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Writing, Reading, and Interpreting a Rorschach Text

An Attempt at Fourth-Order Observation and Reflexivity

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Abstract
A rejoinder to the papers on *A Joyfully Serious Man. The Life of Robert Bellah* (*AJSM*) written by Andrew Abbott, Federico Brandmayr, Charles Camic, Andrea Cossu, Jean-Louis Fabiani, Laura Ford, Harlan Stelmach, and Rhys Williams. Conceived as an exercise in self-reflection, the paper addresses five wide areas: specific critiques of *AJSM*; an assessment of the relationship between *AJSM* and the research project whence it came; the connections between author and critics; a clarification of some fact regarding the main character of *AJSM*, that is, Robert Bellah; and the analysis of particular experiences which the author, Bellah, and his critics share as sociologists.

Keywords Robert N. Bellah · Sociology of ideas · Intellectuals · Biography · Ambition · Interpretation

> *Each of us is not a human being,*
> *but only the symbol of a human being.*
>
> Norman O. Brown[1]

Being a sociologist of ideas and intellectuals is a wonderful job, but also a never ending tour in self-awareness. As themselves people "who produce decontextualized ideas", sociologists of intellectuals are compelled to see everything they think or write about their subjects as immediately relevant to their work, their lives, and

[1] Norman O. Brown, "Love Hath Reason, Reason None," unpublished lecture given at Boston University, December 15, 1993, cit. in Weinstein (2006), p. 11.

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the ways they see, imagine, and evaluate themselves (Collins, 1998: 19; Želinský, 2020). Those who follow Collins (1998) in looking for the situations where emotional energy is produced will interrogate themselves about that fateful meeting when the attention of others bolstered their determination to develop a particular idea; those who describe intellectuals as strategic players in a field (Bourdieu, 2004) will find themselves reflecting about their own thinking and writing as a ceaseless (and exhausting) game of positioning; those who write on scholarly self-concepts, taking inspiration from Gross (2008) or Paul (2014), will ask themselves what kind of thinker or writer they are or would like to be; those who focus on performance (Alexander, 2016; Baert & Morgan, 2017) will think of their last seminar or conference and reflect on how well they did; and those who still cherish Zygmunt Bauman's musings on public intellectuals as legislators or interpreters (Bauman, 1987) will, sooner or later, fantasize of themselves as celebrities. We do not have to play with metaphors: each piece of research immediately doubles as a moment of self-reflection.

This applies in an even stricter and deeper way when the empirical object of the sociologist's research is found within the boundaries of sociology itself. For sociologists of ideas, studying the history of sociology or its present condition means touching upon topics and themes that are directly relevant not only to their "general" role—that of the intellectual—but also to their day to day work as sociologists. Abstract considerations are forced to attain some degree of concreteness. Those who think of disciplines as infinitely repeating the variations of a limited number of basic debates (Abbott, 2001), for example, will naturally reflect about the branch(es) of the fractal tree of theories, epistemologies, methods, and techniques upon which they themselves sit. In fact, while I was researching and writing *A Joyfully Serious Man. The Life of Robert Bellah* (Bortolini, 2021a, henceforth *AJSM*), no topic or phase of my scholarly life was spared from consideration: the impact of an intensely cross-disciplinary training on my ideas and attitude; the changing form and depth of my liaisons with mentors and peers; my trajectory across fields and within the particular field of sociology; my convictions about functionalism, evolutionism, theology, and interpretive social science; my ability in thinking and crafting new ideas and the amount of recognition they got; my experiences as a teacher and translator; the intersections between my private, professional, and public selves; and, as the story drew to a close, even an existential question about the ultimate meaning of my professional (and non-professional) life.

From a different point of view, a specific interest in sociology or other sociologists—rather than philosophers, chemists, or economists (Bourdieu, 1991; Camic, 2021; Latour, 1988)—has the side effect of dragging sociologists of intellectuals into the substantive and political disputes that are proper of, and relevant to, *their* discipline in *that* particular moment. Given the dynamics of scholarly fields, this is an obvious but nonetheless risky outcome (Bortolini, 2019), one which forces students of sociology to add a layer of reflexivity (and prudence) in expressing their own positions. Even in the most balkanized disciplines, names, schools, and theories are used as symbolic boundaries signaling, dividing or crossing fields and subfields—often starting from a naïve or radically presentist understanding of the history of the discipline itself (Dayé, 2018; Fleck & Dayé, 2015; Steinmetz,

2022; Wisselgren, 2022). For this reason, the particular empirical objects of one's inquiry attract the attention of peers like magnets, and in fact tend to obfuscate any theoretical, methodological or historical claim that one might try to advance. After twenty years working on Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, and their peers and students from the point of view of a historical sociology of expert knowledge production, I can only offer a florilegium of what I have heard over time in different countries and circles:

> "Ah, you study Talcott Parsons? So you must be a Parsonian."
> "You know, sociological theory advanced much since the Fifties."
> "Will you be offended if I say that this stuff about 'civil religion' is nonsense?"
> "Ah you know about Bourdieu? I thought you were a Parsonian."
> "How could one ever be a Trumpian? Bellah would have been pissed off by him!"
> "So you're not Parsonian? Why do you study Parsons then?"
> "I can't understand why you're still doing research on these dead white males… There's so much exciting stuff to be discovered in the work of women or minority sociologists…"
> "Who now reads Parsons?" *giggles*
> "Are you religious? I'm asking because I heard that you're writing about that guy, that Christian communitarian who wrote a book called 'habits of something' in the 1980s, is that right?"
> "You're not even a sociologist anymore… What does 'a historical sociology of expert knowledge production' mean, anyway?"[2]

But there's more—and this is something I only discovered when *AJSM* became the object of sustained attention. When sociologists read a study in the sociology of intellectuals focused on a major sociologist, as *AJSM almost* claims to be, this self-reflective urge will likely hit the readers themselves. When they write about the book, critics will have a proper, "professional" say on topics, methods, descriptions, interpretations, or style; but they also read themselves in the book, and are somehow pushed to compare their own life with that of its main character. They are thus buying a ticket to a house of mirrors—just like the original author did while researching and writing the book. In this sense, the papers collected in this issue of *The American Sociologist* and other published materials on *AJSM* are more or less directly the combination of a scholarly reading of the book *and* a personal projection *of* and *on* the stories told in it. Apart from Andrea Cossu and Harlan Stelmach, who explicitly wrestle with their own experience, Laura Ford and Rhys Williams recount their personal acquaintance with Bellah's works and what they did with them (as do, among others, Blum, 2023; Henking, 2022; Yamane, 2023); Andrew Abbott and Charles Camic extract two general hypotheses from the book that might easily be applied to

[2] This last phrase alludes to a rather serious outcome of the process of self-reflection I am talking about. Shortly after *AJSM* was published I applied to move from the Department of Sociology (and Philosophy, Education, and Applied Psychology) to the Department of History (and Geography and the Ancient World) in my home university of Padova, Italy. The move, which was ratified one year later, expresses not only my interest in more historically-oriented work, but also my growing awareness that the very few historical sociologists working in Italy are having a rather hard time.

any other academic-turned-public intellectual—Williams also reflects on a general topic but from a more personal point of view. Employing another discursive strategy, Federico Brandmayr analyzes Bellah's opposition to scientism to reflect upon the moral positioning of the sociologist (a topic he shares with Ford). Finally, when Jean-Louis Fabiani subjects Bellah's interpretation of Durkheim to ruthless scrutiny he is only vindicating the Father of (his own) French sociology.

