

‘Emotional Payoff of Ritual’ [review article about Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*]. *European Journal of Sociology*. 2006, 47(3): 446-51.

Jack Barbalet

Interaction Ritual Chains is the work of a major sociologist at the height of his career and the peak of his ability. Collins is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of at least twelve previous books. *Interaction Ritual Chains* offers an original approach of sociological analysis – a radical microsociology – that Collins effectively began thirty years ago with *Conflict Sociology* (1975) and more recognizably in a contribution to Theodore Kemper’s *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions* (1990), ‘Stratification, Emotional Energy, and the Transient Emotions’. But more than these probable beginnings, the book draws on and expands the contributions of a working life that has, among other distinct projects, given commitment to development of a uniquely forged microsociology that not only provides a novel social psychology but also claims to offer a foundation to the analysis of institutions in the political and economic spheres; that is, foundation to a macrosociology, as Collins’ celebrated article, ‘On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology’ (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1981), had earlier indicated.

The underlying assumption of *Interaction Ritual Chains* – that institutions ultimately derive from bodily engagements – is drawn from Collins’ close reading of Erving Goffman’s treatment of interaction rituals, in a collection of essays of the same name, and also Emile Durkheim’s later sociology of religion. Although Collins’ reading of these authors is close and informative he does not principally offer a scholarly interpretation of them. Rather, he applies strategically adopted select concepts and ideas from their work which are then elaborated in the development of his own theorizing. This is arguably the proper use of others’ discoveries and formulations, namely to serve as a point of departure in the extension of sociological research and understanding. It is possible to disagree with key aspects of Collins’ reading of both Goffman and Durkheim, for it is intentionally opportunistic in the best sense and mobilizes their ideas for purposes they did not intend. But any criticism of *Interaction Ritual Chains* that comes from such a disagreement is beside the point: this is not a work concerned merely to exegetically explain the thought of historic luminaries but chiefly to elaborate a new and highly original perspective and approach in sociology.

The book is in two parts. The first part, ‘Radical Macrosociology’, has five chapters in which the sources of Collins’ approach are identified and its principles and elements enunciated. The second part, ‘Applications’, consists of four chapters in which the approach is demonstrated or tested in accounts respectively of sexual practices, social stratification, tobacco consumption and, finally, individuation. These are lively and engaging discussions, full of interest and insight. The chapters on sex and tobacco in particular could stand apart from the broader framework of the book as essays of intrinsic interest. Indeed, these chapters draw on argument and evidence that goes well beyond the basic premises of *Interaction Ritual Chains*: it may be a meaningful exercise to consider how much they in fact owe to the concepts they are designed to demonstrate the power of. These concepts are relatively simple to state though radical in their content and form, as Collins rightly insists, given that they occupy ground typically ignored and, if noted, then rejected by most sociology. These are conceptualizations of the human body and its emotions as the principal materials from which social relations and institutions are constructed.

The intellectual tradition that has encouraged Collins' thinking and stimulated his production of a theory of interaction ritual chains is set out in the first chapter, 'The Program of Interaction Ritual Theory'. In addition to offering a characterization of both Goffman and Durkheim the chapter provides a necessary account of treatments of the concept 'ritual' in which Collins' own understanding of the term is situated. The account is necessary because Collins goes beyond both standard sociological and anthropological meanings by locating ritual in any momentary encounter in which the participants mutually focus their emotions. What is of interest in Collins' statement includes especially the consequences of such encounters for the generation of symbols and interactive continuities, what could be called 'interaction chains', things that are discussed more fully in subsequent chapters. The question of whether 'ritual' is redundant in 'interaction ritual chains' is not semantic but relates to a concern about the substance of ritual as a social process. Collins goes to great length to justify his use of the term but never satisfactorily explains how a notion that more or less applies to social encounters in general can be meaningfully specified as an explanatory concept. The issue is not so much solved as passed over in the following chapter, 'The Mutual-Focus/Emotional-Entrainment Model', in which the processes of interaction chains that Collins wishes to highlight are specified.

