

Gary T. Marx, Oct. 16, 2017

## **Neil Smelser: As Gifted and Gift Giver**

*Vita mutatur, non tollitur*

Latin Rite Mass

When learning of the unexpected death of a mentor, words of sorrow can never adequately communicate the sense of loss. But written memories can offer trace elements of the specialness and love the person inspired. These remarks are offered in that spirit and in the good fortune to have had Neil as a teacher and friend for 57 years.

The void created by the passing of a mentor who was central to one's development is immense. It is as if a pillar anchoring one to life and meaning suddenly disintegrates. There is a material, reeling sense of instability and unreality, not unlike what I recall from experiencing the ground roil from earthquakes in southern California.

If we are among the very fortunate, sometime in life we are inspired and gently guided by a person of extraordinary insight, character, competence and kindness. Neil Smelser was such a person for legions of students and colleagues in higher education. His unselfish dedication to individuals and hallowed institutions set the bar as high, and at times it seemed even higher, than was humanely possible.

Such persons by their deeds and the simple act of being, help others find their own path, uplift the human spirit and create and sustain our highest civilizational ideals. While I profited intellectually from other mentors, their lessons were largely practical, professional and impersonal. Not so with Neil, who was a role model both personally and professionally.

To take one example, in 1964 after having passed my orals exam, I was deciding about whether or not to take a year off and travel around the world before the concrete of home ownership, pets and kids set in. Goffman and others advised against it. But Neil was very encouraging and that made it possible to just do it. I asked him later about that and he said he identified with my quest (e.g., his later odyssey book). That sense of well-roundedness was terribly important to me at that time of identity exploration, given my doubts about being a one-dimensional

person like so many (I imagined at least) that I saw on the faculty and even fellow students who seemed so dedicated, narrow and serious.

Neil was the engineer on a very long train whose antecedents are deep in Greek history. The train continually evolves with each new crop of engineers. Georg Simmel has written of the "irredeemable gratitude" felt toward the gift giver. This applies to what one feels toward the mentor who offers his or her intellectually and morally powerful sensibilities and insights to guide a career and a life.

Awareness that such gifts cannot be directly reciprocated, deepens the indebtedness. Yet reciprocation is possible by doing for our students (whether those in the class room or those reached through writing) what Neil did with such skill and grace --passing on the values, sentiments, style, method, substance and even love of what he was given, enhanced by his own experiences and creativity. The giver is paid back in knowing that what he or she offers is a gift that keeps on giving, as links are added to the chain.

Wordsworth tells us that we should not grieve for the splendor in the grass, nor for the glory of the flower, but rather seek strength in what remains behind. Yet we can also gain strength in what lies *ahead* that we will never know.

We pay back those who have given us so much by passing it on. As teachers we are rewarded in knowing that through our students and their students *ad infinitum* some of what we give seeps into the culture and geometrically trickles across generations --whether in direct interaction or to those we don't know who encounter our work.

Our sense of connection to life and earth is deepened by awareness of what we inherited and of what we pass on. I recently came across sociologist Robert Bella's observation regarding death that he "...had within me the earliest beginnings of the components of a billion or more years of life, the genes that I share with worms (a lot) and with mold (some) and the atoms that I share with the universe all the way back to the big bang. So returning to all that isn't so bad. Further, I will join the company of saints, of all those whose cultural work has made it possible for me to have been a half-way decent person, and *what I have added to the cultural pool, even when I am long forgotten, will go on having an influence ...for a long, perhaps an immeasurable time.*"

The scholar is complicit in the great chain of being that involves the delivery, receipt and transmission of knowledge. Knowledge and the values of the humanistic tradition, unlike other forms of wealth, are enriched as they are shared and exchanged. Neil understood this with respect to both the giants who shouldered him and the imposing stature he offered to support subsequent generations. I am very glad that I was able to give him further evidence of how his impact continues to reverberate in sending my recent book on surveillance so steeped in systematic conceptualization and an article on meaning in academic careers ( <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/whatsit.html> ).

