

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

may have had only dim awareness of just what it was they were seeking to explore. Nelson does have a clear awareness of this *mare incognitum*: the sociology of civilizations, and he is trying to indicate to sociologists both the theoretical relevance and the practical urgency in establishing the cartography of this vast body.

In the great sociological tradition of Durkheim, Weber, and if I may add, Sorokin, Nelson's existential starting and concluding point is the crisis of modern society at its ideational underpinnings. It is the explosion of the cultural basis of Western civilization which is at the heart of the matter. For Weber, the process of rationalization that had so profoundly marked and given dynamism to the social structures of Western civilization, having differentiated itself so much from the spiritual life that had animated this process in the early phases of modernization, was losing its energy and its sense to actors, and thereby putting the whole edifice of the civilizational complex into question. For Durkheim, the definition of the crisis was in terms of increasing normative ambiguity underlying social organization. The two are not far apart, and when Nelson in diagnosing the sociocultural processes that are involved in the crisis of modern society draws attention to one of the revolutionary processes, that which he calls "World-Revolutions in the Structures of Consciousness and Conscience," his highlighting of "a comprehensive antinomianism, better described as *A-nomism*" (Nelson, 1973a:81) suggests the common ground linking Weber and Durkheim. Durkheim's key concept of *anomie* is obviously reflected in Nelson's emphasis on antinomianism or "*A-nomism*," and Durkheim certainly had in mind that the structural condition of *anomie* involved the breakdown of social discipline, the lack of commitment to social rules curbing individual desires, the lack of motivational commitment to the welfare of society in preference for immediate fulfillment of gratifications. As to Weber, it seems to me that his analysis of the depersonalizing tendencies of modern bureaucracy, on the one hand, and his critique of the intrusion of political ideology in the academic setting, on the other, both point to his anguish over the increasing undermining of the commitment to personal responsibility. At the heart of antinomianism—stated as *A-nomism* or by any other designation—is the felt release on the part of the actor of personal responsibility for one's social conduct. If I define myself as "saintly" and the social order out-there as "ungodly"—a structure of consciousness which characterizes antinomianism—then the problem of the social responsibility of my actions is non-existent. This perspective is antithetical to the "voluntaristic" frame of reference of both Weber and Durkheim.<sup>1</sup>

Now Weber and Durkheim felt the need to re-examine the structural and historical base of the crisis of present-day Western civilization. This entailed their probing into transformations of the structures of consciousness and conscience, a theme which occupies the fourth part of Nelson's essay, wherein he presents us with an essentially historical typology of three distinct forms of consciousness: from magico-sacral, to faith-structures, and, appearing in the 13th Century or so, to the rationalized structures of consciousness. It is the latter which is on trial today, and if I understand Nelson correctly, the prosecution of the case is led by

<sup>1</sup>In this and several other crucial aspects not germane to the present discussion, Talcott Parsons is quite justified in drawing the convergence between Durkheim and Weber. See Parsons' classical study, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), New York: The Free Press, 1968.

both antinomianism and Marxism; just who is the defense for Western civilization, if not for its heretofore dominant structural mode of consciousness, is unfortunately not clear in Nelson's essay. Is it the case that the sensibilities and tendencies of the present historical situation can no longer accommodate or support a civilizational ethos characterized by rationalized structures of consciousness? And, if this is the case, what are the alternatives that we as sociologists have to envisage as the most likely outcomes? This is a crucial problem which I think is one of the key messages of Nelson, but it is not a new problem. For it is the problem that Pitirim Sorokin (1950; 1951; 1962) grappled with in various settings. And if Sorokin did not make much use of the terms "civilization" or "structures of consciousness," he certainly shared the same universe of discourse as that of Nelson, for he did seek to relate within the focus of sociocultural change the inner dynamics of civilizational complexes to transformations of structures of consciousness (notably those major complexes of consciousness and conscience he designated as "sensate," "idealistic" and "ideational"). And the same problem, I think, is also at the heart of Arnold Toynbee's comparative study of civilizations, or going back a little further in this century, that of Alfred Weber's *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie* (1935), and further back to Oswald Spengler's seminal study of civilizations, *The Decline of the West*. I mention these four because in the third part of Nelson's essay, in which he rightfully calls for a codification of the literature pertinent to the comparative study of civilizational complexes and intercivilizational relations, he has neglected to do so. Quite rightly, Nelson wishes to sensitize us to the pioneering contributions of earlier pioneers in the comparative sociology of civilizations: Maine, Durkheim, Mauss, Max Weber and Joseph Needham.<sup>2</sup> But at this nascent stage of formulation, I should think that sociology students of civilizations seeking insights and areas of investigation can ill afford not to have familiarity with the writings of the figures I have mentioned.

