TRIBUTE TO NEIL SMELSER

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WE CAN AND SHOULD RETURN TO HIS WRITINGS WITH PROFIT

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МЫ МОЖЕМ И ДОЛЖНЫ ВОЗВРАЩАТЬСЯ К ЕГО НАСЛЕДИЮ

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I am going to speak from the point of view of many of Neil Smelser's students, especially the students of the latter part of his career. It is great to remember Neil here in Toronto for reasons I will get to later. But it has also been great for me personally, because I had an opportunity to go back through my files and hear his voice again through those files. So, I intersperse my reflections here with a little bit of his voice. From our first casual conversation to our last professional chat, Neil was a stalwart and kind presence in my life over thirty years. He was a lovely man and I'll miss him, as many of you here will, and certainly many of his students of my generation.

At that first meeting, I was saying something about the beginnings of my dissertation design, some rigorously linked set of hypotheses. He kindly mentioned that it might be

a mistake to make the design so tight at such an early stage of the research, because unexpected things might happen. So, obviously I had to ask him to be on my dissertation committee. And at our last meeting, we had a lovely chat in a hotel lobby: professional gossip, his latest writing– very characteristically, his essay called "Sources of Unity and Disunity in Sociology"– and his grandchildren (I was very impressed by a game he had invented for them). When we had to part, I said "But we haven't even talked about health issues", and he answered warmly: "Well, we've covered the important things".

So, thirty years of support and friendship leave a lot of memories. Amazingly, there's not one upsetting memory among them. That's quite remarkable, I think. As a dissertation advisor, Neil may not have realized how much it meant to find his long letters of careful reflections in my mail so promptly after I'd given him something to read. He was balanced, undogmatic, open, interested, and supportive. Never unduly directive, he didn't create "Smelser students," but helped us become scholars in ourselves. Yet years later I would be surprised to realize that Neil had pioneered the scholarship generating some new idea of mine. And that was the least of it. I also remember the years of advice about navigating my career, and, when he plunged into his active retirement, I always enjoyed hearing the latest enthusiastic accounts of his next book, his keen travels, and the grandchildren who delighted him.

To me, Neil seemed amazingly unpretentious. If it had been left to him, I would not have known what a significant figure he is in twentieth century sociology. Yet, looking back at all he did, he must have been a professional virtuoso. Occasionally, he might mention some obligation to travel— on the program committee here at ISA, or to Berlin to give the Georg Simmel Lectures, or to a National Academy of Sciences meeting. Or he might mention an acquaintance from his long tenure with the Guggenheim Foundation or the Social Science Recearch Council, or Directorship of the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences. Or he might mention a project he was particularly engaged in– like a national report on terrorism, or a plan for the University of California in the coming century. And it's very fitting to be remembering Neil in Toronto: the Toronto meeting of his ASA presidency was a high point for both of us. (Also fittingly, when he was introduced as President of ASA, he was called "Bridge-builder par excellence.") Yet all this was a tiny fraction of all he contributed to the academy, mostly behind the scenes.

He was similarly unpretentious about his scholarship. But ultimately, that is what we should remember most. He is gone, but we can and should still return to his writings with profit.The fact that he treated his retirement as a happy opportunity to write more books reminds us how important scholarship was to him. Here is Neil's voice, writing at the time of his retirement: "I think it will be more like a third career than a retirement".

And so it was. Overall, his contributions covered a vast terrain, because he was always pleased to think about a new problem, or rethink an earlier position. We all have our particular interests, but Neil wrote a lot that any sociologist can profit from, whatever their interests. I still find his early Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences useful for my students. Among his later works, I remember his particular delight in The Odyssey Experience, describing a pervasive and influential social process broadly applicable to many arenas of contemporary life.

I also think — and I emphasize this — every sociologist should read his article "The rational and the ambivalent in the social sciences", his presidential address for ASA, which was the culmination of a series of more obscure but important articles over the years offering a sustained critique of rational choice.

And every student should read his short book «Problematics of Sociology: The Georg Simmel Lectures» for really lucid and balanced map of the field, of the sort that only Neil could provide. Neil's wise reflections on the scope and inherent tensions of our discipline, and the forces that shape it, are explored in more depth in one of his very last books, Getting Sociology Right: A Half-Century of Reflections. That includes the wonderful essay "Sociology as Science, Humanism and Art" – another required reading.

So I am grateful to remember Neil's support and friendship through the years, and even more, for the distinctive voice he offered to sociology. And I ask you all to look more at this voice. Thank you.