The Civilization-Analytic Frame of Reference

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Benjamin Nelson’s death in the Fall of 1977 was a great loss to scholarship, and to sociology in particular.* His leadership in the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations created a context for intellectual advance and cross-disciplinary debates—spanning the range of philosophy, history, literature, anthropology, geography, and sociology. He pressed for empirical precision and theoretical depth in pursuing the goal of a rational and realistic understanding of the dynamics of society and culture in history.

This paper is an attempt to build on his work. I wish to describe the special frame of reference which several writers have come to call “civilization analytic”1 by placing it into the context of several contemporary concerns in sociology, and by drawing systematically on those ideas of Benjamin Nelson’s which I consider direction setting. On this basis I will then explore certain foundational issues in cultural sociology which appear to me theoretically and methodologically pivotal—particularly processes of structuring and de-structuring, and the crucial dynamic of identity and authority. I will follow Nelson in his emphasis on the importance of intercivilizational encounters as sites for the exploration of these matters, but I will place more emphasis on conceptual issues than he might have liked.

What I will offer is a theoretical perspective, not a theory. In all scientific work the construction of theory and its testing are centrally important. However, at times it is crucial to have a rationale for selecting areas of inquiry, and for connecting as yet isolated elements of theorizing. A theoretical perspective or frame of reference offers such rationales. It delimits a domain, pointing to landmarks of orientation.

The civilization analytic perspective seems to me particularly significant in sociology at this time—but it is, of course, not limited to sociology as such. I will treat it here as providing a foundation of cultural sociology.
II

There have been misunderstandings of profound consequence for sociology as to what the scientific attitude in social inquiry means. Some have equated the criterion of scientific adequacy and rigor with a particular array of techniques or formal expressions; some have thought that science requires the adoption of a language of behavioral generalities and the pretended neglect of historical particulars; others have tried to expand, by artifice or brute faith, on the basis of ideological commitment, the domain of scientifically possible knowledge. Some phenomenologists, some critical theorists, and others have at times given in to the temptation to proclaim that the unknowable has just become known. Fortunately it is not necessary to choose between the narrowness of scientistic pretensions and the audacious errors of ideologues.

In social science as elsewhere science must rationally and empirically select among and correct proposed theory—it is necessarily abstract. But in spite of all the difficulties this implies, science strives to achieve an understanding of reality as much as possible adequate to that reality, that is: disciplined by it. In sociology it must emphasize a certain naturalistic bent of observation and explanation. It also requires breadth of view—to avoid mistaking the particular for the universal, and vice versa.

These reminders are necessary because in the not too distant past sociologists cultivated often narrowness and artifice. As empirical sociology in the Western countries grew into an established academic discipline after the period of the World Wars, its intellectual focus began to shrink to a frame immanent to the national society. It did come to be more or less taken for granted that the society as a major collective frame of study was to be equated with the nation state. Probably the most important analytical category within that frame was that of the status-role.

To deal with the societally immanent came to be a matter of course. A domain of social system studies arose which largely omitted the psychological, the natural setting and the extra social referents of culture. This kind of climate was quite consistent with the trend toward the national orientation of the sociological professions. The contraction of sociology probably had much to do with the practical issues with which many sociologists dealt—most of these, after all, were national, or even local.

This contraction of sociology became particularly visible as it turned upon itself in the sociology of sociology, and sociology began to reflect on its multiple paradigm condition. In a sense, that phase opened the
door to self critique and correction, but it also appeared that the concern with external reality, social or otherwise, was to be pushed even further away.

There are, however, powerful counter-currents. Benjamin Nelson pointed to several of them when he wrote:

Sociology is at a turning point in respect to the horizons it is obliged to adopt in order to make sense of the perplexing and tumultuous sociocultural processes of our time. We dare no longer suppose that these processes can effectively be gotten at by confining ourselves to settings which are local, parochial, or instantial at the level of interaction (for example, small groups); the social system setting (the family); the geographic setting (the local community); the temporal horizon (the current moment, the present).