If this were not enough, reading the scholarly *cum* personal comments of one's critics elicits in the author an additional level of self-reflection and, hopefully enough, awareness. It all comes back to the author: their original scholarly decisions and personal musings are magnified through the gaze of others who were, at the same time, looking at themselves *but* through the lenses of the story of another sociologis as it had been written, construed, and maybe even created by the original author (who is also a sociologist). Each order of observation and interpretation adds a new layer of projections on the top of existing ones, with the interesting particular that the latter are often the tool which allows to create the former. Thus the original text—in our case, the biographical story of Bob Bellah as instanciated in *AJSM*—becomes *a Rorschach text* of sorts, the mother of all projections.

Reading the comments to one's book, however, is not yet the end of the story, especially if they are collected in a monograph or a special section of a journal, as it happens in the present case. In fact, authors are required by academic etiquette—and personal vanity, and sheer interest, and all the rest—to write a rejoinder as a new text that should be many things at once: an act of acknowledgment of the attention given by others to their book (in fact, attention is the most important resource in the intellectual field and one that is in very short supply) and a testimony of one's gratefulness for it; but also, and mainly, a serene, professional, and precise answer to their positive or negative observations—which may focus on almost every aspect of the book, from the choice of one's subject to various conceptual and methodological assumptions (Scott, 2022)—in the form of a number of punctual clarifications, explanations or justifications.

If the theoretical framework I sketched so far has any plausibility, this Nolanesque house of mirrors makes almost impossible to serenely write such a rejoinder, as authors are supposed to surf between the different levels of explicit and implicit criticism they have been subjected *and* the additional projections emerging in the encounter between the readers and the contents of the book. Coming after the sources, the book, and the symposium papers on the book, the rejoinder is thus a text placed on a fourth order of observation. Every and each of its sentences is bound to become a move on a five-dimensional chessboard, to say the least. It might be read, first, as a commentary on the book that originates as a response to specific criticisms that were made of it or, second, as an assessment of the relationship between the author and the book as the final outcome of a research project. In the third place, it might be seen as a clarification of some fact regarding the main character(s) of the book, or even as a remark on a particular experience which the author, their subject, and their critics may share as sociologists or intellectuals—e.g., thinking with others (Cossu, Stelmach), discovering one's intellectual limits (Abbott), (mis)interpreting and being (mis)interpreted (Fabiani and Williams), and exploiting (or struggling with) one's structural position (Ford, Brandmayr, Camic).

Last but not the least, given that author and critics all belong to the same field, any sentence in the rejoinder might be interpreted as expressing the relationship between the former and the latter relative to their positioning on some step of the scientific continuum (Alexander, 1982). Since the papers collected in this issue of *The American Sociologist* have been written by friends, esteemed colleagues, and even a couple of individuals whose work I regard as a paramount inspiration for my own, this last point is especially frightening.

What's in a Book?

To start with, any assessment of a cultural object begins with categorization: it is only by deciding of what type *AJSM* is a token that one might think or write about it. In this sense, there seems to be few doubts that *AJSM* is a biography, and with this I mean a "full"—i.e., not an "intellectual" or "sociological"— biography.[3] As stated in an endnote at the end of the *Preface*, there is no explicit sociology in the book, as it was written in such a way as to be readable by anyone. I have recounted elsehwere (Bortolini, 2022a, 2023) how and why I came to this decision, and Cossu's and Stelmach's papers add further details to my own recollections. At the same time, two points are also true: first, no biography is "just a biography," for any story is bound to express, represent, or exemplify something else; second, I am a social scientist rather than say, a historian, a journalist or a novelist—*AJSM* cannot but being aligned with my interests as a sociologists of ideas. In this sense, not only does *AJSM* focus primarily on the construction and the transformations of Bellah's scholarly habitus and self-concept (a trace of my original 2006–2013 project, as recounted in Cossu, 2023), but it can also be read as an emblematic story of coming to terms with one's roots, an almost theatrical text on ambition, or even an allegory of the de-Parsonization of American sociology (Abbott, 2023; Ford, 2023; Knöbl, 2021; Borovoy, 2022; Saikia, 2023).

As noticed by Goldberg (2023) and in some of the papers in this issue, however, the scientific articles I published while I was writing *AJSM* employed episodes of Bellah's life as case studies related to a small set of theoretical themes: the connections between intellectuals, institutions, and infrastructures (Bortolini, 2011, 2021b); the dynamics of networked, distributed creativity (Bortolini & Cossu, 2015; Bortolini, 2020, 2022b); scholarly fields as relational spaces of positions (Bortolini, 2010, 2014, 2019); and, most importantly, intellectual success and its consequences (Bortolini, 2012; Bortolini & Cossu, 2020). The conceptual architecture of the book

[3] As with any cultural object, the interpretations of the author, that of the publisher, and those of different readers almost necessarily diverge (see Childress, 2017). While the Princeton University Press website has no tags to describe *AJSM*, its 2021 Fall catalogue filed it as "Biography | Sociology." In book reviews it has been called an "intellectual biography" (Gorski, 2022: 181), a work of "social and cultural history" (Rajagopal, 2022: 1), or a book "at the nexus of biography, history of ideas, sociology of knowledge, interpretation of texts (and lives)" (Henking, 2022: 246), while Watts (2023: 108) found *AJSM* "difficult to classify."

is built on these themes, and some of them have been hightlighted in this issue—e.g., the awareness of one's strenghts and limits as an academic thinker by Abbott, the relationship between status and freedom by Camic, intellectual collaboration by Cossu, and the heteronomous pressures to which authors are exposed to when they intervene in the public sphere by Williams.

