a newly created post. He specialized in ancient, modern, and contemporary political thought; literature and politics; political education; democratic culture and politics; and the politics of morality.

"My heart sank when I heard the news. I met Professor Euben during my freshman year when I took his class on 'Challenges of Living an Ethical Life,'" said Poorav Rohatgi (T'10). "From that moment until I graduated Duke (and off and on after then), he was my close mentor, always teaching me how to improve my critical thinking and writing skills and encouraging me to pursue the professional passion that burned within me. I will never forget his patient teaching style, his genuine feedback, his not-so-subtle humor, and, of course, his iconic mustache. He will always hold a special place in my heart."

Peter Euben was the author of *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, *Corrupting Youth*, and *Platonic Noise*; editor of *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*; and co-editor of *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstitution of American Democracy*. He received fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the National Humanities Foundation, and was a Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Fellow at the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University.

[Read "This is Ethics? An Idiosyncratic Guide" by Peter Euben from *DukeToday*, May 2010.](#)

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Remembering Peter Euben

Tuesday, May 29, 2018

From <https://polisci.duke.edu/news/remembering-peter-euben>

The faculty, staff, and students of political science are saddened at the news of the passing of J. Peter Euben, beloved Research Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics.

Euben won five teaching awards across his career. Writing for [Duke Today](#), nearing his retirement, Peter reflected on his teaching. "All this speaks to the importance of establishing a dialogue among the students and between them and me even in a class of 75. Of course, dialogue has become a cliché: who is against dialogue? But too many dialogues are covert monologues. My idea and practice of dialogue is more substantial in intent (if not in execution). It entails becoming a student of my students in order to become a better teacher of them and, just as important, having them see me do that." "He taught with humor and with love," [Ruth Grant](#) remembers, "and those of us who were his colleagues and students remain very much in his debt."



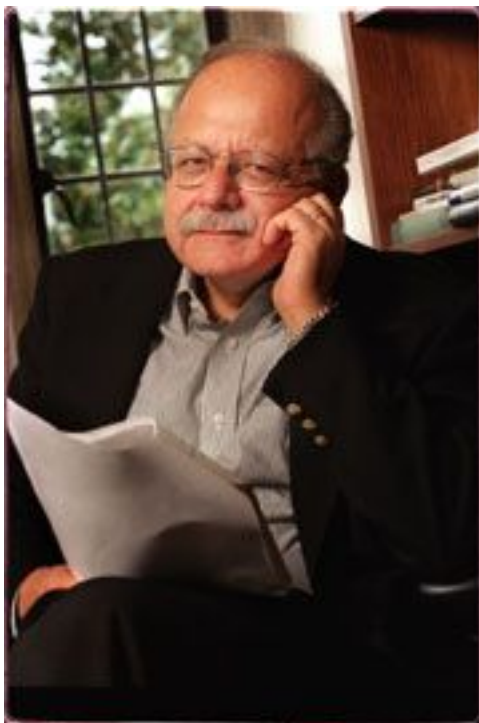
One of Peter's students, [Nathan Jones](#), wrote fondly of his class experience. "When Peter Euben recently died, Duke lost one of its finest professors. When I took the first incarnation of his now-well-known 'Living an Ethical Life' class during spring semester 2007, I expected conflict. The idea for the class was almost absurd: put a bunch of bright Duke kids from vastly different backgrounds holding vastly different convictions into a room together and make them read everything from Socrates to Nietzsche to the Book of Job.

Then pull the pin out of the grenade and toss it into the center of the room with a question like 'What does goodness look like in a world without God?'"

Euben wrote and co-authored many books including [The Tragedy of Political Theory](#), [Athenian Political Thought](#), [Debating Moral Education](#), and [Corrupting the Youth](#).

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NEW FACULTY 2002



Peter Euban, Photo by Jim Wallace

J. Peter Euban Named Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics

From today.duke.com

By Wendy Hower

October 25, 2002 | DURHAM, NC -- At the University of California Santa Cruz, [J. Peter Euban](#) taught the most popular class on campus, "Political Freedom," routinely packing 650 students into a 500-seat auditorium.

He won four teaching awards. He wrote three books, edited two and had several more on the way. His vitae was six pages long.

At 63, Euban could have retired with pride after a distinguished 34-year career. Instead he chose to start anew at Duke last spring as research professor of political science.

"I wanted to prove myself again," he says.

Luring him was a new post -- the Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics - and a group of lively, brilliant colleagues, including his longtime friend, President Nan Keohane.

Just as important, Euban knew his classes would be small enough to know his students better. In a more intimate setting, he would be able to listen to them and make sure they defended themselves well. By learning more from his students, he'd become an even better teacher.

"There's a difference between being a circus performer in front of 650 people," he says, "and being a teacher."