This quotation expresses a sense of moral obligation under which the sociological enterprise is to proceed: "to make sense of the perplexing and tumultuous sociocultural processes of our time." It harks back to the sense of urgency and intellectual commitment of the classic sociologists of the turn of the century, and is an antithesis to the conception of narrowly defined, only technically responsible practice of the sociologist as one analyst in the division of research labor among academic disciplines.

The recognition of the need to broaden the field of vision has many causes; reflection on the moral grounding of sociology is one of them. An important factor is the growth of an international social science community. Social research establishments have appeared in an increasing number of countries, as empirical social research is recognized as an inescapable intellectual and possibly technical necessity for modern or modernizing economies and states. International social science has emerged in these contexts as a cultural movement, much embroiled in intercivilizational encounters.

In this sense sociology has a dual nature, it is a science with rational and empirical truth claims, but at the same time it is a cultural movement, propagating redefinitions in social meanings and reality constructs. The life histories and sometimes tortuous identity constructions of many contemporary sociologists attest to this complexity. I know of many cases in which a sociologist chose his career and cultural identity as sociologist in order to help with the predicament of identity crises, often in the context of intercivilizational conflict and changing ascendency.

There are also technical reasons which press for the broadening of vision: the immensely extended capacity for data analysis and for comparative and historical work made possible through the computer based
technology of large data files and multivariate analysis; the probably even more immense growth in social measurements of many kinds for governmental and other purposes—from vital statistics through test scores to opinion polls—must also be included. This emergence of technical capacity is an important factor making potentially for expansion in the scope of sociological vision.

From the passage I quoted above Nelson went on to argue—and I follow him in the argument—that:

We are obliged to see that many of the most important phenomena of processes and productions of our time are occurring everywhere across the world and they are occurring most intensely in those levels and in those settings which have been least systematically studied by sociologists or anthropologists. I refer to the societal level, the civilizational level and the intercivilizational settings and encounters.3

The argument appears to be merely a demand for what has come to be called “macro-sociology” and as such would not create much controversy or challenge today. However, it is much more than that—it represents a challenge calling for a theoretical reorientation, building upon the core sociological tradition (not at all in the sense of hero worship of the classical authors), and disciplined by the obligation to “get at” the turbulent reality of social life. It is particularly important for cultural sociology. I will pursue this point now.

III

Several theoretical developments in cultural sociology have created in this field an open scientific frontier. Cognitive and epistemic issues have been addressed and their significance has been shown by studies to understand the social construction of reality, of ethnomethodology, of ethnoparadigms. To date this work has suggested conceptual and methodological avenues for the searching study of the manner in which social forms and structures (like roles, organizations, institutions) are produced, maintained, altered or destroyed. Established sociological categories of social structure, previously taken often as “independent variables” have now been subjected to close scrutiny as to how they are constructed, opening at least potentially the way to an understanding of processes of structuring. Attention has been directed to the way in which reality tests and criteria of truth shape these processes, and to the dynamics of trust and distrust in social action and structure. By emphasizing the epistemic and ontic dimension in the phenomenal worlds of social actors, these efforts lead to a second order of sociological con-
cepts. By this notion I refer to constructs which account for processes and mechanisms producing the phenomenal level whose surface is described, if incompletely, by for example role-status concepts.

This general thrust in cognitive sociology also has emphasized the methodological implications of the circumstance that sociologists study the actions of conscious and at times very deliberate people. The results of this work underscore the significance of symbolic rationales for action, of cultural models for personal or for collective identity, or authority, and for the construction of histories. Again, standards and tests for knowledge to be taken as true play a special role. All of these are factors in the process in which people construct the realities with which they deal, and they are important for explaining the resulting structures.

Much has been done in the close-up study of particular forms of social life to show the manifold significance of structures of symbolism, and the multiplicity of levels of such structures. The idea of rationales for action, of cultural models is entirely compatible with the concept of symbolic codes as templates for the construction of symbolic resources, themselves codes of a lesser order.