The effective processes of interaction chains are treated by Collins in terms of a distinction between the ingredients or initiating conditions of interaction ritual (IR) on the one hand and its outcomes on the other. The four conditions of IR include physical or bodily co-presence of two or more persons, barriers or boundaries separating participants of IR from non-participants or outsiders, mutual awareness of a common focus of attention on an object or event, and a shared mood or common emotional experience. The four outcomes of IR that Collins identifies are: a feeling of common membership and therefore group solidarity, self-enhancing and group dependent feelings that Collins describes as emotional energy (EE), iconic or verbal or gestural representations of the group – symbols – in which the collective experience of group membership is located and endures beyond the discrete encounters that by hypothesis give rise to symbols, and finally a feeling of rightness in group belonging or morality that centres on respect for its symbols and evaluation of outsiders. All of this is essentially a systematization and generalization of what Collins takes from Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*: bodily assembly and collective emotional effervescence productive of symbolic forms that maintain group solidarity after particular assemblies and effervescences have dissipated. To summarize it in these terms is not to distract from Collins' inventiveness. But Collins' distinctive contribution is more fully expressed in the following three chapters in which the basic model spelled out above is elaborated. Of particular interest are chapter 3, 'Emotional Energy and the Transient Emotions', and chapter 4, 'Interaction Markets and Material Markets'.

The concept of emotional energy (EE), and therefore the relationship between EE and what Collins calls transient emotions, is characteristic and defining of his theory of interaction ritual chains. Indeed, chapter 3 opens with the statement that 'Emotion is a central ingredient and outcome of IRs' and Collins goes on to say that the centrality of emotion to sociology derives from the fact that emotions hold a society together and provide the energy through which groups are mobilized (p. 103). It is curious that the most obvious fact about emotions, that they may influence the dispositions of actors and therefore the direction of action of mobilized groups and individuals within them, is not mentioned. This omission will be taken up below. The focus of interaction ritual theory, on the other hand, is that rituals or social encounters

begin with emotions of various sorts, which become intensified through the course of the encounter and which are ultimately productive of other sorts of emotions as an outcome of the encounter in question (p. 105). The emotions with which encounters begin, Collins says, are transient whereas the outcome of IRs include long-term emotions, what he calls emotional energy.

The notion of emotional energy (EE) is understood by Collins in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The measure of a successful IR is that it is productive of high levels of EE, whereas unsuccessful or failed IRs can generate only low levels of EE. Qualitatively, high EE is described as confidence, enthusiasm, positive or good self-feelings and so on. Low EE, on the other hand is depression, lack of initiative and bad self-feelings. Associated with these considerations is a motivational factor. High levels of EE lead participants and potential participants to be attracted to a group and are therefore responsible for social solidarity whereas low levels of EE are repellent to potential group members and draining for those subjected to them and are therefore productive of an absence of social solidarity. Each of these propositions requires further consideration. The idea that the level or quantity of EE in an IR has a motivational correlate is developed more fully in chapter 4, 'Interaction Markets and Material Markets'.

Collins opens chapter 4 with the idea that attraction between persons cannot be taken for granted and therefore involvement in IRs takes on 'the character of a market for interaction rituals' (p. 141). Any given situation out of which an IR may arise, Collins goes on to say, has a context which includes prior situations which the participants have already experienced and also future alternative situations that they may anticipate and must choose between. Collins acknowledges that this aspect of IR markets introduces a factor of constraint for those who are potential participants in IRs. There is a further constraint that Collins acknowledges: 'If we grant that individuals pursue EE payoffs of participating in interaction rituals, it is also true that individuals need material goods and that they will spend a certain amount of time and effort in working to procure them' (p. 160). When opportunity structure and material resources are introduced into the model in this way, then Collins' insistence that the interaction ritual chain theory constitutes a radical microsociology is compromised unless opportunities and material resources can be exhaustively explicated in terms of micro-interactions. But no such assurances are or can be given. Collins' discussion about the IR model is disjunctive with his statements of the model. Indeed, Collins' discussion throughout *Interaction Ritual Chains* is informative, illuminating and profound. His critical treatment of the assumptions of rational choice theory (pp. 174-6), for instance, is simply brilliant. Yet his own preference for an EE maximizing model against the conventional statement of utility maximizing is wholly disappointing.