Maybe a key to understand what kind of book *AJSM* is (a narrative full biography with an invisible sociological background?) entails moving from the question "What did you want to do with the book?" to "How did your image of Robert Bellah develop over the years?" Critics would respond in different ways to the question. Abbott (2023) enlists me among Bellah's admirers, a veritable member of a "Bellah cult" he finds puzzling on intellectual and disciplinary grounds; this categorization is warranted by the fact that in *AJSM* (and elsewhere) I do not question Bellah's ideas or behavior and by my use of the colloquial "Bob" (on this last point see also Goldberg, 2022; Watts, 2023; Ford, 2023; Chesta, forthcoming). This conviction is echoed in Cossu's remarks about (him hating my alleged) "going native," Bryan S. Turner's idea that my personal relationship with Bellah makes *AJSM* as much a memoir as a biography, and Peter Blum's remarks on my "sensitive and poignant treatment" of the most tragic moments of Bellah's life (Blum, 2023; Cossu, 2023; Turner, 2022). Italian philosopher Paolo Costa (2023) speaks of a non-mimetic adherence to the protagonist of the story on my part. The personal emails quoted by Stelmach (2023) should close once and for all the question of my admiration for Bellah.[4]

It is Laura Ford (2023), however, who spends some time and effort in trying to get to the bottom of the matter. She observes that Bellah was an outspoken, divisive figure who almost naturally prompted people to take sides—as do some of the papers in this issue—and that at times it seemed that I, as the author of *AJSM*, was fully on his side. But then, she writes, whenever she seemed to have figured out where I stood, I would switch sides to show some "incisive and, sometimes, devastating" criticism of Bellah's work. This "swinging" and "perspectival" style—which first invites the reader to identify with one side and then immediately to empathize with the opposite one—had the rhetorical effect of a whiplash, and proved to be rather risky, for at the end of her reading Ford had lost most, if not all, of her sympathy for Bellah. In the end the portrayal is even-handed," she suggested, but at any given moment in the story, the portrayal is most definitively *not* neutral (Ford, 2023). The

[4] It is not a secret that I was very friendly with Robert Bellah. Since our first encounter in 2007 we met almost once a year until his death in 2013, took some trips together, and exchanged hundreds of emails, drafts, and reading suggestions in both directions (a true process of "dialogue and draft," I should say, parallel to that I had with Cossu and others). Beyond this personal friendship, however, it seems clear to me that as a sociologist I am almost never on Bellah's side when it comes to either theory, method, or substantive interpretation—I am no evolutionist, have no patience for sociology as public philosophy, and as far my understanding of culture goes I feel closer to Ann Swidler (2023) than to Bellah's hermeneuticism. As I wrote in my introduction to the *Anthem Companion to Robert Bellah* (Bortolini, 2019) the two points that made me truly admire Bellah as a scholar were the deep connection between his life and his metaphysics (which I do not necessarily embrace) and his more general attitude of reinvesting most of his scholarly gains in intellectual freedom—which was also the freedom to make big mistakes (more of this later). This said, I sometimes wonder if this characterization of Bellah is but a projection of myself and some of the decisions I took during my academic career (see Regard 2000: 400).

same point is underlined by Costa (2023), who calls the style of *AJSM* "a field of hermeneutic tension" where "a sympathetic reconstruction of Bellah's human and professional story [is combined] with eccentric points of view that systematically problematize its meaning, self-understanding, value." On a different level of textual analysis, Riccardo Emilio Chesta (Chesta, forthcoming) criticizes the "indistinct organization of sections" in *AJSM*, a point that is also made by Watts (2023: 108) when he writes that "Bortolini structures the chapters in no easy discernible fashion: each corresponds to a mix of formative intellectual periods, geographic moves, institutional stays, major publication dates, and personal crises."

It seems to me that Ford and Costa not only nail it, but they also illustrate what I was trying to do much better than I could. While writing *AJSM* I was obviously thinking of C. Wright Mill's sociological imagination as an understanding of "the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals."[5] But I was thinking even more of Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Cubism. As explained by John Golding (1988: 17–18), when 1910s painters and critics like Jean Metzinger tried to sistematize the principles of this new, radical style, they highlighted the "right of the painter to move around an object and combine various views of it into a single image" and "the organization of the whole [pictorial] surface in terms of interpenetrating or interacting planes." When combined, the two principles were meant to drive painters to capture on canvas at least some of reality's multiplicity, restlessness, and vibrancy. *Si parva licet*, this was what I tried to reach through my writing style and the structural organization of the elements of the book. As a social scientist, my attempt at seizing difference and contingency through perspectivism—a rough one, to be sure—was rooted in epistemic, rather than aesthetic, considerations.[6]

From a theoretical point of view, starting from the idea of a dynamic understanding of intellectuals "in the field but not of the field" (Bortolini & Cossu, 2020), coupled with a growing impatience with the very concept of "field" (Abbott, 2005; Gross, 2018; Liu & Emirbayer, 2016), I would now describe my position as a when-Pragmatism-beat-Bourdieu kind of mood with countless other influences and fleeting crushes. Such a meta-theoretical position requires that any reconstruction embrace multiple levels or domains of social and cultural reality, their inner multiplicity (sometimes but not always expressed as a pluralism of juxtaposed positions),

[5] When David Yamane (2023: 217) wrote that "to truly understand Bellah, Bortolini shows, we need to see him as a minute point of the intersection of biography and history in society, to paraphrase C. Wright Mills," he saw the general sociological inspiration of my work, for which I am grateful.

[6] In fact, I experimented with more coeherent and one-sided chapters, especially when writing the most delicate part of *AJSM* (chapters 13 to 15). In the beginning I drafted a chapter on Bellah's sexual and sentimental experiments, one on the cultural and political context of the 1973-1985 period, and another on the ideation, creation, and production of *Habits of the Heart*. Not only the tryptich sounded much artificial to my ear, but it was unable to communicate Bellah's chaotic, tentative, and incomplete attempt to let his desire run free while recasting his network of intimate relationships *and* working on his major scholarly work to date coordinating a group of younger scientists (a practice that was almost completely foreign to him). The fragmentation of those (and other chapters) was thus aimed at communicating both the happening of "everything everywhere all at once" while keeping explicit interventions on my part to a minimum.

and their inescapable processuality.[7] As theorists in the pragmatist tradition know (Abbott, 2016; Gross et al., 2022), as much as it is difficult to analyze social and cultural phenomena from this point of view, it is even harder to express the results of such an insight through writing. More concretely, as a sociologist of intellectuals I think it is my job to reconstruct the processes of creation, production, and reception of specific cultural objects without ever expressing my judgment about their soundness, truthfulness, or morality. One thing is to show what intellectuals were doing with words—for example what Bellah was trying to do with his interpretation of Durkheim or his persistent (and little noticed) leaning toward Schutzian phenomenology rather than Parsonian functionalism—or to highlight the contradictions, ambiguities, and ambivalences in their work. Passing judgment on the content of their ideas as if one possessed a view from nowhere is quite another.