All of these conceptions, many as yet nascent and dispersed, resulted from the relatively close-up scrutiny of what people do. They might be called micro-sociological as a consequence. However, it should not be difficult to see how such ways of thinking might gain systematicity by being integrated with the civilization-analytic perspective, which takes the most macroscopic view, and yet focuses on the central significance of symbolic resources in peoples’ struggles with their realities and selves out of which the structures of social life and the reality constructs of society emerge.

IV

I turn now to the civilization analytic frame of reference which Nelson tried to articulate and exemplify in his work. The central idea was well formulated in the “Note on the Notion of Civilization” by Durkheim and Mauss. They begin with the rule that, in studying social phenomena in themselves and by themselves, we take care not to leave them in the air but always to relate them to a definite substratum, that is to say, to a human group occupying a determinate portion of geographically representable space. But, of all these groups, the largest—that which comprises all of the others in itself and which consequently comprises all forms of social activity—is, it would appear, that which forms the political society: tribe, clan, nation, city, state, and so on. It seems then, on first view,
that collective life can develop only with political organisms having definite contours, within strictly marked limits, that is to say, that the national life is the highest form of social phenomenon and sociology cannot know one of a higher order.

There are, nonetheless, phenomena which do not have such well defined limits; they pass beyond political frontiers and extend over less easily determinable spaces . . . they have a life which is in some ways supranational.  

This is not limited to technology or aesthetics or language, it also includes the patterning of institutions.

Moreover, it has been recognized that phenomena which present this degree of extension are not independent of one another; they are generally linked in an interdependent system. It often occurs that one of these phenomena involves the others and reveals their existence. . . . There exist not merely isolated instances, but also complex and interdependent systems, which without being limited to a determinate political organism, are, however, localizable in time and space.

These are to be called civilizations. Durkheim and Mauss point out that every civilization may be capable of nationalization, and that it may assume very special and particular characteristics with each people and within each state. Yet, their notion of civilization transcends the individual society or people:

A civilization constitutes a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations, each national culture being only a particular form of the whole.

For Durkheim and Mauss the purpose of sociology in studying civilization is, of course, to determine its causes. It is necessary to find out how a civilizational complex was produced in historical evolution. The present analysis of civilizational complexes follows this lead. It deals with the dynamics of civilizational change, and the manner in which civilizational contexts, especially symbolic resources, enter into and shape the manifold forms of social life.

Benjamin Nelson addressed himself to these issues in an empirically and historically concrete manner. His peculiar way of handling abstraction and concreteness makes the conceptual scheme—which is illustrated and exemplified, but rarely stated—difficult of access. It hardly helps to say that he brought to the task critically selected resources from the works of the classical sociologists, anthropologists, and comparative historians: Durkheim, Mauss, Maine, Weber, Needham and others. Also the mode of presentation creates difficulty. Much of his recent work is published in diverse articles, editorial introductions, and notes.
Worse yet, different audiences are addressed—sociologists, psychohistorians, psychoanalysts and others.

Thus, instead of dealing with a comprehensive listing, I will begin with those elements of Nelson's work that seem to be central to his analytical style and from which a somewhat more systematic web of concepts might be unravelled. In spite of his well-known and extensive reliance on the body of work of Max Weber, this starting point lies in Nelson's particular use of psychoanalysis, his building on the theoretical achievements of Freud.

Several important papers should be mentioned, because even their titles are suggestive of the way in which psychoanalysis is here turned. For example: "Self-Images and Systems of Spiritual Direction in the History of European Civilization," or "Psychological Systems and Philosophical Paradoxes." His more recent "Eros, Logos, Nomos, Polis: Their Shifting Balances in the Vicissitudes of Civilizations," is a sketch of the civilizational dynamics of emotion and morality, knowledge and order.

In his introduction to *Freud and the 20th Century* Nelson extolled Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* as "the most distinctive statement in the philosophy of existence and civilization which has been produced in the present century," but he also placed Freud's work in the context of other "explorers of the soul" such as Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, Dante, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Rimbaud.