It is not that Collins is unaware of the issues nor that he does not have the answers: he does. But in his commitment to a radical microsociology the explicit formulation of interaction ritual chains is left intact and the qualifications he accepts in broader discussion are not permitted to encroach on statements or formulations of the model. 'Human behaviour', Collins says, 'may be characterized as emotional energy tropism' (p. 181). This is a view frequently repeated throughout and is the core explanatory principle of motivation and interaction in his theory. Human individuals are EE seekers and approximate to EE maximization against other considerations:

... individual 'choices' come about, not by comparing symbols along a scale of their objective value, but purely from the viewpoint of the individual actor in the flow of situations in which the symbols are used. Individuals feel their

way toward those situations in which, through the local combination of ingredients for making an IR happen, the EE payoff is highest. EE operates as a common denominator for choosing among symbolic currencies (p. 157). In this formulation, which is heuristically powerful and parsimoniously expressed, EE payoff is the efficacious variable and behaviour can be explained in terms of it. And yet dismissing the value of symbols in choice determination is both a distortion of the fuller statement of the argument indicated in the quotation above which also misleadingly subsumes the value of symbols in 'the local combination of ingredients for making an IR happen'. The EE payoff and the value of symbols are simply distinct vectors and each must be represented in the model. It is untrue to say that human behaviour can be explained in terms of EE maximization. Such a propensity is always qualified by matters of taste, propriety and other bases of evaluation that are independent of any given IR opportunity. Even though a rock concert offers high EE a person who favours chamber music and cannot abide heavy metal would forego such a high EE experience and settle for something less. Collins knows this and says as much but his final theoretical statement refuses to acknowledge the fact. He sticks to the quantitative measure of EE when a qualitative factor is also necessary even though it goes beyond the IR formula he has so succinctly constructed.

These concerns converge as two problems that have been mentioned already: doubt about the coherence of the concept of emotional energy and also the radical microsociological context within which it operates. Collins agrees that the concept of emotional energy is difficult to grasp: why it derives more from his construction of it than its complexity. Collins accepts the common-sense but misleading notion that emotions are typically disruptive of on-going events and quickly dissipated. Commonplace experiences of anger, fear, sadness and so on seem to make the point. Against what he calls transient emotions are long-term enduring emotions that he describes as emotional energy. Interaction rituals, he says, convert transient emotions into emotional energy. There is some confusion here: no emotion in itself has an intrinsic time frame so that the distinction between transient and long-term emotions can only relate to particular emotional episodes and is not a meaningful theoretical distinction between types of emotions. Also, the idea that emotions are disruptive is a misunderstanding of how to formulate the quality of intentionality that is common to all emotions, their goal-setting propensity. If an emotion is experienced in a setting that offers imperatives at odds with the intentions or purposes implicit in the emotion it may be described as disruptive, but that is contingent upon the setting and not intrinsic to the emotion. Collins does acknowledge that emotional energy has affective tone – high EE is confidence, low EE is depression – but he operatively defines it quantitatively, as high, moderate or low EE. What is stored in the symbolic output of interaction rituals, according to Collins, is the quantitative energizing form of EE. There are two problems here: it is simply inconceivable that emotion can have an only energetic form without affective content; second, what symbols convey is invariably the affect not the energy. Collins' EE is denatured emotion: it is only responsible for the energy in the actors and their interaction, not the direction that interaction takes. Presumably the latter comes from the ritual itself.

Interaction Ritual Chains is a book that will inevitably provoke discussion. It is forcefully written, absorbingly engaging, provocatively argued. Its serious flaws come more from the fact that it is a strong personal statement and methodological manifesto – in the manner of Durkheim's *Rules* – than from the full compass of its informed and intelligently challenging arguments. Collins' main points concerning the somatic and affective basis of mundane ritual are starkly presented. This has meant

that their necessary qualifications are absent or underplayed. This will lead the book to be noticed in a manner that may be at the expense of its being properly understood.