

Friedrich Paul Cilliers: Philosopher (1956–2011)

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How to cite this article:

 Hofmeyr J-H. Friedrich Paul Cilliers: Philosopher (1956–2011). *S Afr J Sci.* 2012;108(3/4), Art. #1148, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i3/4.1148>

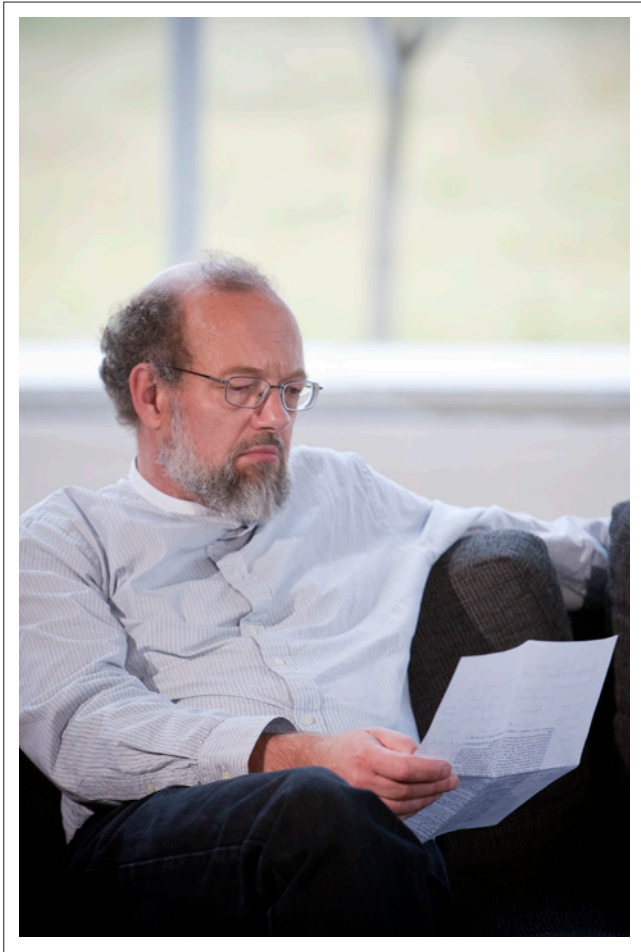
On 31 July 2011 South Africa lost one of its foremost intellectuals in Paul Cilliers, Professor of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University, who died unexpectedly at the age of 54 from a massive brain haemorrhage. He and his wife Sandra had just bought and furnished a weekend retreat in Moullie Point in Cape Town and it was the first weekend where Paul had felt that everything was arranged to his satisfaction. Sadly he had only a day to enjoy it. In retrospect he had been living on borrowed time. Eleven years ago, on the morning of the new millennium and after a memorable old year's eve party at his house, he suffered an aneurism which very nearly claimed his life, but from which he miraculously recovered. In the 10 ensuing years he produced a body of work that catapulted him to star status in the world of complexity studies. I was fortunate to be able to enjoy his successes with him: for 30 years he was my best friend and travelling companion in the world of ideas. Writing this obituary has been one of the saddest tasks I have ever undertaken. But I hope to convey something of the intellectual excitement of our relationship over the best part of three decades, which culminated in our realising a shared dream of creating, in 2009, a Centre for Studies in Complexity – a formal structure across faculty boundaries where the Natural Sciences and the Humanities meet and merge.

Paul Cilliers was born in Vereeniging on 25 December 1956, the eldest son of Willie and Annemarie Cilliers. His upbringing was steeped in a home atmosphere of intellectual enquiry and debate. His father, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of Africa with a congregation in Katlehong, was a fierce critic of the apartheid system. Much of Paul's sense of justice, his feel for ethics, and his social awareness and sensitivity can be traced back to his remarkable parents. He completed his schooling at the Hoërskool Vryburger in Germiston, a city that honoured him in 1989 for his scholastic achievements through a Citizen's Merit Award.

Paul started his professional life as an electronic engineer after obtaining his BEng from Stellenbosch University in 1980. He did his 2 years of compulsory national service as a senior research engineer in the South African Navy and then took up employment in this capacity at the Institute for Maritime Technology in Simon's Town, where he stayed until 1993. It was here that his interest in complex systems was awakened through his research on pattern recognition, neural networks and artificial intelligence. But it was the philosophical rather than the technical aspects of his research that interested him: he wanted to explore the implications of acknowledging the complexity of the world in which we live. While working, he obtained a BA through the University of South Africa, which allowed him in 1987 to enrol for the honours course in political philosophy at Stellenbosch University. He followed this with an MA in philosophy in 1989 on the topic 'Brain, mind and language: A poststructural neuropsychology' and a DPhil in 1994 on 'Modelling complexity'. His promoter was Johan Degenaar, the renowned Stellenbosch philosopher, and his external examiner was the equally renowned Mary Hesse, now emeritus professor in philosophy of science at Cambridge University. In 1994 he was appointed as a lecturer in philosophy at Stellenbosch University, quickly rising through the ranks to full professor in 2003. He was an inspiring lecturer and taught a wide range of subjects: complexity theory, ethics, deconstruction and cultural philosophy.

