

Civic Sociology

In Search of a Schema in a Joyfully Serious Life: Robert Bellah, the Cold War, Psychoanalysis, and Intimate Experimentations

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A rejoinder to comments by Amy Borovoy, Chad Alan Goldberg, Arvind Rajagopal, and Joan W. Scott on my book, *A Joyfully Serious Man*. I begin with a brief narrative of how I came to write the book and how I worked on it with the help of many different people. I then move to the place of psychoanalysis in the book, my analysis of Bellah's early positioning in Cold War social science, and a few questions regarding American culture, religion, and politics. The article ends with a few remarks on my current research on the life and work of Clifford Geertz.

Without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986

It is not easy to reciprocate in a few pages the generous attention paid by Amy Borovoy, Chad Alan Goldberg, Arvind Rajagopal, and Joan W. Scott to *A Joyfully Serious Man*. What follows is a token of gratitude for their interest and words, and a map for some future work on theoretical, methodological, and substantive issues regarding Robert N. Bellah, his ideas, and the many intellectual and cultural contexts in which he pursued his calling as an intellectual. I begin with a brief narrative of how I came to write the book and how I was able to bring it to conclusion with the help of many different individuals; I then move to some substantive issues, including the place of psychoanalysis in *A Joyfully Serious Man*, my analysis of Bellah's early positioning in Cold War social science, and a few questions regarding American culture, religion, and politics. I will close this rejoinder with a few remarks on the theme of "alternate timelines" as it connects with my current research on the life and work of Clifford Geertz.¹

As I recounted in a long-forgotten draft of the preface, the research project I had started in 2005 was completely different from what came out as *A Joyfully Serious Man* (henceforth *AJSM*) some sixteen years later. The original outline, entitled *The Parsonians*, focused on the career tra-

jectories of Talcott Parsons's students from a strictly sociological point of view. I wanted to understand how different individuals had found their way to becoming original thinkers while having a towering teacher who abruptly fell into disgrace. What does it mean to be a well-known follower of an exceedingly central, contested, loved, and hated intellectual figure? What does it mean to work in a professional field that suddenly becomes a very hostile, and maybe dangerous, environment? As a typical work in the "new sociology of ideas" (Camic and Gross 2001), my research was to have taken all of Parsons's PhD mentees as its sample—my early list, compiled with the assistance of Victor M. Lidz, consisted of fifty-nine individuals. During my first year of research, the number of my subjects gradually dropped, and while I was at Jeffrey Alexander's Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale in the fall of 2006, I decided to focus on the trajectories of three famous students of Parsons: Bellah, Geertz, and Neil J. Smelser. My central concept was that of the *scholarly habitus*—the position-specific set of skills, dispositions, and self-representations needed to be a full participant in the professional field of cultural production. I envisioned a comparative study of how the scholarly habitus might be produced, maintained, and transformed in its encounter with the field of cultural production and its actors, practices, and institutions.

Geertz died shortly after I formulated this new version of the project. I then rushed to contact Bellah and Smelser (who were, respectively, seventy-nine and seventy-six at the time) and arranged to visit them in Berkeley in the summer of 2007. As my work proceeded, I abandoned the idea

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¹ References to Robert Bellah's works cited in this paper can be found in Bortolini 2021.

of comparing the three trajectories, and focused on Bellah for intellectual and personal reasons. It was my resolve to write one sociological biography—the framework would be the same, but I would focus on just *one* case that could provide a vantage point on how the scholarly habitus was made and remade.² Bellah and I became very friendly, and we met almost every year until his death. He offered to proof-read all my drafts, advising me on my written English, setting facts straight, and expressing his surprise at long-forgotten stories without ever questioning my interpretations, even when he strongly disagreed with what I wrote. At least twice I presented papers about Bellah with him listening and the rest of the audience turning to him for a nod. I was with him at the Axial Age seminar he organized with Hans Joas in Erfurt in 2008, at the American Academy of Religion celebration of *Religion in Human Evolution* in 2011, and during his weeklong trip through the south of Germany in November 2012. That was the last time I saw Robert Bellah.

On July 30, 2013, the eighty-six-year-old sociologist died from complications of heart surgery, leaving me sorry and angry with myself, for I had promised him that I would finish the book before he died, and I had not. Later that year, I flew to Berkeley at the request of Jenny Bellah Maguire and Hally Bellah-Guther to give their father's personal archive some shape. On December 13, 2013, I crossed the bay to meet with John A. Coleman, a Jesuit father and a former student of Bellah's, for what I thought would be the last interview for my book—at that point I had a 250-page-long draft and was quite happy with it. Halfway through our talk, Coleman almost casually dropped a few words that changed everything: "There's another thing about Bob, which you may or may not know, and if you do, that's fine. And it's not anything that I... but you know, he was also gay." What Coleman said seemed to make immediate sense. The interview ended, and I rushed back to the Berkeley Hills: I knew I had seen some personal stuff in a box I had ignored, but now I had to read everything. As I reached Mosswood Road, I realized with some pain that no one had told me anything about "that small detail" in the last seven years—not Bellah himself, to be sure, but neither had his daughters, his former students, or his closest associates. My hasty nocturnal reading of the diaries left me speechless, but I had no time to process the new information: just a couple of days later I hopped on a night bus headed to Los Angeles, where another batch of Bellah's papers was waiting in a room that Jenny Bellah Maguire had set up for me next to her office at the Wells Fargo Center in downtown LA.

