

IN MEMORIAM: FRITZ RINGER

Fritz K. Ringer, a member of the *MIH* editorial board, died in February of this year, less than five years after he retired from a Mellon Professorship at the University of Pittsburgh. I was not one of his students, but from my graduate years onward his influence on my own scholarship was profound. In recent years his friendship helped keep me anchored in times of crisis.

At his retirement celebration, known as “the Fritz Bash,” I found myself in the lively company of several generations of graduate students from Harvard University, Indiana University, Boston University, and the University of Pittsburgh. For all of us Fritz had been an immense presence, a rigorous but vigorously supportive and sympathetic mentor. We shared an abiding admiration and affection for him. It was clear that retirement would not change his ways. He loved to thrash his way through thickets of historical cant, to argue his position with uncommon acuity and energy, and to be among friends who could push back and make him laugh at himself.

Fritz’s family emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1949, when he was fifteen. We might think of him as a younger member of the Great Migration of German scholars, but only if we keep in mind how he differed from his elders. He saw it as critical to his formative years in Germany that he had attended a “modern” (i.e. non-classical) secondary school rather than a classical *Gymnasium*. If he resented not having been numbered among the intellectually gifted, he was also proud to have escaped the misty elitism of German humanistic *Kultur*. He did not bring to his country of adoption an ingrained contempt for its democratic sociability. At the same time he was too young to have settled into one of the many ideological trenches scattered across German post-World War I culture. He entered graduate school at Harvard in 1956 with a distanced, critical fascination with the entire spectrum of German thought, quite rare among the older generation of émigrés.

The first product of this fascination was *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (1969), which had begun as a doctoral dissertation. Sweeping in its command of German academic thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Mandarins* was one of those rare first books that begins to reshape the landscape of a historical field. For my generation it opened whole new ways to construct a social history of ideas. I came away from my first reading of the book, as a second-year

graduate student, inspired by the prospect that contexts and the ideas formed in them could be put in a probing dialogue that would do full justice to both. The book was also a fearless performance, particularly for a junior scholar. Fritz's subject was the antimodernism that pervaded the professoriate of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany as it was faced with, among other things, mass culture and democratic politics. He did not shrink from spelling out affinities with Nazi ideology. Predictably, the heirs to this tradition in the professorial ranks of the Federal Republic were slow to confront his challenge.

Fritz's next book—*Education and Society in Modern Europe* (1979)—used statistical analysis to compare social access to secondary and university education in Germany, France, and England. It was a systematic and painstaking labor, with invaluable results. Some of us, perhaps a little intimidated, worried that we had lost one of our finest intellectual historians to number-crunching. But Fritz was simply circling back. Over the next quarter century he produced three books, each in its way remarkable. In *Fields of Knowledge* (1992) Fritz trained his skepticism once again on *Bildung* and *Kultur*, the hoary idols of the German academic elite, but this time he used them as a comparative referent for a no less skeptical examination of the educational orthodoxies of the French Third Republic. The book ends with the cautious hope that we can find a way to teach texts to “cure the moral idiocy that comes from never having supposed that other people too have a rational standpoint”—a standpoint perhaps different from ours but “not utterly impenetrable.” The slimness of *Max Weber's Methodology* (1977) is deceptive. Fritz uses his remarkably lucid understanding of Weber's thought to ponder how the discipline of history can fuse its commitment to the hermeneutic recovery of meaning with its concern as a social science to uncover causal explanations. In my ideal graduate program in history, all students would read it (and if they found it abstruse, I'd urge them to read it again). In *Max Weber* (2004), his culminating work, we witness intellectual history at its paradoxical best. Placed back in the various contexts of his own time, Weber becomes more present for us, as a thinker for our time, an urgently needed clarifying voice. That Fritz battled debilitating health problems to accomplish much of this work is a measure of his Weberian grit. He had learned from Weber not to make scholarship an excuse for self-pity or self-indulgence. With Max watching over his shoulder, he got on with the work.

The last field Fritz listed in his *vita* is “Faculty Governance at American Universities.” Behind that apparently matter-of-fact phrasing lies a traumatic personal history. Fritz was, by inclination and by conviction, a troublemaker in the halls of American academe. At Indiana in the late 1960s he became involved to the point of emotional exhaustion in campus protests against the university's complicity in the Vietnam War. At Boston University in the early 1970s, confronted with a dramatic turn to an administrative absolutism that has

since become more quietly insinuating, he was one of the key figures in efforts to organize a faculty union. Throughout his career he detested the suffocating complacency so often found in faculty culture. Faced with comfortable delusions of enlightened consensus, he took pride in making his own voice oppositional and even contentious.

Though Fritz was anything but a hero-worshipper, he did find inspiration in Weber's life and thought. It was not simply that Weber guided so much of his own thinking about the promises and pitfalls of disciplinary knowledge in a disenchanted world. Weber exemplified the life of engaged thought he himself was devoted to leading, and particularly the unflinching insistence on critical (and self-critical) openness that keeps engagement responsible. Perhaps all intellectual historians aspire to practice their profession as a secular calling, but for Fritz that aspiration had special meaning. Few have practiced the calling so well, or with such bold, uncompromising, and enduring commitment.

Anthony La Vopa