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# Nelson's Legacy of Comparative Studies

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## 2. Nelson's Legacy of Comparative Studies

*Vytautas Kavolis*

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In the early seventies, Benjamin Nelson concluded a brief autobiographical statement by pointing in a new direction:

Recently . . . I have become curious about several questions related to my growing interest in the comparative study of civilizations and of intercivilizational relations. Does the concept "conscience" give us any clue as to some of the differences in the distinctive patterns of development in various parts of the world? What are the relations between the structures of conscience and the tumultuous sociocultural processes of the 20th century across the world? . . . it is necessary to work one's way back through questions of this sort if we hope to work toward a basic foundation for sociology, history, and psychology and anthropology . . . we are now obliged to do a massive amount of work to get anywhere near these questions.<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of an autobiography reveals assumptions about what must exist (or occur) when the life of an individual commences its changes into a meaningful story. An autobiographical ending suggests what an individual has been transformed into by his passage through the machinery of his life, what his life signifies to him at the point when he is ready to leave it, as a finished (but perhaps, in later autobiographies, revisable) text, to others. Having begun with "a question for which I haven't really ever found an answer" (how he became a medievalist), Benjamin Nelson characteristically concluded with a reformulation of his old European questions in new and expanded frameworks. The old themes of conscience, work (both as necessity and as hope), and going back in order to advance to more "basic foundations" are now restated in a manner requiring a comparative study of civilizations.

The International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, originally founded under the leadership of Pitirim A. Sorokin and mainly active in Europe, was revived at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Philadelphia, December 29, 1971. Nelson served as its president until the spring of 1977, taking a particular interest in involving comparative civilizational studies with all of the most vital intellectual developments and the most perplexing predicaments of the life of the time.

He considered the global studies of whole civilizations in the manner of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee to be dangerously speculative and likely to produce distorted images of the particularity of the historical experience of each civilization, a clear sense for which is what ultimately mattered. A more fruitful approach, he thought, would be to focus on particular analytical issues or processes of crucial significance to humanity, as well as to the various social and humanistic disciplines, and to study them in depth both within their own civilizational setting and in comparative civilizational perspective. It is in this manner that a reliable understanding of whole civilizations and of their historical trajectories, as well as the essential qualities of "being civilized," would eventually emerge, although we are not yet at the point for fruitful syntheses of this scope. This approach to comparative civilizational studies came to be known as the *civilization-analytic* perspective.

At the inception of his presidency of the ISCSC, Nelson co-authored with Vytautas Kavolis a programmatic statement, presented at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington on December 29, 1972. In this "inventory and statement" on "comparative and civilizational perspectives in the social sciences and humanities," the main approaches toward comparative studies were reviewed and criticized. Nelson preferred two of the eight "horizons" presented and explored. One was "the comparative study of *institutions* and '*symbolic designs*' against the backgrounds of determinate civilizational settings." The other was "the comparative study of the histories, sociologies, psychologies of civilizational complexes and processes as these are perceived and work in the settings of intercivilizational relations and encounters."

In the part of the statement he wrote, Nelson urged: "It is only as we see the civilizational complexes in the crucibles of intercultural process that we can perceive the distinctive thrusts and patternings of different civilizational and societal structures."

The two approaches he considered most promising:

... describe ways of studying all sociocultural processes and issues within a distinctive *civilization-analytic* perspective which proves

preferable on general intellectual grounds (comprehensiveness, depth, compactness) to existing horizons and approaches in history, anthropology, sociology. The comparative depth-historical study of process and pattern in *civilizational perspective* offers great advantages over current varieties of structuralism, structural functionalism, schematic Marxism, phenomenology, inductivist empiricism, and so on.

The statement concludes with a more detailed specification of the main elements, as then perceived, of the civilization-analytic perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Nelson would speak of the "comparative historical differential sociology of sociocultural processes and civilizational complexes" and of "a polyphonic depth history and sociology of cultural expression and experience." Another name, "anthroposociology," he sometimes expanded in conversation into "psychohistorical anthroposociology," in search of a way of stating plainly where the movement stood among the academic disciplines.

