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INVITED ESSAY

Everett Mendelsohn: The Harvard Professor

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"What happened to Harvard?" a journalist from *The Washington Post* asked in a feature article about the University published in the fall of 1973. Proper young Harvard men in tweeds wining and dining on white cloth tables were replaced by students in blue jeans lunching in dining halls with "as much ambiance as a suburban McDonald's" (Isaacs 1973). The famous University had gone through a period of radical change, and Everett Mendelsohn was in the midst of it. He came to embody and promote a new academic ideal for his generation. How did he shape his Harvard professorship in the process?

When Mendelsohn arrived at Harvard in the summer of 1953 it was still a place of tweed jackets, wine-tasting, and polite teas. With him coming out of Brooklyn, that was probably not to his liking. He would later describe his student years at the University as being in an academic culture that produced "a sense of hubris, a kind of false pride, a sense of enormous importance without looking out at what was happening in the society. […] New knowledge was being sought, found and used without any feedback by the society which was going to be using it" (Isaacs 1973). This is an apt description of an institution living its own life detached from the world around it, and to some degree, it also describes his own PhD and book from the period. *Heat and Life: The Development of the Theory of Animal Heat* (Mendelsohn 1964) is a fascinating read, though it would be an overstatement to say it was an answer to a larger societal need. If nothing else, it landed him a professorship in the history of science.

Then came the counterculture of the late 1960s, and Mendelsohn became one of its advocates in his questioning of the role of science in society. "For so long we've been selling science for what it could do for people, and it just has not done that much," he told a journalist. "The fulfillment comes out stillborn" (Reinhold 1970b). This was surely a radical break with the idea that scientific progress in itself was serving the nation and the world. His questioning of scientific progress was part of

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a general trend among progressive radicals. Harvard University "found itself as part of an establishment that was no longer trusted," Mendelsohn argued, and he consequently set himself the goal of trying to refashion his institution so that it could regain the trust of society (Isaacs 1973). After all, if he could change the culture at Harvard, many other universities would follow suit. This he pursued as Chair of the Department of History of Science in advising students and colleagues, and also in his course "The Social Context of Science" which, over the years evolved into his hugely popular core course, "Science and Society."

The rise and popularity of the history of science were closely linked with the questioning of scientific progress. He was chairing a Department in which scholars could critically discuss the military-industrial complex and scientific support of the Vietnam War, the role of physics in developing atomic weaponry, and the general lack of social responsibility among scientists with respect to environmental impact. At least this is how the *New York Times* wrote about the field in 1970, with the history of science described as beyond popular, with professors teaching "some of the most sought after courses of study in American universities." Indeed, it was a time in which "any senior historian of science could have gone almost anywhere he wanted with a 50% increase in pay," according to Thomas Kuhn (Reinhold 1970a). His famous book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1962) was by then a best seller among young radicals, as it evoked the possibility of not only a scientific but also a social "paradigm shift."

Mendelsohn was in the midst of all the excitement for the history of science, taking the lead in founding the *Journal of the History of Biology* in 1968. "[T]he simple narrative is no longer acceptable," he wrote in his first editorial, and he promised "new sophistication to the writing of history" of biology that included both the working biologist and the professional historian (Mendelsohn 1968). Up to this point, histories of biology had mostly been written by scientists laying out the historical facts in an orderly manner that would explain discoveries and breakthroughs. Mendelsohn wanted something more, namely histories of biology that would be willing to contextualize discoveries, question scientific authority, and boldly ask if science always led to social progress.

All this reflected a larger questioning of the advancement of science, including within the powerful American Association for the Advancement of Science. Here Mendelsohn took the lead as Vice President, organizing an anti-Vietnam campaign which led to a petition signed by 270 of its members. "The feeling is high among American scientists about the bombing" in Vietnam, he told a journalist in 1972, pointing to the "horror, terror and outrage over the continued bombing" (Anonymous 1972). As an important voice in the anti-war movement, he not only questioned the role of science in society but also took an active role in mobilizing resistance to the war as an activist scholar (Lyons 1972). In doing so, he came to refashion the ideals of the Harvard professor. Instead of the disengaged ivory-tower academic, Mendelsohn came to embody the new ideal of how a scholar should risk engaging with the society in which we live.

For all the questioning of the elitism at Harvard, it is worth noting that the University would remain an elite institution. The humdrum dining in a McDonald's ambiance was all about breaking down old hierarchies of power, though in effect it

would only conceal new ones. A journalist visiting noted that the new counterculture elite was thriving on the dustbin of old hierarchies, resulting in an academic culture among the revolutionaries that led to horror stories of despair, alienation, cynicism, unwanted sex, pseudo-radicalism, cancel culture, and a general lord-of-the-flies ethos on campus (Isaacs 1973). Not to enthusiastically follow the dominant radical anti-war trend came at an expense.

