

Robert Bellah as Modernization Theorist

Amy Borovoy, East Asian Studies Department, Princeton University, Princeton

Correspondence should be directed to: Amy Borovoy, East Asian Studies Department, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1008 , aborovoy@princeton.edu

Abstract

Bellah's early Japan work was important to his thinking and reflecting on Bellah's Japan work offers an interesting window into some of the contributions and limitations of his broader ideas. Putting Bellah's early work together with his later theories raises questions about the kind of social community that Bellah envisioned in his theories of civil religion and communitarianism.

Keywords: Robert Bellah, Japan, civil religion, communitarianism, modernization, Tokugawa Religion, Harvard Department of Social Relations, Parsons

I'd like to commend Matteo Bortolini on a remarkable book, which enriches our understanding of Bellah's writings in so many ways. It offers a portrait of Bellah's personal and psychological life as these entwined with his writings, and it also offers a close-up discussion of an extremely generative moment in American intellectual life and the social sciences.

Bortolini tells us that Bellah's early Japan work was important to his thinking, and I believe that reflecting on Bellah's Japan work offers an interesting window into some of the contributions and limitations of his work. As a cultural anthropologist focusing on modern Japan, I have been interested in Bellah's contributions and the relationship between his Japan research and his broader theoretical contributions. I'd like to share two reflections here and to solicit Bortolini's responses.

I first read *Habits of the Heart* in the late 1980s, and, like many Americans, found myself inspired by its critique of the excesses of American individualism and free market capitalism. I was living in Tokyo at the time, studying Japanese language before returning to graduate school. I read the book on the quiet, clean trains, observing the relatively egalitarian, family-oriented society around me, nurtured by corporate welfare and investments in human capital. In some ways, the society seemed to exemplify the communitarian ideal of a world in which capitalism was contained by social values beyond profit.

I have thought about that comparison a great deal as I've moved through my career. Bellah began his own career as an expert on Japan who received a joint Ph.D. in sociology and East Asia Studies. Yet those who engaged with Bellah's later work are not always acquainted with his Japan work. Putting the two together raises questions about the kind of social community that Bellah envisioned in his theories of civil religion and communitarianism.

Bellah's first major book, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Preindustrial Japan*, based on his doctoral dissertation, is a major theoretical experiment. In it, Bellah engages in a sociological analysis of the historical structures and values which gave rise to Japan's industrialization. The book received a good deal of attention at the time, because in it, Bellah claimed to have discovered a parallel (or "analog") to Max Weber's "Protestant ethic" in the social transformations of early modern Japan (17th-19th centuries): a set of core social beliefs which paved the way for industrialism and market capitalism. At the time Bellah published the book, in 1957, Japan was still regarded as an exotic outlier by many historians and social scientists—a case which did not fit the theory of "modernization" because of its "feudalistic" patterns of kinship, paternalism, and administrative power. In Japan, some liberal social theorists were reluctant to label these historical institutions "modern" at all. Bellah's finding of an "analog" to Protestantism was provocative indeed.

The parallel ethic that Bellah described, however, was significantly different from the ethic of utilitarianism and the profit motive that Weber had described. This is where Bellah's contributions lead to some interesting questions concerning Bellah's status as a "modernization theorist" and also the nature of the communitarian ideal that he eventually proposed.

Indeed the ethic of industriousness that Bellah describes in Japan is so different from Weber's that it emerges as a kind of counter-example to Protestantism and bourgeois liberalism. Bellah finds this analog in the neo-Confucian idea that economic behavior should comply with the larger political order and the collective good, and also in the samurai ideals of learning (*gakumon*), diligence, restraint, frugality, and loyalty (summed up by the ideal of *bushidō*). Capitalism, money lending, and consumption were contained and restricted in early modern Japan. Consumption was regulated by sumptuary laws (laws restricting personal expenditures specific to social classes). Merchants (money-keepers and money-makers) were wealthy but their social status was low. The industries which grew in the late 19th and 20th centuries were regulated by bureaucrats, and the government worked to contain the effects of urban alienation and social fragmentation through policies and ideologies promoting national oneness. We could say that this kind of capitalism—contained by government bureaucracy and rooted in ethics of social obligation—was, for Bellah, an early step in working out the ideals he later developed in his theories of civil religion and communitarianism.

After publishing *Tokugawa Religion*, Bellah continued to be interested in this alternate moral ideal. He became fascinated with Japan as an industrialized nation which had never made the "axial break": a break from mysticism and particularistic moral ideals towards more codified and abstract forms of religion. (The ideas drew on the schema of Karl Jaspers and the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt.) Bellah was interested in the ideals of "culture" and "nation" as possessing overwhelming power in Japan to shape the identity of individuals. In his 1960s essays analyzing the work of modern Japanese intellectuals (later collected in the volume, *Imagining Japan* (2003), Bellah expressed great interest in the idea of the "*kokutai*" or "national essence," promoted by the government in the late 19th century as a unifying term. The idea was taken to extremes, linking the emperor to the gods and describing the people of Japan as descended from the emperor (and thus divine in origins). Although the idea was used to mobilize wartime

consciousness, a fact Bellah recognized, Bellah saw the *kokutai* ideology as a uniting force, expressing “higher order” ideals and a sense of shared purpose and “ultimate value” of the Japanese people. He was fascinated by the idea that these shared moral ideals came not from the teachings of a prophetic god (as they did in Judeo-Christian traditions) but rather from this-worldly secular institutions and cultural beliefs, for example the ideal of filial piety (which had been used to extend loyalty to the emperor as “father of the nation”) (Bellah 2003, 114–16, 118). I think we can see Bellah’s nascent interest here in the idea of “civil religion.”