The attempt to craft what could be called, with a pinch of narcissism, a Pragmatist sociological Cubism, however, brings us back to the most classical of problems—fact and fiction, granite and rainbow (Hemecker & Saunders, 2017). Here no theory seems to be particularly useful. On the contrary, as Ray Monk wrote in a seminal paper, while biographers customarily write without a theory, almost anyone who tries to theorize about biography thinks that "that biographers cannot write anything *but* fiction, that biography is, by its very nature, fictional" (Monk, 2007: 555; Monk, 2009). Notice that the methodological issue of fact and fiction turns almost immediately into a question about meaning: "If one admits that human lives are, without exception, opaque and intricate," writes Costa (2023), "and that the lives of moderns are made even more indecipherable by the 'light of Public [which] obscures everything' (Heidegger), is it not, on balance, unreasonable to expect that telling a personal story will have a significant enlightening effect?" As Virginia Woolf would probably have it, if there is "a light that never goes out" in the biographies we write, it comes only from the many decisions we, as narrating authors, make about the materials, patterns, meaning, and significance of the lives we aim to tell. If this awareness may momentarily reassure us as writers, it does not even remotely solve the underlying epistemic and methodological problems.[8]

It seems to me that Frédéric Regard's philosophy of biography as exposed and elaborated by Stelmach (2023) goes a long way in showing that a good answer to the classic problems of writing biography can be only cast from an ethical point of view—that is, through an assumption of personal responsibility. What is interesting in Regard's attempt at addressing these age-old questions is that his connection to Alain Badiou's philosophy allows him to reverse the relationship between fact and fiction in a non-empiricist way. According to Regard the subjective identities of both the narrated and the narrating authors only emerge in and through the biographical

[7] Again, after fifteen plus years I am not sure if I projected this principle on Bellah (for example when describing the style of his *Religion in Human Evolution* in *AJSM*, p. 339 ff.) or viceversa. While lately friends as Matteo Santarelli, Neil Gross, and Tullio Viola pulled me towards pragmatism, my interest in Bourdieusian field theory was crucial while I was writing *AJSM*.

[8] As I wrote elsewhere (Bortolini, 2022a: 4), as a sociologist one faces the additional problem of finding an acceptable balance between individual agency and the power of cultural, material, and social structures.

text; as mediated by the act of writing and giving a form to a text, their respective identity "is not therefore a truth that has degenerated into a ficton, but a fiction that aspires to the condition of 'truth'" (Regard, 2000: 404). This process of co-creation can only point to the *fidelity* of narrating authors to the *event(s)* defining the lives of narrated authors (but also to those of their own lives, which are somewhat illuminated by the story they are telling) as its paramount pragmatic principle (Regard, 2000: 396). To go back where we started, in Regard's sense fidelity has almost nothing to do either with agreeing with the ideas, actions, and decisions of the narrated author or with "sticking to the facts." Rather, it is a bidirectional ethical relationship between two authors who emerge, act, and disappear together in the narrating author's understanding of the most fateful and consequential breaks in the narrated author's life. The outcome, *ça va sans dire*, is always and fatefully tentative, fragmented, and contingent on the will of the writing subjects and on their own attempts at self-deception. With all its cracks, it nonetheless points to the unattainable and unverifiable truth of the event and the changes it brought to the world.[9]

I thus agree with Regard and Stelmach that the bliss and burden of writing a biography is to enact this fidelity in each and every move—from thinking to writing and everything in between. This interpretation sheds light, I think, on Cossu's estrangement from "the project" in the moment when it switched from a sociological to a full biography (Cossu, 2023: @) as a legit refusal on his part to embrace the principle of fidelity towards the narrated author and a retreat into what, in Badiou's terms, would be called the domain of ordinary knowledge—that is, the normative realm where almost everything else happens. On my part, I think that it is precisely the inclusion of the reader as the third vertex of this triangle of fidelity (Regard, 2000: 407–408) that turns writing biographies into a worthy endeavor—one in which one might sense "a genuine admiration of the biographer for his subject, but also a vivid sense of the latter's inadequacy, which is but a placeholder of the inadequacy of humankind as a whole" (Costa, 2023). The ethical principle of fidelity should govern the writing of any biography, no matter how cruel, stupid, deplorable, or depressing its subject may be. Those who cannot in good conscience embrace it should refrain to commit time, effort, resources, and chunks of their lives to such an enterprise.[10]

[9] In Badiou's ethics all these concepts have a particular meaning, but the kernel of the argument is easily understandable, I think. See, among other texts, Badiou 2001; Badiou 2003. I should add that in my view this ethical responsibility extends also to the people who make the writing of a biography possible in the first place. I am thinking, for example, of the relatives and executors of dead authors, who give their permission to use personal documents and stuff (Hamilton, 1994). In this sense, it is fair to remind that for all the seven years of our friendship Robert Bellah knew that I was writing a sociological book on him as a case study in the construction and transformation of the scholarly habitus. It was only after his death and the discovery of his "experimental period" (Bortolini, 2023: 2) that Jennifer Bellah Maguire and I agreed to turn the project into a full biography. Over the years, then, I have felt a forceful obligation not only towards Robert Bellah as the narrated author, but also towards his daughter (and Bill Sullivan, to be sure). This, again, does not mean to accept censorship to what can or can't be said, but to find the right, most faithful way to recount the story of an individual who is not here to discuss our decisions.

[10] This is but a rough sketch of a more theoretical reflection on writing biography that I am presently trying to cast. Besides Monk and Regard, I find particularly interesting the work of James Clifford (1978).

Between Center and Periphery

If the biographer's responsibility is personal, the intellectual burden is widely shared through a network of conversational partners. Take this issue of *The American Sociologist* as a *post-hoc* example. Of the eight participants two are very good personal friends with whom I shared joys and sorrows; two are people whose work I only recently learned about and wanted to involve at all costs; two are excellent new discoveries who were suggested by some very smart friends; and two are, I cannot lie about this, among the individuals who inspire me the most in my scholarly work. The colleagues who wrote the blurbs for *AJSM* and the dozen book reviews that came out in the last couple of years (all of which I referenced in this paper out of respect and appreciation) are more or less distributed in the same way.[11] Together they describe a set of concentric circles that, as theorized by Cossu (2023), makes *AJSM*, as any other cultural object, just a node of a widely distributed network of knowledge production. There are, to be sure, many more people who gave a contribution to the creation, circulation, and reception of "my" book—archivists and librarians, graduate students, Bellah's family and friends, generous financers, publishers and journal editors, academic administrators, seminar organizers and participants, the members of my extended family, and even the random individuals I met in this or that bar who had the misfortune to ask me about my job.

One may say that the long and stratified acknowledgments section in *AJSM* tries to capture at least the past of such a network, and that the symposium and this rejoinder, as texts belonging to a specific *genre*, try to assess its present. And still, while most rejoinders focus on the content of the critics' papers, I am also trying to incorporate Cossu's suggestion into this very text. More than any other, his essay reminds us of the bliss and the burden of being a sociologist of ideas and intellectuals: we are constantly called to reflect on our many entanglements from many different points of view, thus going against the grain of the academe's individualistic culture (Collins, 2002). If this is true, and I think it is, the right way to face the papers included in this symposium seems that of connecting them (and other texts) in an emerging network which expands Cossu's one-to-one narrative with additional particulars and people. In particular, I would like to highlight two very different connections that might not be clear to the readers of *AJSM* and that explain, or so I think, many of the cross-cutting interests that emerge from the book. Since I was twenty-five I have been part of the "Seminario di Urbino," a loose assemblage of philosophers and social scientists who came together in the mid-1990s as an enactment of that "addiction to reflection" and "foolishness for ideas" that Abbott (2003: 118) singles out as typical of "the state of being" of intellectuals. The group met at least once a year for a three-day seminar that taught me not only that one could be very (or probably *more*) serious and intense outside academic institutions, but also that peer groups and self-management can work. The seminar was a triumph of

[11] I have to admit that reading the book reviews and the papers in the two symposia dedicated to *AJSM* had invariably the effect of moving me (I can only imagine the sound of Cossu's sigh when he will read this). I am not sure if such a commotion comes simply from my own imposter's syndrome, which does not seem to be healing, or from a heightened awareness of all the work I still have to do to bring something meaningful home.

horizontality and commitment—some of its members are among my most important conversational partners today (see Corchia, 2017). Later on, the Italian sociologist, Marco Santoro, was also crucial: he was the one who crossed the boundaries separating Italian sociologists into three political-academic "camps" (Cossu & Bortolini, 2017: 91 ff.) to invite me to become the managing editor of an ambitious journal, *Sociologica*, thus giving me the opportunity to play in a higher league than I was used to; and it was him who pushed me to widen my reading habits—"What does it mean you don't read Bourdieu? You've never heard about Abbott? How come?".

