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Neil Smelser

NEIL SMELSER: DISTINGUISHED SOCIOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AND
SERVANT TO THE PUBLIC

Interviews conducted by
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Foreword

Jeffrey C. Alexander

Readers of Neil Smelser's oral history will encounter an extraordinary narrative of public citizenship and academic scholarship. His story spans the entire second half of the 20th century, and it is still going strong. It recounts intellectual and civic accomplishment of the highest order, displaying the best face of the American nation during an historical period when it strove, and sometimes failed, to set scientific and civic standards for the rest of the world.

What unfolds in these compelling pages of transcribed, informal interviews is a panorama of a strenuous intellectual life well lived. An exceptionally brilliant student, upon whom fortune smiled, became a man not only of great accomplishment but of good conscience and good works. He gave back to his profession and community even more than they had earlier given to him.

In the first place, Neil Smelser was a remarkably acute sociological theorist. Time and again, with razor sharp precision, he succeeded in dissecting historical, contemporary, and analytical problems that hitherto had been treated in murky and confusing ways. During his first year of graduate school, Smelser coauthored *Economy and Society* (1956), a major work of theoretical innovation with Talcott Parsons, the towering figure of mid-century sociology. Recounted here for the first time in detail, Smelser's analytical contribution to that joint project triggered a fundamental advance in functionalist theorizing, an idea about societal interchanges that continues to be influential to this day. In the Ph.D. thesis that soon followed, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959), Smelser created a new approach to class conflict and historical change, anticipating future research on family and gender in a book that immediately became a contemporary, if controversial classic. Just three years later, Smelser's *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962) appeared, a gigantically ambitious, systematic theory of social movements and cultural change that played a central role in defining the field for decades to come. One year after came his pioneering *Sociology of Economic Life* (1963), a subtle and precocious essay that adumbrated the future sub-discipline of economic sociology.

In less than a decade, and still two years short of his 35th birthday, Smelser had already published a life's work of radically new sociological theory. To be sure, in the years that followed there were many more works to come. Among them, *Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences* (1976) remains a uniquely theoretical investigation of methodology, exemplary for its rigorous, counter-intuitive logic; *The Social Edges of Psychoanalysis* (1999) explosively expanded the boundaries of sociology and psychology; *The Odyssey Experience* (2009) explained how institutions can be designed to release people from organizational constraints, allowing personal creativity to reorganize the parameters of cultural life.

Yet, even as he continued and deepened his personal intellectual journey, Smelser began to invest in – to give back to — the institutions that nurtured this exemplary academic career. One path led to ever deeper participation in the University of California, to this day the world's finest public institution of higher education. In Berkeley's times of troubles in the 1960s, Smelser served as a counselor to a series of university leaders, warning against repressive measures and

arguing for negotiation and mutual understanding. For a decade, he also helped lead the Berkeley faculty association. He chaired a major task force reconsidering Berkeley's school of education. In another time of trial, he chaired the Blue Ribbon Commission investigating the university's involvement in Intercollegiate Athletics. He represented the system-wide (nine campus) faculty for two years on the California Board of Regents. He became a Special Advisor to the University of California president, a floating trouble shooter engaged in long-term planning. Another pathway beyond academic writing led Smelser into the heart of the social scientific community, from being the youngest ever editor of the *American Sociological Review* to chairing boards for the Social Science Research Council, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Academy of Sciences, and to becoming the extremely successful Director for seven years of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto.

These admirably wide-ranging extra-curricular activities remind us that citizenship is not just about participating in politics; it is also, and often even more importantly, about sustaining civil institutions. For a half century, Neil Smelser devoted himself to maintaining the most central institutions of academic life. At one point in the pages that follow Smelser recalls his seventh grade teacher pulling him aside to tell him, "you should become a diplomat." As he became an ever more powerful figure on the American (and international) academic scene, Smelser was indeed considered an honest broker, committed to deep principles both political and intellectual but even-handed, a person who not only saw but responded to the other's point of view. It was precisely this virtue, however, that allowed Smelser to move from diplomat to leader, becoming a dominant figure who dispensed great intellectual power in a sagacious, fair-minded way.

Some part of Neil Smelser's civic accomplishments were due to his cool head, his clarity of mind, and his immense, supra-disciplinary knowledge and sophistication. As a University of California leader once remarked, he was simply "non-intimidatable"! His achievements as an academic citizen were due also to his unusually synthetic turn of mind, a distrust of extremes that fed an ambition to find the golden mean. But if he was almost always disinterested, he was never uninterested. For Smelser, the politics of the academy was an ethical pursuit, the kind of morally driven and pragmatically responsible calling that Weber called "politics as a vocation."

In six decades of intellectual and civil prowess, Neil Smelser received virtually every honor, yet he eschewed bragging rights and seemed effortlessly to sustain a modest and approachable, if also high-minded, demeanor. In a time when academic stars flitted from one university and department to another, Smelser spent his entire academic career in one place. He recounts how it was that, during that time of troubles when he began to project his activities to audiences beyond department and discipline, he experienced for the first time, not simply appreciation for the University of California, but a deep love for it, an intense desire to serve and protect it from harm. Those who had the good fortune to work closely with Neil felt this love, but it was also experienced much more broadly. If Neil has been a true son of Berkeley, he has also been a profoundly significant member of society at large.

I first met Neil 43 years ago, in September, 1969, when I entered the sociology Ph.D. program at Berkeley and sat down with some 80 other graduate students to hear his weekly lectures in sociological theory, required of the department's first year students but attended by others from all over the social sciences. It was a difficult time. I had just come from SDS at Harvard and burned with all sorts of social indignation. I was taken aback by Neil's decidedly cool analytical

style, how he responded with brilliant detachment even as my Marxist friends and I peppered him with our critiques of the classical and modern sociological tradition. In later years, as my political fury ebbed and my disciplinary interests grew, I came to feel that a privileged opportunity to learn from a master had passed me by. So I took Neil's first year course all over again, this time as an advanced student, and determined never to let another opportunity to learn from him slip by. I asked him to co-chair my thesis committee; ten years later, we collaborated on three years of German-American theory conferences; ten years after that, during his directorship of the Center in Palo Alto, we organized two years of conferences and a third year of intensive disciplinary collaboration. We have co-edited two books and co-written one. My theoretical thinking about society has been deeply affected by Neil's. It has been an extraordinary privilege to learn from him these many years.

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