Not that Euben reinvented himself on the East Coast. He brought with him "Political Freedom" and its unconventional syllabus that mixes novels and plays with ancient Greek texts. Almost as soon as he unpacked his dog-eared, heavily lined and highlighted copies of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Plato's *Republic* at his Perkins office last spring, Euben was generating a bit of a buzz on campus.

"I heard about him from everybody," says Laura Grattan, a first-year graduate student in political science.

When it comes to teaching, Euben has a style and purpose that sets him apart. The way he lobs questions at students, it's tempting to cast him as a modern-day Socrates. He has made a name for himself by applying classical Greek philosophy and culture to today's politics.

With his white temples and mustache, he looks the part of wise sage. But the comparison is shallow: Anyone who takes notes during one of his "Political Freedom" lectures or even meets him for coffee realizes Euben is committed to open-ended discussion. He asks questions -- not to manipulate or push his own views, but to provoke critical thinking, deeper discussions, more difficult arguments.

"I don't think he knows exactly what the answer is to those questions," says Jason Frank, who took Euben's "Political Freedom" course at Santa Cruz and followed him here as a post-doctorate student and visiting assistant professor of political science.

Euben asks the questions to make a person think. Part father figure, part storyteller, part philosopher, Euben pursues serious, and sometimes uncomfortable, discussions with compassion and a touch of humility. The combination of warm, friendly voice and New York accent give him the air of a character actor. And he's funny, injecting humor into the gravest of topics.

At a recent meeting of his graduate seminar "Death and Mourning," Euben shows up early in a dark suit with a blue striped button-down shirt, no tie. He makes himself comfortable with a little AirBack pillow, pours diet root beer into a glass of ice and gets out his yellowed copy of Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*.

Right away, he's challenging the four graduate students around the conference table. He has a bad cold, he tells them.

"Given my state of mind, you'll have to bear most of the burden today," he tells them. "If you came here to have an easy, relaxing time, forget it. It's not going to happen."

It's true. Right away, he stumps them when he asks how it is that truth is unattainable. His eyes are bright, eyebrows up, and he's leaning forward expectantly on his elbows. "How does that change your life?"

Ninety minutes pass quickly as Euben pushes the conversation, peeling back layers of the novel. More than a few times, the students answer with silence.

"Nobody else has anything else to say?" he asks them at one point. "None of you are going to pick up on this?"

Gradually, the students catch up to their teacher. By the end of class, they are sparring with him over "presentism" and the erasure of history for the sake of entertainment. Euben isn't buying their argument. He dissolves into giggles, shoulders heaving, hands over his face.

"I don't know if I should be crying," he gasps.

But Euben has been writing down notes on the students' comments the whole time. He made a point of describing as "excellent" a paper written by one of the students, which influenced part of the afternoon's discussion. As always, he strives for back-and-forth learning with his students.

"I can assure you that every one of my lectures has been shaped by the questions you have asked in class ...," Euben wrote in the essay, "Final Lecture: Political Freedom." "So if this course has mattered to you, you deserve as much of the credit as I do, though I have no intention of sharing my salary with you."

Euben learned the art of debate from his political parents at the dining room table while growing up in New York City. Some of his parents' friends were arrested during the McCarthy era.

His education at Swarthmore College, an inclusive Quaker school in Pennsylvania, further shaped his political mind. He took part in Civil Rights sit-ins at Woolworth counters during the years he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy and political science.

Euben went on to the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied China and earned a master's in political science.

The free speech movement at Berkeley in the '60s also proved a strong influence on Euben, who joined in anti-war demonstrations.

At Berkeley, he discovered two "unbelievable" professors in political theory who taught him to look to democracy's early roots and led him to earn a doctorate in political science. "These seemingly archaic texts could give you a radical perspective on the present."

In 1968, Euben was attracted to the Santa Cruz campus, where professors worked across disciplines, held smaller classes and gave narrative reviews instead of letter grades. One of his first classes was a senior exit seminar, "Political Responsibility," which he co-taught with a mathematician and a philosopher.

"He hit the ground running as a superlative teacher," says Ann Lane, who took that first class of Euben's and went on to become his good friend and a lecturer at Santa Cruz.

During the anti-war demonstrations, Euben brought students into town residents' homes to talk through the issues. The phrase most associated with Euben was, "So? So what?" Lane says. "There's no such thing as a right line in his class."

Euben developed "Political Freedom" in the early '80s, which eventually grew into a university-wide conversation, Frank says. "It would spill over into other people's classrooms," he says, and late-night dorm room discussions.

At the notion of popularity, Euben almost winces. Near-guru status at Santa Cruz was seductive. He says he began to worry about his own complacency.

"There are people who are brilliant and I ain't one of them," he says. "I just work very hard."

Of course he misses his one-man "Political Freedom" show, although he will teach an introductory version this spring with an expected enrollment of 150 students. So far, Euben feels challenged and intrigued by his new post.

"If I came here to be pushed out of a sense of complacency and comfort," he says, "it's happening."