Once there, I unearthed documents relating to aspects of Bellah's intimate life that I had hitherto chosen to ignore. After I consulted my sociologist friend Massimo Rosati about the idea that only a full biography might convey the

intricacy and the depth of what lay beyond, and behind, Robert Bellah's scholarly career, I shared my "discovery" with Jenny, Ann Swidler, and Bill Sullivan, two of Bellah's closest collaborators and friends—who, of course, already knew everything. They all encouraged me to go ahead with the new project, and we made a pledge: as her father's literary executor, Jenny would grant me full access to personal material as long as I shared my drafts of the book that I would write with her, her sister, and Sullivan. Relentless research and a continuous dialogue with Bellah's daughters, friends, and collaborators occupied the following seven years, until I sent my completed draft to Fred Appel, my editor at Princeton University Press, during the toughest days of the 2020 pandemic.

Given this approach, many of the decisions about what to include or exclude were the result of a rather distributed effort—nothing that I could, or would, have done by myself. My collaboration with Jenny Bellah Maguire and Bill Sullivan was crucial, for they not only expressed their considered opinions on my rendition of the most delicate episodes of Bellah's intimate life, but they also often helped me to see the wider *Gestalt* and the deeper meaning of the complex web of relationships that Bellah and his wife, Melanie, created in the late 1970s. Not that we agreed on everything all the time, but the outcome—especially for chapters 12 to 15, which were the object of countless rewritings—was the result of a collective endeavor.³

Talking about practices of inclusion and exclusion brings me to one substantial point raised by Goldberg: the role of psychoanalysis in Bellah's life and my handling of it. As a product of the multidisciplinary environment of the Harvard Department of Social Relations, Bellah was fascinated by psychoanalysis both as a scientific theory and as a vehicle for self-observation, a passion he shared with many of his sociologist colleagues—Parsons (1964) undertook didactic training at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, while Smelser (1998) became a practicing therapist in the 1970s, and both wrote extensively at the intersection of sociology and psychoanalysis. Besides undergoing therapy since his undergraduate days, Bellah developed a deep knowledge of the work of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, and was conversant with various post-Freudian scholars, from Norman O. Brown and Herbert Finckelstein to Philip Rieff.⁴ In fact, at least until the mid-1980s, psychoanalysis provided him with the tools he used for self-analysis throughout the most intricate and difficult times of his life, to the point that his personal journals often read like a primer of Freudian and Jungian imagery—immediate associations, interpretations of dreams, and attempts at understanding his relationship with Sullivan in Freudian

2 An exemplar of this kind of work is Gross 2008.

3 Most chapters benefited from the continued attention of friends like Lidz, Sam Porter, and Paolo Costa. The title of the book came from Appel, who turned my image of "The Joy of a Serious Life" in the apt description of Robert Bellah as an individual.

4 See, for example, *AJSM*, pp. 35–36; p. 116ff.; p. 136ff.; p. 215ff. See also Manning 2005.

terms as having to do with his childhood traumas literally fill Bellah's diaries.⁵

This generated a twofold problem. On the one hand, I wanted to give the reader a sense of the pervasiveness of the psychoanalytical vocabulary in Bellah's self-analysis. This was not only a problem of historical accuracy; it was also a substantive part of the narrative, for, as in W. I. and Dorothy Thomas's dictum, Bellah's psychoanalytical image of himself produced its own reality in the very moment in which he considered it as the basis for his actions toward himself and his loved ones. On the other hand, I did not quite subscribe to Bellah's views on how selves should be analyzed. Building on the work of theorists like Bernard Lahire (2019), James Clifford (1978), and Peter Sloterdijk (2014), I see the self as much more plural, fluid, and plastic than Bellah's Freudianism would admit. What interests me is the subject's incorporated heterogeneity of internalized habits, attitudes, and dispositions; their ever-changing relationships with projects, concerns, commitments, and contexts; the impact of bifurcations and ruptures on individual trajectories; and the reflexive anthropotechnics used by actors to deliberately remold their habits and selves. This convinced me to write about psychoanalysis in *AJSM* to the extent necessary to give readers the impression that it was *crucial for Bellah, but not in general* (and certainly not for the observer—that is, me). In fact, as I said, Bellah's diaries were so full of Freudian and Jungian self-analyses that not even a hundred pages would suffice to summarize them all. In this case, as in others, the assistance of colleagues and friends, who read my drafts and gave me their advice, was essential in helping me strike the right balance between Bellah's view and my sense of what was happening.

