

**Randall Collins and the Sociology of Emotions***Paolo Iagulli***How to cite**

Iagulli P. (2016), Randall Collins and the Sociology of Emotions [Italian Sociological Review, 6 (3), 411-429]

Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v6i3.142>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v6i3.142]

**1. Author information**

University of Bari “Aldo Moro” (Italy), School of Medicine

**2. Contact authors’ email address**

piagulli@iol.it

**3. Article accepted for publication**

April 2016

**Additional information about  
Italian Sociological Review  
can be found at:**

**About ISR-Editorial Board-Manuscript submission**



# *Randall Collins and the Sociology of Emotions*

Paolo Iagulli\*

Corresponding author:  
Paolo Iagulli  
E-mail: piagulli@iol.it

## **Abstract**

The objective of this article is to illustrate the close relationship between the thought of Randall Collins - well-known in Italy for his manuals, less so for his more innovative works - and the sociology of emotions. The publication of his book *Conflict Sociology* (1975) was one of the most significant episodes in the emergence of this field of study towards the end of the 1970s. More importantly, though, Collins' interaction ritual theory is inextricably linked to the emotions: his "ritual theory of emotions" is an integral part of IR theory and has become the theory of reference for what now constitutes an autonomous sociological approach to the emotions. Collins may be reproached for configuring the social actor as overly emotional, but obviously this is also a merit, if one considers for how long sociological theory was characterised by the primacy of normative and rational actors.

Keywords: sociology of emotions; Randall Collins; interaction ritual theory.

## **1. Introduction**

One of the most renowned contemporary sociologists and social theorists, Randall Collins is probably better known in Italy for his popular manuals<sup>1</sup> than for his more innovative works; indeed, most of these (*The Credential Society*, *Weberian Sociological Theory*, *The Sociology of Philosophies*, *Interaction*

---

\* University of Bari "Aldo Moro" (Italy), School of Medicine.

<sup>1</sup> I am referring, in particular, to Collins 2006 [1988] and 1996 [1994], though it is perhaps reductive to describe texts that are clearly underpinned by *his* sociological theory as mere manuals.

*Ritual Chains*) have not yet been translated into Italian<sup>2</sup> and the secondary literature dedicated to him is somewhat meagre<sup>3</sup>. The fact that he is nonetheless a very important figure in the panorama of international sociology is attested to by, amongst other things, his inclusion in the best introductory texts on contemporary sociological theory. For comprehensible pedagogical reasons, these tend to locate Collins within precise sociological traditions, as in the case of Ruth A. Wallace and Alison Wolf who consider the American scholar an heir to the Weberian version of the sociological theory of conflict<sup>4</sup>, or else to reduce his work to specific themes, as in the case of Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva who, rightly of course, emphasise the centrality of the concept of trust (and the emotions) in his reflections<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, it is probably more correct to note that in reality Collins' ambition is apparently to "elaborate a sociological theory in which the principal sociological traditions (Weberian, Marxist, Durkheimian, interactionist) are combined and integrated into a new synthesis, of which interaction ritual chains (or IRC) have to date been the heart and the nerve centre" (Santoro, 2012: 719). Certainly, in *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), the latest and most analytical presentation of his theory, Collins keeps faith with "the idea that a theory is primarily a tool of *explanation* and not an imaginative construction of more or less apocalyptic social scenarios [...] [not, that is,] a set of normative prescriptions about what a fair and just society should be" (Barbera, 2005: 159), and confirms himself to be a very different scholar from the sociologists *à la page* like Bauman and Beck (ibid.) most frequented by Italian sociology, probably because their focus is on *social criticism* rather than *sociological analysis*, the terrain on which Collins moves.

