

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Neil J. Smelser**, *The Odyssey Experience: Physical, Social, Psychological, and Spiritual Journeys*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, 286 pp. \$US 29.95 hardcover (978-25897-6)

**N**eil Smelser's first monograph, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution: An Application of Theory to the British Cotton Industry*, was published in 1959. *The Odyssey Experience* thus marks fifty years of publications, which is worth a moment of respect. While this book is part memoir of Smelser's distinguished career, that material serves to advance his exploration of a form of structured experience. Most societies provide, and many require, periods of withdrawal from normal life and responsibilities, and the return from those periods often involves a change of status and self-perception.

Homer's Odysseus provides a familiar narrative template of such withdrawals, but Odysseus lends little more than a name to Smelser's Weberian ideal type. "As the term *ideal* connotes," Smelser writes (p. 9), "[an ideal type] involves a deliberate intervention — an act of imagination — on the part of the investigator to extract the essentials of historical situations." The essentials of the odyssey experience are: Such experiences are finite in duration, although some experiences are scheduled and others unscheduled. They involve "destructuring" the routines and obligations that "constitute the normal ebb and flow of life" (p. 12), with leisure frequently being an important component. "After the episode is over, there will be a restructuring, or reincorporation into a more routine existence" (p. 12). Between destructuring and restructuring, the experience itself is of *liminality*, as described in the anthropological literature on rituals of initiation; participants often travel in cohorts through this liminal space, and leveling of status differences produces both solidarity and "a sense of exclusiveness" (p. 13). Uncertainty and danger frequently occur, possibly including physical threats and abuse. Finally, these characteristics combine to produce a sense of that participants "*leave this world* and enter another." In religious odyssey experiences, contact with the sacred is sought. Even in what Smelser calls "weaker versions," there is a feeling of "remove or even transport" (p. 15).

Smelser begins with odyssey experiences that are academic, and these set the tone for what follows. In what many readers may find to be

the book's most engaging chapter, Smelser reviews his career as a series of odysseys, beginning with leaving his family home in Phoenix to go to Harvard in 1938. Later journeys generally involve some fellowship award. When Smelser marries and has children, his family accompanies him. Smelser uses this autobiographical material to develop his ideal type, but the memoir seems richer than the typification. A student of Pierre Bourdieu could read the chapter as an example of how academic capital accrues. Surely few academics have been as accomplished as Smelser at the game (in Bourdieu's sense of that term) of capital accumulation.

The remaining chapters — more than three quarters of the total length — survey different aspects of odyssey experiences: the religious foundations of odysseys, including pilgrimages; secularized and commercialized odysseys, including cruises and other tourism; a catch-all chapter including experiences of birth, initiation, and death; and finally coercive odysseys, including military service and brainwashing, a topic that especially engages Smelser. The final chapter has the unfortunately generic title, "Additional Theoretical Reflections." Having come so far, across so many cultures and variant odysseys, I found the lessons learned to be valid but less than arresting; for example: "one cannot repeat the same odyssey experience a second time with the same vividness of effect as the first" (p. 211); or, "Independence is never achieved without nostalgia for dependency" (p. 217). My choice of most provocative conclusion reflects Smelser's engagement in psychoanalysis: "The odyssey experience, in a word, is a kind of repetition compulsion that offers temporary respite from an eternal tension, but its eternal nature provides the motive for repeating the cycle of release and restoration" (p. 218). But *whose* repetition compulsion is at work? Smelser's attention to coerced odysseys underscores that participants are often not motivated to go on their odysseys. Odysseus models the unwilling voyager; yet once embarked, he often lingers and must be reminded to move on. Closer attention to Homer's *Odyssey* might have opened up the complexity of how an odyssey can be both chosen and forced upon the participant.

Despite Smelser's repeated references to Max Weber, the book strikes me as more in the spirit of George Simmel. Someone having an odyssey experience seems part stranger and part adventurer, in Simmel's demarcation of those types. The book's style follows Simmel's method of opening up innumerable possibilities for the future development of an idea. Smelser convinces me that odyssey experiences are a constant feature of human lives, and that insights into significant differences between and within cultures can be gained by comparing who typically undergoes

which odyssey experiences, whether these are initiations, European sabbaticals, trips to Disneyland, or brainwashing.

Smelser's academic odysseys culminate in the fellowships during which he does the research that becomes this book, which provides a nice reflexive closure. The book reflects how Smelser, like all of us, seems to have become the sum of his odysseys, both what is best and what is lacking in those experiences. Homer's Odysseus is memorable not least because he makes terrible mistakes and by the end of his travels has much to answer for. Smelser's odyssey experiences never seem to involve much that is unexpected, and neither does the book. The later chapters' recounting of diverse odysseys becomes a litany of unpopulated variant forms, lacking either the personal drama of having such an experience or sociological consideration of what the variations *do* in their respective societies: Who or what structures these experiences, to what effects on which people? Who resists and recasts the typical experiential form, creating what new variation of subjectivity? Smelser implies but offers few specifics as to how odyssey experiences reflect and perpetuate typical life courses among participants whose sharing of those experiences makes them into some sort of group. Nor do we hear from those who break out of what is typical and recast the odyssey experience to some unanticipated effect. Yet that trickster quality of creating the unexpected is what I would call truly odyssean.

*The Odyssey Experience* is a gift to scholars who can make it the basis of research projects that add embodiment and context to Smelser's ideal type. Smelser has spent much of his career mentoring, and nothing could honour that career more than this book instigating future dissertations and monographs. Individual lives, groups, and communities are structured by which odyssey experiences are available and which are not, whether these experiences occur in lives as scheduled or unscheduled, which odysseys are sought and which are coerced, and whether experiences are spiritual, serving some greater purpose, or commercialized as commodities. Smelser continues to do the essential sociological work of making fully recognizable what was always there but too often left unnoticed.

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