Inter-Civilizational Encounters and the Construction of Social Actors. A Note

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In this brief and preliminary note I comment on the notion of inter-civilizational encounters developed by Benjamin Nelson which I believe to be particularly fruitful and important. I wish to emphasize certain methodological and conceptual aspects of the matter and show convergencies between the conceptual apparatus required for the study of inter-civilizational encounters and other developments in current sociological theory.

The program of a comparative sociology, of course, is as old as our discipline itself. Indeed, as Emile Durkheim noted, all sociology is inherently comparative and cannot be otherwise. And yet, some uses of the comparative method for the variation of the contexts of social phenomena had to remain unsatisfactory because of insufficient clarity in the understanding of the dynamics of society and intersocietal relations. Societies and civilizations are treated as objects by sociologists. However, they are also contexts within which scholars form their perspectives and observations. It is in this regard that the concentration on the often abrasive and certainly always dynamic inter-civilizational encounters becomes a strategic corrective. It provides occasions for directing the social observer's attention both to dramatic and drastic contrasts in patterns of social relations. Even more important may be the fact that the attention to inter-civilizational processes requires an understanding of inter-societal and inter-civilizational structures and their changes. Nelson has directed our attention, indeed, to an area most fruitful for the further development of social science.

In the often conflictual arena of inter-civilizational encounters it is possible to observe the interdependencies and dynamics of symbolism and social relations with particular clarity. For example, the great encounter between China and the West, and the current Chinese integration of Marxian and nationalist models into a uniquely Chinese moral fabric challenges the sociological imagination to construct an adequate account. The mobilization of great social energies, and the construction and wide adoption of new, symbolically articulated models of individuality, and of Chinese nationhood seem to require for their understanding not merely the tools of descriptive history or of existing sociological theory, but new analytical devices fashioned in an awareness of the significance of inter-civilizational processes for intrasocietal structures. The Chinese example is particularly compelling. However, the problem is general: the concern with inter-civilizational encounters directs our attention to contrasting symbolic rationales of action and modes for constructing collective and individual identities which even the comparative observer otherwise may be inclined to take for granted, or overlook.

Thus, if one is convinced, as I am, that investigating the interdependencies and dynamics of symbolism and social relations is a matter that is central and urgent for the further development of social scientific theory today, one must follow Nelson's lead. Within that broad domain of inter-civilizational encounters and their arenas there is one concern that seems to me of theoretically dominant importance, namely the way in which actors, individually and collectively, are constructed and their identities shaped. Putting it differently, it is the question of how different modes of being a person and different conceptions of solidarities are formed, cast into models of personal identity, conceptions of organization and authority, integrated into models of collectivities and mediated by what are considered binding rationales of decision. In the Chinese case, for example, there is no doubt that the Chinese Communist revolution was not merely an internal Chinese movement in overthrowing one regime in favor of another, but that the Communist movement itself perceived its own historic role in the context of China's suffering and inferiority in relation to the West and thus shaped a sense of national identity in an international and inter-civilizational arena. In this context the image of the Chinese "new man" and the construction of a moral order are integral aspects of the process of transformation which proceeded with astonishing rapidity through the dissemination of specific models not only of organization, but also of individuality.

Maybe this is merely a minor variation on Nelson's emphasis on different structures of consciousness which are laid bare with particular clarity through the description of encounters and of conflicts. However, it becomes a matter of importance for the social scientist to account for such structures of consciousness so that he is enabled to describe the conditions under which changes in them arise. The classic tradition of sociology has dealt implicitly with this issue in treating social solidarities and modes of individuation. Since Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel a great deal of work has been done which we should be able to organize and integrate for more coherent, specific and appropriate accounts of the construction of social actors. Of particular relevance in this context are microsociological developments, following up the leads of George Herbert Mead, and more recently Alfred Schutz, including the empirical studies of social action conducted by Omar Khayyam Moore and Alan Anderson and the work stimulated by them. Obviously, this note is not the occasion to attempt a detailed explication of what such a theoretical synthesis involves; but a sketchy indication may be possible.

