

INTRODUCTION

“All new developments in the history of knowledge have been due to those scientists who did more in their social roles than their critics wanted and expected them to do”.¹ So Florian Znaniecki concluded his landmark contribution to the sociology of knowledge. Alongside the technologist and the sage, the scholar who systematizes knowledge and the scholar who fights for truth, we see from time to time emerge those whom we call “explorers, those who create new knowledge”, and who stand at the apogée of human achievement. Their achievement, however, lies not only in the domain of ideas. They are above all those who see and understand cultural realities, and who “accept as normal in the domain of knowledge ceaseless and unexpected change”.²

Znaniecki’s description fits well the character and life of Everett Mendelsohn, mentor and friend, to whom the following essays are dedicated. For over forty years, Everett Mendelsohn’s career has rested squarely on his service to Harvard as classroom teacher and mentor to thousands of graduate and undergraduate students; to the history of science through his writings and penetrating questions at meetings far and wide, and to the international community through his wide-ranging peace efforts in conjunction with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). During this time, he has seen massive changes in all three areas – indeed, he has been an agent of change, both in his profession, and in the way in which his profession is seen by others.

From fledgling beginnings in Widener Library, in the shadow of George Sarton, the history of science has become an established feature not only at Harvard, but many other universities around the world. Today, over 600 undergraduates at Harvard each year take courses in the History of Science Department, and over 400 take the courses that Mendelsohn offers. His Social Sciences 119 (currently Historical Study A 18), “Science and Society in the Twentieth Century”, is among Harvard’s most popular undergraduate offerings. Few who attend his lectures fail to be impressed by his easy familiarity with complex issues, and his ability to motivate the least motivated. For some, it becomes an experience in learning how to think about professional issues as matters of public interest. For others, it becomes an introduction to a world in

which the factors that have shaped modern science are to be challenged, understood, and made accountable.

Blessed with apparently limitless energy (he once said, that to get things done you have to “stay up late, get up early, and read fast”), Everett has called into existence two generations of scholars devoted to the social studies of science and the history of biology. Today, his roll call of graduate students numbers over fifty. Students gravitate to his recent work on Lewis Mumford, technology, and the challenges of modernism, and to his work in the history of nineteenth century abiogenesis, physiology, and human behavior. Then, there are those who know him best through his work in peace studies. Among very few others in his profession, certainly in the United States, Mendelsohn has shown the way a public intellectual can speak of justice and provide a challenge to traditional power structures.

BEGINNINGS

Everett Mendelsohn was born on 28 October 1931 in Yonkers, New York, the only son and second child of first-generation Jewish immigrants from Romania and Russia. As he recalls,

I was born and grew up during the intense years of the depression, so it was a family which was constrained in terms of resources, but there were members of the family who had independent intellectual interests ... [professionally] they were small business people, a lot of school teachers and people of that sort. I was raised in a family in which my mother was from a highly secular Jewish family – the type of background which valued social justice. My mother as a child was sent off to socialist Sunday school, and I’m sure that framed the background against which I was then to look at the world. We were, however, also in that period [when] Jewish families were haunted by Nazism. My father’s older sisters had remained in Europe, in Romania, and I’m sure that there was continuing discussion in the household as relatives came into the States – and if not our relatives, relatives of friends – so that these were parts of the world that I grew up in, although I was not necessarily conscious of all the implications at the time.*

An enterprising business family in the Bronx, the Mendelsohns educated themselves and their children, and young Everett went – ironically, as he put it, “as far away as I could get on the New York subway” – to the Brooklyn Technical High School, where he enjoyed and excelled in science. After his sister established the precedent of going West – to the University of Wisconsin – he went to Antioch, a good place for a “hyperactive child”, as he describes himself, a place that would ‘let me move around.’ Indeed, the Antioch system – study for twelve weeks, then working at a job for twelve weeks – was perfect for his needs.

Antioch proved a turning point, for it was there that one of his science teachers, Oliver Loud, a Harvard graduate in organic chemistry (and an Ohio

State Ph.D.), brought him to reflect upon history, the history of science and the political issues of the day. Loud was a knowledgeable Marxist, with a strong social conscience:

... [he was] truly a socialist in outlook, and he introduced me to the works of J.D. Bernal and the range of left intellectual commentaries on the sciences. Personally, he was very influential in my life. He was very, very thoughtful, a kind of moderated voice, but very principled, and he introduced me to ways of thinking about science – to the ways of framing questions and ways of pursuing issues – which matched my own general progressive outlook on the world. To a very significant extent, it was his influence that brought me into the history of science, via an interest in science and society. He was a Marxist, no question. He gave me a number of his books, he was the kind of person who read and underlined copiously, and you could, of course, watch the development of his own thought in the books that he read and underlined ... I became interested in those sorts of issues [science and society] under Loud's influence, but my own sense from early on was that a fundamental Marxist interpretation of the nature of society, the role of different elements of that society, its science, its technology, its medicine, its agriculture, this made a lot of sense. I found it a good analytical tool.

