

**Matteo Bortolini**

## **Introduction**

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# Introduction

*by* Matteo Bortolini

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The career of an intellectual might be observed and assessed from many points of view: as a process of personal individuation, a sequence of structural turning points, the unfolding of a complex, unstable symbolic project. As the work of sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, Jeffrey Alexander, Charles Camic, Neil Gross and Randall Collins has shown, the sociological study of intellectuals is always caught between the Scylla of the “biographical illusion” and the Charybdis of the structural determination of ideas.

These contrasting dangers could be better avoided thanks to deeper understanding of one of the most neglected topics in the sociology of ideas: typification, i.e., the process of categorization which locates ideas, approaches and intellectuals within intellectual and disciplinary fields. As happens in any other social field, intellectuals and their work are understood by way of, and thus are somehow “reduced” to, ready-made stereotypes, simple categories, or ideational labels. Far from being a distortion, this process of typification is a necessary one. It works as a reducer of complexity, allowing those debates and discussions which are the very stuff of intellectual life. As Bourdieu and Collins have shown, social life is a relational and positional game, and being recognized in relation, or opposition, to other influential ideas is generally the first step of an intellectual career.

Categorization and typification are obviously mediated by intellectual work. An author’s position is assessed through published writings, performances at seminars and meetings, and, in some special cases, academic lectures, which Robert K. Mer-

ton understood as “oral publications.” As a matter of fact, the pattern of cognitive and evaluative categories by which a field is pre-structured is one of the most significant frameworks within which individual intellectuals exert their agency in trying to advance their own ideas – up to the point that the failure (either conscious or unconscious) to understand the pattern of the main positions and oppositions around which a certain intellectual field is structured may result in the neglect of even the most interesting and well-crafted ideas.

This process is made more interesting by the fact that, among the many texts and ideas that an average intellectual produces during an average 35-40-year career, only a few really attract the attention of readers, critics and peers. Thanks to the structural and cultural dynamics of intellectual fields, some ideas just seem to make their appearance in the right place at the right time: they seem to be clever, clear, ready to use. They start new discussions, renew old debates, attract admiration and criticism, allow other intellectuals to fashion their ideas in accordance or opposition to them. On the part of their creators, these ideas become those “key” cultural objects, thanks to which they are recognized, categorized, and thus “assigned” to some portion of the field. Comparisons between the most famous works will serve to assess and evaluate the development of the intellectual’s thought. More importantly, these important ideas somehow “attract” within their sphere of influence other sectors or moments of an intellectual’s work. Older works will be read as “adumbrations” or “anticipations” of the most famous ones. Writings pertaining to a period between two important works will be interpreted as “transitional”, just as those appearing after the last milestone will be defined as “later,” or even “lesser,” works.<sup>1</sup>

This *Flashback* presents materials relating to “Civil Religion in America,” an essay which played this key role in the scholarly and academic career of the American sociologist of religion, Robert N. Bellah. “Civil Religion in America” was published in 1967 as the opening article of the winter issue of *Daedalus*, the quarterly journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The issue, titled “Religion in America,” was the offspring of a conference sponsored by the Academy and the Church Society for College Work, an Episcopalian organization, on May 14-15, 1966, at the Acad-

<sup>1</sup> Mention need only be made of Talcott Parsons, whose career has often been understood as the sequence of three main phases: sociological voluntarism, as presented in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937); structural-functionalism, as presented in *The Social System* (1951); arch-functionalism, as presented in *The System of Modern Societies* (1971) and *The American University* (1973). In fact, it could be argued that the lack of a clear and ultimate exposition of Parsons’ hyper-functionalist theory – i.e., the absence of a large theoretical work expounding the AGIL scheme and its uses – was responsible for (at least) some of the many misunderstandings and simplifications to which his work was subjected after the mid-1950s.

emy headquarters in Brookline, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> While Bellah's contribution to the conference received little attention in the press, in his preface Stephen R. Graubard wrote that "Bellah's essay (...) [provided] an admirable frame for the issue." The essay was indeed destined to be widely reprinted, quoted and debated. Within a few years, a fierce discussion had begun on "American civil religion" – understood as a neo-Durkheimian interpretation of the emergence of common religious values and practices in America – which involved sociologists, historians, political scientists, theologians and the clergy. Bellah, who had been known mostly as a Japanologist, refashioned his career as an expert in American religion and politics and devoted almost fifteen years of his scholarly life to civil religion.

After much discussion and criticism, "Civil Religion in America" still continues to be widely cited and "used" as an inspiration for empirical and theoretical research. While Bellah published at least another groundbreaking and attention-stealing work – *Habits of the Heart*, written with Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton – he is generally identified with his first essay on things American. As he has remarked many times, in both public and private, "Civil Religion in America" has been one of the keys of his success as an intellectual, but it has proven to be a gilded cage, almost impossible to escape from.