So, although he is well-known, Collins is "still in Italy (as in other European countries [...] including Britain) an author and a scholar of whom much remains to be discovered, and, above all, valorised" (Santoro, 2012:

---

<sup>2</sup> An exception is the recent translation of *Violence*: Collins, 2014; on the theme of violence in Collins' work, see the monographical part of No. 2011/2 of the journal "Sociologica" ([www.sociologica.mulino.it](http://www.sociologica.mulino.it)).

<sup>3</sup> Marco Santoro (2012) points this out in his introduction to a robust interview with Collins, which I recommend as an excellent introduction to his sociological thought. Santoro references the few Italian presentations of Collins' work, with particular regard to the theory of interaction ritual chains that constitutes its essential point of arrival: a monograph by Bifulco (2011) and the shorter but acute interventions of Barbera (2005) and Barone (2005) hosted by the journal "Rassegna italiana di sociologia"; I would add the very useful pedagogical text by Franzese (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Wallace, Wolf, 2008 [2006]: 105-114.

<sup>5</sup> See Baert, Carreira da Silva, 2010 [2010]: 108-112.

720). It should be noted immediately that the following pages have a circumscribed objective: to thematise the close relationship Collins has with the sociology of emotions. And the objective here is not, at least directly, to situate Collins within what is now, especially in the English-speaking world, the nuanced panorama of the contemporary sociology of emotions. If the aim and ambition of this work are therefore limited, it must also be said, however, that the emotions have always been a fundamental element of his sociological theory. I shall start by briefly outlining (Section 2) how the American sociologist contributed to founding the sociology of emotions. I then briefly describe his ritual theory of emotions (Section 3) and show how an autonomous approach to the emotions inspired by Collins now appears to be configurable (Section 4). Finally (Section 5), I argue that although the criticisms sometimes made of the American sociologist's excessive sensitivity to the emotional factor do hit the target, this should be balanced at least by a consideration which in my opinion is a crucial one: Collins has the merit of having contributed to bringing the *emotional actor* onto the stage of sociological theory, a merit even more significant if one considers that he is a sociologist and social theorist who cannot be labelled as closely linked to the sociology of emotions and who is absolutely one of the most authoritative figures in contemporary sociological theory in general.

## **2. *Conflict Sociology*: a significant (publishing) event in the emergence of the sociology of emotions. Overview.**

The object of interesting, occasionally illuminating, but mostly fragmentary insights on the part of classical sociology, the emotions became an explicitly sociological theme rather late in the day. As Theodore Kemper, a North American pioneer of the sociology of emotions, has written

[i]n the sociology of emotions, 1975 was the watershed year. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1975) published an article on emotions in a feminist collection; Thomas Scheff organized the first session on emotions at the American Sociological Association meetings in San Francisco; and Randall Collins (1975) theorized a central place for emotions in the microdynamics of stratification in his book *Conflict Sociology* (Kemper, 1990: 3-4).

In the years immediately afterwards, other publishing events consolidated a tendency which rapidly led to the consecration of the sociology of emotions as an autonomous branch of sociology, at least in the United States. This is obviously not the place in which to reconstruct the birth of the sociology of

emotions, but certainly a significant role was played by Collins' first major work, *Conflict Sociology*. In this book he put forward an analytical theory of conflict<sup>6</sup> whose fundamental explanatory principles included *emotional ties*, regarding which the American sociologist moreover explicitly recuperated one of the many teachings of Emile Durkheim who belonged, as is well-known, to the opposing tradition of the sociology of social order. According to Collins (1975), the French sociologist in his last major work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, had the merit of proposing a model of the ritual aspects of social behaviour that has been extraordinarily useful for understanding social reality and the basic mechanisms of (emotional) solidarity. In other words, Durkheim had understood like few others the fundamentally emotional dynamics of social interactions: the idea that social ties are less the result of cold rational bargaining than principally of emotional constraints linked to moral ideals had already been characterised by Collins in 1975<sup>7</sup> as the French sociologist's greatest contribution to sociological thought, shamefully obscured by the unilaterally functionalist representation frequently given of his sociology.