I was a graduate student when I entered the Seminario di Urbino; eight years later, when I first met Cossu and then Santoro, I had been a tenure-track assistant professor for three years. The relationships built between 1996 and 2006 profoundly shaped my self-concept as an intellectual. Remembering those years, however, might also help us reflect on the pros and cons of being peripheral from a disciplinary, cultural, and even geographical point of view. As shown by recurring comments during conversations, the very fact of an Italian sociologist writing a full biography of an American intellectual (who is, to be sure, almost unknown in my country) and publishing it for a top press in the United States remains puzzling for most of my academic acquaintances. In this sense, *AJSM* is a liminal cultural object, one that emerged at the center of the field of sociology—even if I am not sure that sociology is its field—but has largely been created at its periphery. In a world where postcolonial theory is on the rise (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Go, 2016), Italy is an elusive space—not enough "center," but also not enough "periphery". It is, to paraphrase a typical Bourdieusian expression, "a dominated fraction of the dominant world." Once somebody told me that "*AJSM* should have been written in the United States." On the contrary, I still believe that one of its strengths is that its author is not culturally or academically an American.

Facts and Figures

As much as one might love philosophy and memories, however, when weighing a book about the life, deeds, and ideas of an individual who set foot on this planet, facts and figures are inescapable. What did Bellah want to say when he proclaimed "religion is true"? Was he really meaning it? How should we read his interpretation of Durkheim or his aversion to scientism? Was he intimately convinced that the social sciences should become public philosophies or was it just position taking? Was he *authentic*?

Some of the papers in this issue delve into substantive questions, to which, if I want to abide to the principles I just illustrated, I have to find an indirect way to respond—I still think my job as an author was to provide the pieces of hardware so that others could build their own Bellah tinker toy, not to "defend him," whatever that means.[12] Even in this case, however, it is interesting to see how the assessment

[12] There would also be a big problem of authority. Having studied Bellah's life and ideas for fifteen years or so, I am obviously "an expert" on him. But assuming the pose of *the* expert is profoundly in contradiction with both my understanding of intellectual work and my pragmatist meta-outlook. So, maybe I know something about Bellah, but I do not feel entitled to give any final word on him.

of his ideas and heritage depends on a second categorization process—deciding what kind of scholar and/or intellectual Bellah was. Natural and inevitable as it is (Wisselgren, 2022), this move somehow betrays the very idea of a full biography, whose final outcome should be that, as much as they depend on their social and cultural milieus, individuals are never reducible to those environments.

This said, it seems safe to notice that most of the readers of *AJSM* look at Robert Bellah from a disciplinary point of view, even when they analyze and evaluate his most flamboyant work or his record as a public intellectual. Most commentators, for example, take for granted that he was a sociologist or at least primarily one (Ford, 2023; Bromberger, 2022; Watts, 2023). Here I beg to differ. Sure enough, Bellah usually introduced himself as a sociologist and always refused to move to institutions embedded in other disciplinary realms (*AJSM*: 293). But his estrangement from American sociology began almost immediately, and in any case way before the 1967–1968 revolt against the so-called "structural-functionalist establishment," which also (and not incidentally) coincided with his move from Harvard to Berkeley (*AJSM*: 130 ff.). The fact that he never repudiated Parsons but rather *claimed* the latter as a hermeneutic social scientist in a rather disorienting interpretation should not conceal a simple fact: Bellah had very little interest or patience for coeval sociology, and especially for his putative subdiscipline of the sociology of religion, which he found "dull" and unable to grasp the main conceptual and existential problems of its subject (Bortolini, 2019: 15 ff.).

Among the papers collected in this issue, Brandmayr's and Ford's grab the bull by the horns and look directly at the divergence(s) between the positions taken by Bellah and (mainstream) American sociology. In a harsh critique, Ford calls the partisan and politicized conception of social science championed by Bellah a "sociological faith." With this phrase, she indicates a repudiation of Lockean individualism based on the idea that any comprehension of society, culture, and politics should not ignore some basic ontological tenets such as the relational constitution of individuals or the conditions of the functioning of groups and institutions. "There are *truths*," Bellah and his co-authors wrote in *Habits of the Heart*, "we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism" (cit. in *AJSM*: 250, italics mine). *Habits* and *The Good Society* can thus be seen as attempts at rooting a set of new societal values (and a host of policy suggestions) on top of these sociological "truths" (see also Watts, 2022). According to Ford (2023), this insight eventually pushed the Habits group to embrace an elitist conception of politics founded on the primacy of a scholarly clerisy of sorts—and idea which, in fact, is not far from Bellah's enshrinement of Durkheim as a civic theologian (Goldberg, 2022; Rose, 2023; Watts, 2023).

This last point is somehow reinforced *and* mined by the outcomes of Brandmayr's investigation on Bellah's "cleft" professional status. After finding five different meanings of "positivism" in Bellah's work, Brandmayr calls attention on the most radical of them—positivism as a form of utilitarianism (that is, Lockean individualism) that constitutes the common sense of Anglo-liberal culture and spills into the social sciences. According to Bellah, being colonized by utilitarianism means not only that social scientists themselves forget about what Ford would call sociological faith, but also that their policy recommendations can only confirm and support

the reigning neo-liberal *doxa*. Brandmayr's conclusion, however, is far more radical than this: not only was Bellah against "scientism," he was against *science* tout court. "He considered it at best vulgar, at worst harmful," writes Brandmayr (2023) in a rather drastic passage. And then he continues: "Science was for him part and parcel of the system that was colonizing the lifeworld, rather than a microcosm under threat from external economic and political powers." I am not sure I fully agree with Brandmayr here. Albeit his writings on the subject were typically ambiguous and elusive, Bellah seemed concentrated more on finding an overarching moral form for regulating scientific practices—thus discarding scientism as a catch-all ideology—than on opposing science per se (Ashcraft, 2023).