So much for a first reflection. Now let me go into the deeper meanings of Nelson's endeavor in this and other writings of his. The kaleidoscopic political and cultural changes of the 1960's are temporarily behind us. Sociology, it seems to me, is in search of a new theoretical paradigm, and the "return to normalcy" at the national level is echoed in the return to the sociology of the interesting trivia—from the trivia of descriptions of the everyday life to the trivia of sophisticated techniques based on artificial models of social reality. In the midst of so much banality, Nelson in his recent essay has sounded the prophet's trumpet to reawaken the sociological imagination. If I heard correctly the sound of the trumpet, he is saying something like this: "Sociology has to think big. It has to tackle the big problems that our forefathers, Durkheim and Weber, had begun to apprehend. Macrosociology has to rethink its unit of analysis: not society (that is, political society or the nation-state) but civilizational complexes should be the ultimate units of sociological analysis."

Ben Nelson has provided a signal service to the sociological profession in giving us a new dimension of the writings of Durkheim and Weber, namely, their convergence on the significance of *civilizations* as a unit of macro-comparative

<sup>2</sup>I wish that Nelson had space to explicate just what Needham's contributions are in terms of comparative significance for sociology.

analysis. Weber's comparative studies of religion may properly be thought of as constituting one frame of reference for a sociology of civilizations. At the heart of a civilizational complex is its religious cluster of symbolizations, and this cluster may be thought of as a fundamental cultural paradigm. Weber had particular interest in the major centers of civilizational complexes: Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe in particular. Certainly more than any other figure I can think of, Weber presented us with a canvas of the sociology of civilizations which in itself still remains a major theoretical breakthrough. But the canvas is not a finished one, and the master's death deprived us of his ultimate intention. For example, did Weber intend to come to grips with the theme of intercivilizational encounters, and if so, what veins would he have exploited in this respect? This is not simply an interesting academic question but it also has its practical aspect. Thus, how would Weber have evaluated the chances or the probability of non-Western areas to sustain in the modern world those economic, social, and political structures spawned or favored by the presence at an historically pregnant moment of the ethos of ascetic Protestantism? Another lacuna in the canvas, it seems to me, is that in looking at the backgrounds of Western civilization Weber did not have the time to uncover the civilizational complex of ancient Egypt. This I think needs attention on various grounds. First because ancient Egyptian religion and its attendant civilizational complex was a very significant medium of cultural interchanges with (a) the Mediterranean literal, and in particular with Judaic and Hellenistic cultures, both of which for prolonged periods had major encounters with various levels of Egyptian culture, and with (b) sub-Sahara Africa, extending from Ethiopia, to Equatorial and even West Africa (Diop, 1959). Second, because many non-theological or non-ideational elements of Western Christianity have their origins in ancient Egypt. I am thinking here of the ritual and mythological aspects of "Christianity," such as aspects of the priesthood (including the monastery), the mystery rites of death and rebirth, and the rituals and symbols of such esoteric Western societies as Freemasonry for whom the "tradition" extends even further back from the construction of the Temple to the mysteries of the Pyramids.<sup>3</sup>