Thus in *Conflict Sociology* a theory of interaction rituals began to take shape in which, alongside Durkheim, Erving Goffman played (and would also play later on) an equally important role. Collins recognised that Goffman had skilfully translated to the microsociological level Durkheim's insights about the mechanisms related to physical proximity, the concentration of the attention of a number of people on the same object and the coordination of gestures and actions which are the basis of emotional contagion and hence of emotional ties. Besides having explicitly declaring his debt to both Durkheim and Goffman<sup>8</sup>, Collins did not fail to stress that their contributions had to be considered, as noted above, within the framework of the Weberian theory of conflict: emotional solidarity does not eliminate conflict; on the contrary, it is often one of the most powerful weapons of conflict itself as, for example, when a group exploits its own cohesion to combat other groups. Besides, as has been written in reference to Collins' work in general (Wallace and Wolf,

---

<sup>6</sup> Very briefly, by analytical conflict theory I am referring to the sociological tradition inspired by Weber, according to whom conflict is a constitutive and substantially ineliminable element of social reality and its dynamics (whereas according to the so-called critical theorists or conflict utopians inspired by Marx, social conflicts can and must be combatted and resolved, with the help of social scientists themselves): see Wallace, Wolf, 2008 [2006]: 63-115.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this point a few years later, see Collins, 2008: esp. 11-58.

<sup>8</sup> On the substantial continuity between Durkheim and Goffman, see, apart from Collins' writings, the valuable contributions of Pierpaolo Giglioli (in particular, 1990: 49-74).

2008 [2006]: 105), "[t]he most original aspect of Collins' work is the way he incorporates a theory of how social integration is achieved into a conflict approach".

As regards what chiefly interests us here, even though emotions are not *the* theme of *Conflict Sociology*, as had conversely been the case in those years with the pioneering contributions to the sociology of emotions by Hochschild (1975 and 1979, it. ed. 2013), Kemper (1978) and Shott (1979), their importance in Collins' text legitimates its inclusion in the list of episodes that were fundamental in scientific terms for the birth of this branch of sociology. In other words, there are elements, or at least significant assumptions, clearly present in Collins' first major work of what would later become his ritual theory of emotions.

### 3. Collins' ritual theory of emotions

Collins' *ritual theory of emotions* is part of his more general theory of interaction rituals; from *Conflict Sociology* through to *Interaction Ritual Chains* he never ceased to argue for the key role of interaction rituals in explaining society: for him, the macro level of social reality is constituted by *interaction ritual chains*. This is not of course the place to explore the theme of the micro-macro link, present in Collins' theory<sup>9</sup>, nor to reconstruct his general theory of interaction rituals; we shall consider the latter very selectively, for the sole purpose of delineating what chiefly interests us here, namely his ritual theory of emotions.

Accordingly, we will begin by defining the basic model of social rituals, which for Collins, who in this follows Goffman rather more than Durkheim, are the basic social situations: for Collins as for Goffman, the principal unit of sociological analysis is neither the individual nor society, but situations. Here I shall refer primarily to an article published in 1990, *Stratification, Emotional Energy, and the Transient Emotions*, in which the essential core of Collins' model of social rituals can be found. Their constituent elements are the following:

- 1) a group of a minimum two people face-to-face, the prerequisite for emotional (and cognitive) processes;
- 2) a shared focus on an object or activity and a mutual awareness of this common focus; this is what happens not only in the case of collective formalities like ritual church meetings or political protocols, but in many circumstances of everyday life such as ordinary conversations. Group activity captures, so to speak, individuals who are reciprocally aware of what each

---

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Collins, 1981.

other person is doing and makes the group itself the centre of attention, as a supra-individual reality which influences its members from the outside and, concurrently, through their consciousness from the inside;