Names were important to Nelson, and these shifts are clues to a characteristic quality of his speech in general. He kept talking about old concerns in renewed interpretative languages, seeking continuously to extend the range and appeal of his cognitive thrust. Each linguistic shift revealed or suggested new elements, angles of vision, possibilities. But the shifts were not systematically explained, the implications of changes in the rhetoric rarely spelled out in explicit detail. Nelson's sensitivity to the flows of subjective experience and its cultural expression made him averse to systematizing. He would systematize only when he went to battle. And he would go to battle usually when he saw the theory of culture inadequately developed by others.

Inadequacies in the theories of culture sooner or later proved to derive from insufficient discrimination between particular symbolic designs, as they have been shaped by particular peoples in the particular historical settings of their life. This insufficient discrimination, lack of nuance in approaching historical realities resulted in what he felt were the truly Satanic sins of contemporary social science—*schematism* and *uniformitarianism*, that is, the invention of abstract conceptual typologies without much perceptual content, and the search for generalizations about human behavior that would hold for all men and women at all times, independent of the particular histories of their institutions and their souls.

The social sciences which adopted these orientations Ben Nelson considered superficial, capable of grasping only the specious. The "depth-historical" understanding which he sought meant, first, a search for the shared symbolic structures underlying both human conduct and the most sophisticated symbolic formulations of a civilization and,

second, a watchfulness for fundamental shifts of these structures in the crucibles of cultural struggles and encounters between civilizations.

There were the eternal polyphonies of *axial assumptions and rationales; cultural logics, ontologies, and epistemologies; dramatic designs; structures of consciousness and sensibility; systems of spiritual guidance; symbolic technologies; forensic frameworks; evidential canons; compelling metaphors—indeed, compelling metaphors all*. To understand these symbolic configurations in their actual workings was to become aware of their diversity, flux, and interpenetration in concrete historical settings. He discussed organizing a journal of comparative civilizational studies, to be named *In Process*. It appeared, after his death, as *Comparative Civilizations Review* (1978—).

He described his “sense of the sociological,” in a particularly revealing manner, as deriving from “a predicamental vision,” “the sense that people everywhere, whatever the form and structure of their arrangements, inexorably find themselves in the midst of predicaments which call forth urgent responses in the way of passions, actions, efforts to achieve mastery and control through multiple forms of affiliation, organization, imposition and imputation.” (It is perhaps not accidental that Ben Nelson lists “passions,” presumably in the dual sense of intensity of emotion and suffering in which the term is used in the Christian and Romantic traditions, *first* among the responses to “predicaments.”) He added, in *Sociological Analysis*, a key phrase from his final conception of sociology: “I see no way of doing sociology without clearly relating to the structures of *existence of peoples, the structures of their experience, and the structures of their expressions.*”<sup>3</sup> For him, they were all symbolic structures, languages for organizing both thought and action.

Nelson saw diverse kinds of symbolic structures everywhere, but, unlike the structures which the structuralists see, *these* structures were fluid, if viewed over time, and rigorously prescriptive, utterly clear in their definition at any given time. All the fluidities had a way of ending up as structures, and indeed one had to be firmly locked into some symbolic design to experience “meaning.” But there was more personal meaning in the structures believed to be fictional than in the structures known to be necessary: “mummery . . . alone confers significance on acts which might otherwise seem pointless and futile.”<sup>4</sup> It is not the profound that needs a mask but that which, without a mask, could be neither profound nor indeed human.

There is, in Ben Nelson’s anthroposociology, a peculiar mix of a medieval and early-modern need for decisive symbolic guidance, and a sense of human existence as the continuous staging and dismantling of various kinds of spectacles, none of which seemed to be meaningless. Life

is theater and, in our times, he thought, a grotesque one, in which the games of life, to which the magnificent rituals of earlier times have been reduced, turn out to be indistinguishable from the dances of death—but it is nevertheless to be analyzed rationally and lived in accordance with clearly defined canons of responsibility, a position I have tended to perceive as that of a late Roman intellectual.