The crux of the matter is that Nelson did not accept the universality of psychoanalytic images of ontogenesis and familial dynamics. He insisted on the differential nature of meanings in cultural and civilizational structures, which requires superordinate concepts such as "systems of spiritual direction" whose concrete forms are historic in nature, related to the struggle with specific historical realities. Indeed, he emphasized that the quest for "guidance of the soul," whatever its form, always involves a struggle over the very definition of reality. There is not only a psychological reality principle, but there is a social reality principle, which for Nelson was best represented in Weber's work.

However, it is the psychoanalytic emphasis that sharpened Nelson's view for the "predicaments of men" in the "crucible" of historical change—these are terms of which he was fond and of which he made frequent use. It is in the struggle to resolve these predicaments of self and reality that men draw on the symbolic resources of rationales, of models of conscience and systems for the guidance of souls. That means, of course, that models of conscience, or identity, the "logics of morality and the moralities of thought" are not universals in their speci-
facilities; they may indeed be invented, and gradually implanted in the self images of men and their psychic organization in the course of civilizational movements; but they also may be altered or disintegrate in cultural revolutions and fundamental crises of credibility—of which history has seen many.

Yet, the variations in conscience or in conceptions of identity are not simply relative to circumstance: relativism and historicism both must be rejected in spite of the emphasis on cultural differentials. There is a coherent frame which allows the intelligible placement of such differentials into their context—it is the specific context of the evolution of civilizations and the resulting stratification of residues of history in each present on one side, but the context of general theory on the other. A lengthy quote on this point seems necessary.

In “Eros, Logos, Nomos, Polis” Nelson inserted the passage:

This essay is written in the conviction that sociology and history—and one must add, anthropology and history—have a relation to one another like that which Kant ascribes to concepts and percepts. Anthropology and sociology—one wishes one would have available a broadened expression, anthroposociology—prove to be empty without history just as concepts are empty without percepts. And history without anthroposociology is blind just as percepts are blind without concepts. . . .

Nor do I suppose that so-called past events have occurred once and for all. I am convinced that many pasts live again today; also that many of the extraordinary features of the tumultuous socio-cultural processes of the twentieth century are best understood as the re-presentations of what had been assumed to be extinct.

Thus, in my view, anthropology and sociology are strongly rooted in depth-historical understandings of structures of existence, experience and expression. We are hardly likely to range beyond schematic histories if we do not come into close contact with the actualities of existence; the myriad strivings to realize hopes, dreams, myths, in social and symbolic forms of various sorts; if we do not somehow see the meshes and mixes of eros, logos, polis, nomos, in wider civilizational and even intercivilizational perspectives. . . .

The imaginative use of sociological and psychoanalytic conceptions in comparative and historical work aided Nelson in his examination of the “roads to modernity.” He could show the critical effects of emerging “logics and moralities of action and moralities and logics of thought” in shaping structures of consciousness, and the path of civilizational change. The idea of the emergence of structures of consciousness and personality, of conceptions of social relations, indeed the cultural invention of psychic and social forms as shown in his work constitutes a challenge to social science theory. One aspect of this challenge is the demand that now make claims...
to universal validity are from Nelson’s perspective partial and incomplete. Much of social science theory today constituted for him arrogant and ethnocentric misinterpretations of the diversity of historical human reality.

And yet, there is a most practical commitment in Nelson’s work to the universality of social theory, as my quote above has shown. He searched for uniformities and similarities in difference, for example by examining cultural revolutions, crises of credibility in various contexts. Again the titles of his papers are revealing: “The Early Modern Revolution in Science and Philosophy,” “Sciences and Civilizations ‘East’ and ‘West’: Joseph Needham and Max Weber,” “The Quest for Certitude and the Books of Scripture, Nature and Conscience,” to name just a few.