3) the participants in the group share a common sensibility. The sentiments involved can be extremely diverse, from anger and fear through to friendliness, enthusiasm, and so on; it does not matter what they are, nor which sentiments are initially present. What Collins' model postulates and simultaneously emphasises is the *emotional contagion* that occurs between people who are co-present and focused on the same activity or object. This is the reason why the emotional state, both individual and general, is intensified: participants at a funeral will feel sadder during a funeral "that goes off well", somebody who is part of the audience will feel in a better mood when the majority reacts positively to a comedy, a participant at a party will feel more emotionally involved if it is a "successful" party, and so on;

4) the outcome of the construction of this kind of successful emotional coordination during an interaction ritual consists of sentiments and solidarity. The transient emotions inspired by the ritual are transformed into long-term emotions: if the short-term emotion present during a funeral is sadness, the "ritual work" of the funeral will produce group solidarity; if the emotional ingredients of a party are friendliness and humour, the long-term outcome will be the feeling of belonging to that group (see Collins, 1990).

More generally, for Collins long-term outcomes of this kind constitute *emotional energy* (see *ibid.* p. 32), which he defines as the "quality of confidence, enthusiasm, warmth and assertiveness with which one carries out one's actions" (Collins, 2006 [1988]: 342), namely the motivational force that is the basis of social behaviour. Collins is interested in the more durable emotions that generate, and indeed end up coinciding with, (emotional) energy in various situations rather than transient individual emotions. His notion of emotional energy designates a *continuum* that ranges from a strong sentiment of confidence and enthusiasm for a social interaction and feeling good in a group to a lack of personal initiative, negative feelings about self, depression and the absence of Durkheimian solidarity (see Collins, 1990: 32-33).

Emotional energy is not just something that pumps up some individuals and depresses others. It also has a controlling quality from the group side. Emotional energy is what Durkheim [...] called "moral sentiment": it includes feelings of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral. Individuals, who are full of emotional energy, feel like good persons [...]. Persons with low emotional energy feel bad (*ibid.*: 33).



And it is precisely on high or low levels of energy and enthusiasm that interactions, their initiation and their outcome depend.

Emotional energy is therefore an element and a key concept not just of social rituals, but of Collins's more general sociological perspective, as emerges very clearly from the following words of his:

All social life can be analysed as a vast market of interaction rituals; each individual brings to it his own accumulated reserves of emotional energy and symbols, which he then invests with the objective of obtaining the highest possible level of emotional energy in the next encounter. If I place the emphasis on *emotional energy* as the common denominator of individual choices on this market, it is not to deny the other ingredients necessary for a successful interaction ritual chain (like material conditions and symbolic capital), but rather to resolve a fundamental analytical problem: if people must choose between investing themselves in one situation or another, some mechanism must exist that enables them to compare the alternatives. In real life it doesn't matter that certain goods are theoretically not comparable: people make their choices anyway. And they are capable of making choices that will maximise their emotional energy (Collins, 2005: 175, my italics).

For Collins, in other words, the social actor, who tends to maximize his/her level of emotional energy, will try and indeed learn to recognize situations and people that are gratifying from this point of view, and will avoid situations and people that have previously generated low levels of positive emotional energy or negative transient emotions.

What has been outlined so far should have made it clear enough that for Collins rituals and *emotions*, and not other factors, like strategic rationality, for instance, constitute *the founding block of social life* (Baert, Da Silva 2010 [2010]: 110). But I shall say a little more, albeit very schematically.

First of all, in Collins' model emotions are both an ingredient and an outcome of ritual: specific emotions present perhaps only in small measure at the beginning of a ritual may be strengthened by the time it ends, but what the ritual principally produces is that more general emotional energy which when shared becomes a crucial element of solidarity and the "symbolization" of the social group.