As a scholar, Ben Nelson was an apprentice to the master puppeteer, the spontaneous spectacle of culture, seeking an exact understanding of how *each* string in *all* the diverse performances operates. The strings were the particular lines of movement of faiths, of sciences, of technologies, of laws, and the more immediate expressions of experience in literatures, and only if they have left an intellectually impressive record and have had practical effects on the historical scale were they worthy of being closely watched. Only the “world-historical” nations seemed to matter in the movements of civilizations.

He was unusually sensitive to the sources of modernity in the spiritual movements of the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. But he also responded quickly to the most recent innovations of thought in a variety of fields. He wrote more powerfully on Jean Genet than on Max Weber and considered Paul Valéry rather than Arnold Toynbee a master civilization analyst. He would have made a fine literary critic. One of his most exhilarating articles is an inventory of analytical methods for the history of psychiatry.

“Ben knew more about civilization than anyone I ever encountered,” wrote his long-time colleague at the New School, and intellectual antagonist, anthropologist Stanley Diamond.<sup>5</sup> He has left exemplary civilization-analytic studies of key ideas and idea complexes in Western civilization: the self and conscience, probability and certitude, the categories of *eros*, *logos*, *nomos*, and *polis*, the emergence of universal standards in economic transactions and international relations, and the little appendix on friendship. In the comparative study of civilizations, he had time to outline a distinctive approach. He wrote the dramatic statement on “Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters,” developed his typology of sacro-magical, faith-, and rationalized structures of consciousness, dissected the differential trajectories of the histories of science in China and the West. In his work on the structures of consciousness, Nelson has been particularly concerned with the social contexts of *insight*—the historical conditions which have favored (or blocked) the breakthroughs to the faith- and rationalized structures; less with the social contexts of *plausibility*—the historical conditions which sustain the vitality of a particular structure of consciousness once it has been elaborated. His studies centered not on descriptive comparisons

but on theoretical issues central to explaining the differential trajectories of modernity in various parts of the world.

In these studies, he grappled with some of the key issues in the problematics of civilization analysis, such as: Why did something of universal significance emerge or become potent only in a particular civilization? How come that the same problems have been subjected by different parts of humanity to differing procedures and given diverse solutions? Why are some major intellectual or institutional patterns borrowed across civilizational lines and others are not? Why does something which works well at one time cease to work at another? How is comparative quietude broken by effervescences, efflorescences, and aggressions?

Nelson did much to advance civilization analysis as a general methodology for studying any theoretically significant social or humanistic issue with full attention, first, to the cross-civilizational range of alternative ways for dealing with it; second, to the interdependence of particular solutions within the largest sociocultural configuration of which they constitute understandable components; and third, to the changes over time in the design and workings of particular civilizational structures in the concrete sociohistorical settings in which they were located.

The relationship of his theoretically sophisticated work to sociological theory as currently constituted has remained problematic. He was engaged in reconciling Max Weber's processual with Emile Durkheim's structural conception of society and concerned to incorporate into this larger synthesis all that was vital in later historical, philosophic, and psychoanalytic thought. But his main contribution to a comparative-civilizational sociology has been that of generating a pre-theoretical matrix, a pluralistic repertoire of symbolic frames for capturing the essential constituents of the great wealth of evidence on the diverse modes of consciousness and currents of sensibility that a close historical investigation reveals in any civilization. Benjamin Nelson has done more than formulate a general theory of civilizations to which his name could be attached; he has provided us with an evocative rhetoric which, instead of limiting our attention to the questions he has raised, activates our own scholarship by making alive the immense variety of symbolic designs that must be identified and closely examined in doing serious work in sociology, anthropology, intellectual history, studies of religion and of philosophy and, he hoped, psychiatry.

Ben Nelson has created a language that makes it possible to talk about *all* of the symbolic structures which tradition provides (or we create) for interpreting experiences and guiding actions, but with particular attention to those which focus on moral and intellectual responsibility. From beginning to end he has been concerned with symbolic configurations

transcending those of a single society or language (though the structures he found usually emerged in Greco-Latinized forms). He has greatly increased our capacity to describe in precise and evocative ways particular cultures and their changes arising from encounters and conflicts between clusters of ideas.