Nelson conceived of this kind of investigation into the sources of the modern western mind as the new science of civilizational analysis. The expansion of the theoretical frame to encompass civilizational complexes had the background of his investigation of The Idea of Usury which he had declared in his introduction to be virtually a footnote to Weber’s concluding insights into the changes in social mentality which paved the way for the emergence of capitalism. The broadening to the present conception of the civilization analytic frame of reference occurred in the early 1970s, and was best expressed in the essay “Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters,” and the discussion ensuing in the pages of Sociological Analysis.

Nelson argued that the required theoretical perspective is likely to emphasize two different major foci:

First, the analysis of the mix and interrelations of institutions and cultural forms within the frameworks of any given civilizational complex; second, the investigation of the encounters of different civilizational complexes in which civilizational values are found to be in the crucible.

It is fairly obvious that these are not the only possible matters for investigation, but it is difficult to disagree with him on the importance of the themes proposed. This is especially so if one reminds oneself of the requirements of the scientific attitude in such empirical work, as they were sketched above.

Civilizational analysis hopeful of becoming as empirical as possible will find itself needing and wishing to compare histories in the most responsible ways on the basis of the best available sources and secondary materials.

Clearly, what Nelson pursued and proposed was not global speculation, nor the intuitive grasping of the “essence” of a civilization. The idea is one of investigating differences and similarities between civiliza-
tional complexes by means of a deliberately differential, historical sociology. It is important to keep in mind that the analytic stance is one of discovering the characteristics of reality, not its forced and empirically inadequate reduction to preconceived uniformities.

It is because of this that Nelson saw as the major enemy both relativism and "uniformitarianism." The "uniformitarians" are those who try to discover uniform patterns and structures in human behavior at the neglect of differences, thereby distorting reality. Nelson's attack on the hated uniformitarians had somewhat the quality of a crusade; and yet the point is not without merit. In contrast to such uniformitarianism the emphasis in the civilization analytic frame of reference is on differential, historical work.

The call for the practice of differential analysis in social science, studying historical data comparatively, which was Nelson's insistent demand, of course is only possible on the basis of some general sociology (or anthroposociology, as Nelson said) of a high level of abstraction. Indeed, it must also be said that general sociology, in the end, is the yield of the program of differential, historical, comparative investigations. Yet, the call for differential sociology in the context of a struggle against premature uniformitarianisms which generalize by assumption or by decree rather than through sensible scientific work, is a meaningful one. It poses one of the old dilemmas of all social science in a new and practical form: the inescapable dialectic between universality and particularity.

The call for differential sociology, even though necessarily based on the at least implicit presupposition of a program for a general sociology, requires a vast division of labor, consonant with the current expansion of social science into a world-wide community. It also requires that social science be aware of its dual nature as science and cultural movement, of its inevitable embroilment in intercivilizational encounters, and of the profound nature of the tension between universality and particularity.

But the recommended frame remains as yet too broad to be useful in specific methodological guidance. Nelson recommended a focus on rationales and especially on responsibilities. This follows, as one can see from the conceptual emphasis on the "predicaments" of self and reality. Central attention should be paid to those "who have been charged or charged themselves with the responsibility to define and mediate the central structures of meaning." One discovers structures of consciousness by investigating the contexts of responsibilities, and the structure and nature of truth.
Nelson wrote:

One of my primary interests has been to ascertain how groups variously located and disposed seek through their forensic and other disputes to make sense to themselves and others. Within this framework I have a second reason for putting stress on responsibility. I suspect that across the world great numbers of peoples have been committed to the view that they had themselves performed or acquiesced in some sort of crime or wrong for which reparation needed to be made. Wherever we discover the order I have called praxisms as the central feature of the society, wherever that is, great numbers joined together in the performance of acts in some sense ritually prescribed, we have sacro-magical structures at work. To explain what is revealed to us by the complex odyssey and turbulent transformation of the people struggling to master and give meaning to themselves and to their inner and outer worlds, I have so far placed more stress on the developments, institutions, and frameworks associated with legal, political, social, religious, economic spheres than with the distinctly artistic orders.  

It appears that in this manner Nelson sought the explanation of the presuppositions which people use in order to define their patterns of interaction, the explanation for their modes of affiliation and organization—in other words, the grounds for the generation of social structure.

