

## **Donald Levine. A Commemoration**

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Vincenzo Mele

## Donald Levine. A Commemoration

Professor Donald Levine, Peter B. Ritzma Professor Emeritus of Sociology, died on April 4, 2015 after a long illness. He was 83. Donald Levine made a wide-ranging contributions to the field of sociology, alongside his lasting impact on the University of Chicago as dean of the College from 1982-87. Ethiopia, martial arts, intellectual history, pedagogy, sociology—the breadth of Levine’s interest and his openness to new ideas distinguished him as an outstanding and unconventional professor.

As a young scholar, Levine spent several years doing fieldwork in Ethiopia, which resulted in his first book, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (1965). Levine remained interested in Ethiopia throughout his life and served as an advisor on Ethiopia to the American government and several federal agencies, included the U.S. Department of State, the United States Senate, and the Peace Corps. Before joining the University of Chicago in 1962, he taught at Ethiopia’s University College of Addis Ababa. In 1999, he also published *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*, an interdisciplinary study of Ethiopian history.

In the area of social theory, Levine published several works that are now considered landmarks of sociology. One of his most important works was *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1995. He was specially known for his interpretations of Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, S.N. Eisenstadt, and above all Georg Simmel, whose writings promoted and translated. His edited book *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms* became a classic collection of Simmel’s sociological contributions in English language. In 2010 Levine edited and translated (with John A. Y. Andrews and Daniel Silver) Simmel’s “testament”, *The View of Life* (The University of Chicago Press), which was still unpublished in English. At the end of his life, Levine was still able to publish a book on *Social Theory as a Vocation: Genres of Theory Work in Sociology* (2014). In 1997 he was elected Chair of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association and served on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, and *Theory Culture and Society*.

A fourth-degree black belt in Aikido, Levine taught a College course that incorporated sociological theories of conflict resolution along with a weekly three-hour “lab” focused on the theory and practice of the Japanese martial art. In 1983, as fresh new Dean of the College, Donald Levine suggested that the members of the College community, first-years and fourth-years alike, participate in a week-long winter carnival of sorts, to combat the dreary conditions of Chicago’s winter. Levine insisted that the carnival’s name include “Kangeiko”, a period of resistance and discipline training that derives from Shinto and Buddhist traditions of ascetic practice. With several colleagues, he created the College’s annual wintertime festival, Kuviasungnerk/Kangeiko. The celebration was, in many ways, a reflection of Levine’s seemingly indefatigable good humor. “You can’t change the weather, but you can change your perception of it”, Levine used to say.

As dean, he reaffirmed the importance of the College’s liberal arts education. Levine used his experiences as dean of the College to inform his 2006 book, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America*, in which he explored the history of undergraduate education at UChicago and proposed ways to keep liberal education relevant in the modern world. All his colleagues and students affirm how Levine brought his passion for education to his work as a teacher. It is not difficult to understand how he tried to apply the main principles of Simmel’s pedagogy (*Schulpädagogik*, 1922) in his teaching. The main goal of Simmel’s pedagogy was to encourage students to follow their “individual law” wherever it led. The real job of educator is to become superfluous for the students. “His goal as a teacher was to produce students from whom he could learn later”, Daniel Silver once said. In the key elements of the crisis which Simmel diagnosed, we may recognize some central motifs of the philosophy of liberal education in our time: “to counter the fetishism of techniques and methods with a return of attention to ultimate human purposes; to counter the atomization of the disciplines with a sense of the connectedness of the different domains of culture; and to counter the alienation of objectified culture by connecting knowledge with the cultivation of human powers, and its roots in the ongoing flow of the life process” (D. Levine, *Simmel as Educator: On Individuality and Modern Culture*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1991: 113).

Finally a personal memory. I was on the program of the ESS Annual Meeting in Philadelphia (February 2011) with the paper “At the Crossroad of Aesthetics and Sociology: Comte, Simmel, Weber”. Few days before the conference I found an email in my email box from Donald N. Levine. The text was short but nice “I would be grateful for a copy of the paper”. I

spontaneously thought: “it cannot be THAT Donald Levine...” But actually it was. I – young Lecturer in US – found very unconventional to receive attention by an emeritus professor. In Europe academic relationships often still follow the golden rule of European mandarins, which rarely include scientific exchanges between established professors and young – unknown – scholars. This showed to me how Levine’s scientific passion and his philosophy of education simply bypassed the traditional academic hierarchies. That email generated a correspondence in which we exchanged papers and information. He wanted to speak directly with me on the phone and we agreed to meet personally in Philadelphia. Unfortunately it didn’t work: our sessions were in different days and we both couldn’t stay longer for academic commitments. So I loosed the chance to meet a great man.

Donald Levine is survived by his wife, Ruth Levine; his children, Rachel, William and Theodore Levine; and his grandchildren, Natanyel Bohm-Levine, Zoe Melnick and Ari Melnick.