



“Robert Bellah: Free-floating Intellectual Redux”

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A Joyfully Serious Man: The Life of Robert Bellah will be the envy of Social Scientists and Historians who Write in the Genre of Biography, and it will long set the gold-standard for Scholarship of this kind. A Study of a Thinker who was (Among many Other Things) a Great Durkheimian Theorist, Matteo Bortolini’s book *Stands Rightly in the Company* Steven Lukes’s *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* and Marcel Fournier’s *Emile Durkheim: A Biography* – up to now the Finest Biographies of a Sociologist by a Sociologist. At once Sweeping in Scope and Granular in Detail, Encyclopedically Researched and Beautifully Written, this is a Biography that Narrates the long and Winding Intellectual and Personal Story of a Thinker of Celebrated Accomplishment and Situates that Story in a Miniature History, told with a Pointillist Skill, of the Transformation of American Society and the American Academy over the Course of Nine Decades (late 1920s to Early 2010s). Bortolini set Himself a Daunting Biographical task, and I cannot Imagine how Anyone could have Landed it more Successfully.

The book is far more, however, than what is likely stand as the definitive account of the ideas, the public and private life, and the historical setting of an eminent social thinker. (As if the wasn’t enough.) It is also an outstanding case study in the sociology of knowledge and, more specifically, the sociology of intellectuals – a case study that no one working in these areas should miss. Bortolini does not explicitly brandish this feature of the book; he has too much else on his hands – and one book can only do so much. So we need to read a little between the lines to see the book’s bearing on the sociology of intellectuals, but we don’t have to look far. Subtly, Bortolini leads readers to the well – appropriately for a scholar who elsewhere describes the “sociology of intellectuals” as one of his primary research interests (2002, p. 5). This is the

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angle from which I want to consider Bortolini's book. Here, as in other respects, he makes an important contribution.

To put this contribution in relief, it's useful to think back to the early days of the "sociology of intellectuals" (so named) to Karl Mannheim and the notion of "free floating" intellectuals. Writing in the 1920 and 1930 s. Mannheim posited (to oversimplify) that there are *faux* intellectuals and genuine intellectuals: the former, hacks working in service of one or another social or political cause; the latter, relatively "unattached" women and men of ideas – "set free. . from these social bonds" (1936, p. 232). Mannheim's principal concern was with the "bonds" of social class; but in later iterations of the notion, in the mid-20th century writings of Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, and Edward Shils, *bona fide* intellectuals were free as well from other kinds of social bonds and thus at liberty to traverse in the relatively autonomous realm of ideas.

Isolated exceptions aside, this conception has long since gone by the boards within sociology, displaced by various forms of contextualism, which have foregrounded the ways in which intellectuals are attached to, and impacted by, the intellectual dialogues and debates occurring around them (the motif of research in the tradition of Quentin Skinner) and by the structure and demands of the intellectual "field," particularly the academic discipline, in which they are situated (a premise of much research in recent decades in the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of science).

Talk about "free-floating" intellectuals has, accordingly, gone out of fashion, though not entirely. Most conspicuously in the writings the most unrelenting field theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, there runs the contention that, although most thinkers are hedged in by the tight "limits imposed [on their thought] by the social conditions its performance," as well as by the accompanying "illusion of the 'free floating intellectual,'" intellectuals nevertheless "can. . be set free," or "relatively free," of constraints imposed by the intellectual field or discipline where they are situated. For this liberation to happen, according to Bourdieu, requires intellectuals to make an *epistemological break* and to recognize their own field positioning: "an intellectual can fulfill the liberating function that he [sic] claims for himself. . only on the condition that he understands and masters what determines him" ([1980] 1995, pp. 42–44). Because of this epistemological possibility, Bourdieu, despite all his emphasis on field constraints, outdid Mannheim in maintaining "a resolute, stubborn, absolutist" belief in "the autonomy of the intellectual field" and its self-reflexive members (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 187).

Bortolini addresses the issue of free-floating intellectuals more sociologically. He does not advertise this point, and one might read his study "merely" as a multi-layered contextualist treatment of its biographical subject. The book excels in setting Bellah in his intellectual-historical contexts, as, for example, when Bortolini examines the tenets of mid-century modernization theory, the controversies during the 1970 and 1980 s over the relation between religion and civic life in America, and the debates over the "Axial Age" that occurred at the turn of this century.

Bortolini combines this expert intellectual contextualization of Bellah with a thorough analysis of the social-institutional contexts of Bellah's work, describing (inter alia) the field of sociology in the mid-20th century and the ecology of field of religious studies in the following decades. To round out the institutional analysis,

Bortolini looks beyond academic fields to situate Bellah's life and work in the macro-context of American society during the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the anti-war protests of the 1960s, and the early years of the gay liberation movement. If a student asked me how to go about contextualizing a modern social thinker, I would tell her/him/them to follow the model of Bortolini's book.

