

8. Trust as an Aspect of Social Structure
Robert Wuthnow / 145
9. The Organizational Foundations of University Capability:
Differentiation and Competition in the Academic
Sector of Society
Burton R. Clark / 168

PART III: BELIEFS

Introduction

Jeffrey C. Alexander / 191

10. Primordial Beliefs and Immigration Policy:
The Case of Britain's Patriots
Christian Joppke / 195
11. Causal Reasoning, Historical Logic, and
Sociological Explanation
Lyn Spillman / 216
12. Intellectual Cycles of Social Movement Research:
From Psychoanalysis to Culture?
James M. Jasper / 234
13. Shaping Sociological Imagination:
The Importance of Theory
Piotr Sztompka / 254

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS / 269

INDEX / 273

Chapter 1

Mastering Ambivalence

Neil Smelser as a Sociologist of Synthesis

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Gary T. Marx, and Christine L. Williams

Future historians will write about Neil Smelser as an iconic figure in twentieth-century sociology's second half. Smelser has had an extraordinarily active career not only as a scholar but also as a teacher and organizational leader. Every participant in this volume has proudly been a "Smelser student" in one form or another. The distinction of these contributions speaks directly to Smelser's power as a teacher. His immensely impressive and varied performances as organizational leader are perhaps less well known, but they speak equally clearly of scholarly power exercised in a more political manner. His roles have included being advisor to a string of University of California chancellors and presidents; referee of the nation's most significant scientific training and funding programs, from the National Science Foundation to the departments of leading universities; organizer of the *Handbook of Sociology* and the new *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*; and, most recently, director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

In many respects, both Neil Smelser and the social sciences matured together in the second half of the last century. Smelser expanded his areas of research to include sociology, psychology, economics, and history at the same time that newly synthetic cross-disciplinary programs, area studies, and applied programs appeared. Through his work with commissions and foundations and as a spokesperson for the social sciences, he sought a greater public role for sociology and helped to foster the gradual infiltration of their findings and methods into other disciplines, practical settings, and popular culture. Smelser's early interest in comparative international studies anticipated their expansion, an increase in international collaboration, and greater awareness of globalization issues. His move from optimism about positivist approaches and functionalism in the 1950s to a more guarded opti-

mism and plurivocality today has paralleled broader doubts within the academy and greater tolerance for other ways of knowing.

There is one fundamental respect, however, in which Smelser has broken with dominant trends. The last thirty years have been marked by increasing fragmentation and seemingly endless specialization. It has been an age of centrifugal conceptual forces and centripetal methodological rigor. These post-1960s scientific developments have unfolded against a background of ideological jeremiads, the continuous reference to social crisis, and alternations between elegies and eulogies to revolutionary social change. Through all this Smelser has continued to uphold generality and synthesis as worthy scientific goals. He has maintained his intellectual commitment to uniting divergent disciplinary perspectives, and even expanded significantly his own disciplinary reach. He has become ever more dedicated to bridging various conceptual and methodological divides. He has also maintained a quiet and impressive serenity about the continuing possibility for progressive social reform and democratic political change. He has kept his eye on the ball as well as on the ballpark, on what is enduring as well as what is new.

This book honors Smelser primarily as a man of ideas. It does so by exploring the sociological pathways that he has inspired others to take. In this brief introduction, we first make some general points about Smelser's intellectual career, highlighting what we take to be his most significant contributions. We conclude by returning to Smelser as a man and a teacher. It has been these human qualities, not only his intellectual ideas, that have inspired his students to move forward on our diverse paths of intellectual life.

SMELSER THE SCHOLAR

Because he started so early and so fast, lasted so long, and matured so well, Neil Smelser has had an active life as theorist and researcher spanning almost fifty years at the time of this writing, and it shows no signs of slowing down. In 1962, at the age of thirty-two, he became editor of the *American Sociological Review*, the most influential editorial position in the discipline. Almost thirty-five years later, in 1996, he was elected president of the American Sociological Association, in recognition not only of his lifetime achievement but also of the influence, both scientific and organizational, that he had wielded over those decades.