The focus on the way in which social actors are constructed expands the scope of explicit sociological theorizing in that it raises questions about the changing nature of actors themselves, be they individuals or collectives, and the conditions of their emergence and structuring. An actor must be an object and a subject simultaneously; that is, he must be capable of demonstrating his identity by establishing determinate relations between himself and other actors within a frame for such relations considered appropriate or compelling. The constraint to engage in such identifying performances and to maintain or alter frames for the determination of identity limits both the modes in which an actor can be construed to be an object and the perspectives he can adopt as a subject. Thus, the focus on the construction of social actors makes it inevitable to study the relation between consciousness (subjectivity) and social structure, thus placing cultural patterns in relation to the so-called "real factors" of cultural dynamics. Indeed, the drift towards idealism

inherent in much cultural analysis—of which Nelson's paper also might be accused—should be corrected by the emphasis proposed here.

In relation to these pursuits it is of considerable methodological concern to clarify the concepts to be used. I will select only four of such concepts for brief sketches. An interplay between historical studies of inter-civilizational encounters and micro-analyses of human conduct is required for the clarification of these concepts in scientific usage.

The concept "*frame of reference*" points us to the fact that an observer interprets an experience or observation by relating it to a taken-for-granted frame which provides anchor points for his standards of judgment or measurement. It is well known that the concept "frame of reference" has been widely used in social psychology, especially in studies of social perception, that it has found its way into studies of cognitive orientation in the sociology of science, the professions and the like. It is clearly relevant in the study of inter-cultural and inter-civilizational encounters; however, if we wish to use it in a more than metaphorical sense it becomes necessary to investigate in close detail the way in which reference frames (or as Schutz calls them with a provocative phrase "systems of relevance") are anchored and how they are structured through rationales for cognitive operation as well as specific measurements and judgments. A very great deal of the necessary work in this regard still remains to be done.

Similarly, there has been wide use in the sociology of culture and in social psychology of conceptions like "*models of and for action*." These notions have been formulated and used by Geertz, and in a specific and technical way by Moore (who has investigated the symbolic structure of "folk models") (Geertz, 1964; 1963; Moore, 1973). Clearly, models of action are a critical aspect for understanding human activity, as they provide pathways to the solution of recurrent problems encountered in activity. The relation between the symbolic structure of such models and the structuring of reference frames still remains to be studied with necessary rigor. The integration of action models into models of actors and identity refers to the overriding problem alluded to above. Surely, it is not a simple matter to demonstrate who and what an actor is, especially since his identifying performances tend to be demanded in stressful situations. The range of available models of actors and identities thus becomes an important limitation for the range of possible activities. Such models in an historical sense include the conceptions of citizen, subject, the idea of personality, and the like. These culturally constructed models for individual identity tend to be related to models for collective identities—such as the nation state, or some other group or organization. Again, it seems clear that variation in these models would be limited by available reference frames.

"*Rationale for decision*" is a term referring to a specific domain of symbolism, namely that which enables an actor to calculate and justify a decision outcome. Here a broad body of work is relevant, but extreme care must be taken to avoid normative and prescriptive uses in favor of empirical investigations of the historic variation in rationales of decision. Thus, a body of work related to modern "decision theory" is of questionable utility in this regard, unless specifically used to determine alternatives in historic rationales.

Finally, the conception of "*models of conscience*" refers to cultural articulations of paradigms for integrating rationales of decision and models of identity. Again, we

are only in the beginning of empirical investigation and the concomitant conceptual clarification of this notion. The very terminology, however, has the advantage of sensitizing us to the fact that models of this kind are cultural objects, diffusable and learnable and capable of being studied in their own right.

I conclude this note in the hope that it does illustrate some strategically important ways in which the focus on inter-civilizational encounters calls for new concept formation in sociology which simultaneously integrates micro-sociological analyses and their yield into the emergent body of knowledge of broad patterns of historical development.

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Reflections on the Sociology of Civilizations

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The stimulus for this paper is an invitation by the editor of this journal to respond to the recent article of Benjamin Nelson, "Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters." I have found this to be a welcomed and challenging task. Nelson's essay is provocative and programmatic in a variety of respects involving multiple referents. That is one sort of challenge. Another is that he covers a wide terrain of figures and epochs and presupposes the reader's familiarity with this terrain. Lastly, the eclecticism of the essay is not organized around an explicit theoretical frame of reference nor a discernable methodology for relating sociologically to the phenomena of civilizational complexes and intercivilizational encounters. Like Balboa, Nelson has brought us to the shore of a new ocean. Or, to modify metaphor, Nelson is drawing our attention to the fact of a sociological sea which has had early navigators—such as Weber and Durkheim—who at the time