As regards this symbolization, an important point must be emphasised which shows the influence not just of Durkheim's thought but also of the symbolic interactionist perspective, expressed, however, in much more emotional terms. Collins writes:

[o]ur lives consist of a series of interactions, some of which generate more ritual solidarity than others (This is what I refer to as "interaction ritual

chains). The high-solidarity rituals give individuals a store of cognitions that they carry around with them, and use to think and communicate with. Whenever someone thinks in terms of concepts that were the focus of a successful interaction ritual, they are subjectively reinvoking the feelings of membership in that group. We are, to speak in the idiom of Symbolic Interactionism, imagining society in our minds; it would be more accurate, however, to say that we *feel the emotions* of social solidarity in the various ideas with which we think (Collins, 1990: 34, emphasis added).

Essentially Collins is arguing here that only by acknowledging the presence, and indeed the significance, of the emotional element alongside the cognitive component can we grasp the fact that people who have derived emotional energy from successful group interactions continue, even when they are alone, to have emotional energy tied to ideas, sacred objects, and symbols (whether these be a tribal totem, a Bible, a Koran, a flag or a wedding) (ibid.: 33-34). If, for instance, raising the American flag activates emotional energy in a strongly patriotic person when s/he is alone (i.e. in the absence of others with whom to share the spirit of what it symbolizes), this is because cognition, that is to say, memory, is emotionally charged.

And finally, it is evident, as indeed Collins has explicitly acknowledged (see esp. Collins, 2006 [1988]: 313-353) how close his theory is, in certain respects at least, to social exchange theories. Social actors, for the American sociologist, are constantly in search of favourable exchanges and tend to avoid unfavourable ones: put another way, they renounce certain resources on condition that they can obtain greater quantities of other resources. These resources are also cultural: what is exchanged is also "cultural capital". Not only are cultural capital and emotions resources that are often co-present in a ritual situation, they are also able to reciprocally condition each other: if a person emerges from an encounter satisfied with the exchange in terms of cultural capital, presumably his/her emotional energy will also have been increased. But certainly for Collins what seems to matter most is what we might call "emotional capital"; for him, the exchange is of an eminently emotional order. If a conversation has generated pleasure and thus renewed and heightened emotional energy, the social actor will be inclined to "spend" other energy as soon as possible in a new conversation with the same person, because s/he knows that in all likelihood the emotional "balance sheet" will once again be favourable. In short, Collins' theory moves within a conceptual framework not very different from that of exchange theory; nevertheless, "[i]ts *social psychological basis* is neither behaviorism nor rational choice, but interaction rituals; hence the focus is on situations and the symbols and emotions which are generated in them." (ibid.: 337).

### *3.1. Power rituals*

The ritual interaction model can be seen in action in two types of ritual, those of power and status: this is the theme of social stratification, dear to the American sociologist, seen here from the point of view of the emotions involved. We shall limit ourselves to considering power rituals, exemplary instances of situational stratification since basically they boil down to a process of giving and receiving orders. The fact that they are ritual interactions is perfectly obvious when one considers the focus of attention on the same activity (giving and taking orders are essentially contextual) and the reciprocal awareness of this common focus. It might seem counter-intuitive, but Collins has no difficulty in showing that power rituals have a shared emotional centre as well, provided the ritual proceeds successfully (since a ritual interaction can always collapse or result in conflict). It is true that not everyone who receives orders executes them, but what matters is that the order-takers show deference and respect for the activity of order-giving itself. In Goffmanesque terms, order-givers are like the main actors in a performance in which they take the initiative and, if they are successful, reaffirm their leadership and command role in the organizational chain; Collins seems very interested in the emotional implications of this fact and indeed he shows that "order-givers enhance or sustain their emotional energy by dominating during power rituals; and their ritual stance makes themselves loyal to the symbols of the organization" (Collins, 1990: 35). Conversely, those who receive orders tend in that moment to furnish a "realistic assent" that is able to perfect the relative ritual; moreover, it goes without saying that it is always possible to do something different or something extra, as in the case of employees who, backstage to use Goffman's term, criticize or ridicule their bosses "behind their backs". From the point of view of the emotions experienced, order-taking as a rule is inherently alienating and the prevailing emotions are negative ones (weakness, fear, and so on). As regards the organizational symbols (the dominant values and ideals, for example), while order-givers tend to identify with them, the attitude of order-takers is often ambivalent; they may pretend to share them, only to deride or contest them later on. Clearly, power rituals can therefore produce very complex emotions. To give just one example, an order-taker may feel a mixture of emotions, because s/he certainly, and predominantly, feels negative emotions, like weakness, fear and depression, but s/he may also experience the feelings of the order-givers, namely powerful emotional energy and a sense of dominance, but then, in consequence, anger. Collins puts forward the hypothesis that sometimes people who are severely dominated (inmates in prison camps, children who are beaten, military recruits and so on) tend to identify with the dominator

