

BOOK REVIEW

Bortolini: A Joyfully Serious Man

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There are probably a couple of reasons a considerable number of biographies of great social scientists have appeared in recent years, especially on the English-language book market. First and foremost, of course, is the simple biological fact that many of the figures who shaped the international social sciences after 1945 have lived to an astonishing age and thus died only a short time ago. With the passing of the authors mentioned above, hitherto unknown sources became accessible, from which interesting biographies could be reconstructed, especially since the life courses of quite a few of these figures had been highly complex. It should be remembered, for example, that some of these intellectuals were socialized in the extreme left-wing milieus of New York City or Chicago or came from Germany and had to go into exile in the 1930s. Certainly this is what Martin Krygier reports in his biography of Philip Selznick, or Jeremy Adelman or Daniel Bessner do in a similar way in their biographical accounts of the lives of Albert O. Hirschman and Hans Speier. Occasionally, however, biographies are written from the view that the respective discipline is in a form of crisis and that it might therefore be worthwhile to look back at the work and the personality of some rather heterodox representatives of the discipline as Charles Camic recently did with his biography of Thorstein Veblen.

All this does not seem to apply to the “hero” of Matteo Bortolini’s biography – at least not at first glance. For although Robert Bellah was undoubtedly a great figure of the social sciences, known far beyond the boundaries of his discipline, his life does not seem to have been particularly exciting, especially since he spent most of his time in Berkeley, California. And his work can hardly be called heterodox in any way, at least not if one considers the fact that Bellah had been the master student of Talcott Parsons at Harvard, so that his scientific socialization took place in the context of what was later called the “orthodox consensus”, which then possibly also explains the fact that Bellah later rushed from success to success and became one of the great public intellectuals of the USA.

Matteo Bortolini, an Italian sociologist at the University of Padua who has published extensively – particularly on the history of Italian sociology – thus took a considerable risk when he decided to write Bellah’s biography. For at the beginning of what became decades of research, it would not have been known that Bellah was to have had a much more fractured curriculum vitae than might be expected. In short, in this brilliantly written book, based on many archival sources and many interviews (including conversations with Bellah himself), Bortolini succeeds in presenting to the reader a quite unimaginable intellectual figure and in a way that makes Bellah’s oeuvre more than accessible. In short, the risk taken by Bortolini was worth it!

Robert Bellah, born in 1927, probably did not have an entirely happy childhood and youth. His father had become a moderately successful journalist and publisher of a local newspaper in Oklahoma in the mid-1920s, but he sold his newspaper in the summer of 1929 before the family lost its fortune in the stock market crash of October and decided to move to Los Angeles to live with relatives of Robert Bellah’s mother. The father, however, left the family during this phase (he was to commit suicide a few years later as a bigamist), so that Bellah grew up fatherless under somewhat precarious circumstances in Los Angeles. As an individual eager to learn, however, Bellah was able to enroll at Harvard in February 1945, which was immediately interrupted by his enlistment in the military, where he performed writing services during the demobilization phase at the end of the war. Unlike many social scientists who were to become influential after 1945, Bellah was thus too young to take an active part in the war in any form. What he did share with quite a few, however, was his left-wing political orientation. As Bortolini shows, Bellah was enthusiastic about Roosevelt’s New Deal as a young man, and during his career moved further and further to the left, eventually openly showing his sympathies for the Soviet Union by the end of the war. When he returned to Harvard after his military service, Bellah became a member of the John Reed Society and the undergraduate branch of the Communist Party (CP) at Harvard. But it was also clear that he was interested in all kinds of intellectual currents, not least in Freud and psychoanalysis, which soon led to his expulsion from the CP. It was during this phase that he met Talcott Parsons, in whose intellectual environment he was to develop further. In 1950, Bellah, who had married shortly before, enrolled in a double PhD program in sociology and Far Eastern languages at Harvard, thus entering an institutional structure in which the ideas for his famous book *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (subsequently published in 1957), were to take shape.

The genesis of this book was anything but happy, however, as Bellah was denied a research trip to Japan because of his former membership in the CP. McCarthyism and the problematic domestic political climate in the U.S. thus began to have a considerable influence on Bellah’s career, so that – as Bortolini explains – he was forced to remain an armchair scholar with little field experience. Eventually, he even left the U.S. for a short period and went to McGill University in Montreal to escape political pressure and further questioning by the FBI. Bellah, according to Bortolini, did not compromise himself politically, he did not name other CP members to the FBI and thus showed himself to be a person of high integrity.