So while Bellah drew on Weber’s theoretical notion of rationalization as a template, for him Japan already represented a counter-alternative to European modernization, in which economic activity had not yet been separated from the concerns of state and society. In this context, “rationalization” did not mean utilitarianism, and elements of “collective consciousness” and the moral authority of religion remained in secular, capitalist institutions—ideas close to the concept of “civil religion” he later developed.

This leads me to my first reflection and question for Bortolini (or others). Bellah has often been categorized as a “modernization theorist.” At least in the community of Japan scholars in the 1970s, he was described this way (see, for example, Dower 1975). But perhaps we should think more carefully about the range of positions that modernization theory encompassed. Bortolini does a wonderful job of painting the messianic sense of purpose and mission for those in the Harvard Department of Social Relations in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, to study the “human factor” in a rapidly changing and technological society. Bellah certainly did embrace the evolutionary aspect of modernization theory and argued that Japan, too, was following a “parallel” path. But Bellah’s neo-Confucian ethic of modernity was different—a critique of free-market, unregulated capitalism, and a critique of individualization as an essential element of modernization. Under the banner of the study of modernization and rationalization, he expanded that idea to include what he described as a feudalistic kind of modernity which rejected certain Western European liberal ideals.

“Modernization theory” in its most elemental form promoted a universal model of social and economic development. This model described a process in which the individual would leave behind the authority of traditional social groups (kin-based groups, community political organizations, villages) in favor of abstract rules and principles, inner autonomy, and selling one’s skills on an open market. It was a story of the emergence of the individual against the group. Parsons too, told this story, of the shift from particularist loyalties to universal and abstract principles and meritocracy.

But, Parsons’ theory of “social action” was also about drawing attention to the sphere of society and the operations of social groups and institutions upon the individual, as Bortolini tells us. His goal was to challenge reductionist theories of human behavior—theories of heredity or the methodological individualism of economic theory. Although his theories explored the reproduction of social values and optimistically equated modernization with progress (a perspective that Bortolini tells us Bellah eventually distanced himself from, p. 176), he was, in the end, concerned with an exploration of how society shapes the individual through secular institutions—such as the family, university, classroom, or doctor’s office. This focus on the

sphere of the social allowed Parsons' ideas to live on through Bellah, Geertz, and others, even though these thinkers let go of Parsons' terminology and aspects of his theoretical apparatus.

Bellah continued to defend the relevance of Parsons' thought and his interest in reaching beyond rationalism, utilitarianism, and positivism to think about "culture," "social milieu," and social meaning. (He discussed these ideas in the introduction to *The Robert Bellah Reader* 2006). He shared his perspective with me when I had the chance to meet with him in the emeritus office of the U.C. Berkeley Sociology Department in 2006. He told me with some amusement that he had wanted to include a discussion of Parsons' thought in the introductory framing of *Habits of the Heart*, but his co-authors had opposed the idea, telling him, "'no,' because Parsons was 'a functionalist,' and that's 'bad'" (personal communication, November 21, 2006).

Given what we've learned from Bortolini and from Bellah's own work, was Bellah a "modernization theorist"—or doing something different entirely? And isn't Bortolini's return to the Social Relations Department and to Parsons an invitation to think more deeply about the range of intellectual projects going on during that time? We tend to associate modernization theory with ethnocentrism: the assumption that modernization equals "Westernization." In this respect the label does not capture what Bellah was up to. Modernization theorists are also sometimes tarred as cold warriors, and while Parsons had made his anti-Communist politics clear, both scholars were influenced by socialism and clearly concerned with society, community, and ideologically-charged thought, despite the demonization of ideology as "propaganda" during that time (Geertz 1973).

A second question concerns the reactionary nature of the modern values Bellah identified (and arguably admired) in early modern and Meiji Japan, and what this tells us about his communitarian vision.

The modern Japanese state that Bellah drew on as his counter-example was illiberal in many ways. The Meiji constitution upheld the emperor as the ultimate authority of the Japanese people (the constitution was presented as a "gift" from the emperor). Japanese people were "subjects" of the emperor, not citizens endowed with natural rights. The government drew on moral and emotional discourses of love and family to promote loyalty and duty to the nation (Barshay 1998, 371–73; Gluck 1985, 120–21, 124–27; Hardacre 1989; Koschmann 1981–82, 610–12; Siemes 1966). (Even after the postwar reforms of the occupation, secular institutions such as schools and company training programs took on the project of socializing individuals into certain moral traditions.)

Bellah's fascination with Japan's cultural nationalism finds parallels in his calls for biblical republicanism and a "public church" as well as calls for family values and moral unity.