In respect to Durkheim, American sociologists owe a debt to Nelson for his recent translation and publication of a collaborative note of Durkheim and Mauss on the notion of "civilization." This note is found in 1969 re-issues (Duvignaud (ed.), 1969; Karady (ed.), 1969) of its original 1913 publication in volume 12 of the *Année Sociologique*. There are a couple of points I would like to make in this context. It is in that volume, the last published under Durkheim's editorship, that a bibliographic heading entitled "Civilizations and Types of Civilizations" appears for the first time in the *Année Sociologique*, and moreover it appears in the very first section, "General Sociology." We should keep in mind that the *Année Sociologique* was for Durkheim and Mauss more than just a journal; it was a laboratory for evolving sociological conceptualizations. Therefore, if Durkheim and Mauss included a new section on civilizations in the central domain of general

<sup>3</sup>If all this seems a bit quaint, we might keep in mind that the lure of the Pyramids in the West is as esoteric as exotic: it is a key symbol of the Great Seal of the United States, and quite possibly also might account for one aspect of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition.

sociology, this can only serve to indicate the great importance Durkheim had come to give in his last years to the notion of civilization as a heuristic sociological tool of comparative analysis.

The joint note with Mauss, and the immediately ensuing critique by Durkheim of Wilhelm Wundt's *Elemente der Voelkerpsychologie*,<sup>4</sup> together constitute the rudiments of a conceptualization of the sociology of civilizations. There is a call for the need of a division of labor in studying civilizations, and the need to eschew an unilinear evolutionary model.<sup>5</sup> There is a call for mapping out the geographic areas of civilizations and for accounting for their frontiers. There is a call for accounting for differentials in the "coefficient of expansion and internationalization" of elements originating in the cultural matrix of one civilization. Durkheim and Mauss saw the need for ethnography and history for preliminary research in the mapping out of civilizations; after the initial necessary spade work, however, the comparative study of civilizations was for them an urgently needed sociological endeavor.

Another reflection which emerges from the above is how right Nelson is to make us realize that Weber and Durkheim, from separate tracks, were converging on a new field, the sociology of civilizations. But, because of their respective untimely deaths within a few years of each other, they left us with little more than a prolegomenon which needs much greater articulation and explication.

Where do we go from here? Nelson's formulation of the sociology of civilizations suggests to me that part of this field should be devoted on the one hand to examining "civilizational encounters," that is, interchanges between civilizational complexes, and on the other, "structures of consciousness" within the internal evolution of a given civilization. These are worthwhile suggestions but they also require additional specification.

For example, we need to reflect on what units of a civilization should be examined in "encounters." For sociological purpose, at least, an historical individual, or even a group of individuals, who for a brief time are foreign visitors or residents in a different civilizational complex from their own may not be sufficient to constitute a "civilizational encounter." Marco Polo in Cathay or the Jesuit mission to the Imperial Court of China in the 16th Century may formally be thought of as instances of encounters between Western and Chinese civilizations, but what structural changes or changes in the structures of consciousness in their respective civilizations can be demonstrated to have been brought about as a result of these encounters? On the other hand, the impact of Western civilization upon Chinese civilization in the 19th Century did have more dramatic and long-term effects, such as the rise of new structures of political consciousness (Cohen, 1963; Shih, 1966).

We need, then, to look at the sociohistorical context of the encounters, what

<sup>4</sup>Pp. 50-61 in the 1913 edition and pp. 682-696 in the 1969 Duvignaud edition. It would be very worthwhile to have available an English translation of the Wundt critique.

<sup>5</sup>Let me quote the following prophetic passage of Durkheim in his critique of Wundt: "Nothing informs us that tomorrow's civilization will be only the extension of what is today taken as the most advanced civilization; on the contrary, perhaps tomorrow's leading civilization will have as its agents peoples we judge as inferior, like China for example, and who will give it an unexpected and new direction" (P. 60f in Volume 12 of the *Année Sociologique*).

aspects of civilizational complexes were altered as a result of the encounters, and whether the changes occasioned by the encounters were short-term or long-term ones for the respective civilizations. Perhaps what is called for at this stage is for a group of sociologists having some in-depth knowledge of specific historical civilizational encounters to get together and examine a variety of specific cases in order to come up with a methodological harvester that can separate the wheat from the chaff.