At McGill, Bellah made contact with the famous historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his Institute of Islamic Studies, but remained closely associated with Clifford Geertz at Harvard, so that his study of Japan emerged under a variety of influences. For even though this study was undoubtedly heavily influenced by Parsons and his AGIL scheme (a systematic depiction of certain societal functions fundamental for sustaining social life), Parsons was by no means the only key figure for Bellah. On the recommendation of C. Wright Mills, of all people, who was certainly no friend of

Parsons, Bellah's attention was drawn to the work of Paul Tillich, a man who was to have a considerable influence on his own understanding of religion. In any case, it was clear that Bellah, who returned to Harvard in 1957 (having turned down job offers from McGill), continued to be opposed to simple notions of secularization and – as is apparent in his book on Tokugawa religion – always insisted on the autonomous causal role of culture and religion. Presumably, it was this last point that brought sharp criticism from Barrington Moore at Harvard, although Bellah's book on Japan certainly also had a somewhat tense relationship to the emerging modernization theory of the time (something with which Barrington Moore was familiar, although this did not prevent him from severely attacking Bellah's culturalist position).

After the publication of the book on Japan, Bellah spent some time abroad, and his travels brought him into the intellectual environment of American Studies. Indeed from the early 1960s, Bellah became increasingly interested in the peculiarities of American culture and democracy, thus preparing the text and the concept with which he became famous also in the non-academic world with his book *Civil Religion in America* (published in 1967). Although he had become Associate Professor at Harvard a year earlier, Bellah left the institution and thus the intellectual orbit of Parsons in order to join the Sociology Department at Berkeley, where he would remain until the end of his life.

At that time, Berkeley was as intellectually vibrant as Harvard, since the former had been aggressively recruiting new sociological scholars, including Erving Goffman, Nathan Glazer, and Neil Smelser. These sociologists joined existing Berkeley "stars", such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Philip Selznick, Robert Nisbet and Herbert Blumer. And in this environment, which was additionally influenced around the same time by the student movement, Bellah had to establish himself, which he did unabashedly, even with tendencies that were opposed to the main figures within the Department. And this was quite evident when he – in accordance with his concept of civil religion – tested the limits of science and questioned the boundaries between the social sciences and theology. Likewise, Bellah (according to Bortolini) defied what he saw as the excesses of the leftist student movement at Berkeley and published a reader on the work of Emile Durkheim, and later made an effort to undermine certain established forms of differentiation between science and religion. As an example, in 1969 at a symposium in Rome, in the presence of important sociologists of religion, Bellah attracted in an almost scandalous manner the criticism of his colleagues, who sensed a betrayal of science in his approach. Bellah did not allow himself to be irritated by this; rather, new readings of Durkheim's sociology of religion strengthened his emphasis on the autonomy and efficacy of symbolic systems and led to a position (one described by Bortolini as 'symbolic realism') in his 1970 book *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*. This position, similar to that of his friend Clifford Geertz, demonstrated Bellah's increasing detachment from Parsons' functionalist horizon of thought, and subsequently led to a personal distancing from his former teacher. Bellah could not (and probably did not want to) gain real institutional power with such a theoretical position, even if he had a number of students who would later become famous – from Jeffrey Alexander to Robert Wuthnow and Ann Swidler.

The late 1960s and early 1970s can certainly be described as another formative phase in Bellah's work, especially since these years were also marked by professional and personal twists of fate. On the one hand, Bellah's appointment as a permanent member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton was a failure and the site of a very public, unpleasant "mudslinging battle" over claims about the unscientific nature of Bellah's work. On the other hand, Tammy, one of the four daughters of the Bellahs, committed suicide in 1973, while Abby, another daughter, died in a car accident in 1976. These personal events caused a lot of disruption, and some previously hidden issues became

public. For example, during this period, Bellah openly sought homosexual experiences and finally confessed his homosexuality, although the consequences were mitigated somewhat because he had been living with his wife Melanie for years in an open marriage, which enabled the partners to explore their sexuality outside of the usual legal context. In his professional life, Bellah began to withdraw from American Studies, becoming increasingly interested in new religious movements, including the spiritual currents supported and promoted by the hippie movement. This latter was one of the reasons that Bellah, unlike many of his friends and colleagues, refused to condemn American counter-culture from the outset.