Differences in symbolic resources, in rationales, standards, conceptions of identity and conscience, structures of consciousness become particularly visible in the context of intercivilizational encounters, and the processes through which civilizational values and identities are reconstituted. Indeed, the entire Third World can today be seen as the battleground of these forces, in which processes of ecumenogenesis or the construction of world systems vie with the opposite, processes of ethnogenesis, particularisms and separate identity constructions.

Nelson’s recommendation to attend to intercivilizational encounters has historical, theoretical, and methodological justifications. The historical justification derives from the fact that such encounters often have been turning points of history. One only needs to think of the Islamic expansion, the Crusades, the world-altering and fateful encounters of colonialism, and the current phase of such encounters in the creation of new states, “modernization” and “development.” The theoretical importance of these events lies in the fact that they show society and culture in the making, and processes of construction, reconstruction, and destruction exposed to view. Unavoidably in the intercivilizational encounters, central meaning structures are in contest with each other, differences in standards of truth and trustworthiness, and in their social
mediation, are brutally exposed. At the same time there is the interpene-
tration, the diffusion into each other of civilizational complexes. The
methodological significance of intercivilizational encounters is proba-
bly quite apparent. It is akin to the importance of fissure zones for
geology. It is in such contexts that the otherwise taken-for-granted pre-
suppositions in social structure may be discovered more readily.

The civilization analytic perspective, as is obvious by now, requires
the unification of scholarly endeavors usually thought of as separate.
Social science research without attention to the symbolic designs and
structures of meaning usually reserved to the humanities for inquiry
made little sense to Nelson. At the same time, specialized humanistic
scholarship separated from the social sciences is likely to be sterile. In
this call for intimate cooperation between the humanities and the social
sciences might well lie one of the most fruitful challenges of his work.

V

So far my attempt to sketch the contours of what I take to be Nelson’s
civilization analytic frame of reference. It is now necessary to address a
set of further issues, focusing on social structure. A word of caution
about the emphasis on culture and symbolism seems in order, because
such a stress requires corrective counterweights, and a careful concep-
tual focus, if it is not to mislead.

There is a complimentary duality built into sociology as it is built into
society itself—one may call it a dialectic if one so wishes. It is the
duality of the object-subject relation. Social structure can always be
viewed from two perspectives: the cultural or orientational perspective
which views society and its structure as a distribution of meaningful
orientations, and the situational or ecological perspective which views
society as a structure or distribution of objects in environments. Talk of
a “dialectic” is appropriate here, because while separate, both these
aspects are not entirely independent of each other. This is so because
social structure is always, no matter how one views it, a knowledge and
consciousness containing system.

The cultural or orientational structure of society emerges when we
understand it from the point of view of conscious, participating mem-
bers who observe and know it. Within this framework society appears as
a large network of purposeful actors and their meanings. At the same
time a different perspective is possible from which a detached viewer
may see society as consisting of interdependent, behaving objects that
relate to each other in describable fashions. This is the situational or
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ecological structure. While the cultural perspective emphasizes meanings and their structuredness, the ecological perspective emphasizes constraints, and the conditions of power. It now can be readily seen that there is not only duality here, but also interdependence. Indeed, it is in the struggle of purpose and constraint in social action that social reality is experienced and constructed.

There can be no cultural sociology as such that ignores the other aspect of social structure. However, there also can be no ecological sociology that ignores the cultural side. Each may and for practical purpose must have its own primary focus, and make simplifying assumptions about the other aspect—but total exclusion of either meanings or settings and their constraints is not possible.

Indeed, insofar as cultural sociology is sociology at all, it cannot be simply the imaginative reconstruction of meanings. I argue that its most significant contribution to sociology as such might be the illumination of the interplay between meanings and power, purpose and constraint.

VI

I am moving now at the very abstract level of analysis that Nelson called anthroposociological. Two further steps in this direction are necessary: reflection on the consequence for cultural sociology that follows from the above, and its more concrete specification.