He had his limitations. Not in his general statements of intentions, but in his actual cross-civilizational studies, he tended to remain Western-centered. Ben Nelson did not glorify the West, particularly the contemporary West, but, in all its mortifications (and, for him, we became more real precisely in our mortifications), he still considered it, with Max Weber, as having produced the only history of universal significance. He tended to see other civilizations as answering Western questions and as problematic in terms of what they, by Western standards, lacked: notions of universal brotherhood in India, modern science in China, individual conscience in the world of Islam. On these issues, he could be hard on the experts.

As a man of the book and the theatre, Nelson could not quite take mythology, that ancient, organic unity of reason and emotion, seriously as a legitimate part of modernity. His love belonged to rationality, his tenderness to language: he was quite extraordinary in the precision of his evocations, terribly suspicious if not fearful of the messiness of inexact emotions, experiences without structure, wildly utopian dreams. He was curious about the metaphoric passions unleashed by the various social and cultural upheavals of his later years, the possibility, around 1970, of encountering on New York's Fifth Avenue, as he left his New School office, walking impersonations of the different historical epochs and cultural movements he had studied. But he was repelled by the lack of a "reality principle" in most of this "revolutionary" and "counter-cultural" creativity. There was much of a romantic consciousness in his conception of sociology, held ardently in check by sobriety and the spirit of scholarship.

The spirit in which he sought renewal of "our civilization—Occidental and Oriental, Western and Eastern, alike" was that of literate, tragedy-sensitive rationalism and an adult, that is, illusionless, disenchanting responsibility shared by all mature minds, regardless of their ideological commitments, transcending in importance the lines of division between religion and secularity, radicalism and conservatism. For an adult to be "childlike" was the worst possible transgression against the requirement for integrity. Nowhere in Ben's work does one find the slightest trace of sympathy for the lost paradise of childhood.

And now we must ask: How central is the final achievement of Benjamin Nelson to his chosen fields, history and sociology, and to the other disciplines to which he offered it as a guide? Will these disciplines



respond by embracing the “wider frameworks” of symbolic understanding that would save us equally from schematisms, whether scientific or ideological, provincialisms uneducable or principlal, the enthusiasms and the burlesques? Or will a “new science of civilization analysis,” a homeless discipline, have to be founded or perhaps recovered once again? Would Benjamin Nelson have had to confess, a few years hence, that he failed in teaching sociologists, as he did declare in the autobiographical statement cited earlier that he had failed in enlightening psychoanalysts?

The reviewers have judged Benjamin Nelson’s work to be of major significance in reconstituting the dynamic cultural frameworks which a genuinely global sociology requires, in conceiving of comparative sociology as a differential analytical history of consciousness. But while Nelson’s influence is spreading and his spirit—in its imaginative precision and faithfulness to evidence—is alive to challenge others, he has not left a viable school of sociology working on the agenda he has set. Perhaps his repetitive agenda-formulating efforts were self-defeating. Nelson was eager for followers, anxious about their faithfulness, and he did occasionally use his own analytical categories in the manner of magical incantations. But there has never been anything but sobriety in his vision.

The basic reason for the uncertain future of what Ben Nelson did after *The Idea of Usury* is that his approach impressed too many people as a peculiar kind of history of meanings: too structural for historians, too intellectual for sociologists, unyielding in its intangibilities. Sociologists still need to do detailed studies to understand how social conduct generates itself out of the categories and symbolic matrices provided by intellectual histories, and by the struggles of men and women to make their histories meaningful. But that is now an inheritance of the friends and critics of Benjamin Nelson.

## NOTES

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1. Benjamin Nelson, “Systems of Spiritual Direction,” reprinted in this volume, p. 33.
  2. Reprinted in part in *Sociological Analysis* 35 (1974):129–141, as well as in *On the Roads to Modernity* (ed. by Toby E. Huff), pp. 230–243.
  3. Symposium on his “Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters,” *Sociological Analysis* 35 (1974):131.
  4. “The Balcony and Parisian Existentialism,” *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (1963):72.
  5. *Social Research* 45 (1978):4.