This last point also works as an answer to Joan Scott's question about identity politics and their relationship with Bellah's intimate explorations of sex and gender. Although he would openly support the maximum of rights for all individuals and minorities, the evidence I have gathered casts serious doubt on Bellah's desire to be identified as either a gay or bisexual man and attests to his distance from his day's sexual identity movements (*AJSM*, p. 215ff.). This is obviously a euphemism when we think that, although he spoke of the matter with many friends at the time and although the individuals from the Bay Area I corresponded with all remember his homosexual relationships being quite public between 1977 and 1983, Bellah never came out. My view is that while he relentlessly reflected on the topic of his "identity," Bellah never wanted to be seen as gay or bi in the way he would later identify as a Christian intellectual. His sexuality was very much his own, and surely not a topic he would discuss with perfect or generalized strangers, especially from the mid-1980s on.

Why then, one may ask, write about it? As I hope to have made clear in *AJSM*, I believe that the period of experimentation with his sexuality *and* relationality (the latter be-

ing at least as important as the former) at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s was crucial for Bellah's final coming of age as a mature intellectual and human being. I may be wrong here—of course, had I been able to talk about these issues with Bob Bellah himself, I would have had a clearer idea of at least his personal views—but I do think that the crushing tragedy of losing two of his four daughters in only three years forced Bellah to face his own condition of fragmentation and uprootedness as a son, a father, and a scholar. This is not to say that he discovered, as Coleman said, that he "was also gay"—there was no "hidden true self" to make public through an act of coming out or a revolution of his relational life. My focus was on *plurality and process* rather than on *identity and essence*: it is my conviction that Bellah's experiments with sexuality and relationships gave him a deeper and firmer understanding of his own complexity, limits, and potentialities. It was not by chance that only after this moment of self-examination could Bellah lead a truly collaborative endeavor and produce with a group of younger scholars one of his masterpieces, *Habits of the Heart*—the difference between the latter and his previous attempt at collective work, *The New Religious Consciousness*, is staggering. It was not by chance that only after this moment of experimentation could Bellah find a new language that enabled him to bring his ideas to the general public and engage it in a lively conversation. It was not by chance that only after this moment of atonement could he seriously consider his lifelong plan of writing a book comparable in style, scope, and depth to Max Weber's *Sociology of Religion*. And it was not by chance that he could finally work out his difficult relationship with lived religion and finally become a practicing Christian. Like many of us, Robert Bellah had to conquer himself after something crucial had been stolen from him, and, like some of us, he mostly succeeded in doing so.

I would now like to turn to the intellectual and scholarly milieu in which Bellah was raised—the heterogeneous and contradictory Harvard of the immediate postwar period, and the central place it occupied in all the major social-scientific networks of the time. Amy Borovoy and Arvind Rajagopal have raised some crucial issues on the early Bellah, the young scholar embedded in modernization theory circles who nonetheless tried to find his own way in a hegemonic and very crowded field. Here I see two different questions. The first has to do with *the* methodological problem of any historical reconstruction of intellectual or scholarly fields. In a nutshell, every general description of a period *has* to simplify the field in order to make it intelligible and subject it to analysis—it has to find, as Primo Levi would say, a schema in what is a chaotic stream of interacting cultural objects, groups, and institutions. In general, these synthetic overviews tend to favor theoretical over empirical works and to identify one or two hegemonic positions that "set the tone" for any chosen era.

5 As told in *AJSM* (p. 240), after 1983 Bellah stopped writing personal journals for good.

On the contrary, if one starts from a view of intellectual spheres as “fields,” that of hegemony and domination immediately becomes a risky vocabulary. If a field is understood as a relational network of positions whose intelligibility depends on mutual connection and difference (Martin 2003), our methodological principle becomes that *any field will always be diverse and pluralistic*, since any central position invites the establishment not only of enemies and allies, but also of shadier niches where the excluded can thrive. In his global research on the philosophical field, Randall Collins (1998, 81ff.) found a “law of small numbers,” whereby intellectual fields include, at any time, from three to six such positions. Moreover, specific views and theories tend to fractalize themselves into slightly different subsidiary versions, among which the emergence of microdiscussions ensures the continuation of otherwise neglected confrontations (Abbott 2001). This fractalization occurs mainly where material, organizational, and symbolic resources accumulate—that is, at the center of the field (Frickel and Gross 2005). Deductively, then, one would expect to find *a surplus of variety* precisely “where the action is”—Nils Gilman’s article, cited by Rajagopal, is a fine exercise in differentiation in the camp of “Cold War social science.”