But how does this square with Bellah's more liberal commitments to inner authenticity and the exercise of liberal freedoms? The call for community in *Habits of the Heart* was inspired by Tocqueville, and his republican belief that civic participation and local political participation would prepare the individual to undertake self-governance in the interest of the broader polity. But the cultural ideology that Bellah admired in Japan emphasized a deeply held, organic

relationality, rather than political identity cultivated through bottom-up, grass roots activity or political participation (Borovoy 2016, 2019).

There is a tension here within Bellah's ideals of republicanism and community—between bottom-up participation and top-down pressures, or perhaps between a solidarity that is cultivated through action and one which is assumed, organic, or resting on the assumption of homogeneity. The first is the one that Tocqueville and presumably Bellah too endorses, but it feels uncomfortably close to the second sometimes.

The Japan counter-example highlights these tensions. Bortolini tells us that a comparative chapter on Japan was planned for *Habits of the Heart* but never materialized. I wonder what such a chapter would have looked like, and how would it have wrestled with the uncomfortable trade-offs of communitarianism in Japan—the heavy-handed socialization in schools, the everyday control of welfare institutions like family and company, or the way in which public safety, public health, and community organizations depend on the labor of non-working women and mothers?

Bortolini defends Bellah from those who believe his politics resembled those of the Moral Majority in the 1980s (pp. 229-230). Yes, the accusation is unfair, because Bellah embraced tolerance, supported civil rights, and supported social welfare, social equality, and big government. Bellah's politics were rooted in deeply liberal traditions. His heroes were postwar intellectuals wrestling with histories of fascism, including Jurgen Habermas and political theorist Masao Maruyama (who idolized Meiji writer and Westernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi).

But was Bellah's politics a politics of pluralism? What was the nature of the community that Bellah was seeking? Bellah's fascination with Japan is again interesting, because it is a relatively ethnically homogenous nation where schools, companies, and families engage in heavy-handed practices of socialization and homogenization.

Bellah himself was aware of these tensions and questions. He told me so in our meeting and mentioned that he understood that “communitarianism” was associated with *Gemeinschaft* ethics, organic unity, and even “ethnic cleansing” in Germany. But I don't have a sense of how he resolved those questions in his own mind.

A powerful criticism of Bellah's work comes from one of his fellow communitarians, moral philosopher Michael Walzer. Walzer's communitarianism¹ focuses more on ethnic communities, religious communities, or work groups—groups where our felt-identities and sense of civic commitment take shape. His communitarianism is pluralistic and argues that the identification with local groups will spur a commitment to the larger polity. Walzer argues that Bellah's communitarianism seems to search for a shared, unified community, which he (Bellah) assumes is located deeply within each American's heart. But if the problem that communitarians point to is one of social fragmentation and “the coexistence of isolated selves” (Walzer 1990, 8; see also 1998), why is the proposed solution to the problem the search for an underlying and assumed unity?

I wonder how Bellah might respond to that challenge, which for me remains a major limitation of his thought. Bellah's engagement with Japan points to some of these same tensions.

I want to thank Matteo Bortolini again for his remarkable research on a towering intellectual figure who has generated so much to talk about.

References

- Barshay, Andrew. 1998. "Postwar Social and Political Thought, 1945-1990." In *Modern Japanese Thought*, edited by Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, 273-355. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bellah, Robert N. 1985 [1957]. *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan*. New York: The Free Press.
- 2003 *Imagining Japan: The Japanese Tradition and its Modern Interpretation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2006 "Introduction." In *The Robert Bellah Reader*, edited by Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton, 1-17. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Borovoy, Amy. 2019. "Dialogues Between Area Studies and Social Thought: Robert Bellah's Engagement with Japan." *The Anthem Companion to Robert N. Bellah*, edited by Matteo Bortolini, 33-62. (Series editor, Bryan S. Turner.) Anthem Press.
org.ezproxy.princeton.edu/10.2307/j.ctvj5f6p6.5
2016. "Robert Bellah's Search for Community and Ethical Modernity in Japan Studies." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75, no. 2: 467-494.
doi:10.1017/S0021911815002107
- Dower, John W. 1975. "E.H. Norman, Japan and the Uses of History." In *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E.H. Norman*, edited by, John Dower, 3-101. New York: Pantheon.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973[1964] "Ideology as a Cultural System." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 193-233. NY: Basic Books.
- Gluck, Carol
1985. *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in Late Meiji Period*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hardacre, Helen
1989. *Shintō and the State, 1868-1988*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Koschmann, J. Victor. 1981-1982. "The Debate on Subjectivity in Postwar Japan: Foundations of Modernism as a Political Critique." *Pacific Affairs* 54, no. 4:609-631.

Siemes, Johannes

1966 *Herman Roesler and the Making of the Meiji State*. Tokyo: Sophia University Press.

Walzer, Michael. 1998. Michael Sandel's America. In *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy*, edited by Anita L. Allen and Milton C. Regan Jr., 175-182. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1990. "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism." *Political Theory* 18, no. 1: 6-23.

¹ He distances himself from the term, as do others who are associated with the idea.