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A Response to Tara Mastrelli's '"In the Name of Freedom": a Review of Judith Friedlander's *A Light in Dark Times* (2018, Columbia University Press)'

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Tara Mastrelli begins her review of *A Light in Dark Times* with a quote by Arthur Vidich, chairman of the New School's Department of Sociology during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and founding editor of *Politics, Culture and Society.* The quote appeared in *Contemporary Sociology* in 1987, in a "scathing" review of Peter Rutkoff and William Scott's *New School*, the first book-length history of the university. During that same year, Vidich published the first issue of this international quarterly, an impressive achievement, given what he had been going through over the last ten years. As Mastrelli noted, during the late 1970s, the Department of Education of the State of New York had placed three of the New School's six PhD programs on probation. And this included Sociology, about which outside evaluators had concluded: "The distinctive mission of the New School's sociology program as a purveyor of European thought [was] being better fulfilled elsewhere." Adding insult to injury, they claimed, unjustly, that Vidich was not regarded as a major figure in the field. In their considered opinion, New York State should close down the department immediately.

Although the Department of Education rejected the evaluators' harsh recommendation, it put the New School's Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science through multiple hoops before permitting the university's targeted programs to admit PhD students again (see chapter 18). Sociology earned that right in 1986, but things remained very difficult in the department for a long time, no doubt contributing to Vidich's impatience with Rutkoff and Scott's journey down memory lane. The historians, Vidich complained, were so blinded by "their nostalgia for Weimar-on-12th Street" that they ignored the Graduate Faculty's struggle to survive in the face of declining governmental subsidies and reduced philanthropic largesse.

Tara Mastrelli is much kinder to me than Vidich was to Rutkoff and Scott, for which I thank her. But like Vidich, she expresses impatience with my effort to capture the ethos of a university she knows well. Once again, she complains, a historian of the New School has shied away from addressing the most pressing problems facing the university today, which are

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having a serious impact on faculty and students alike. And that includes Mastrelli, who is currently doing her Master's there in Philosophy. Although the New School is stronger financially and academically in 2019 than it was thirty years ago, the university's president, David Van Zandt, is stepping down this year amidst considerable controversy. Van Zandt's predecessor, Bob Kerrey, caused an even greater uproar. Yet despite all the turmoil, I devote only a page and a half to life at the New School under these two presidents. The last substantive chapter of *A Light in Dark Times* ends in 1999, when Jonathan Fanton, president of the university for seventeen years, resigned to accept the presidency of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In my ten-page epilogue, which brings the story up to September 2018, I spend most of the time describing the activities of colleagues featured prominently in the last chapters of the book.

Mastrelli praises me for my "meticulous historical method" and for "taking a distinct point of view" as I "[lay] out the social and political realities... of the school's defining moments." But she parts ways with me, now and again, particularly in the epilogue, where she worries that my "proximity" to the events and to the people involved may have influenced the way I interpreted the last twenty years. She objects most vehemently to the way I describe Bob Kerrey, whose "decisions," she quotes me as saying, were "controversial, but necessary," which, for the record, is not what I said. Kerrey's leadership, I wrote, "was controversial, but effective" (352). By which I meant, following Webster's definition, that Kerrey succeeded in "producing a definite or desired result." Although he met with a great deal of resistance from both faculty and students, Kerrey succeeded in transforming the New School all the same and he did so with the full endorsement of the board of trustees.

I made the decision to end my history of the New School in 1999 for reasons I will not elaborate upon here, for lack of space, but will be happy to discuss at another time. Having done so, however, I still felt an obligation to say something about the last twenty years, particularly given the fact that the publication of *A Light in Dark Times* coincided with the New School's centennial. Without having conducted in-depth research on the Kerrey and Van Zandt administrations, I limited my description of their years at the helm to a few incontrovertible facts, without providing a lengthy disquisition on my own "distinct point of view." At least not explicitly, I assumed that those who had been following my argument in the substantive chapters of the book would read between the lines.