From this point of view—which builds upon the work of Collins, Andrew Abbott, Pierre Bourdieu, and Patrick Baert, among others⁶—all homogeneous or center-periphery descriptions of intellectual fields are seen as simplified schemas that might be good, at best, for comparing real cases with ideal-typical scholars, practices, or institutions. Accordingly, if Bellah looks like a full denizen of the “hegemonic” network of modernization theory but also the uneasy standard-bearer of some eccentric theoretical and empirical proposals, it is because I began from a composite, distributed, and agonistic view of intellectual and scholarly practices that understands “the center” as just a denser region where many different networks (and maybe different fields) overlap or intersect. In *AJSM* (p. 71ff.) and subsequent work, I spelled out what I think were Bellah’s “humanistic deviations”—which the center might well absorb without consequences—from an ideal-typical version of modernization theory: his interest in ideational or cultural factors over economic and technological ones; the importance he attached to religion and tradition in setting the stage for various strands of modernization (and thus his adumbration of the concept of “multiple modernities”); and his conviction that the past was as crucial as the present for envisaging the future of countries, regions, or even entire civilizations.

This brings us to Bellah’s understanding of the relationship between modern America and Japan, where I see another profound ambivalence. During his first decade as a professional social scientist, Bellah found his own version of American exceptionalism in the lack of premodern traditional forms in the realm of *social structure*. In a lecture

given in Japan in 1961, he underlined that the American colonies did not import feudal political and economic structures from Europe: “In America modernization goes all the way down to the roots (...) It is the whole structure, the whole substance of the society itself” (cited in *AJSM*, p. 85). America was exceptional because its social structure was, from the very beginning, rootless and “new.” At the same time—and this is a point that Bellah emphasized when his interests shifted more decisively from general to cultural and interpretive analyses—American *culture* was a composite concoction of different symbolic strands, some of which were thousands of years old: the biblical tradition; a form of republicanism going back to ancient Rome; and modern utilitarian individualism. To these basic constituents of American culture, spelled out in *The Broken Covenant*, *Habits of the Heart* added a fourth strand, expressive individualism. While a depiction of the counterculture of the 1960s as an “expressive revolution” was found in much coeval commentary, in the understanding of the *Habits* group the idea of expressive individualism as a proper cultural tradition added depth and complexity to a phenomenon that Talcott Parsons and others would depict as a sudden and short-lived burst of chaos and informality.

Today, the connections between expressive individualism, Romanticism, the counterculture, “liquid” individualism, and cybercapitalism, as suggested by Goldberg, might be studied as a continuing thread in American (and Western) culture (see Watts 2022). In the 1990s, when the debate between liberals and communitarians thrived and Michael Walzer wrote “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism” (cited by Borovoy), the *Habits* group’s idea of a fourfold culture, made up of independent and at times warring strands, should have been a dire warning to all those who took Bellah and his coauthors as the advocates of a return to a consensual, homogeneous American community (see Bortolini 2015). In fact, the basic message of both *The Broken Covenant* and *Habits of the Heart* was that there had never been a “common American culture”—a reason why I see both books as much better assessments (and diagnoses) of the United States than Bob Bellah’s work from the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. This also means that, to respond to another point made by Borovoy, for all Bellah’s interest in, or fascination with, communitarian Japan, any idea of a homogeneous culture or community would have been anathema for him.

There is much more I would like to say about the neglected dimension of “class,” which I find crucial to understanding the whole of Bellah’s work as a public intellectual (but see *AJSM*, pp. 288–91); his early fascination with communication, with at least two articles built around the basic concepts of cybernetics and systems theory; and the question I have been asked a thousand times since 2016, “What would Bellah say of Donald Trump?” Resisting the temptation to summon the dead to talk about the present, I would like to end by focusing on a passage from Scott’s paper:

6 See Bortolini and Cossu 2020 for a discussion of these theorists and a general model.

“The deservedly small place [the Bellah affair at Princeton] holds in the life of Robert Bellah is at odds (in my perception of things) with the pernicious impact the ‘affair’ had on the life of the School of Social Science. It took many years to achieve the stable and recognized place the school now has. In the event, more damage was done to the Institute than to Robert Bellah.” I understand my current research on the life and work of Clifford Geertz as a way to explore the alternate timelines that my Bellah story left untouched—in this case, “What happened at (and to) the Institute after Bellah went back to Berkeley?”—but also as

a way to reconnect with the original project of comparing the trajectories of individuals who shared a common beginning as scholars. Luckily enough, terrific intellectuals such as Andrea Cossu and Joel Isaac (whose fine work on Geertz I see as the foundation for my own), Jeff Alexander, Larry Rosen, Karen Blu, Joan Scott, and all the participants in this symposium on *A Joyfully Serious Man* are going to help me in this amazing new scholarly and personal endeavor.

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