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# MEMORIAL

# Fritz Ringer, 1934–2006

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FRITZ Ringer, Emeritus Mellon Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh, died on February 3, 2006, of a chronic pulmonary illness with which he had been struggling for several years. With his death we lost one of our most distinctive and recognizable voices in modern European intellectual history. He leaves us a distinguished body of scholarship that reflects an unusually unified, lifelong, intellectual project as well as an example of active, principled conduct in defense of the ethical ideals of the university. Both will remain challenges to us now and in the future.

Fritz's family emigrated from Germany when he was a teenager, and his down-to-earth, German-accented but thoroughly idiomatic American English perfectly captured his position between the two cultures. He was intended to become a chemist (which perhaps helps to explain his lifelong affinity for the philosophy of science), but he rebelled by pursuing graduate study in history. He thus began his career at Harvard as part of the postwar American and German generation addressing "the German question." His first and still best-known book, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, was a field-defining work centered on a concept—the "mandarins" as the academic elite of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*—that came to be inextricably associated with his name and has proved to be one of the touchstones of modern intellectual history. In it, he provided both a history and a critique of the mandarin tradition. On the one hand, he deftly and patiently argued that most of the mandarins succumbed to an antimodernist rhetoric that was driven by anxieties about their own loss of status; as a result, they failed to defend their tradition's own best values and became complicit in the rise of political barbarism. On the other hand, he also showed us how a creative minority—modernist mandarins such as Tönnies, Simmel, Weber, Mannheim, and Troeltsch—selectively adapted mandarin values to defend modernity even as they generated critical insight into its pathologies.

Fritz's Harvard years were formative in other ways as well. It was at Harvard that he acquired his lifelong commitment to a conception of history as a robustly causal and comparative social science. In fact, the *Mandarins* proved to be more than a contribution to the German question; it became the first stone in an



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ambitious intellectual project that Fritz pursued to the end of his life. When I first met him, a decade later, he sketched an intellectual trajectory that had begun with the *Mandarins*, was leading through a series of studies on the comparative social history of education that he felt were necessary to test that work's assertions about German academic culture, and would culminate with a return to intellectual history, informed by what he was learning about the historical sociology of education. His ultimate goal was to finish his project with three books, one on each of the mandarin sociologists he so admired—Tönnies, Simmel, and Max Weber. In fact, he was a half-generation younger than many fellow historians of the German question, and this shaped his relations with colleagues as well. As an assistant professor at Harvard, Fritz provided a bridge to a younger generation of graduate students whose sympathies lay further to the left, with the student protest movements and the rediscovery of the Frankfurt School. His own political values always remained firmly within the modern tradition of democratic liberalism, but he prized and encouraged debate with those who held heterodox ideas and strong ethical convictions.

Fritz's career, together with his work, took an important turn when he left Harvard first for Indiana (1966) and then Boston University (1970). On the one hand, he began the productive detour through the social history of education that would take two decades to complete. On the other hand, he began to find himself compelled to become publicly involved in the political crises that were shaking American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. He provided an account of his own involvement in these crises in an often surprisingly candid memoir, *Trouble in Academe*. The double meaning of its title was surely intended, for Fritz was perfectly aware that there were those who regarded *him* as the inveterate troublemaker. It was only fitting that the period of his sustained scholarly attention to the social history of education coincided with his intensive, active involvement with the politics of the university. For many outside the field of history, Fritz became known as the public face of the Boston University faculty movement that challenged John Silber's presidency in the 1970s, playing leading roles in Boston University's chapter of the American Association of University Professors and as a negotiator on the faculty's collective bargaining team. He saw Silber's reign at Boston University as an early and particularly egregious case of the rise of a new model of the modern university as a business enterprise, with all the threats to the virtues of the academic vocation which that entailed. Yet Fritz was no defender of faculty prerogatives for their own sake. Though he was deeply committed to the role of the academic intellectual, he harbored no false respect for its trappings and argued that we should be willing to shed them, if necessary, in order to preserve its substance. At Boston, this meant actively pursuing faculty unionization and collective bargaining precisely to make the traditional standards of faculty governance enforceable. In this stance—the selective adaptation of what had

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proven valuable in tradition, and a resolutely unsentimental attitude about status—we can recognize his version of the critical attitude he admired in the modernist mandarins.