In the final paragraph of the epilogue, I quote rather pointedly, I thought, from Jonathan Fanton's farewell speech, where the departing president urges colleagues and friends to remember that "the New School stands for something." A vital academic institution, like the one he is leaving will change of course, but the New School, Fanton solemnly proclaims, has a moral obligation to remain true to its historic legacy and continue defending the rights of persecuted intellectuals, both at home and overseas.

Mastrelli shares my strong commitment to keeping the legacy of the New School alive, but she insists, as do I, in examining the history of this venerable institution with "a critical eye," to use Arthur Vidich's famous formulation. As a student of philosophy, she has studied the work of John Dewey, who gave courses at the New School during the early years, and she quotes him eloquently at the end of her review. She has also conducted research on the history of the institution. Firmly identified with the political and intellectual convictions of the founders, Mastrelli returns frequently in this review to a document that nineteen of them signed in the spring of 1918, nearly a year before the New School had opened its doors or even settled on a name. The document, "A Proposal for an Independent School of Social Science for Men and Women," was drafted by the school's organizing committee, which consisted of nine men and

ten women, all of whom campaigned vigorously for progressive political and social causes, including women's suffrage, which was still a matter of open debate in 1918.

Mastrelli devotes most of her review to providing readers of this journal with a very thorough and generous summary of *A Light in Dark Times*. When she found an error in chapter 6, she buried it in a footnote. This delicate gesture not only revealed her kindness, but the high quality of her own research, which entailed recognizing that the trustee identified in early New School documents as Mrs. Willard Straight did not step down from the board in 1925, as I had suggested, but continued to serve under the name of her second husband, Mrs. Leonard Elmhirst, whom the widowed philanthropist had married that year. I thank Tara Mastrelli for catching my mistake.

Although I could not have asked for a better review, Mastrelli accuses me, on occasion, of misrepresenting the founders' vision for the New School, when, for example, I describe their plans for ensuring the financial well-being of the institution or, even more egregiously, of applauding administrative and ideological changes, introduced in later years, that compromised the founders' legacy. I will try to respond to what I see as her major objections in the time-honored New School tradition of engaging in vigorous debate. May this exchange between Mastrelli and me lead to other spirited conversations about the history of the New School, both at the university and in academic journals.

A number of our disagreements stem from the fact that Mastrelli uses a proposal, written in 1918, as if it were an early policy statement for the New School. Although this pioneering document announces triumphantly that an Independent School of Social Science for Men and Women will soon open, it is still only a planning document. And as such, its nineteen signatories do not speak with the same authority as the twelve individuals who replace them a few months later and form the New School's first board of trustees. Almost everyone appointed to the board had previously served on the original organizing committee, but only the members of this second group had also assumed fiduciary responsibility for the institution.

At one point, Mastrelli challenges me for having accepted a claim made by Alvin Johnson, the New School's legendary first president, that the founders fiercely rejected the idea of building an endowment. The evidence she uses to prove Johnson wrong is the 1918 proposal, where the organizing committee raised the idea of creating one. Johnson, however, who served first on the committee and then on the board, subsequently wrote that Charles Beard persuaded their fellow trustees to vote against it. And Beard did so against Johnson's objections, succeeding in closing the door on the matter for decades to come. The New School did not mount an endowment campaign for the university as a whole until 1963.

Mastrelli evokes the 1918 proposal again to challenge recommendations made during the Fanton years to strengthen the university's policies on academic freedom. According to her, this effort distorted the founders' original objectives—objectives, I hasten to add, that the founders themselves had abandoned by the time the New School opened a year later. In the 1980s, President Fanton charged a committee to review the university's by-laws and asked his dean, Ira Katznelson, to serve as its chair.