As far as the story goes, "Civil Religion in America" was Bellah's first scholarly foray into American religion and politics. He had been very interested in politics since his high school days, and had been a member of the Communist party as a Harvard undergraduate in the late 1940s. His scholarly work, however, focused on Japanese religion, the theoretical sociology of religion, and the work of such sociological classics as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. As Bellah recalled many times, it was Talcott Parsons, Bellah's former mentor, who almost "forced" him to participate in the *Daedalus* conference on American culture and religion, saying that a sociologist "could write on anything." Archival research, however, has shown that Bellah participated in *two* American Academy of Arts and Sciences conferences on American religion, presenting two different papers: "Heritage and Choice in American Religion" (October 15-16, 1965) and "Civil Religion in America" (May 13-14, 1966). An unedited draft of "Heritage and Choice" was included in the informal proceedings of the *Daedalus* conference on "Religion and American Culture" and is reproduced here for the first time. As readers will see, the second section of this paper already contains the main idea of "Civil Religion in America," but it is framed in a quite

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cox, Talcott Parsons, Langdon B. Gilkey, Martin E. Marty, Michael Novak, Daniel Callahan, Milton Himmelfarb, and Charles S. Liebman were among the thirty scholars and journalists who attended the meeting.

different way, as a moment of a wider assessment of a wider assessment of both the public and the private dimensions of the history of religion in America.

Bellah's unpublished essay is accompanied by three papers which interpret it and its relation to "Civil Religion in America" in different ways. A former student of both Parsons and Bellah, Victor Lidz presents a well-reasoned interpretation of the two versions of the original civil religion paper which emphasize the Weberian, as well as the Durkheimian, roots of Bellah's understanding of civil religion. According to Lidz, the Weberian root – which seems much more pessimistic than Parsons's Weber, and thus closer to current interpretations of his work – is the key to assessing Bellah's analyses of discontent of American civil religious beliefs and commitments. Lidz follows the various interpretations of such discontent in several of Bellah's "later" writings on civil religion, and concludes with a plea for the concept of civil religion, which he sees as a major contribution to the sociology of religion and to the sociological understanding of American civilization.

A second theoretical analysis is presented by *Habits*'s co-author Steven Tipton. The paper shows the dialectical logic of Robert Bellah's first assessments of American civil religion and follows it through Bellah's intellectual career to his latest writings on the prospects of a global civil religion. According to Tipton, the most interesting and innovative aspect of Bellah's work was its focus on the dialogical, multivocal qualities of the theological and public discourse which was made possible by the very existence of the civil religion as a deeper cultural dimension. This differentiated Bellah's work from more state-centered understandings of civil religion and somehow "protected" it from any deviation in the direction of a mere celebration of the role of America in world history.

Using published and unpublished materials, Matteo Bortolini shows that the two essays on civil religion were by no means Bellah's first scholarly works on America; at the same time, the work shows that Bellah's "forgotten encounters" with his country were heavily influenced by his position within those Harvard circles where structural-functionalism and modernization theory were being developed as a widespread and tacit intellectual *doxa*. However, at the time of writing "Civil Religion in America," Bellah was facing the "gifted student dilemma," which drove him to decide whether to remain in the shadow of his mentor, Talcott Parsons, or to try to become his own man. Bellah's "decision" is reflected in the published version of the civil religion paper, which bears almost no traces of either structural-functionalist technical language or modernization theory's optimism on America. Bortolini thus argues that structural factors must be taken into consideration – together with cultural and personal ones – in explaining the shifts in Bellah's conception of American politics and religion and in general.

Together, these papers aim at showing some of the different ways in which ideas and concepts may be interpreted and assessed in relation to their creator's intellectual and scholarly career. In so doing, they aim to show the benefits of supplementing a traditional approach to the history of ideas – i.e., how important thinkers and their ideas influence an intellectual field – with a truly sociological approach, which focuses on how ideas are made important by the structure of the field and how they influence their authors' subsequent professional and personal lives.

As the editor of this *Flashback*, I would like to thank Robert Bellah for his help and his permission to publish “Heritage and Choice in American Religion,” Victor Lidz and Steven Titpon for their papers, and Todd Ito from the University of Chicago Law School library, who helped me to locate the only known copy of the proceedings of the first *Daedalus* conference on American religion.

## **Introduction**

**Matteo Bortolini** is assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Padova, Italy. His current research focuses on the sociology of intellectuals, exploiting the careers of some of Talcott Parsons' students as a case study for the problem of "finding one own's voice" in the social sciences. Website: <http://www.scform.unipd.it:8080/~m.bortolini>.