What Neil did for so many of us was not so much by passing on substance or a fixed approach/method, but rather by way of example. For me, in that 218 social theory class and in the collective behavior book, he taught by way of illustration, by his energy and really his LOVE of untangling theoretical knots and using concepts to make sense of the empirical. I saw for the first time that learning could be a calling with deep historical roots and that in spite of all that divides people and groups, the quest for truth in the face of all that inhibits finding it was a noble, even sacred pursuit, one that could unite persons of good will sharing those values and one that was possible. He was the essence of civility, but without the sense of *noblesse oblige* others of his status might have so easily reflected.

In responding to an article I wrote on 36 moral mandates for sociologists ( <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/37moral.html> ), Neil suggested the last sentence for what became mandate #37. "Know that both principles and ideas matter and that the individual can make a difference. *Believe that knowledge is better than ignorance, that knowledge is possible, and that empirical and scientific knowledge about human and social conditions can result in the improvement of those conditions*". What a magnificent summation of a major factor that directed his and his students' lives.

I have further expressed many of the reasons for my unbounded admiration and appreciation for Neil as a mentor, scholar and teacher in an introduction ( <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/tocb.html> ) to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reissue of his classic *Theory of Collective Behavior and Social Movements*.

Co-editors Jeff Alexander, Chris Williams and I and other colleagues also wrote about Neil in a 2004 festschrift volume (*Self, Social Structure and Belief* ( <https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520241374> ). Some excerpts from our introduction:

“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 optimism 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 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 [*in this book*] 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 T. 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....

## **Introduction to Section Two (pp. 77-78)**

The five chapters in this section edited by Gary T. Marx treat highly varied topics--the limits of rational choice, types of exchange, religion, trust, and higher education. Yet to varying degrees they all directly reflect six lessons learned from Neil Smelser as a teacher and scholar.

These lessons are (1) that social analysis must avoid reductionism as well as "parallel trackism," in which analytic borders are impenetrable; (2) that we must attend to different levels of social analysis; (3) that, where possible, we must identify reciprocal influences and integrate levels, paradigms, and specialized theories; (4) that we must generate abstract analytic categories, whether treated as single dimensions or combined to form typologies and ideal types; (5) that we must apply middle-range approaches rather than a general theory to the richness of an ever-changing empirical world; and (6) that we must consider both social structure and social process and recognize that, while behavior (whether of individuals, groups, or institutions) is contingent on prior (highly variable but not unlimited) social circumstances, it is also fluid and dynamic, reflecting unique local circumstances and individual agency. A related idea is that the very social and cultural structures that give legitimacy and stability to behavior are subject to inherent tensions and contradictions, resulting in specific forms of deviance, conflict, change, and varied interpretations of objectively similar behavior.

In contrast to the academic stables overflowing with one-trick ponies, whether of explanation, level of analysis, method, or a preferred focus on social order or social change, Neil Smelser has encouraged pluralism and, where possible, the integration of diverse intellectual perspectives. His tent is substantively inclusive but not indiscriminately so. Its supports rest on standards of excellence, theoretical imagination, and the search for connections. When we unreflectively restrict our focus, our careers may be advanced, but we risk missing interconnections and do not see how barely visible cultural assumptions and limitations of time and place may limit our understanding.

The need for tolerance and the need to avoid reducing explanation to one perspective--whether involving rational choice, power, psychoanalysis, culture, or social structure--require no justification within the better sectors of sociology. Yet intellectual breadth and pluralism, at their best, need not imply the spineless relativism characteristic of contemporary approaches imported from the humanities, or the isolation from each other and failure to

seek interaction effects and integration that currently characterize many specialized approaches.

There is a powerful scene in the film *Chinatown* in which Jack Nicholson tries to determine how Faye Dunaway is related to a young woman in her family. At first Dunaway responds, "She's my sister," then "She's my daughter," and under Nicholson's grilling she continues to say, "She's my sister," then "She's my daughter." Finally, in response to Nicholson's demanding which it is, she replies, "Both," indicating an incestuous relationship with her father. The nonbinary nature of that encounter illustrates a central theme of Neil's career: careful and systematic thought and empirical inquiry may suggest that seemingly rival approaches to social reality can each be helpful and advance our understanding through integration. Where you stand depends on where you sit, and it is important to move around....”

(Please note also [Mastering Ambivalence: Neil Smelser as a Sociologist of Synthesis](#). In J. Alexander, G. T. Marx, and C. Williams, Self, Social Structure, and Belief. University of California Press, 2004.)

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