As a sociological concept, the notion of "civilization" suggests a sociocultural referent of a larger degree of magnitude than the nation-state, yet more specific than a more inclusive and more amorphous unit such as "humanity." This suggests to me that one empirical manifestation of "civilization" which is amenable to empirical grounding may be that of "empires." If all empires have a core center (a metropole), their political, cultural (in terms of language, religion, etc.), economic and other structures have a larger horizon than that of any specific society. Consequently, I would suggest that the sociology of civilizations would have to pay serious attention to the sociology of empires, a field marked by the pioneering studies of S. N. Eisenstadt (1963;1967). Moreover, the comparative study of empires leads naturally to the comparative study of colonialism, for the "colonial situation" (Balandier, 1970:21-56) may be rethought as one of "civilizational encounters." In this context, two observations arise. First, a comparative study of colonialism should examine not only modern (i.e., 19th and 20th Century) forms of colonialism, but also earlier ones which brought about civilizational encounters, such as Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) colonialism of the 16th and 17th Centuries, and the even earlier Roman colonialism. Second, we should not only consider the impact of colonialism on the civilizations submerged or subjugated by colonialism but also its impact on the social structures and the structures of consciousness of the subjugating metropole.

One remaining aspect of the sociology of civilizations that I would like to comment on is the area of "intra-civilizational encounters," as a complementary aspect of "inter-civilizational encounters." I think it would be misleading if we thought of a given civilizational complex, say the familiar "Western civilization" as a homogeneous, integrated whole, even regarding its structures of consciousness. In a given civilization there are encounters between competing forms and structures of consciousness which are grounded particularly in socio-religious groups. Thus, historical unfolding of Western Civilization obviously has at its core transformations in the religious definition of reality, and particularly (as Weber quite clearly realized) in what constitutes "salvation." The very dynamism of Western Civilization is obviously closely tied to the multiple alternatives to salvation found in different Christian interpretations of the meaning of the world. Yet, the picture is a good deal more complex than this, for Western civilization has also harbored another cultural complex, some of whose aspects are not endogenous to the West nor to Christianity itself; I have in mind what I have referred to elsewhere as "esoteric culture" (Tiryakian, 1973;1974). This includes the Gnostic underground of Western civilization, which has had many encounters with the Western "overground," and which quite likely is a source of "antinomianism"; it would also include a variety of forms of theosophy, of mysticism, and pantheism. Some of these are imports from "the East," and represent an aspect of "civilizational

encounters" but with the encounter being situated geographically within Western civilization.

In any case, I think it will turn out to be fruitful for a sociology of civilizations to pay attention to intra-civilizational encounters, whether of the sort I have just mentioned or other sorts. It is by examining both intra- and inter-civilizational encounters that we will get a more valid picture of the *dynamics* of the structures of consciousness and conscience, which I consider to be at the heart of sociocultural change.

In conclusion, I have sought to offer an initial set of reflections on the sociology of civilizations which have been triggered off by my reading of Nelson's highly stimulating piece. Curiously enough, the very topic of civilization is a new area for sociological awareness; it has been a domain area of historians, humanists, and anthropologists.<sup>6</sup> It is high time for sociology's neglect of civilization as a proper domain of inquiry to be remedied, and I am convinced that it will be a field of sociology which will interrelate and integrate at the macro level various established sociological fields, such as the sociology of religion, the sociology of knowledge, and modernization. We owe a major debt to Ben Nelson for sensitizing us to this domain area and for urging us to give it centrality in the sociological imagination.

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<sup>6</sup>The anthropological attention to the concept of civilization goes back to Tylor and Morgan and extends down to Redfield and Steward. For a brief overview, see Pedro Armillas, 1968.

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