Brandmayr, however, might have a point that goes beyond the tone of much of Bellah's essayistic production. His critique, in fact, resounds not only with the Berkeley sociologist's understanding of social science as public philosophy, but also with Fabiani's assessment of Bellah's reading of Durkheim (Fabiani, 2023). As Steinmetz (2022) and Dayé (2018) have recently written, histories of sociology might be useful to enhance our reflexivity toward disciplinary amnesias and the many roads not taken, on the one hand, and our understanding of the reciprocal impact of sociology and and its social contexts, on the other. In this sense, Fabiani's paper brings our understanding of Bellah's Durkheim (and of Durkheim himself) under serious scrutiny from a decidedly contextualist position that I cannot but embrace.[13] Beyond any erudite and compelling demostration, however, what emerges from his analysis is that Bellah's interpretation of Durkheim was never "scholarly" in the strict sense of this expression. It was fully instrumental to Bellah's own scientific goals and, as such, "political" and *un*faithful to the French sociologist—pretty much as Parsons' (different) rendering of the same author in *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937). I am mentioning Parsons because a new interpretation of Durkheim was Bellah's way not to completely detach himself from him at the time of his personal *hejira* (*AJSM*: 142 ff.), but also because of a rather curious connection that up until now I failed to notice, a connection that might help us link Fabiani's critique to William's paper and the sociology of ideas.

Just as Bellah was publishing *Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society*, the *American Sociological Review* featured an article by a sociologist from Indiana University, Whitney Pope, who had gotten his PhD from Berkeley in 1963 with a dissertation on Durkheim's theory of integration (Durkheim, 1973; Pope, 1976). Titled "Classic on Classic: Parsons' Interpretation of Durkheim," the paper aimed at showing that Durkheim's movement to and from voluntarism portrayed in *The Structure* had never happened (Pope, 1973). Just like Fabiani, Pope was looking for a "truer" Durkheim, but instead of a contextualist interpretation of the pragmatics of Durkheim's *œuvre*, he committed himself to a detailed textual analysis, which he would later complement by putting some of the French's factual claims to empirical test (Danigellis & Pope, 1979). In method Pope's article was not that distant from Bellah's introduction to the Durkheim anthology, and while Bellah was way less outspoken than Pope, their conclusions were different but almost equally opposed to Parsons'.

[13] A judgment I did not pass in the book, for reasons I tried to justify above.

The really interesting point, however, comes from a quick glance at the debate triggered by Pope's paper. A couple of years later, the *American Sociological Review* published two rejoinders to Pope: one by sociologist Jere Cohen and one by Talcott Parsons himself, who in fact took the chance to respond to Pope *and* Cohen *and* Bellah. If Cohen (1975: 105–106) added weight to Pope's critique, highlighting a couple of points where Parsons' original reading failed, Parsons (1975a) juggled the texts written by the three younger sociologists to create a sort of moving target (so much so that at one point it was no longer clear whether the target was Parsons, Durkheim, or someone else). Predictably, Parsons accused his accusers of being "too literal" in their readings and of considering only *The Structure*, while the (evident) differences between his work and Bellah's were downplayed on the basis of their personal relationship. Pope, obviously enough, wrote back, revising his interpretation. But this is not the point.

Much more interesting is the generative power of interpretation(s) that emerges from a translation of my last few lines into a sort of *Chad Gadya* chain. It all starts in 1937 with Parsons reading Durkheim and enshrining him as "a classic."[14] And then: Bellah reading Durkheim in 1973; Pope reading Parsons reading Durkheim, but also Pope reading Durkheim, in 1973; Cohen reading Pope reading Parsons reading Durkheim, but also Cohen reading Durkheim, and Cohen reading Parsons reading Durkheim, in 1975; Parsons reading Pope reading Parsons reading Durkheim, but also Parsons reading Durkheim, and Parsons reading Bellah and Cohen reading Durkheim, in 1975; Pope (1975) reading Parsons and Cohen reading Pope reading Parsons reading Durkheim in 1975.

The sequence was not yet over, for Cohen and Pope were on the verge of co-authoring with Lawrence E. Hazelrigg two other papers aimed at "de-parsonizing" the classics, themselves followed by *four* rejoinders and counter-rejoinders (Cohen et al., 1975a, b; Parsons, 1975b, 1976; Pope et al., 1975, 1977). Non-intellectuals would shiver down the spine at such a display of scholasticism. For us, such is the stuff from where dreams are woven: being published, being criticized, answer to criticism, being criticized again. Repeat. Forever.

One of the things we learn as sociologists of ideas is that "intellectual life is first of all conflict and disagreement." This is true at an empirical level but even truer from the point of view of the formation of new ideas, and thus creativity, and also from that of the construction of career paths (Collins, 1998: 1–15). Being read and criticized is the key for existing within any intellectual field. "The authors have repeatedly accused me of 'distorting Weber's meaning,'" wrote Parsons (1975a: 666) in his second rejoinder, "I'm afraid I must come back with a claim that, however that may be, they have distorted my meaning." "Afraid," however, is a deceptive word. One must imagine Parsons happy. After the disbanding of the Department of Social Relations in 1970 and his retirement three years later (Nichols, 1998; Schmidt, 2022), he became increasingly estranged from Harvard and suffered the kickbacks of the 1968 revolt. Except for a small group of aficionados who participated with him in the so-called "human condition" project at Penn (Lidz & Bershady, 2021; *AJSM*: 189

[14] See, among others, Connell 1997; Platt 1995; Ollion and Abbott 2016.

ff.), between 1973 and the time of his death in 1979 Parsons was for all practical purposes a has-been. What Whitney Pope and his companions did was summoning him from public oblivion, bringing him back into the agon, and even calling him "a classic"—even if this expression might have multiple meanings. One can only think of the Collinsian burst of emotive energy that hit Talcott Parsons as he set up to write his rejoinders and mischievously communicated his "preference to end the controversy *from my side* with a very brief statement" (Parsons, 1976: 361, italics mine).

Back then to Rhys Williams, whose paper I read as showing that from an analytical point of view misinterpretations and misreadings just *do not exist*. Williams is not a sociologist of ideas, but he correctly points to a generative structural contradiction: on the one side, intellectual fields want their participants to be original but recognizable, and those who are able to come up with a "signature concept," as Bellah did with the American civil religion, are advantaged in getting the attention of their peers. On the other side, the same fields encourage a multiplicity of interpretations, and even reward counterinterpretations by critics (Williams, 2023) which multiply the points of view and make the proliferation of different understandings of any topic a *sine qua non*. To go back to *AJSM*, it is clear that Bellah was rather annoyed by what he saw as "misreadings" of his major works, but also that his attitude changed radically over the years. During the civil religion debate to the 1970s he often clashed with his critics and tried to rework his signature concept so many times as to render it unrecognizable to his conversational partners (*AJSM*: 172 ff.; Bortolini, 2012). After the publication and the success of *Habits of the Heart* Bellah went for a more pragmatic approach which pushed him, most of the time, to *simplify* (instead of remaking) his conceptual framework to make it accessible to his lay audiences (*AJSM*: 258 ff.). Here one might say that, besides making a "lateral" move from the academe to the wider public sphere, he also showed some lack of reflexivity as a scholar or, maybe, an enthusiastic embrace of a rhetoric of *fausse naïveté*. If Williams is right, as I think he is in his general insight, each of us should think of themselves not only as the author of one's work, but as one who throws texts into the intellectual field that immediately escape one's control and, in fact, become a pawn of a much wider, deeper, and uncontrollable game. This is why I think, *contra* Fabiani but not against his persuasive rendering of Durkheim's context and intentions, that in order to criticize one author's interpretation of another author's work, it is much more interesting to focus on the interpreter than on the interpreted. In fact, even when they claim of having discovered "the truth," be it sociological or otherwise, what intellectuals ultimately want is to be discussed, criticized, and even attacked. What we are really aiming for is to be (mis)interpreted, so that the debate—and, with it, ourselves—can exist. And this brings us to the last room of our house of mirrors.