Neil Smelser began his public life as a wunderkind. Having barely settled into Oxford as a Rhodes scholar in 1952, he was tapped by Talcott Parsons, his Harvard mentor, to advise him about preparing for the Marshall Lectures at Cambridge. Parsons wanted to demonstrate that his newly developed AGIL theory could handle economics.¹ However, he had stopped reading in that discipline before John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory*. Smelser was au courant with the Keynesian revolution and AGIL besides.

During their collaboration, it was actually Smelser, not Parsons, who suggested the scheme of double interchanges that allowed AGIL to be applied to social systems. This brilliant conceptual innovation formed the core of their jointly written book, *Economy and Society* (1956), which accomplished what its subtitle promised: an integration of economic and social theory. Along with Smelser's later work, especially *The Sociology of Economic Life* (1963), *Economy and Society* laid the foundations for the new field of economic sociology that has become central to the discipline today. It was only three years later that Smelser published the extraordinarily innovative and deeply researched book *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution: An Application of Theory to the British Cotton Industry* (1959); and only three years after that, he brought out the equally pathbreaking *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962).

While Smelser gained great distinction for this rush of early work, he also aroused great controversy. It was high noon for the functionalist paradigm. Smelser was its crown prince and its clear leader-in-waiting. His work was not only systematic, original, and erudite but also intellectually provocative and aggressive. It brimmed with great ambition and utter self-confidence, and it seemed to suggest that, with the emergence of action theory, the solution to sociology's struggles had arrived. Revealingly, the second chapter of *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* was titled "Some Empty Boxes," and the chapter that followed was titled "Filling the Boxes." In *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Smelser began with the pronouncement that, "even though many thinkers in this field attempt to be objective," they had not succeeded. Because of their failure, "the language of the field . . . shrouds its very subject in indeterminacy." The aim of his study, he proclaimed, would be to "reduce this residue of indeterminacy" by "assembling a number of categories" so that "a kind of 'map' or 'flow chart'" could be constructed of the "paths along which social action moves." While he was strongly assertive, his goal appropriately was to *reduce*, not eliminate, the residue of indeterminacy.

The youthful Neil Smelser did, in fact, succeed in filling his boxes, forever broadening our view of the industrial revolution as a multidimensional social process—political, economic, familial, cultural, and scientific, and very much contingent, all at the same time. He also managed to create an utterly new and fascinating conceptual social map, one that simultaneously separated and intertwined the different dimensions of collective behavior, social structure, and social movements in a value-added manner never before achieved. What he could not do, however, was assure the continuing sovereignty of functionalist theory. In the history of social science, much more than conceptual precision and explanatory power is involved. Every powerful approach tends to overreach and is partial and, to a degree, situationally conditioned.

Thirty years after his unabashed and triumphal entrance on the sociological scene, Neil Smelser penned a "concluding note" to his penetrating

essay "The Psychoanalytic Mode of Inquiry." He warned his readers to be careful of their imperialist urge. Was he not looking back with rueful reflection on the grand ambitions and urgent polemics of those early years?

Whenever a truly novel and revolutionary method of generating new knowledge about the human condition is generated—and the psychoanalytic method was one of those—there emerges, as a concomitant tendency, something of an imperialist urge: to turn this method to the understanding of everything in the world—its institutions, its peoples, its history, and its cultures. This happened to the Marxian approach (there is a Marxist explanation of everything), to the sociological approach generally (there is a sociology of everything), and to the psychoanalytic approach (there is a psychoanalytic interpretation of everything). (Smelser 1998c: 246)

In the halcyon days of the Parsonian revolution, there had always been a functionalist approach to everything—though few approaches, if any, could rival the power and insight generated by those developed by Smelser himself.

By the late 1960s, the functionalist approach had stalled. Attacked as ideologically conservative, accused of every imaginable scientific inadequacy, functionalism eventually lost its position of dominance. Yet Smelser's post-functionalist career has also been an extraordinary one. He did not blame the enemies of functionalism for his tradition's weakening. Instead, he targeted the nature of Parsonian thinking itself. He engaged in implicit self-criticism. This required courage and maturity.

