

## Yehuda Elkana (1934–2012)



We mourn the loss of Yehuda Elkana, founding editor of this journal. Setting science in context was a mission of his life. For him this did not mean to relativize and historicize science to the point where it is no longer distinguishable as central to the human quest for knowledge. Rather, an understanding of science as being rooted in social, material, and cultural contexts was for him the key to its central role for solving the problems of humanity with which he was so deeply concerned.

Yehuda Elkana was not interested in anything less. He pursued what he called “comparative epistemology” in the twofold sense of historically reflecting on the contexts of knowledge generation and knowledge circulation, and encouraging us to rethink the seemingly evident. As a survivor of the Holocaust, he neither locked his experiences away nor allowed them to determine his, as well as our future. Rethinking science in its contexts thus involved for him a deeper understanding of its social, cultural, material, and intellectual history, while keeping in mind the concerns of our future. When Yehuda Elkana wrote about “Rethinking the Enlightenment” or “From Local Universalism to Global Contextualism,” he would combine historical insights with future challenges and often with concrete, moral, or even political issues.

Nevertheless, science in context was not for him a mere programmatic approach to the history of science. Pursuing history without philosophy, sociology, or psychology, considering the natural sciences without the humanities and the arts, writing without reading very broadly, research without teaching, engaging in intellectual discourse but not in politics – all such limitations would strike Yehuda Elkana as not just narrow-minded but downright irresponsible. In the course of his life, he assumed numerous institutional responsibilities, e.g., as Director of the Van-Leer Institute in Jerusalem, as Head of the Cohn Institute at Tel-Aviv University, and as Rector of the Central European University in Budapest. In these functions, he always made sure that the highest intellectual standards were maintained, that opportunities were opened to the young, the outsiders and the underprivileged, that unusual ideas would be given a chance, and that the mainstream would not prevail.

Yehuda Elkana wrote about a broad array of subjects, from nineteenth- and twentieth-century physics, via the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, to curriculum research

in the twenty-first century. Over many years, he developed and practiced new forms of teaching that met with worldwide interest, particularly concerning his ideas about curricula and university reform. For him, his institutional and his intellectual work were never separate entities. He enjoyed mixing the spheres.

In the private as well as in the public sphere, Yehuda Elkana brought together people from the most diverse backgrounds. Whenever and wherever his friends and colleagues gathered around him, he gave them the feeling of participating in the kitchen cabinet of a world reform movement that was all about science in context and its practical, global consequences. Everyone's ideas and suggestions were now measured against the standard of whether or not they would contribute to making the world a better place, if not they were irrelevant. For those of us who had the good fortune to meet him, he quickly became a friend, a teacher, a mentor, a sharp critic as well as a good colleague. He was open and direct, curious and supportive about one's intellectual pursuits, as well as being concerned about the personal lives of the other; he was capable of summing up a long discourse in a short, witty or caustic remark, was often better read than most, and both demanding and generous with his own intellectual gifts.

The journal *Science in Context* is among Yehuda Elkana's most visible legacies. Together with the other founding editors, Robert S. Cohen, Gideon Freudenthal, and Simon Schaffer, he helped to create a forum for expressing and discussing new ways of examining science: as being rooted in society and inseparable from actors, institutions, and epistemic foundations. This view emerged in the seventies, partly constituted by a revival of earlier traditions that were also reflected in classical texts discussed and republished in this journal. Yehuda Elkana's demand for high intellectual standards, his plea for broad-mindedness and pluralism of approaches and themes, have all been reflected in contributions to this journal over the years.

Yehuda Elkana has confronted us – not just the editors but also the authors and readers of this journal – with many challenges. The most urgent one was, and remains, that of continuing to rethink the history of science and its contexts in the light of the troubling problems which the world faces and which did not leave him indifferent, as they should not leave us.

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