"The Autobiography of the Human Race"

As noticed multiple times, one of the juiciest moments of Robert Bellah's intellectual trajectory was his move from the academe to the public sphere around 1973–1975. Such a transition is mentioned by almost all authors and reviewers, but

it is the specific focus of two papers that might be read as pointing to common situations that *all* intellectuals might have experienced at some point. In what follows, it is my contention that Andrew Abbott and Charles Camic have written two papers that almost completely diverge in their conclusions, thus showing what third-order observers can do starting from the same historical data and the same narrative.[15]

Since Abbott's main cleavage is that between academia and the wider public sphere, I think it is warranted to examine the definition of the academic intellectual that might underpin his reasoning and see what can be done with it. In a (beautiful and, sadly, little known) piece he published in 2003, academic intellectuals are a species of the genus "intellectuals" who add to a "characteriological" and "pervasive" love for ideas the empirical fact of making a living thanks to them—that is, the contingency of working in a higher education institution (Abbott, 2003: 117). If this definition is acceptable, as I think it is, Bellah never "moved" from the academic field to the public sphere, for he never stopped being employed at a university. In fact, not only did he retain his position at the Berkeley Department of Sociology, but while he was writing *Habits* he occupied the highest departmental rank. After 1985, the success of the book increased his academic capital to the point that the University of California gave him the Eliot endowed chair *on top* of his Ford chair to prevent his departure to other universities (*AJSM*: 261–262). In this capacity he participated in various committees, selecting new members of the profession; he continued to teach, communicating his unconventional views to new cohorts of students and mentoring them; and he maintained his position at the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union, employing its infrastructures for new publicly-oriented projects such as the Center for Ethics and Social Policy and the Good Society Summer Institute and Fall Conferences (*AJSM*: 277 ff.).

At least for Bellah—but I think we may dare to generalize from within his case—"becoming a public intellectual" did *not* amount to *moving* from one domain to the other. Here the use of spatial metaphors and related verbs of movement might hinder our understanding of what happened (Martin, 2003; Silber, 1995). For those individuals who are originally employed in the academe, becoming a public intellectual usually entails superimposing an additional layer onto what is already there—it is more a "thickening" of one's condition than a migration to another field. This new layer might be understood in two ways: as an enlargement of one's social and symbolic capital channelling new opportunities (e.g. when media call to ask for an opinion or arrange a radio, TV, or podcast appearance); and as the possibility of producing cultural objects bending or violating the rules of reciprocal control among academics (e.g. when one is so famous that their papers skip peer review or are easily published in extra-academic venues). Obviously, the new layer pushes the whole figuration to find a new equilibrium. On the merely quantitative side, one's strictly academic activity may plummet, as it happened with Bellah between 1975 and 1997. But there is a more interesting side to the matter: as it always happens, acting

[15] If the material space I will dedicate to each of them may look radically different it is only because I will focus on the paper toward which I have critical qualms, subsuming the other in my argument. Also, I know it might look unwarranted to juxtapose the two, given their reciprocal admiration and friendship (see, for example, Abbott, 2021). But still.

in multiple fields at once makes one's positioning and clarity increasingly difficult. Esoteric texts written in a technical language and addressed at one's scholarly peers might be read and (mis)interpreted by lay audiences, while attempts at simplifying and explaining complex concepts in the public sphere might be seen as "selling out" by highbrow academics. Meanings change, and quickly.

These insights, to be sure, should not be read as going *against* Abbott's understanding, for he never writes that becoming a public intellectual requires resigning from the university. In fact, he speaks of academia-internal strategies or leaving the academic competition (Abbott, 2023), suggesting that "pure" academics are more worried of the judgment of their peers (who are only formally so, if we accept his hypothesis about discovering one's worth) than of anything else. Using a hyperbolic image, one might think of a one-dimensional scholar so strictly committed to (the functions and the meaning of) the conventions of the academic field as to explicitly refuse any opportunity to skip peer review. Given this clarification, I think, the story of Bellah's transition to the public sphere strongly resonates with Camic's paper, although his focus on free-floating intellectuals adds a different twist to the academe/public sphere distinction. Bellah was able to become a public intellectual *thanks to* (and not in spite of) the particular academic institutions that supported him at various times in his career. If we take Camic's view, where the main point is intellectual freedom and the possibility of letting one's imagination wander freely beyond and even against one's disciplinary, social, and cultural positions, we should recognize that Bellah was from a very early stage an individual who aspired—rightly or wrongly, this is not the point—to become an "old style *universal* scholar," as his lifelong plan of 1955–1957 already shows (*AJSM*: 62 ff., italics mine). It is true that this idea was initially confined to the academic field, and becoming a public intellectual was not part of the original project, but one can well see that entering the wider public sphere was but a different way to actualize Bellah's grandiose understanding of himself.

In Abbott's version, on the contrary, becoming a public intellectual can indeed be seen as an escape route for those who discover—as we all do—that they are not the best and the brightest among academics. Here, Abbott (2023) says, timing is crucial. While most of us are so lucky to discover our limits during graduate school or soon after its conclusion, Bellah's is a tale about how institutional and interactional support might buffer individuals so as to delay *that* moment and finally leave late-discoverer clueless about those academic-internal strategies for being second-best that would save their lives and allow them to recast or redirect their intellectual effort and energy (Abbott, 2023). In Bellah's case, the late recognition of "his own stature as a scholar" resulted in a catastrophic fiasco and a kind of self-exile from the game. While more successful peers like Erving Goffman or Clifford Geertz remained faithful to academic knowledge, "Bellah's freedom came by committing himself in part to something outside academia altogether" (Abbott, 2023).

Here, again, I beg to differ. My interpretation radically diverges from Abbott's in that I see Bellah as plagued by a dramatic doubt about his worth as a scholar (and a man) ever since his years as an undergraduate—that is, precisely when he moved from high school to college and found he was not being up to the challenge (*AJSM*: 27 ff., 61). Indeed, the mismatch between Bellah's ambition and his strong sense of

inadequacy and persistent imposter syndrome is one of the main narrative threads of *AJSM*. I would dare to say that in the story I have told the Badiousian event happens precisely when this struggle ends. But in his case the clash between academic ambition and its evident limits resolved itself *in exactly the opposite direction* to what we might expect following Abbott's theoretical reasoning—and here is, I think, a truly exceptional aspect of Bellah's story. The outcome was that of *reinforcing* the ambition (if not the conviction) of being the best and the brightest. In other words, through the crucible of 1973–1976 and the experimental period of 1977–1982 Bellah emerged *stronger* than ever.