and/or aggressor and feel the same emotional energy and sense of dominance in a sort of anticipatory but imaginary assumption of that role, whose real effect, however, precisely because it is illusory, is feeling a rage that may ultimately prevail over fear and result in particularly violent outbursts (see *ibid.*: 36).

### 3.2. (Notes on) Collins' theory and other sociological approaches to the emotions

Collins' theory is naturally far more complex than it has been possible to explain here. As already mentioned, it sees social structures as constructed by rituals repeated in time and space in which emotions appear to play a decisive role: society, for the American sociologist, is the product of chains of emotionally charged interaction rituals. Thus Collins does not conceal, amongst other things, the ambition to explain the complex macro-micro link: in his theory macro-social reality derives from the aggregation of interactions (rituals) between actors strongly characterized by the availability of emotional energy and their capacity to identify (emotionally) with the group.

As regards what chiefly interests us here, a quick comparison of Collins' approach to other sociological approaches to the emotions<sup>10</sup> allows us to observe the following: while the sociological theories of emotions linked to other approaches tend to capture specific, albeit fundamental, aspects of emotions as "social phenomena", Collins' theory appears to go well beyond that. Put simply, *on the one hand*, the dramaturgical-cultural theories (Gordon, Hochschild, Thoits, Clark) place their emphasis on the influence of culture in the formation, experience and expression of emotions; the structural theories (Kemper, Thamm, Barbalet) affirm the importance of structures and social positions in relation to the emotions, particularly with respect to their activation; the symbolic interactionist theories (Scheff, Heise, Stryker) focus their attention on the (cognitive) processes of *defining* social situations as decisive for the emotions, and the evolutionary theories (Wentworth, J.H. Turner) highlight the importance of biological and physiological factors for a sociological thematisation of the emotions. *On the other hand*, Collins' theory appears to make the far more radical claim that emotions play a key role in the very existence of society. In other words, if one considers the object of the sociology of emotions to be constituted simply by the relationship between emotions and society, we can say that whereas for the other approaches the emotions basically appear to be "dependent variables", conditioned for

---

<sup>10</sup> For a robust introduction to the sociological theories of the emotions, see Turner, Stets, 2005.

example by culture and its scripts (the dramaturgical-cultural approach) or by social structures (the structural approach), from Collins' perspective they appear to assume the role of the "independent variable", in the sense that they constitute the element which may be better able to explain society than any other.

#### **4. The ritual sociological approach to the emotions**

The idea that Collins' ritual theory of the emotions can be the starting point for a truly ritual sociological approach to the emotions (Stets, Turner, 2005: 69-99) is demonstrated by a series of theoretical and empirical studies: we shall now briefly consider some of them.