Mastrelli blames Katznelson and his committee for having "narrowly defined" the concept, limiting academic freedom to what constituted appropriate speech in a university setting. The founders, in contrast, used the term more broadly, Mastrelli maintains, to make their case for building an independent educational institution for faculty and students without administrators and boards of trustees. A case, I repeat, that they had stopped defending in 1919 when faced with the realities of running an institution (chapter 5). They did, however, continue thinking

about freedom of expression on an academic campus, in ways that resonated with Katznelson's nuanced analysis (321–322).

Curiously, Mastrelli pays no attention in her review of my book to the New School's decision in 1935 to amend its by-laws on academic freedom in ways that would have been unthinkable in 1919. The reason it made these changes is complicated but the fact remains that the University in Exile's refugee scholars persuaded Johnson to add a clause to the university's by-laws precluding the appointment of individuals who belonged "to any political party or group which asserts the right to dictate in matters of science or scientific opinion." In other words, no Communists, no Nazis, no Italian Fascists, or anybody else who belonged to a party that required its members to sign a loyalty oath. This, in turn, the argument went, obliged scholars to renounce their professional obligations to "follow truth wherever it may lead" (178). While Katznelson was reviewing the New School's by-laws, he stumbled upon this troubling clause and recommended that the university delete it immediately, which it did.

Mastrelli admits that she read *A Light in Dark Times* from the perspective of a Master's student who is earning her degree at an institution that accepts more graduate students than it can, or chooses to, support with adequate funding. Her concern about those struggling to make ends meet had a particularly dramatic impact on the way she responded to my description of the circumstances surrounding the New School's decision in 1970 to annex a bankrupted Parsons School of Design. In my account, I noted that since the merger, every president at the New School has applauded the decision, commending Vice President Albert Landa, the genius behind it, for having saved the university financially.

Drawing, selectively, from the description I gave in chapter 16, Mastrelli writes, with a sigh of despair, that the president of Parsons may have run the institution into the ground, but he did it "for the sake of the students." What Mastrelli neglects to add was the rather significant detail that Parsons had managed to keep tuition low for many years, thanks to the generosity of a very wealthy donor who had been underwriting the institution. When this donor stopped making his annual contribution in the late 1960s, the president failed to raise the money he needed to continue subsidizing the students' education.

In Mastrelli's telling, Parsons' president remains a hero all the same, a point she drives home by switching gears abruptly. Moving quickly ahead to 2019, she recalls the design school's compassionate leader as she skewers the New School's current president. Seething with rage, Mastrelli claims that David Van Zandt is earning one of the highest salaries in the country for a university president, while he is "saddling some of the most vulnerable student populations with exponentially increasing fees."

With all due respect, I object to the way Mastrelli has rewritten a moment in the history of the New School to serve her rhetorical purposes. Had the New School walked away in 1970, Parsons would have folded on the spot—so much for its president's concern for the students. And while the cost of tuition rose in the years following the merger, design students still paid less at the New School, well into the 1990s, than they would have paid at almost any other private university in the New York metropolitan area. Did Albert Landa anticipate that tuition would soar in later years? Few people did at the time.

But more to the point, how about me? How do I feel about the cost of education today and the stress it places on students attending the New School and other institutions of higher education in the United States? The answer is, awful. And I have been feeling awful about it for many years. By the time I came to the New School in 1993 as dean of the Graduate Faculty, the writing was on the wall. When asked, during my interview, what I thought the New School should do about the problem, I recommended that the Graduate Faculty accept only those

students it could fully support. The search committee rejected my proposal out of hand, not only because the New School could never have afforded it, but because the faculty did not want their PhD programs to become exclusive enclaves the way they had at Ivy League institutions. Many of these same professors feel differently about the issue today.

While I remain deeply worried about the sacrifice students are making, I am grateful to aspiring scholars like Tara Mastrelli for not giving up on the life of the mind. May they someday be rewarded. A lame thing to say, I agree, but I really mean it. On a personal note, I look forward to reading Mastreilli's work on Dorothy Payne Whitney Straight Elmhirst and the work of other students at the New School who have started doing research on some of the other extraordinary women who played significant roles at the university.

