

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 21, 2003,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late David Riesman
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

DAVID RIESMAN

BORN: September 22, 1909

DIED: May 10, 2002

Like several eminent sociologists of his generation, David Riesman was trained in another discipline. After graduating from Harvard College and Harvard Law School near the top of his class, he clerked for Justice Brandeis, worked as an Assistant District Attorney for Thomas E. Dewey of New York, was a contract termination lawyer for Sperry Gyroscope during World War II, and then taught law before turning to sociology.

Nonetheless, he became the most famous sociologist of his generation, and wrote the most widely read book on American society of the twentieth century, *The Lonely Crowd*, (with the collaboration of Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney) published in 1950 and still in print.

Having become the sociologist whom leaders, journalists, and opinion makers first consulted on trends in American society, and after writing scores of widely read essays on contemporary issues (gathered in *Individualism Reconsidered*, 1954, and *Abundance for What*, 1964), Riesman abandoned his role as chief pundit on American society and devoted the rest of his career to American higher education. He became the leading authority on the subject, publishing many important books, often in collaboration with younger colleagues who also became authorities on higher education (Christopher Jencks, Gerald Grant, Judith McLaughlin). He was consulted by the leading figures in higher education, particularly in the wake of the student disorders of the late 1960s. His advice was regularly sought on curricular development and appointments of major university and college presidents.

Riesman was an interpretive sociologist who drew upon more specialized work and on other disciplines, especially anthropology and psychology, in his effort to distinguish forest from trees. His craft was distinguished by his remarkable curiosity about all aspects of American life, his meticulous interviewing and recording, and his skillful use of insights gained from pointed discussions and a vast correspondence with persons from all walks of life. But beyond all this, he displayed a sociological imagination that was always original and surprising, and a style that in its vividness and imagery was unique among social scientists. He developed, in *The Lonely Crowd*, the two stylized character types of "inner-directed"

and “other-directed” persons. While the terms became part of the language, Riesman promptly abandoned any use of them. He spoke of himself as thinking “countercyclically,” against the grain, perhaps even against the grain he had himself created.

This approach to the discipline was not widely shared by his colleagues. As a faculty member at the University of Chicago during the 1950s, he taught only undergraduates. He found a more congenial environment in the then inter-disciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard, which he joined in 1958 as the first Ford Professor of the Social Sciences. When it broke up, much to his disappointment, he joined the new sociology department, focusing on his celebrated undergraduate course, “American Character and Social Structure.”

Riesman came from an assimilated German-Jewish family. His father was an eminent surgeon and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He responded to his privileged background with a sense of moral urgency to improve society and give voice to the unconventional and underprivileged. As such he was always engaged with politics, but was neither a conventional reformer nor a traditional conservative. Unlike many of his generation, Riesman was never attracted to socialism and he became a strong critic of the Soviet Union after an early visit there. As a law professor he wrote important articles on the conflict between the First Amendment and the harm of group libel, but he deplored what he called “groupism,” especially ethnic identity pressures, and declined to support many liberal policies and candidates. The most steadfast concern of his political life was the atom bomb and its consequences. In the late 1950s he created the Committees of Correspondence (meant to recall a group of the same name at the time of the American revolution) and the journal *The Correspondent*, devoted to an ultimate ban of atomic arms.

He was, nonetheless, a reformer, even if an unconventional one. He valued utopian writing. He was deeply troubled by conformist tendencies in modern mass society and wrote passionately in defense of an empathic individualism that was responsive to civic obligations. He insisted that leisure was an important but understudied issue in our affluent society, deploring the dominant concern with ever greater market productivity and the search for ways to make people more “productive” even in their leisure activities. His preoccupation with higher education was spurred by his concern for reform, but he found many reforms jejune and half-baked in practice. He was a defender, long before the women’s movement, of the rights of women and of the value of a distinctive women’s perspective. He defended women’s colleges when many were becoming coeducational. But he also defended men’s colleges, and his last public action was to testify for the Virginia Military Institute when it was under legal attack as a discriminatory male institution.

Despite the enormous success of *The Lonely Crowd*, what most distinguished Riesman was his role as a teacher and a letter-writer. For his course at Harvard he regularly recruited a galaxy of “teaching assistants” (at least one of whom was a full professor) and met weekly

with them at dinner at his house to explore issues raised by the course. He cared deeply about his students, and had far more requests to attend weddings than he could possibly accept. His letters to them, based on their term papers, were famous for their length and perspicacity.

His marriage to Evelyn Thompson was long and happy. She was his close collaborator on many of his projects, and co-author of *Conversations In Japan* (1967), based on one of their rare overseas visits, in which they helped to established bridges with post-war Japanese intellectuals.

Riesman's life and work is generally acknowledged as an important part of the intellectual heritage of 20th century America. The publication of his biography by the historian Wilfred McClay will further corroborate this judgment of an outstanding American life: examined, examining and in so many ways, exemplary.

Respectfully submitted,

Daniel Bell

Nathan Glazer

Christopher Jencks

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