But Bortolini never reduces Bellah to these contexts, including the field of sociology, even though Bellah held sociology professorships in leading sociology departments for over a half century. At one point, Bortolini approvingly quotes sociologist Robert Lynd's 1967 description of Bellah as a "maverick sociologist" (113); and this image of Bellah pervades Bortolini's book. According to his portrait, Bellah was a "universal scholar" (xiv), an academic intellectual and (in due course) a public intellectual, a scholar who "enjoyed multiple affiliations [and] ignore[d] disciplinary boundaries" (93), holding that "any distinction between scientific and humanistic disciplines was 'temporary and inessential'" (141).

While serving as a member of the sociology faculty at Harvard, Bellah also belonged to Harvard Divinity School; and while holding a distinguished chair in the department of sociology at Berkeley, he chaired the Center for Japanese and Korean Studies, preferring "to interact with scholars from two disciplinary fields—history and theology—that he found much more interesting and prestigious than late-1960s sociology" (114). Bellah had "no stake in the American Sociological Association" and rarely attended its meetings (134); his 1972 nomination for the National Book Award (for his book *Beyond Belief*) was in Philosophy and History (148). And except for two early articles, he never published in the *American Sociological Review* or the *American Journal of Sociology* (imagine); in his heyday his articles appeared, instead, in venues like *Commonweal*, *Christian Century*, and *Tikkun* (264). Aside from editing a journal during his undergraduate days at Harvard, the only editorial board on which Bellah ever agreed to sit was (in the 1990s) *Responsive Community*, co-edited by several other prominent public intellectuals (168).

Ordinarily introducing himself as a sociologist, Bellah also called himself "a cultural/ sociological historian" (308); and during his highly prolific retirement, he kept "his distance from. . . sociology" (293), aspiring to create the "ultimate interdisciplinary cross-pollination" of the social sciences not only with the humanities, but also with the natural sciences (338–339). His final book, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011) "erased. . . almost any reference to sociological theories of evolution and social change" (331). Again, with approval, Bortolini quotes Samuel Hill, a professor of religion, writing in 1973 (and in seriousness) of Bellah: "In addition to being social scientist, phenomenologist, and historian of religious-philosophical ideas. . . , he is humanist, poet, mystic, and theologian" (146).

In his book, Bortolini does not use the expression "free-floating intellectual" as such, but he comes close to doing so, and in a companion publication from 2019 he refers explicitly to Robert Bellah as a scholar who "would freely wander" and possessed "intellectual freedom" (2019, pp. 15, 21). This interpretation goes to the heart of Bortolini's book. His Bellah in a figure "tireless[ly] wandering from place to place," both geographical and intellectual (187); a figure who disdained "academic conventions" (345); a figure who relished being a "serial contrarian" (36). Even so, Bellah was not the kind of contrarian who applied the same iconoclastic hammer to

every subject he touched—which, in his case, included subjects ranging from modernization in Japan, to individualism and communitarianism in mid-20th America, to evolution over the long course of world history. There certainly were thinkers who exerted a recurrent influence on Bellah’s ideas—Parsons (his teacher), Durkheim and Weber, and Norman O. Brown (the classicist and psychoanalytically-oriented polymath, whose best-selling book, *Love’s Body*, Bellah revered from the mid-1960s onward). But (by Bortolini’s account), Bellah was an intellectual of “radical openness” (359), who exhibited, over decades, “a readiness to change his mind whenever evidence and reflection pushed him to do so” (xiv).

To the frustration of commentators on his oeuvre, argues Bortolini, Bellah thus defies intellectual pigeonholing. His work was a “disordered piling up of . . . ideas [that] did not produce a neat and convincing theoretical argument.” For, “the truth was that there was no hidden structure under the surface of Bellah’s work, but only a growing assortment of diverse ideas, paradigms, and analyses that could be systematized only at the price of distortion or simplification” (179). Mannheim’s free-floating intellectual might see herself/himself/themselves in the mirror here.

In the hands of a lesser biographer, Bellah’s “intellectual freedom”—his wandering from intellectual place to place, topic to topic, viewpoint to viewpoint—might be attributed to the exceptional character of his mind and soul. In the alternative, sociologists following Bourdieu might view Bellah’s “free floating” as the result of a hard-won epistemological break that he—in contrast to intellectuals unable to leave the ground—achieved by self-reflexive understanding of his field position and of the constraints it imposed.