To conclude, I would like to return to the founding faculty's ideas about academic freedom, a subject that demands serious attention today, in light of controversies taking place at universities across the United States. On February 10, 2019, I published an opinion piece on the subject for the history blog of *The Washington Post* ("Made by History"), to mark the anniversary of the New School's centennial.

Calls for academic freedom, I wrote, have become a partisan affair. When conservatives champion the cause today, they do so primarily for two reasons: to strengthen the influence of their ideas at liberal arts institutions and to defend the First Amendment rights of rightwing extremists to speak on campus. Similarly, when progressive advocates of academic freedom call for more diversity on campus, they rarely extend their welcome to activists or scholars on the right.

Yet standing up for the rights of the other side was precisely what the founders of academic freedom had in mind when they came together in 1915 to form the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Four years later, prominent members of the AAUP opened the New School for Social Research to defend the rights of colleagues whose opinions they did not share. The New School opened on February 10, 1919, as an act of protest against academic leaders who denied faculty and students the right to voice pacifist views while Americans were fighting overseas.

The founders of the New School had no sympathy whatsoever for the arguments that pacifists were making against sending U.S. soldiers to Europe, a fact they repeated every time they defended the rights of pacifists to campaign against the war. Among them was the historian Charles Beard, who resigned from Columbia University in protest after Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of the institution, fired two pacifist colleagues.

Beard's letter of resignation remains one of the most eloquent defenses of academic freedom ever written. As he laid out his reasons for leaving Columbia, the historian made the case for creating a new kind of educational institution, where faculty and students would engage in full-throated debates over the urgent issues of the day. Freedom of expression was critical, Beard maintained, to the health of the nation's democracy and its universities. The letter appeared in The New York Times on October 9, 1917:

> I was among the first to urge a declaration of war by the United States, and I believe that we should now press forward with all our might to a just conclusion. But thousands of my countrymen do not share this view. Their opinions cannot be changed by curses or bludgeons. Arguments to their reason and understanding are our best hope.

> Such arguments, however, must come from men whose disinterestedness is above all suspicion, whose independence is beyond all doubt, and whose devotion to the whole country, as distinguished from any single class or group, is above all question. I am convinced that while I remain in the pay of the Trustees of Columbia University, I cannot do effectively my humble part in sustaining public opinion in support of the just war.

It is difficult to imagine prominent intellectuals in 2019—no matter what their political persuasion—abandoning tenure and professorial chairs to defend the rights of people with whom they disagree. And then, in the name of academic freedom and the dignity of humankind, save the lives of endangered scholars the way the New School's first president, Alvin Johnson, did between 1933 and 1945. Within days after Hitler assumed dictatorial power, Johnson moved with lightning speed to open within the New School the University in Exile. By the time World War II ended, the New School had provided life-saving visas and jobs to nearly 200 scholars evicted from academic institutions in Nazi-occupied Europe because they were Jews and/or held the "wrong" ideas.

As the New School turns 100, advocates of academic freedom might consider paying tribute to the legacy of this heroic institution by taking bold initiatives of their own, for example, providing teaching and research positions for refugee scholars fleeing the tyrants of our time—or, if their universities are doing so already, urging them to do more.

They might also consider organizing serious debates on campus between people who fiercely disagree. The operative word here is "serious." In a nation as polarized as the United States, where political leaders have replaced reasoned arguments with mudslinging epithets, universities should step forward and set an example.

Given the depths to which political discourse has fallen, faculty, students, and university administrators should rise to the occasion and acknowledge complexity, addressing it squarely, instead of shying away or ignoring it completely. With our democracy in crisis, Americans need leaders who look at problems from conflicting points of view and consider all the available evidence. The founders of the New School chose "reason and understanding" over "curses and bludgeons," during some of the darkest hours of the twentieth century. The time has come for us to do the same.