It should be said that not everyone found him an easy colleague. With his tall frame, his deep voice, and his penchant for sustained, rigorous argument, he could easily appear larger than life, and even intimidating to some. But this was always counterbalanced by his informality, his generous laughter, and occasional acts of unconventional wit. One graduate student from the 1970s who took doctoral oral exams with him recalls being summoned back to the examination room to learn his fate, only to be met at the door by Fritz leading the assembled committee, glasses of *poire* held high, in a toast of "Welcome to a dying profession!"

Amid the political turmoil of the Boston University years, Fritz maintained an astonishingly high level of scholarly productivity. The products of work he completed or set in motion during this period—*Education and Society in Modern Europe* (1979), a co-authored volume on *The Rise of the Modern Educational System* (1987), and *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective* (1992)—cumulatively established two main conclusions. On the basis of extensive quantitative analysis, they squarely challenged the received wisdom that expanded access to secondary and higher education and had promoted social mobility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and they softened and refined some of the *Mandarins*' strongest assertions about the distinctiveness of German academic culture. He was always somewhat dismayed that these works did not find more resonance in the United States and that their integral role in his larger intellectual project went unrecognized; however, he was compensated by the close and sustaining relationships he developed with scholars in France, Germany, and England during these years. The conclusion of these studies and his move to a Mellon Professorship at the University of Pittsburgh (1984) enabled him to close the long arc of this portion of his project and return his attention to German ideas and reflections on the practice of history.

We can now see that Fritz developed a position on the theory and practice of intellectual history that was not only distinctive but iconoclastic. From *Fields of Knowledge* onward, he reformulated the program underlying the *Mandarins* in terms of a strong concept of the intellectual field, an idea he adapted from Pierre Bourdieu, who was a frequent interlocutor during the 1970s and 1980s. Fritz believed that intellectual history could be studied as rigorously as any other subfield of history, but only if we systematically reconstructed the positions in the symbolic hierarchies of power and authority that structure intellectual fields. This involved extensive empirical research of the sort that few intellectual historians have the patience—or resources—to sustain. At the same time, he always rejected the charge that this approach to the social

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history of knowledge would reduce ideas to their social meanings. On the contrary, he simultaneously held out for the relative autonomy of the texts and arguments he studied. Here, too, he staked out a hermeneutics that is at odds with recent trends in interpretation. He always insisted that our first interpretive move must be to assume hypothetically that texts embody a rationality akin to ours. For him, this was not just a principle of hermeneutics. It was also a moral position required by human respect for our interlocutors, a foundation of human sympathy and effective social action. He was always frankly puzzled by theories that texts are inherently elusive and conflicts of interpretation undecidable. He worried that an intellectual history that abandoned its commitment to the rational reconstruction of arguments, like a history that lost sight of its commitment to causal explanation, would devolve into a fascination with the "merely interesting." (The term was a favorite, and characteristic, provocation).

Then there is the matter of Fritz's special affinity for Max Weber. Ultimately, he saw Weber as having had a penchant for heterodoxy that matched his own and should be an example to us. With his own mortality squarely in view, he abandoned his projected volumes on Tönnies and Simmel. In exchange, he gave us not one, but two books on Weber, *Max Weber's Methodology* (1997) and *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography* (2004). In them, Fritz argued that Weber had defined positions in social theory and historical interpretation that speak powerfully to our time. Weber's portrait of the ethical character of vocations clearly also spoke to Fritz's commitment to the academic calling. Yet above all, he wanted to recover a view of Weber he felt had been obscured in the past several decades of interpretation. This Weber was an assertive, democratically minded liberal, a believer in the productive and ennobling contest between competing value orientations in public life and in scholarship. If he was puzzled by anything in Weber, it was why Weber thought that any of this was incompatible with pleasure and humor. To be sure, Fritz never chose the easy way of doing things, in his scholarship as in his academic politics. He set standards that some found hard to live up to. Words like "challenge" and "force of personality" crop up regularly in remembrances of him. But for all his insistence on the ethical seriousness of these pursuits, there was nothing sanctimonious about him. He was combative, but also deeply humane; capable of moral outrage, but thoughtful and open to argument; demanding, but understanding of human weakness, including his own. We will miss his distinctive voice and vision.

He is survived by his wife Mary, a painter, who lives in Washington, D.C., and his children Max and Monica.

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