

Ellen Turkish Comisso

On July 4, 2013, the UC San Diego Department of Political Science lost a valued, dear colleague—Ellen Turkish Comisso. A pioneer in the study of East European political economy, a member of the generation of political scientists whose careers opened new paths toward gender equity, and a beloved mentor of young scholars, Ellen will be missed by many.

Ellen joined UCSD's Department of Political Science in 1977 when the department was just three years old. She had defended her Ph.D. in political science at Yale University that year and completed a short stay as an instructor at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle. With her new colleagues in La Jolla, including Sandy Lakoff, Martin Shapiro, Sam Kernell, Sam Popkin, Peter Cowhey, David Laitin, and Susan Shirk, Ellen helped create the spirited intellectual life and constructive rough-and-tumble that defined the department for years to come. With her "tough-as-nails intellect, the Brooklyn accent that you could cut with a knife, and the underlying goodness and kindness," as Associate Dean of Graduate Studies Steven Cassedy describes her, Ellen helped make this a department that many of us wanted to join. Former Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Paul Drake summarizes Ellen's contribution well: She was "part of the founding spirit and soul of our department."

Ellen's research, along with that of other scholars of her cohort such as Valerie Bunce (Cornell University) and Laura D'Andrea Tyson (Berkeley, and later the Council of Economic Advisers), opened the field of East European studies within the social sciences. At a time when Eastern Europe was treated as simply an extension of the study of the Soviet Union, these young scholars sought to understand these Communist countries and their adaptations of the socialist model. They also sought to bring area studies within the mainstream of comparative politics. As Peter Gourevitch describes the direction of her research, Ellen was "a comparativist, someone who thought that Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were part of the study of politics on a comparative basis, that capitalism, markets, and planning should be analyzed comparatively." Ellen's first major project explored a very different socialist economic model developed in Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito and the specific undertaking of "worker's self-management" within factories. In *Workers' Control Under Plan and Market* (Yale University Press, 1979), Ellen took a close and critical look at the possibilities and problems in a real socialist economic experiment. Her subsequent research published in prominent journals, such as *International Organization*, *World Politics*, and *Slavic Review*, as well as numerous edited volumes built on this early work on the political economy of a socialist state to include studies of Hungary's new economic mechanism and market socialism, democratization and liberalization in post-socialist Eastern Europe,

and the politics of nationalism and multinational states. A significant statement of her comparative study of socialism came in *Power, Purpose, and Collective Choice: Economic Strategy in Socialist States* (Cornell University Press, 1986), which Ellen co-edited with Laura Tyson. Ellen's book, edited volume, and articles, to use Gourevitch's words, highlight "that capitalism, markets, and planning should be analyzed comparatively, that the authority of the political system interacts with authority in the economic sphere, that control in factories is related to the issue of control of the political system."

As a young woman in a male-dominated discipline and sub-field, Ellen established her right to sit at the table by being, in the words of Val Bunce, "an interesting, intense and pushy broad! There weren't many women in the academy at that time, and she was a grand pioneer." Ellen was willing to take on the many responsibilities of professional life, serving as a member of boards of editors and trustees for *International Organization*, *Slavic Review*, the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, the Council on European Studies, and many more. She was also willing to take on time-consuming and less flashy tasks, such as reviewing piles of applicants for federal grants to study in Eastern Europe, year in and year out.

As a mentor and colleague Ellen earned deep devotion. Described as "a wonderful person and a force to be reckoned with," Ellen, in the words of her student Matt Murphy, was "dedicated to her students above and beyond the call of duty." Another student, Brad Gutierrez, adds, "Ellen was a treasure to those of us who knew her, studied under her guidance, and were fortunate enough to call her a friend." As colleagues, to use Steve Erie's words, we will miss Ellen for her "gusto for life" and "ferocious intellectual curiosity combined with a quick and easy laugh and the sense of the absurd." Clark Gibson relates that "Ellen was one of the first people I met in the department. On the first night of my visit she took me—driving like a madwoman—to La Jolla for a drink. She was simultaneously overwhelming and welcoming. It was a terrific introduction to the department. . . ." She was a "warm and caring colleague, and full of passion for life," as Langche Zeng describes the experience of so many of us. As her former student, Chris Nevitt, summarizes for all of us, "Ellen was such a great, passionate, funny, irrepressible character. It's hard to imagine her gone."

—The Members of the UC San Diego Department of Political Science

The Department of Political Science will host a public celebration of Ellen's life early in the fall quarter. An announcement and invitation to the public will appear in mid-September.