Mendelsohn maneuvered the new counterculture power structure with integrity, at least if one is to judge how he handled proponents of the Young Americans for Freedom. When they appeared at Harvard to make their case in favor of the South Vietnamese government and the war effort, they were met with large demonstrations demanding that they should not be allowed to speak. Mendelsohn disagreed. “The University has a deep commitment and real-self interest in preserving freedom of expression,” he told the press. “And to preserve that freedom, I am willing to listen to an apologist for an immoral war” (Anonymous 1971). His readiness to listen to the views of those he disagreed with was the exception rather than the rule in a period marked by a cancel culture on both sides of the Cold War divide. It was an approach to conflicts that he later took with him in his various attempts to facilitate communication, and perhaps even peace, between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East (Mendelsohn 1977).

It was also his pedagogical approach to students. In his office and classroom he welcomed (or also endured) opinions opposite his own. He did his very best trying to create a safe space, and his warm, humorous, calm, and inclusive mood of teaching and advising became, in the process, a pedagogical model for many of his students. In the end, he could point out that it is not the dissertation committee or your grades that would matter, but how your work would be received in the society in which you live. In the future “PhD candidates will be required to go to the marketplace and explain their dissertations to the first 10 people they meet,” he teasingly told a journalist (McBride 1978). For those of us who had him as an adviser, this was no joke as he encouraged me to do exactly that. And I did. I remember getting mixed responses to my take on the history of ecological debates from a bartender, a book dealer, and a shoe seller, among others, and that, of course, was the point of the exercise. The lesson I learned was to try to be of relevance to people outside academia.

For all his focus on society outside Harvard, Mendelsohn was also an insider. And as years went by, he gradually came to embody a set of key values within the institution. He became a standard bearer for the liberal, politically left-leaning, inclusive Professor caring for the world around him. This was a new ideal for an institution previously known for a socially detached elitism that pursued knowledge for its own sake, or also the values of the upper class. The new academic ideal would not go unnoticed, as in the case of how Mendelsohn was portrayed in the conservative-leaning *Wall Street Journal* in 1976. The full headline on its front page read: “The Good Life | A Harvard Professor Can Teach, Research, and Travel the Globe | Everett Mendelsohn Mixes Lecturing and Consulting with Cocktail Parties | Role in ‘Upper Bohemia.’” Readers would then learn about how he was “clinking glasses with graduate students at a sherry party,” living the “whirlwind life” of “an international jet-setter,” and that he “relishes his sabbaticals” and the “conference circuit” while otherwise enjoying the “sweet life” among Harvard “egg-heads” (Gallese 1976).

In trying to change the academic culture at Harvard, Mendelsohn would take a hit for the team in this rather nasty article labeling him as an example of the very culture he had tried so hard to change. At the same time, it is true that living the life of a Harvard professor entailed a whole lot of privilege. While he tried to change Harvard, Harvard also changed him. Nobody is immune from the culture in which we live, not even Mendelsohn -- who spent his life telling his students how the context of a society would frame the production of knowledge.

Fast forward to the first time I met Professor Mendelsohn, who immediately insisted on me calling him Everett. It was in faraway Norway at the University of Oslo in 1993 where he gave a guest lecture. The fact that he – the famous Professor from otherworldly HARVARD – took an interest in hearing me out, was to me evidence of exactly those values he tried to profess, namely that of being attentive, caring, tolerant, non-elitist, and open-minded. And he would never let my indeterminate English and dyslexic spelling become an obstacle after he invited me to join the ranks of historians of science, first as a student and advisee, and subsequently as a lecturer and colleague.

The truth is that I only have good memories of Everett, and there are many. Smiles, laughter, humdrum pizzas, fancy dinners, an occasional drink, and lots and lots of thoughtful conversations about private as well as scholarly matters. Let me share one of those memories. I had just submitted my first paper at the end of my first semester, and I became rather nervous when he called me into his office to discuss it. Was I about to fail?! I had written a long, rather dry, and arguably dull summary of the scientific achievements of a famous scientist in which I laid out the historical facts in an orderly manner. Everett began our meeting by praising my “brilliant” essay (it was clearly not), after which he made some very general remarks about the importance of contextualizing research using, for example, old newspaper articles to better understand the social impact of a scholar. It was a generous and friendly hint, so typical of Everett, as his method of advising was rarely, if ever, confrontational. This memory has been at the back of my mind while researching and writing this piece about him.

Another memory is that of seeing my PhD thesis at the top shelf of Everett’s office. In terms of space, it only took three inches of about fifteen feet of PhDs he had advised. Let that sink in. In his forty-seven years of service the total number of students he taught or advised may have been as many as ten thousand, as the “Science and Society” core course took place in Harvard’s largest auditorium. These are just rough numbers, of course, suggesting that he might just have been one of the most important educators in the field of history of science. It’s thus comforting to know that Harvard has established the annual “Everett Mendelsohn Excellence in Mentoring Award” to honor his legacy. His true impact, however, lies in the academic culture he sought to establish in his lifelong calling to redefine the Harvard Professor.

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