Smelser accused foundational functionalism of hubris, of overreaching conceptually and underreaching empirically. He dressed it down for being one-sided and polemical. After making those observations on the imperialism of every "truly novel and revolutionary method" that we noted above, Smelser continued with the suggestion that "it is always legitimate to ask about the relative *explanatory* power of the method in settings and circumstances in which it was not invented." Only on the basis of such further reflection is it possible to be objective about "what are the emergent strengths *and weaknesses* of the method" (Smelser 1998c: 246, italics added).

It was just such a commitment to the task of explanation, over and above the allegiance to any particular theory, that allowed Smelser not only to stay afloat but also to flourish after the functionalist ship sank. When Parsons published his first collection of articles, in 1949, he called them *Essays in Sociological Theory*. When, two decades later, Smelser published his own, he called them *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (1968). His ambitions were tied to the scientific goals of discipline, not to any particular approach.

In 1997, in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Smelser developed what has already become the most influential essay of his later career. In "The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences," he developed an argument that exposed one-sided intellectual

polemics as a simplistic defense against the ambivalence that marks human life. "Because ambivalence is such a *powerful, persistent, unresolvable, volatile, generalizable, and anxiety-provoking* feature of the human condition," Smelser suggested, "people defend against experiencing it in many ways." For intellectual life, the "most pernicious" of these defenses is splitting, which involves "transferring the positive side of the ambivalence into an unqualified love of one person or object, and the negative side into an unqualified hatred of another" (1998d: 176–77, original italics). Smelser went on to directly apply this critical observation to sociology itself. Admonishing his colleagues that, "in our search for application of the idea of ambivalence, we would do well to look in our own sociological backyard," he observed, "There is almost no facet of our existence as sociologists about which we do not show ambivalence and its derivative, dividing into groups or quasi-groups of advocacy and counteradvocacy" (1998d: 184).

In his third major historical-cum-theoretical monograph, *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), Smelser demonstrated how this advice generalized from the path that he had now chosen for himself. Rather than declaring all preceding theoretical boxes empty and announcing that he would now proceed to fill them in, his new approach made carefully circumscribed criticisms. It proposed a theoretical model based on reconciliation and synthesis. After reviewing Whiggish, functionalist, Marxist, and status-group approaches to the history of British working-class education, Smelser suggests that each must be "criticized as incomplete, limited, incapable of answering certain problems, and perhaps even incompatible with the others." The alternative, he writes, is "to develop a perspective that is synthetic," that "incorporates insights from approaches known to have usefulness" (1991: 16–18).

From his first, vivid entry into the field of intellectual combat, Neil Smelser exhibited one of the most lucid and coherent minds that ever set sociological pen to paper. As his career continued to develop, he revealed another distinctive capacity: he became one of the most incorporative and inclusive of thinkers as well. In fact, it has been Smelser's penchant for combining opposites—the acceptance of sociological ambivalence without fear or favor—that has perhaps most distinctively marked his intellectual career. Here are some of the most important binaries that Smelser has successfully combined:

- He is one of the most abstract of theorists, yet he became an acknowledged "area specialist" in British history.
- He is a grand theorist, but he employed grand theory exclusively to develop explanations at the middle range.
- He is a functionalist, but he devoted his theoretical and empirical attention almost entirely to conflict.

- He is a liberal advocate of institutional flexibility, but he has written primarily about social paralysis and the blockages to social change (cf. Smelser 1974).
- He is a psychoanalyst who has highlighted the role of affect, but his major contributions have attacked psychologistic theorizing and explained how to fold the emotional into more sociological levels of explanation (e.g., Smelser 1998b, 2004; Smelser and Wallerstein 1998).
- He is a trained economist, but he has strenuously avoided economism, and he is a persistent student of economic life who has demonstrated how it is thoroughly imbedded in noneconomic institutions (Smelser 1968a).
- He is a systems theorist who devoted his most recent historical monograph to exploring the unbending primordiality of class.
- He is a close student of social values (e.g., Smelser 1998a) who rejects any possibility of purely cultural explanations.
- He is a theorist of social structure who eschews any form of structural determinism (Smelser 1968c, 1997: 28–48).
- He was a protégé of Talcott Parsons whom Parsons's sworn enemy, George Homans, publicly singled out for distinct praise.²