However, international affairs soon intervened. Everett came of age during the Korean War, and like so many other progressives, found himself confronting questions driven by the ambiguities of a world at war. It was then that he came into contract with the pacifist movement. His closest counselors had instilled in him a sense, enriched by his early religious beliefs and training, that pacifism was the better path; and in facing the draft, he contemplated registering as a conscientious objector. But pacifism raised problems for Marxism:

Having early on as a college student become a pacifist, I also found some of the doctrinaire attitudes of some Marxists not very useful, they just didn't help, they got you trapped places. You didn't seem to be able to move with the nature of issues that came towards you and wanted everything to fit in neat compartments – at least from where I looked at the world, the world was much too complicated to fit in simple compartments, and perhaps it was the pacifism that I had become involved with and developed that left me much more sensitive to elements of oppression and coercion from all sides. It made my approach to the sciences recognize in part that the old Marxist view that science was a terribly powerful tool for changing society. But I did not want to slip into what was for many the easily anti-scientific attitudes of some critics on the left who had no use at all for organized scientific activity or society.

It was at this point, as Everett recalls, that he chose to adopt a “commitment to spend some proportion of my life ... making the world a better place to live”,

a self-commitment that guided him in his future scholarship and practice. He became involved with the Society of Friends (Quakers), and began what would become a life-long affiliation with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). As an undergraduate, he contemplated a career in the labor movement. However, prospects were not promising:

Organizing within the labor movement – labor education – seemed to be the way to go. One or two of my close friends did it. It turned out not to be a particularly possible choice because it was the beginning of the Cold War and the enactment of the Taft-Hartley Act [anti-labor legislation forbidding the closed shop], which made legal movements very, very sensitive politically.

Eventually, scholarship and family made the larger claims. Everett met Mary Maule Leeds, a deeply-committed Quaker from Philadelphia, who had graduated from Antioch a year before him. Planning to marry, they looked for graduate schools that could offer places to them both. The choice of Harvard was circumstantial, as Everett recalls:

My wife-to-be [a biologist] and I were both looking for places to apply and we had both applied to Cornell – they had a history of science department [headed by Henry Guerlac] – and to Harvard [where the department was headed by I. Bernard Cohen]. The Biology Department at Cornell lost my wife's application, and since we had both been accepted at Harvard, that's where we went.

Everett and Mary entered the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard in the autumn of 1953 – he in the History of Science and she in Biology. They were married in 1954.

HARVARD

To the present generation, Harvard in 1953 must seem like a different country. Experiences of wartime mobilization and military service were still close to many of the staff, both who had stayed in Cambridge, and those who had returned from government or military service. The troubled beginnings of the Cold War, followed by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, underlined the central role of the universities in what President Eisenhower, in his Farewell Address to the Nation in 1962, would later call the “military-industrial complex”. Loyalty oaths were stipulated by the National Science Foundation for all new grantees, and in the spring of 1954 Harvard required oaths from all new Faculty appointments. Fear stalked the campus, in Cambridge as elsewhere, as radicals of many persuasions were confronted by the threat of expulsion, or worse.³ That semester, Everett, a newly appointed teaching fellow in biology, and thus at the bottom of the academic ladder, was called in to see

the Dean, McGeorge Bundy. Apparently, his name had appeared on one of the lists circulated by right wing groups. Bundy asked Everett if he was a communist. Everett said that he was not, but that he *was* a socialist. Bundy did not pursue the matter, and later apologized for the incident. In retrospect, Everett was lucky; others were less so.⁴ Certainly, in such matters he enjoyed the warm support of I. Bernard Cohen, who equally supported Mendelsohn's contemporary, Owen Gingerich, who was a member of a strongly pacifist Mennonite family.

Inevitably, in such a small department, Cohen exerted an important influence on the young graduate assistant in biology,⁵ with whom he soon began to collaborate on several scholarly projects as well as in teaching.⁶ In the survey courses, the two divided history between them (Cohen took the 17th and 18th centuries; Everett, the 19th and 20th). Everett took the biological sciences, and Cohen, the physical sciences. In 1957, in his fifth year at Harvard, Everett was elected to the distinguished Society of Fellows. In 1960, he completed his Ph.D. and was appointed an Instructor in the History of Science. He soon began to attract honors and graduate students. Although his research and teaching efforts eventually took him into contemporary issues, the nineteenth century held a special place among his interests. His first love was the history of nineteenth century physiology, which formed the basis of his doctoral dissertation and his first book.⁷

The first year of his formal teaching career, 1960-61, saw another side emerge. That year, he first offered what would become his near-legendary, upper level course, Social Sciences 119, entitled "The Social Context of Science". This course – unprecedented at Harvard, and indeed, in the United States – was listed in the General Education Program, the remarkable creation of James Bryant Conant, who had become Harvard's president in 1933.⁸ Open to all undergraduates, "Soc Sci 119" was an immediate success, and established Everett's reputation as a lecturer. The course also attracted new friends and colleagues, as Everett recounts:

I did have one of those funny experiences the first day I showed up in front of those forty students. There in the first row was David Reisman, whom I had met through some of my anti-war interests; and he announced to me that he had the tradition of always sitting in on the course of some young scholar and would I mind if he sat in on mine. He is very expressive: if you say something he likes, he beams, or [if you say something he doesn't like he] scowls – it was quite an education. What he did after that, he sent me carbons of letters he had sent to other people which in any way referred to one of the topics I had dealt with, with his own little hand-scribbles of what I might find interesting.

By the early 1960s, Harvard, respected for having given sanctuary, if not whole-hearted endorsement, to George Sarton's fledgling program in the history of science a generation earlier, was now ready to support the history of science in more substantial ways. As a discipline, the history of science fitted

Science, History and Social Activism

A Tribute to Everett Mendelsohn

Allen, G.; MacLeod, R.M. (Eds.)

2001, X, 399 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0495-7