But Bortolini does better—much better. His book goes beyond claims of individual exceptionalism or epistemological breaks to identify the *sociohistorical conditions* that made Bellah’s intellectual free-floating possible in the first place. Again, Bortolini does not say in so many words that this is his argument, and we should always be hesitant to put words in a careful author’s mouth. Nevertheless, in the companion publication that I referred to above, Bortolini explicitly maintains that Bellah’s life story reveals the “preconditions of his intellectual freedom”—its institutional preconditions (as distinct from any epistemological ones) (2019, p. 21). Bortolini’s detailed analysis of these social preconditions is one of the major take-aways of his book for the sociology of intellectuals.

Viewed sociologically, Bellah, for most of his career, “always found himself in the right place at the right time,” according to Bortolini (204). The freedom from the field of sociology that Bellah claimed during his career as a member of the sociology faculties of Harvard and Berkeley reflected, Bortolini shows, the contemporaneous interdisciplinary practices of America’s elite universities—practices that were, in turn, encouraged and enabled by heavy financial backing from major private foundations (Rockefeller, Ford, Carnegie), as well as by the U.S. federal government, particularly during the era of the Cold War. This infrastructure provided generous support for interdisciplinary research initiatives, advanced training programs, the creation of area studies centers, and postdoctoral fellowships for study abroad (44).

Bellah was “an early career participant in these novel national and international scholarly networks” (xii). As an undergraduate at Harvard in the early 1950s, he took his major in Department of Social Relations, newly created by Talcott Parsons

and staffed by scholars in multiple fields, who infused the program with an “interdisciplinary spirit” and “showed students that nothing was fixed” (69, 43). With this background, Bellah went on to earn from Harvard a doctorate in sociology and Far Eastern languages, before accepting a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at McGill University in the Rockefeller-funded Institute of Islamic Studies. Immediately afterward Bellah received a fellowship back at Harvard in its Center for Middle Eastern Studies, followed by a four-year lectureship also supported by the Department of Social Relations, the Center for East Asian Studies, and the Program on World Religions in the Divinity School. This decade-long sequence of institutional affiliations, accompanying interactions with scholars in a wide range of disciplines, and experiences in moving across academic fields amounted, Bortolini’s book suggests, to a concentrated traineeship in intellectual floating.

Near the end of this four-year multidisciplinary lectureship, Bellah (helped by the efforts of Parsons) received tenure at Harvard, a development that “free[d him] to pursue his ambitious projects with the institutional support of the greatest university in the world” (88). But this was also at a time when the nation was experiencing a “dazzling expansion of the academic job market” (130), and Bellah—in what we might see as an example of the Matthew effect of the rich getting richer—was flooded with opportunities for further movement, both geographical and intellectual. Regarding Bellah, even before he received tenure at Harvard, Bortolini summarizes:

Not that Bob was desperate to get a job: he had been offered an associate professorship by the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles ...; by the East Asian Institute and the Department of Sociology of Columbia University; and by the University of Michigan, home of the oldest interdisciplinary center of Japanese studies in North America. [In addition, he was] offered a position at the University of Chicago, where he could [affiliate with] the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations. (87–88)

In the end, Bellah chose the University of California at Berkeley “on his own terms” (107). He was appointed Ford (Foundation) Professor of Sociology and Comparative Studies and chair of the Center of Japanese and Korean Studies, with an adjunct appointment at the Graduate Theology Union. As part of his Ford professorship, he received “lavish funding” for his research and a permanently reduced course load, which meant significant “freedom from teaching” (134, 120)—boons to free-floating.

Topping off all these opportunities, Bellah received residential fellowships at the highest peaks of American academia, the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University (where he had a year’s leave in 1964–1965) and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (where he spent his 1972–1973 leave, but did not receive a permanent appointment). Bortolini gives particular emphasis to these multidisciplinary institutions, seeing the former as an oasis of “unstructured time to work on. . . ‘big ideas’” (65) and the latter as a retreat designed for “unqualified freedom to undertake one’s research” (151).

To describe these institutions, Bortolini unobtrusively suggests the novel concept of “relaxed fields” or “relaxed spaces” (341, 346; see also Bortolini 2019, 24–25).

Bortolini takes this terminology from Bellah's final book, which (in a different context) conjured up the image of a "relaxed field where the ordinary pressures of life are suspended" (2011, p. 586). Implicitly transferring this notion to modern academic environments, it is through this conceptual lens that Bortolini invites us to see (in best actualized form) scholarly institutions like the CASBS and IAS. But he also speaks of "the relaxed fields of scholarly conferences and seminars," such as those where Bellah spent so much of his time in later years (346).