By avoiding the defense against ambivalence, Smelser demonstrated a remarkable ability to take the sword from the hands of those who would destroy him. He showed how Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels could be viewed as conflict-oriented functionalist theorists (1973). He made the gendered division of family labor an independent variable in social change (1959, 1968b) decades before many feminist theorists made arguments along these same lines. He borrowed from Alexis de Tocqueville the idea of intransigent “estates” to explain that functional positions in the educational division of labor could be understood as status groups seeking the protection of their own power (1974). He used the idea of “truce situations,” an idea that John Rex (1961) had introduced as the antithesis to functionalist consensus theory, to explain why the social differentiation, at the heart of functionalist change theory, developed in a back-and-forth, stuttering motion rather than a smooth and unfolding way. He explained how the differentiation between instrumental and expressive activities actually had been continued, not overturned, by the feminist revolution, and how this often corrosive process of social and cultural rationalization could explain the emergence of the new kinds of child-caring institutions and the increasingly difficult and negotiated character of socialization from childhood to adulthood (1998e).

Behind these specific and intellectual innovations, two overarching metathemes have animated Neil Smelser's contributions to sociology. First,

there is the insistence that social reality must be parsed into relatively autonomous analytic levels that, in empirical terms, are concretely interconnected. As he wrote in his intriguing and continuously instructive Berlin lectures, *Problematics of Sociology*, “even though the micro, meso, macro, and global levels can be identified, it must be remembered that in any kind of social organization we can observe an interpenetration of these analytic levels” (1997: 29). There is every “reason to believe,” he insisted, that all “levels of reality are analytically as important” as every other. Smelser's empirical and theoretical work consistently displays the deepest agnosticism about assigning causal apriority. His plurivocality is epistemological and insistent. He absolutely refuses to be absolute. He does not privilege any particular sector or level. Here lies the source of Smelser's famous theft from economic price theory—the notion that causality must be conceived as a “value-added” process (1962: 18–20). This apparently simple yet, in reality, quite subtle idea represents a seminal contribution to sociological thought. Social structure, beliefs, and emotions are all important, as is every level inside them. It seems fitting to incorporate this idea into the title for this honorary book.

Second, there is a deep sense that social structure can never, under any circumstances, be separated from the analysis of social process, from the study of social movement, from the flux and flummox of social change. Every book that Smelser has written, every article on social structure, every study of beliefs, and every discussion of emotions has been a study in the constructive and destructive crystallization of structures.

This double preoccupation with plurality and process, in the context of accepting ambivalence and ambiguity, led Smelser in his most recent historical monograph to a wonderfully sociological rendering of the British notion of “muddling through”:

Like all such stereotypes, this one demands skepticism and a nonliteral reading. Nevertheless, it can be argued that if any sequence of social change manifested the principle of muddling through, the one I have studied in this volume is a good candidate. . . . Almost every proposal, whether ultimately successful or not, was accompanied by a series of disclaimers. These were that past good work in the area would not be dishonored; ongoing efforts would not be disturbed; what was being added would be no more than a helpful supplement to cover certain gaps; and the claims, rights, and sensibilities of interested parties would not be offended. . . . The aim was to squeeze limited increments of social change by and through them without disturbing them. [*But the results were often much more than proponents claimed in their modesty. And in the long run, the policy . . . revolutionized the educational system. The road to that end was marked, however, by a great deal of muddling through.*] (1991: 370, italics added)

Smelser writes here about the ultimate effects of what initially were intended to be modest proposals for reform. He might, in addition, be

speaking about the cumulative effects of the flow of theoretical proposals he has generated in the latter part of his long scientific career. They, too, were accompanied by disclaimers and by the concern not to dishonor past good work. They, too, were launched in a manner designed to not overly disturb ongoing sociological efforts of other kinds, and were presented as helpful supplements rather than as unfriendly displacements. Indeed, Smelser did succeed in his effort not to offend the rights and sensibilities of other sociological parties. All the same, he challenged their claims, and in the long run his work has had, if not revolutionary, then certainly fundamental intellectual effects. Over the course of fifty years in the sociological trenches, he has muddled through in a remarkable and inspirational way.