It was in this context that Bellah began to prepare the work that would become his most famous book, a “bestseller”, even though he did not write it alone – *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. The book was written at the time when Bellah's former mentor, Parsons, with whom he had reconciled, died, and when he became Head of the Sociology Department at Berkeley, thus moving into a position which, on the one hand, entailed power, but which, on the other hand, did not induce him to seek excessive influence. Bellah certainly acted according to the principles of a pluralistic understanding of science; he supported Michael Burawoy as well as Jürgen Habermas, even if he did not succeed in bringing the latter to Berkeley.

The book, *Habits of the Heart* was a success selling 400-500,000 copies in the U.S. Bellah became a sought-after speaker who was able to demand significant honorariums, and he came to the attention of politicians. But Bellah was just as disappointed by President Jimmy Carter as he was – much later – by Bill Clinton and his policies, with Bellah's writings displaying an increasing pessimism with regard to the future of U.S. politics and society. In conceptualizing his 1985 work, Bellah had been heavily influenced by Aristotelians such as Alasdair McIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Joachim Ritter, and become increasingly aware of the importance of Republican (and biblical) ideas and ideals. Under the influence of these thinkers, Bellah rejected Kant's radical dualism of norms and desires, focusing instead on virtues and practices, and thus began to emphasize the role of institutions for the functioning of the social fabric, which then also led him to a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. Bellah's pessimism had probably a lot to do with the fact that – as the follow-up study *The Good Society*, published in 1991, revealed – it had become increasingly unclear to him and his co-authors how ‘good’ social structures could be designed in concrete terms and – above all – which collective actors were to drive them forward and implement them. The consequences of the neo-liberal policies of Ronald Reagan and his Republican successors seemed to be too devastating, so that it became increasingly difficult to point to convincing political alternatives. This, however, did not prevent Bellah from repeatedly criticizing U.S. foreign policy, for example in the wake of 9/11, and to highlight its devastating effects on American society.

One might assume – although Bortolini does not express it in this way – that it was this disillusionment which, after the turn of the millennium, led Bellah to increasingly bury himself in the history of mankind. In the 1960s, Bellah had written important essays on religious evolution, and he returned to this theme in the last decades of his life, considering religion as an aspect of symbolic development. He emphasized that no development belonged only to the past, but is always carried forward, in some modified form, to a later period – “Nothing is ever lost”! As an old man, Bellah began a research project that he knew he would never be able to complete – an investigation of the history of humans as symbol-using animals. In this he connected to the Axial Age-debate conducted by historians and historical sociologists (which since the 1980s has been decisively shaped by Shmuel Eisenstadt), but also to evolutionary biology and anthropological insights, especially those of Merlin Donald. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* was published in 2011

and became Bellah's last major work. Bellah's final years – he died in 2013 – were filled with several sad events, (for example, his wife Melanie and his friend Eisenstadt died on the same day), yet melancholy is alien to his work. On the contrary, the analytical power of Bellah, who never shied from tackling great tasks and taking considerable intellectual risks, continued to be evident during these years. And it seemed as if he could and would extend his research on the history of mankind forever, as if more books written by Bellah could and would be added to this volume.

All this is vividly presented to the reader, and Bortolini's excellent biography does complete justice to Bellah. One might prefer to see greater elaboration in parts, or wish for more information about the influence of Tillich's thoughts on Bellah's sociological reasoning; more background on the reasons for Barrington Moore's criticism of Bellah; more detail about the period when Bellah began to distance himself from modernization theory, etc. At the same time, however, it should be emphasized that Bellah's long life and his rootedness in many forums of discussion and intellectual circles mean that a complete intellectual biography is almost impossible. In this respect, such criticism should not be taken too seriously. For it can hardly be denied that Matteo Bortolini has written an impressive biography on one of the most important figures in the field of the international social sciences – and he has done so in a way that readers will certainly wish that biographies of the same quality on other public intellectuals could be available soon.

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