Dianne Otto

A Woman of Great Integrity, Fierce Passion, and Abundant Hope

Tamsin Paige

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Many have written about the exquisite brilliance of Dianne Otto and her work. In the opening of Melbourne Journal of International Law's collection of writings to honour Otto, Hilary Charlesworth declared that

> *"Di's scholarly style include[s] a mastery of the technical details of law, a deep appreciation of the power of legal theory and a keen attention to the political consequences of a particular legal stance. Her arguments, although grounded in social justice, are always based on a close reading of legal texts and she never follows the easy route of simply asserting the virtue of her position."*



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There is no question that these characterisations of Otto by Charlesworth accurately capture what a compelling scholar and wonderful person Otto is; however, Charlesworth speaks these words as a friend, contemporary, and former supervisor. My experience of Otto, while no less brilliant, is of someone who was already a giant in international law, particularly in areas of feminist and queer theory, when I commenced my graduate studies. For me, Otto was a larger-than-life figure when I met her during my doctoral studies. I am privileged and honoured to call her a mentor and friend. It is through this experience of getting to know an intellectual juggernaut that I write this portrait.

Finding Feminism

Otto grew up in suburban Adelaide, Australia, with her two brothers and sister. By her own account, it was a highly gendered environment where she was expected to assist with housework, and her brothers were expected to assist in their father's timber mill – a gendered dynamic that chafed on her. As such, she found great relief in discovering feminism and getting involved in the women's liberation movement during her studies at the University of Adelaide in 1971-1973. It was during this time that she began her work in community development and activism, including setting up the first women's refuge for women and children fleeing domestic violence in Adelaide.

From Feminism to Law

Otto was already an active feminist when she began her legal studies in 1990 at the age of 38 out of a growing sense of frustration with the Australian government's lack of response to social justice issues. To her, the law "seems to be the problem", and her mantra in

approaching all of this was that "class, race, and gender are the three, for me at the time, significant pivots of discrimination." The journey to law was driven by a desire to equip herself with better tools for her social justice advocacy and activism. In this journey, she found resonance in international law subjects where the veneer of neutrality and objectivity was stripped away in the study of the subject matter. It was also there she discovered the capacity for NGOs to be involved in the shaping of the law – her experience of community development work was that the neoliberal governmental institutions would tie funding to community groups to the implementation and delivery of government policy, rather than allowing them the independence to work towards social justice goals.

Becoming an Academic

After her legal studies Otto briefly worked for Amnesty International Australia but found that she was not utilising her newfound legal knowledge, so she applied for a position at Melbourne Law School and joined the Academy in 1994. From there she completed her LLM and JSD at Columbia Law School in New York while juggling her teaching and research commitments. Throughout her career, she blended activism with scholarship with little distinction between the two – even stating that: "Activism is a form of critique, and critique — even academic critique — is a form of activism."

Her work has made her a foundational figure in feminist approaches to international law, particularly on questions of security and human rights. She also pioneered queer approaches to international law through her involvement on the foundational 2007 ASIL panel and by editing the groundbreaking 2017 Queering International Law book. Her achievements in the field of international law include holding the Francine V McNiff Chair in Human Rights Law at Melbourne Law School (2013-2016) and serving as the Director of the Institute for International Law and the Humanities (2011-2015). She was also among the Australian Human Rights advocates honoured in Ai Weiwei's exhibition "the LETGO room".

She was a member of the Expert Panel at the Asia-Pacific Regional Women's Hearing on Gender-Based Violence in Conflict held in Phnom Penh in 2012 and a member of the Judicial Council of the Women's Court: Feminist Justice held in Sarajevo in 2015. In 2020 she prepared an amicus brief for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in the case of Rosanna Flamer-Caldera v Sri Lanka (2022). Throughout her career, she also held visiting positions at Columbia University, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, the London School of Economics, New York University, the University of Oslo and the University of British Columbia. In 2004, she was the Kate Stoneman Endowed Visiting Professor in Law and Democracy at Albany Law School in New York. Further, she taught in the Oxford-George Washington University International Human Rights Law Summer School Programme at Oxford University in July 2012. While still a Professorial Fellow at Melbourne Law School, she finally retired from the Academy in 2016 so she could spend more time with her partner Joan Nestle, their garden, and their dog Cello.



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A Mentor to a Community

Beyond being an erudite scholar who has shaped international law, feminist theory, and queer theory, to my mind Otto's exceptional professional achievements pale when compared with the example she has set for junior scholars through the ideals and values she has lived. She has modelled an academic life for every international law scholar working in feminist and queer spaces that is underpinned by joy, hope, and kindness. She has shown all of us that rigour in scholarship and determination in activism for a better world do not require a sacrifice of any of these traits – indeed, scholastic rigour and determined activism are rather strengthened by joy, hope, and kindness. She regularly opened her home to junior scholars as a way of building community and supporting those coming after her. Her editing and feedback on the work of others is always rigorous (and not always gentle), but always done in a manner that builds the scholar up and makes the work better – too often a rarity in academic circles. She celebrates the successes and commiserates in the setbacks of those around her. More importantly, every event she takes part in, she uses as an opportunity to get to know and champion the work of junior scholars and to celebrate them. Spending time with Otto always feels like you are the most important thing in her world in that moment. She has also modelled how communities of scholarship help to generate and sustain these traits. Indeed, there is not an international law scholar who has met Otto who has anything negative to say about her, and all of those working in feminist and queer approaches to international law who have had the privilege of engaging with her deeply speak of her with respect and awe that is underpinned by love.

The enduring lessons that Di has imparted to me and all of those that she has taught and mentored: you "can't ever think that the struggle is finished", but you need to "always be true to yourself". Indeed, she has highlighted how understanding your own motivations is so often an important catalyst for good activism and scholarship. She stated this most plainly in a recent interview:

> *"[I]f you can figure it out [why you are studying the law, or that particular facet of the law], that will be really helpful for you in being able to then start bringing your experience and your commitments to equality, inclusivity, anti-hierarchy, those ethics into your actual work."*

There is no doubt that Professor Dianne Otto is a giant of legal scholarship, a foundational figure in feminist international law, and a pioneering scholar of queer theory in international law. But more important than all of these achievements is that she is a woman of great integrity, fierce passion, and abundant hope and joy who has been an inspiration and role model to so many scholars who have come after her. I consider myself extremely lucky to be one of those scholars.

Further Reading

- Queering International Law
- 'A Collection of Writings in Honour of Dianne Otto' Melbourne Journal of International Law

- ‘Feminist Careers in International Law’ Called to the Bar: International Law Over Drinks (Episode 64)
- ‘Rethinking ‘Peace’ in International Law and Politics From a Queer Feminist Perspective’ Feminist Review
- ‘The exile of inclusion: reflections on gender issues in international law over the last decade’ Melbourne Journal of International Law
- ‘Chatting with Dianne Otto’
- ‘Queering Gender [Identity] in International Law’ Nordic Journal of Human Rights
- ‘Power and Danger: Feminist Engagement with International Law through the UN Security Council’ Australian Feminist Law Journal

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