SMELSER THE TEACHER AND MENTOR

Few twentieth-century sociologists touched so many lives in so many positive ways as Neil Smelser. These include the lives of not only his immediate students and those who have learned from his voluminous writing but also those who have indirectly benefited from his role as a leading advocate for the social sciences and higher education.

These chapters by a small fraction of his students and colleagues are testament to his profound impact. Ernest Hemingway advised authors to show rather than to tell. This volume goes far in showing some of the intellectual and stylistic strengths that Neil passed on to his students. His intellectual legacy lies partly in his substantive contributions to diverse fields, such as British history, social change, collective behavior, higher education, the economy, and psychoanalysis, and partly in his exceptional leadership and service roles as a social science statesperson and representative.

His legacy also lies in the many lives he has touched through his teaching and cooperative scholarly endeavors. To many of us he demonstrated that the division between teaching and research was too sharply drawn. For the inspired instructor, teaching was a major vehicle for exploring ideas and exercising intellectual curiosity. It could be a kind of testing ground where ideas that would later appear in print were first put forth. Teaching was a means of coming to better terms with the contradictions in the world and within the social thought that sought to comprehend that world.

Teaching was also a way to communicate the love of ideas and appreciation of the rich intellectual heritage we were bequeathed. In his Social Theory 218 class, taken by most Berkeley graduate students over the more than three decades between 1958 and 1994, Neil communicated, as he continues to communicate, a sense of reverence for those giants of social and psychological thought who sought to understand the vast changes in culture, social organization, and personality associated with the development of the modern world. He showed us that we are not alone—that the social and ethical

questions which assume such great importance today were wrestled with by the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century pioneers of the field. Yet his respect was tempered with critical analysis and the insight that every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. He honored our intellectual past without being stifled by it. Clearly there was lots of work left to be done, given new social conditions and the fallibility of any single approach considered against the richness of social reality.

Academic researchers are nourished by a rich network of inherited ideas initially obtained from those with whom we study. Under the best of conditions, our teachers go beyond offering substantive knowledge and methodological guidance to offering models for how to be in the world. We learn from our mentors directly, through the transmission of ideas, as well as indirectly, through observation. Those of us privileged to have been Neil's students and colleagues have been doubly blessed in this regard. We have benefited from his knowledge and intellect as expressed in his writings and lectures, from his incisive, but diplomatic and supportive, criticism of our work, and from his mentoring and guidance in how to be in the academic world.

In a world where many self-impressed academic egos could make Narcissus appear to have an inferiority complex and dwarf the sense of entitlement felt by the Pharaohs, Neil stands out by his support for and interest in others, his humility, and his low-key, friendly, western American manner. Perhaps the self-confidence that flows from unmatched career success and from good psychoanalysis partly accounts for this. But it also speaks to something more basic: he is simply a nice guy. And one who is also judicious, tolerant, conscientious, balanced, and fair. He sees that the big picture can be known only by looking at the many small pictures that make it up, and that our understanding of the latter is limited unless considered in light of broader, often interdependent factors.

The chapters in this volume are inspired by the authors' contact with the ideas and persona of Neil Smelser. Beyond their rich content, the work reflects some basic themes that Neil demonstrates and has passed on as a scholar and a human being. Like Neil, these chapters are intellectually diverse, crossing disciplines, methods, cultures, and time periods. They share Neil's emphasis on documenting the empirical and unique, not as ends in themselves, as with most journalists and historians, but as building blocks in the quest for more general and enduring (if not necessarily universal) statements about societies. Like Neil with his broad intellectual palette, the authors use a variety of methods (historical case studies, surveys, interviews, and simply thinking). Yet the starting point is always the question rather than the method. Unlike the strand of social inquiry that begins by asking which questions a preferred method can answer, the focus here is on which methods are *needed* to answer the question. Answers do not stand alone, and, as in

Neil's work, in many of the chapters in this volume there is an effort to integrate diverse materials and methods.

Following Neil's model, most of the chapters deal with topics not easily quantified, such as historical change and subjectivity, yet they do so in a logical and systematic fashion. The authors draw upon the empirical to limit, justify, and extend the conceptual, while the conceptual brings some definition and order to the formless flow of the empirical. In some chapters there is attention to comparative international aspects, and in almost all of them the logic of comparative analysis can be found, even when the comparisons are between social forms rather than countries or cultures.

