

TRIBUTE TO NEIL SMELSER

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NEIL J. SMELSER: SNIPPETS OF PERSONAL MEMORY

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НЕЙЛ СМЕЛЗЕР: КАРТИНКИ ИЗ ЛИЧНЫХ ВОСПОМИНАНИЙ

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It is a great gift of fate when the academic master turns into a friend. This has been my experience with Neil J. Smelser. Just three examples of his immense generosity and trust for the sociologist from a far away country, Poland.

When in 1972 I first came to the UC Berkeley as a Fulbright post-doctoral fellow, the first thing was to enroll at Neil's class on classical sociological theories. We were sitting together with Jeff Alexander, Eric Olin Wright, Luca Perone and others listening to Neil's masterful lectures on classical masters of sociology. After classes we gathered at informal "Theory Club" and discussed what he has just said. When after Comte and Spencer it came to Karl Marx, Neil approached me and asked if

I could deliver the lecture in his place. He assumed, quite correctly, that coming from Eastern Europe I had been well acquainted with Marx's work. Indeed at that time I was much interested in the work of Marx as an XIX-century author of original socio-economic theory and humanistic image of a human person, rather than the creator of a communist movement of which I had enough of a first-hand bad experience. I gave the lecture in this spirit with Neil sitting in the audience. Incredible feeling, perhaps the most difficult exam I have ever passed, which became a most memorable event in my long teaching career. An immense gift of trust for a completely unknown postdoctoral student from far away country. But there were other gestures of support. When at the end of my fellowship I completed the manuscript of my first English-language book on structural-functionalism, it was Neil who recommended it to Stanley Holwith, then the editor at Academic Press, N.Y., and the book "System and Function" came out a year later, introducing me to the American sociological community and initiating my international career.

When more than twenty years later I came as a fellow to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University where Neil was a Director, it happened that my mother got terminally ill and I had to break my stay and return to Poland. Neil expressed his sympathy and friendly encouragement once again. Some months later, a bit contrary to the CASBS standard policy, he reinvited me to complete my fellowship and the result was a book coauthored by Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser and myself on "Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity" (CUP at Berkeley 2005).

Again some twenty years passed and in 2014 at the age of seventy I was retiring from the Jagiellonian University at Krakow. The idea of the Faculty instead of the traditional Festschrift was to invite some of my foreign colleagues and collaborators to deliver a series of visiting lectures ("oral publications" on their current work) for our students. Some of my colleagues came, one month Jeff Alexander, then another month Anthony Giddens. And one day at the Krakow airport at Balice I was greeting Neil Smelser, already well over eighty, who came from the plane on a wheelchair, after a long flight from California. He had medical problems with his legs. And he took all this huge trip from California via Frankfurt, and all discomfort of a long flight, just for the sake of his student of nineteen-seventies. And to the delight of my students he delivered impressive lectures on the tradition of universities and contemporary dilemmas of their structure and functioning.

Of course I have had many more opportunities to meet and collaborate with Neil, for example within the framework of International Sociological Association (ISA) where he was a Vice-President, and in 2002 I followed his tenure elected as a President. But those three occasions I have described evoke strongest emotions of gratitude and show best what kind of unusual person Neil Smelser was. All who had known him, and all readers of his important work, will miss him for a long time.