From his doctoral dissertation came a book entitled *Complexity and postmodernism: Understanding complex systems*, published in 1998 by Routledge. It was this work that rapidly established him as a major player in the community of complexity theorists. I had the joy of following Paul's postgraduate research and his writing of the book from its inception. The number and breadth of ideas I had bounced off me was astonishing. I had been working my way into biological complexity from the bottom up, from molecules and metabolism to the complex organisation of the cell, and here I was confronted by complexity on the level of man, mind and morality. Paul tackled the big and difficult issues, such as what distinguishes a complex system from a merely complicated system; whether one can model complexity and the ethical implications of acknowledging complexity. He started from scratch, carefully teasing out the properties of complex systems. At that stage he found the connectionist model a suitable starting point,

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Paul Cilliers in contemplative mood (photo: Bernard Bravenboer).

weaving it together with the language theory of Ferdinand Saussure and its poststructuralist incarnation developed by Jacques Derrida, and Sigmund Freud's model of the brain. He was extremely critical of computational and representational theories of the mind. In Paul's subsequent publications he analysed particular aspects of complex systems, such as limits, constraints, boundaries and hierarchies. Recently his main interest was what he called 'critical complexity', which led him to the ethical aspects of acknowledging complexity, using Edgar Morin's notion of general complexity as the point of departure. As important as exploring the notion of complexity was for Paul, so important for him was the application of his insights in other spheres. He collaborated across a wide spectrum of disciplines, for example, law, medicine, natural resource management and even safety.

Paul received a number of prestigious awards, starting in 1999 with the Stellenbosch Rector's Award for Excellence in Research. Following that was the Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship Award and Gold Medal in 2006 – Paul was the first recipient from the Humanities. This award allowed him to spend a year as a visiting research professor in Utrecht during 2008, where he started a collaboration with the Dutch

philosopher Harry Kunneman. He was recently appointed in a similar capacity in the Graduate School of the University of Humanistics in Utrecht. Previously, he had held visiting professorships at the Institute for the Study of Coherence and Emergence in Boston, USA, and at the *Institut für Philosophie*, Philipps University of Marburg, Germany. He was also elected a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa in 2003, and in 2010 a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa to be inducted at the society's annual dinner in September 2011; it was my sad duty to read his citation.

On his return from Utrecht, Paul joined the fellowship and programme committee of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS). He was already the leader of a STIAS project on complexity – a project which to date has produced two edited books. I had been part of this committee since its inception in 2005, and was therefore privy to the immense contribution that he made to the development of the STIAS fellows programme. In his tribute to Paul, STIAS director Hendrik Geyer aptly described him as a one-man multidisciplinary team. During the last 3 years, our Centre for Studies in Complexity has been temporarily housed in the STIAS's Wallenberg research centre, and Paul became a central and respected figure in the wide-ranging lunchtime conversations amongst fellows; he was always able to shed new light on the topic under discussion.

Such was Paul Cilliers the academic. So much more can be said about Paul the family man, devoted husband to Sandra and father to Ilana and Cornel. Not to mention Paul the food and wine lover and accomplished cook – an epicurean in the classic sense, the musician and music lover with a CD collection second to none, the columnist, the voracious reader, the insightful book reviewer who determined for many their reading list for years to come, the film buff and analyst, and, above all, Paul the caring friend to many. Paul lived life to the full and in so doing enriched the lives of countless others. In his inaugural lecture he argued that a modest position is not a weak position, and that quality is possible only from a platform of modesty; his life was a testament to this principle. The idea of 'slowness' became an important mantra for Paul: he wrote a widely cited paper on this topic. One of the popular newspaper columns he wrote for *Die Burger* was a letter to John Stuart Mill in which he described how he made the eating of an egg a quality event. He of course did not want to be prescriptive about how to eat eggs, but rather wanted to urge one to make every act in one's daily life a quality act. This wish was fulfilled: if there is one thing I learned from him it was this principle, and so many others have expressed the same sentiment. Now Paul is gone and he leaves behind an empty space which seems impossible to fill. But, he also leaves behind a host of inspired friends, students and young colleagues who will carry forward and develop his legacy.