The chapters use theory as a compass more than as a fixed road map. While informed by the values and pressing issues of the day (e.g., change, equality, democracy, freedom, civil liberties, individuality, and citizenship), the chapters are balanced and scholarly. They put the pursuit of truth before the passion for change, without in any way denying the ubiquity and necessity of change in many areas. Indeed, as Neil's extensive efforts to advance national and international understanding of, and resources for, the social sciences make clear, purposive change not grounded in empirical fact and conceptual understanding is likely to fail, particularly in the long run.³ The basic commitment is to advancing knowledge about important social questions. If there is a dominant method, it is one called *thought*—to be judged by its scholarship, imagination, logical rigor, and empirical support.

Finally, while not lacking in argument or point of view, the articles, like Neil, are nondoctrinaire. They acknowledge complexity and the appropriateness of multiperspicacity. Many seek to go beyond being cross-disciplinary to being interdisciplinary and integrative.

Beyond sharing the abstract characteristic noted above, these articles are diverse in subject matter, method, and degree and kind of explicit theoretical argument. The coherence exists at a general level. This contrasts with many such volumes in which acolytes honor their mentor by exploring themes narrowly within the mentor's orbit. This again speaks to Neil's style, encouragement, and openness. He did not seek to build a school. His own independence and awareness of the variety of approaches appropriate to understanding a complex and changing world prevented this. There seems to be little of the often latent oedipal conflict found in many teacher-student situations. Rather, he was broadly supportive and encouraged us to follow our muse, guided by a quest for excellence and a willingness to work hard. Budding scholars worthy of the name (and the scholarly enterprise) are indeed well served when offered resources, support, and guidance to pursue their own interests, rather than being expected to add another plank to the building of their mentors.

Gary Marx, one of Neil's first Berkeley students, discussed the idea for a book such as this with Christine Williams, one of Neil's last students. Later,

in planning for this volume, they learned that Jeff Alexander, a student at Berkeley during the middle years of Neil's career, was also planning such a volume, and we joined forces.

Neil's career has covered almost five decades, various locales (Cambridge, London, Berkeley, Palo Alto), and diverse academic, editorial, special-assignment, and service roles. In the language of football, Neil is a triple (or more) threat. These chapters are intended to reflect the research side. An appreciation of his contributions to teaching and his various public service roles is also in order.

Even restricting our emphasis to research alone, we have had to be more selective than we wished. Neil has taught numerous students, chaired more than fifty Ph.D. committees, and served as an outside member on many more. In editing this volume, we sought to make it broadly representative of the major areas Neil has worked in and of students across his career by including a sampling of his students who have themselves gone on to make significant contributions to knowledge. A few authors here are colleagues with whom he has worked particularly closely—they are his students in a less formal sense. Given the scope and scale of Neil's career, there are many other colleagues who could have contributed to this volume. We are sorry that resource constraints prevented our casting an even wider net.

NOTES

1. AGIL refers to the four "pattern variables" in Parsons's theory of social action. In particular, these are *adaptation*, *goal attainment*, *integration*, and *pattern maintenance*, later changed to *latency*.

2. From Homans (1964: 815):

My next contention is that even confessed functionalists, when they seriously try to explain certain kinds of social phenomena, in fact use non-functional explanations. . . . A particularly good example of this new development in functionalism is Neil Smelser's book, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution: An Application of Theory to the British Cotton Industry, 1770-1840*. The book is not just good for my purposes: it is good, very good, in itself. It provides an enormous amount of well organized information, and it goes far to explain the changes that occurred. The amusing thing about it is that the explanation Smelser actually uses, good scientist that he is, to account for the changes is not the functionalist theory he starts out with, which is as usual a non-theory, but a different kind of theory and a better one.

3. For examples, see Adams, Smelser, and Treiman 1982; Smelser and Gerstein 1986; Gerstein, Luce, Smelser, and Sperlich 1988; and Luce, Smelser, and Gerstein 1989.

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