In this sense, the justification for writing about his bisexuality—a theme that most readers of *AJSM* prefer not to comment upon—depends on the fact that it was the pivot around which he organized his prolonged phase of self-reflection. It could have been otherwise, but *that* was Bellah's own trigger. The outcome was probably not that he was the best and the brightest, but at least that the idea that the imposter syndrome that had plagued him up until that point was *not* justified.[16] As I wrote elsewhere (Bortolini, 2023: 3): "It was not by chance that only after this moment of atonement could he seriously consider his lifelong plan of writing a book comparable in style, scope, and depth to Max Weber's *Sociology of Religion*"—the twentieth chapter of *AJSM*, titled "Between Religion and Evolution. North America, 1955–2004" was meant to suggest that without *that* crucible he would have never been able to carry out his plan. Indeed, how could a 70-year-old retired professor embark on the project that eventually led to *Religion and Human Evolution* if he did not at least have the hope of being the next Max Weber, albeit at an age when the time left to enjoy being one was almost over? I am stretching things a bit, but not much.

Ironically, my interpretation is supported by a radical deployment of Abbott's conceptual tools. He, in fact, is not talking of "failed academics." He tells the tale of countless individuals who, at some point of their life, discovered they were not *the* best and the brightest, and then embraced "new conceptions of ambition and new strategies for dealing with (…) 'failure.'" Here "failure" is written between inverted commas not only because no one—except for John von Neumann, apparently—*is* the best, but also because each of these ways to face "failure" may produce highly successful outcomes. For clarity's sake I turn Abbott's paragraph into a list and italicize the points:

1. One can *specialize*, becoming the best in some narrow range.
2. One can move into *obscure subject areas*, where no one else is interested in competing.
3. One can move along "ahead of the crowd," always adopting the "*cutting edge*" of some area of thought.
4. Or one can indeed do the reverse of this perpetual retooling, making a virtue of one's longterm *consistency*.

[16] Notice that I am sticking to Bellah's own subjective understanding of himself and his value, for this is the outlook embraced by Abbott (2023) in his paper. Whether this self-assessment was "correct" or not from an objective point of view, whatever it is, is not interesting.

5. One can become a *borrower* from other fields, benefiting from others' intellectual capital.

   Complementing these strategies that are internal to academic competition are those that look outside it. One can opt out of the system in various ways.
6. In the school years one can move towards *extracurricular excellence*.
7. As a faculty member, one can opt into *teaching or administration*.
8. Or one can even take up *a second career*: playing a musical instrument, writing fiction, volunteering extensively.
9. Or one can, like Bellah, become *a public intellectual*.

Abbott's long and detailed list covers almost everything that each of us routinely does as an academic intellectual.[17] Its author, however, is not equally clear about what the best academic intellectual would do. Imagine the kingdom of Academyland—probably located in Fredonia, NY, but surely not in Anaheim, Orlando, or Paris—as a magical place where the question, "Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the brightest one of all?", could have one straight, certain, and fully public answer. What would happen to the brightest of us all? Based on what we know about that fondative concept of the sociology of ideas and intellectuals, the Matthew Effect, she would immediately get bottomless funding and the collaboration of anyone else. Abbott thinks of von Neumann, others will think of J. Robert Oppenheimer in Los Alamos (Monk, 2012), but without the practical urge to win a war against Evil. What would she do? Once we write off all the points in Abbott's list of what second-, third-, and nth-rate academics do, there is only one answer: A theory of everything. Or, maybe, "the autobiography of the human race."

This last phrase, as readers of *AJSM* will remember, was used by Robert Bellah to describe his newly published book, *Religion in Human Evolution*, at the American Academy of Religion meeting on November 20, 2011: "Recently somebody asked me: Why are you writing this book about religion when you should write your autobiography? I said: I *am* writing my autobiography, it's the autobiography of the human race!" I then commented as follows: "Under its apparent humility, Bellah's quip spoke of the desire of the Enlightenment to embrace all that exists through pure scientific reason, and yet it suggested that only myths and narratives might be able to capture the essence of the human condition through innumerable individual examples" (*AJSM*: xii). For Abbott (2023) this proves that I endorse Bellah's *grandeur* and subscribe to the view that he was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. On the contrary, the first image of Bellah that readers encounter opening *AJSM* is bound to suggest that the man had an extremely (and unbearable, as it seems) high opinion of himself—and the rest of the book tries to demonstrate how his individual response to Camic's institutional and historical dynamics produced such a conviction. Indeed, Bellah is first described as "visibly thrilled to be under the spotlight" as he enjoys the homage of faceless sycophants visiting him as he sits comfortably on a couch during a party held in his honor by the Episcopal

[17] Abbott's list is similar to a list of alternative paths presented by Randall Collins (2002: 54-55) in an old paper that was particularly important for my work.

bishop of San Francisco (*AJSM*: xi). This narrative comes immediately before the description of the scholarly event where Bellah equated his autobiography with the autobiography of the human race and his book with both.[18] The fact that *AJSM* ends on the rather opposite image of Bellah silently listening to a tour guide ripping Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* to shreds does not change the first image, but only adds to his ambivalence as a human being.

Last but not the least, and I say this with only a small Nietzschean smirk, as a sociologist trained in the heydays of the postmodern condition, it should be clear that I regard "the desire of the Enlightenment to embrace all that exists through pure scientific reason" as *the* root of all the evil that modernity has delivered—a position that, of course, was sometimes voiced by Bellah himself, but with different overtones. Not only would I never read a book that begins like that as a "celebratory biography," but it seems to me that the story about academic ambition I try to tell in *AJSM* is quite the opposite of that told by Andrew Abbott in his paper and much in line to what Camic (2023) wrote about the sociohistorical conditions that made Bellah's intellectual free-floating possible in the first place. Whether this free-floating was a genuine intellectual freedom or a partial result of Bellah's belated recognition that he was falling behind in terms of intellectual competition (Abbott, 2023) only the reader can say.

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Consent for Publication I consent.

Conflicts of Interest To the best of my knowledge, I have no conflict of interest regarding this paper.

[18] Indeed, the first version of my preface opened with a story that I really wanted to be *the* beginning of the book: "As Bob and I sat for one last coffee on a sunny afternoon, the opening glissando of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* filled the Musical Offering Cafe, just across the street from the main entrance to the Berkeley campus of the University of California. 'That damned Gershwin again. I hate this music,' he moaned. 'I thought you liked classical,' I said, quite surprised. 'Mateo,' he replied in a rather patronizing tone, 'I like *classical music*. I like Mozart, I like Bach. Not Gershwin.'" When I sent this to Andrea Cossu sometime in 2019, he told me that I did not want to start my book, which took such a long time to be written, by introducing my main character as an as*hole.

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