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## TRIBUTE TO NEIL SMELSER

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### **A SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE GROWS WHEN IT REMEMBERS ITS GREAT FIGURES**

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НАУКА РАЗВИВАЕТСЯ, КОГДА ХРАНИТ ПАМЯТЬ О СВОИХ ГЕРОЯХ

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A scientific discipline grows when is able to develop new knowledge, new questions and hypotheses, new methods and theoretical paradigms. But it also grows when it remembers its great figures like Neil Smelser and critically assesses their legacy. Neil Smelser had a long and very fruitful career, about six decades and a half of intense intellectual work. He was a kind of wunderkind; when he was twenty two years old he went to Oxford with a Rhodes scholarship and he was asked by Talcott Parsons, his Harvard mentor and the most influential sociologist at that time, to assist him in preparing the Marshall lectures. Neil was much more than a research assistant. He

updated Parsons' economic knowledge with John Maynard Keynes general theory and brought very innovative ideas, first of all the scheme of the double interchanges, that allowed Parsons' AGIL model to be applied to social systems, a substantial contribution to the joint book "Economy and Society. An integration of economic and social theory". I know this book very well, it was the way through which I met Neil. In 1966 I was preparing the Italian edition of "Economy and Society"-with a long introduction where I defined my own theoretical position when I won a Harkness fellowship for Ph.D. for studying in the United States and I chose the University of California at Berkeley. In the late 60's, Berkeley was a very special place for all what was happening inside and around campus; there was a great sociological school with figures like Bellah, Bendix, Goffman, Lipset, Lowenthal, Selznick, and Smelser. When I met him, he had already published among other works the book on the British industrial revolution, the one on collective behavior, "Sociology of economic life". Being one of the most eminent representatives of functionalism (at the time the hegemonic paradigm in social science), a kind of heir apparent to Parsons, I thought to find a very self-assured, arrogant man, a sort of primadonna. On the contrary, he was a gentle and generous person, very open, always respecting other's ideas, I had different political views at that time and we used to have very open and interesting conversations. Neil had not only a very brilliant mind, but also a wide and deep culture, extending across the boundaries of sociology, economics, psychology, psychoanalysis, history. He was also a great educator, a mentor for a generation of students. Many among us remember his social theory class, which was really a model of how to teach. He always believed in the close link between research and teaching. Teaching helps the growth of brilliant minds and it is a way to test hypotheses and generate new knowledge. Neil Smelser was the author of major scientific works; he was very productive in the first ten-fifteen years of his career; in from the late 1970s and '80s he made a partial reappraisal of his early functionalist paradigm; in the last decade of the twentieth he was again very productive, with important new contributions to psychoanalysis and the method of behavioral sciences and additions and revisions of his key topics, like the sociology of collective behavior. Neil also reflected upon his own experience as advisor to academic governance in higher education. A sort of completion of his intellectual career was his famous speech as elected president of the American Sociological Association on "the rational and ambivalent". Finally, in the new century and in the last years of his life, he continued to work, going back and forth his lifetime interests in research, but also addressing new and much debated topics as for instance terrorism. There is another component of his personality which must be stressed: his role of spokesman for the social sciences, a sort of ambassador, with various and different stakeholders, including government agencies, international organizations, the general public, the media. Neil Smelser consistently defended science, good social science. And to this purpose he also played a major role in international organizations. In 1978 I started with him the research group on "Economy and society" which is now RC-02; Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Arnold Sales and Harry Makler had a similar proposal, so we joined efforts and started one of the most successful research committees of the ISA. In 1990 he became ISA vice-president and chair of the program committee, which is not so common because many first class scholars think they cannot 'loose time' in this kind

of organizational responsibilities. Another quality I have always appreciated was Neil's constant attempt to bridge disciplinary divides. He was against the over-fragmentation of social sciences and tried to build bridges between sociology and economics, sociology and psychology, sociology and history. The complexity of knowledge nowadays fosters specialization, it is inescapable, and we must counteract this trend through the development of interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation. I think that Neil would have appreciated what I've done in the last five years as president of the International Social Science Council, in particular the merger between ISSC and ICSU (the council which represents international organization of the natural sciences) in the new International Science Council with the objective of creating a single, powerful global voice for science. This is my personal tribute to him.