The most general constraint at the level of meanings for social action is knowledge, or truth, or more precisely: knowledge adequacy and standards of trustworthiness. This is so in at least two different, but interrelated senses. The first of these points may appear obvious: the adequacy of knowledge of nature and environment is an essential condition of effectiveness; inadequacy in this sense means deficits of power. Here I am speaking of the kind of knowledge that science strives for. Such knowledge has always extra-social referents, it points beyond society.

The second point derives from the fact that what is taken as true knowledge in social life is always socially mediated, filtered through a multiplicity of social channels; standards of truth applied in such channels may not at all be similar to those science would strive for. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that the viability of social life is predicated on some level of truthfulness—in the long run social intercourse breaks down in an environment of total deceit. The problem here is that of trustworthiness of communication—a rather different one from the problem of knowledge adequacy. If the reverse of adequate knowledge
is error, the reverse of trustworthy communication is deceit. Both error and deceit are threats to social life, but the requirement of trust in communication is the socially more immediate one.

It is in dealing with the problem of knowledge adequacy and the problem of trust that men come to terms with what they take to be reality itself; these are the foundations on which they rely in their life struggles to deal with their constraints. Cultural sociology can illuminate the processes of social structuring and de-structuring by focusing on these central issues—even though the contribution of cultural sociology alone will not yield the total picture. It seems that systematic attention to the epistemic and ontic problems of social action, that is to standards of truth and affirmation and trust is crucial for a theory wishing to grasp the dynamics of social structuring, that is a theory of the determinants of the connection between the dual aspects of social structure.

VII

Some further specification is possible. Benjamin Nelson had come to recognize the centrality of truth and trust, and focused on, for example, crises of credibility. But one problem, with which sociology has not dealt in sufficient depth, is located at the conceptual fulcrum of these matters: it is the general issue of the relation of identity and authority. It is in the complex dynamics of identity and authority that issues of the definition of reality, of knowledge adequacy and especially of trustworthiness have their most serious consequences for the existence of individuals and collectivities.

The concept of "authority," of course, has been central in sociology for some time. Its relation with identity, both in the sense of identification with and the identification of persons and collectivities has been less clearly seen, and less often explored. And yet, all identities are in some central sense authorizations, and authority rests in some critical aspect on identifications. When one focuses one's questioning in this way, the significance of the epistemic and ontic aspects of social constitutions, defining the relation between individual and collective and the conditions of trustworthiness come into view. These are issues several sociologists have pursued elsewhere.23

Here it must suffice to point to the link between cultural models of identity and authority, and the standards of truth and trusting in social discourse. Indeed, it may well be breakdowns of trustworthiness that come to be among the potent determinants of innovations of identity models.

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VIII

I have now attempted to specify certain foundational issues in cultural sociology, especially with regard to social structure and have pointed to issues of practical concern with truth and trustworthiness, and with identity and authority as foci for understanding the social consequences of what Nelson characterized as the struggles of men with their predicaments. In concluding let me point to one further subtle but significant shift in perspective that results from the civilization analytic perspective: it relates to the process called modernization. Instead of the instrumental-technical emphasis, which defines western conditions as goal states for modernization, the civilization analytic perspective provides a different view. The context of the intercivilizational encounter, the struggle to establish credible authority and identity, trustworthiness as well as effectiveness comes into view. I believe that this field of inquiry may well have become ready to move in this direction, contributing both more realistic understandings of the process itself, and an expansion of social science knowledge by breaking through the barrier of what Nelson called ethnocentric uniformitarianism.

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NOTES

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1. Among them especially Vytautas Kavolis, Roland Robertson, Edmund Leites, Toby Huff and many others.
5. Durkheim and Mauss, ibid.
6. Durkheim and Mauss, ibid.
7. Durkheim and Mauss, ibid.
8. Two collections of his articles have since been published: Der Ursprung der Moderne: Vergleichende Studien zum Zivilisationsprozess, übers. von Michael Bischoff, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1977; On the Roads to Moder-


15. Ibid., p. 8.