This picture will resonate, in some degree, with our own lived sense of the dichotomy between ordinary days when our academic schedules are crowded with teaching, meetings, and committee assignments, versus our lighter days when we can do our research and writing—and thinking. Likewise, we long for our sabbatical leaves, because they suspend some of the "ordinary pressures" of academic life, even when those leaves of absence do not come with prestigious residential fellowships at distinguished multidisciplinary centers like CASBS, IAS, the Radcliffe Institute, or the Russell Sage Foundation. More mundanely, we value course-release time, as well as so-called "discretionary funds" that allow us travel for our own research purposes. Yet, while we live these experiences and know them in our bones, prior to Bortolini's study of Bellah, sociologists of intellectuals have not (to my knowledge) considered these episodes explicitly, viewed them cumulatively (rather than as one-offs events), or factored them into their theories of knowledge production. For the same reason, aside from Bortolini, no one has connected the dots between relaxed fields and the possibilities for intellectuals to float free.

To be sure, "relaxed" may not be the best term. CASBS and IAS were hyperactive intellectual hotspots when Bellah was on the scene, and so they have remained. They keep visiting fellows running on high energy, eager to outshine scholars in other disciplines during group meetings, and anxious, at the same time, to finish their books as precious sabbatical hours tick away. What's more, to describe "scholarly conferences and seminars" as "relaxed fields," even for confident speakers and debaters like Bellah, may be a stretch. We might recall that Randall Collins sees collective intellectual events as caldrons of "emotional energy," where participants are "charge[d] up. . . like an electric battery" (1998, p. 23): such events that are more like hectic resorts than they are like a quiet oasis or a secluded retreat. But even if metaphors like oasis or retreat are appropriate, at least in regard to the spaces in Bellah's life that Bortolini emphasizes, instead of characterizing such spaces as "relaxed," it would perhaps be more apt and useful to conceptualize them as comparatively "low pressured," "non-pressuring," "non-restrictive," "non-interfering," or (if we're thinking about free-floating intellectuals) relatively "liberating." But this is an empirical question for sociologists of intellectuals to address going forward.

In any case, it is not the purpose of Bortolini's biography to theorize the concept of a relaxed field. Introducing it is itself an original contribution to the sociology of intellectuals—and one that opens the path to further elaboration, particularly as a contrast with our current understandings of intellectual fields. According to Bourdieu (and others, such as Collins), intellectual fields are all isomorphic to one another; differing in the content of the ideas that circulate through them, intellectual fields (insofar as they are autonomous from other social fields) exert similar constraints on similarly-position members. In contrast, to recognize with Bortolini the possibility

of “relaxed” fields suggests that there may be *different degrees* of constraint across fields, as well as within them—as a figure like Bellah shows when we compare him to scholars who were (and are) more tethered to the ground of their disciplinary field.

And Bellah was not alone. Bortolini’s biography points the way also to a much needed collective biography of the cohort of luminary sociologists—including the figures of Arthur Stinchcombe, Charles Tilly, and James Coleman—to which Bellah belonged: men (yes, all white men) who were born on the eve of or in the midst of the Great Depression, who (after earning undergraduate degrees outside of sociology) received doctorates in sociology from elite departments in 1955–1960 period, who readily found faculty positions at these institutions in a roaring job market, who thrived within the interdisciplinary institutions underwritten by lavish funding from private foundations and the federal government—and who, in their different ways, also soared high, making sweeping contributions to multiple areas scholarship in and out of sociology, as they navigated freely from topic to topic, working out their own “diverse ideas, paradigms, and analyses,” which (as Bortolini says of Bellah’s) defy any tidy “systematization” (179). Because these particular men (Stinchcombe, Tilly, Coleman) were not engaged with Bellah-esque topics like modernization theory, the sociology of religion, or processes of evolution, Bortolini does not discuss them by name (again: one book can’t cover everything), although he does discuss many others who crossed Bellah’s path. So doing, Bortolini’s book provides a strong foundation for a collective biography of this cohort whose members carved much of the framework for sociology as it has been practiced for the last half century.

If Bellah and others in his cohort landed “in the right place at the right time,” however, academic times have since changed, along with many of the institutions for the production of sociological knowledge. As Bortolini remarks the outset of his study, after the 1970s “the economic and cultural milieu that had nurtured Bellah’s ascent and his ambitious scholarly dreams was gone”—with little to replace it. By examining the golden age of Bellah, Bortolini invites us also to analyze the decades that followed, when the job market in sociology nose-dived, when abundant financial support—for interdisciplinary research centers (as distinct from today’s multidisciplinary teaching programs), fellowships of all kinds, teaching release-time, etc.—dwindled, and when access to relaxed spaces and fields became rarer and much more competitive, inasmuch as such spaces continued to exist at all. The parameters and timing of these changes—and their ramifications for the possibly of another free-floating sociologist like Robert Bellah—warrant historical comparison with the institutional patterns that Bortolini’s study reveals. Outstanding as a biography of one preeminent sociologist, the book valuably opens (in addition to the questions mentioned) this very fruitful line of inquiry for future research on the sociology of intellectuals.

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