a) We shall begin with Erika Summers-Effler (2002), who, after Collins himself, is probably the most important exponent of the ritual approach to the emotions. The premise of her discourse is that when people find themselves in subordinate positions they are not, in general or in principle, in a position to maximize emotional energy: on the contrary, because they are obliged to be deferential, they lose emotional energy whenever they interact with their superiors. She argues that, in actual fact, subordinates can react to their position in three ways: 1) resist those who are in positions of superiority; 2) avoid or reduce to the minimum interactions in which they are in a subordinate position; and finally, 3) continue to participate in this type of interaction while managing their emotional reactions, controlling them by using specific techniques such as "cognitive work". Nevertheless, considering in particular the position of women, who in the course of everyday life inevitably interact with men in many contexts, Summers-Effler notes that Strategy 2 is the least workable in practice and Strategy 1 is often avoided because resistance provokes negative social sanctions and transient negative emotions; women therefore tend to adopt Strategy 3. But there is often a price to pay for following this strategy: the delicate labour of managing emotions can produce depression and an ulterior loss of emotional energy. From society's point of view, this is entirely to the benefit of those in a position of superiority: the more general outcome is maintenance of the *status quo* with all the inequalities between people and groups that this implies.

How, Summers-Effler asks, can this cycle of emotional labour and thus of tacit and/or implicit consent to the *status quo* be broken? When, in other words, can Strategy (or Hypothesis) 1 be adopted? Her response was that this occurs, for example, in the case of women's movements (or more generally of movements for civil rights): a collective identity forms within

them aided by the fact that women are co-present, develop shared moods, experience rhythmic synchronization of actions and collective effervescence, and support and defend new symbols that draw attention to injustices and demands for change. More precisely, or put differently, Hypothesis 1 comes into play in the presence of *interaction rituals*: social movements are in fact characterized by internal rituals that develop a common centre of interest and attention around, amongst other things, symbols that are circulated which highlight the collective situation of the subordinates, generating solidarity and stimulating emotional energy. This is, for example, and more concretely, the case of women who derive greater emotional energy from participating in feminist causes than from passively enduring being treated as second-class citizens. It is evident that Summers-Effler considers emotional energy a key element for a theory of the mobilization of social movements constituted by persons who are otherwise, and indeed habitually, situated in subordinate positions.

b) Turning to more empirical works, I shall mention first of all those by Barbara Zajac (1998, 2003), who used Collins' theory of interaction rituals in her reading and interpretation of biographical accounts of the process of becoming a nun, based on interviews with fifty members of the Order of the Sisters of Reconciliation of Jesus. It emerged from the interviews that they all came from practicing Catholic families, had attended Catholic schools and, more importantly, were constantly engaged as a result in *interaction rituals* (at home, at school and in church) that favoured an intensification of emotional energy, in particular through the shared use of symbols like the crucifix, rosaries, prayer cards and the Bible. Moreover, it turned out that many of these future nuns had had a special relationship with a particular person who had guided them towards the religious life. In other words, the future nuns were surrounded by the symbols and rituals of Catholicism and they reported that this had enabled them to experience heightened levels of both emotional energy and cultural capital; indeed, the latter circulated in such a way as to enhance the emotions. Part of the cultural capital that flowed between family members and members of the clergy could be defined as particularised; another part, involving the formal positions and symbols of the Catholic Church, could be described as generalized. The circulation of these symbols and the emotional effervescence that characterized the rituals these women took part in had thus decisively favoured their choice to become nuns, which was perceived as more rewarding than the choice of "secular careers" (Zajac, 1998 and 2003, cit. in Turner, Stets, 2005: 86).

c) An interesting ethnographic study by Tim Hallet (2003) highlights the way the emotions present in an interaction can be intensified during the course of it: the interaction acts as a stimulus for emotions that then become

increasingly intense. The author had himself hired as an assistant waiter in a restaurant in a suburb of a large Midwestern city in order to observe the activity of waiters on both the day shift (professionals) and the night shift (non-professionals, usually university students) from the dual point of view of the interactions between waiters and the interactions between waiters and customers. Hallet was able to observe two different kinds of emotional amplification: spontaneous and managed. The former occurred between the waiters on night shift: as non-professionals, they were less concerned with earning tips than their professional daytime colleagues and so developed a greater sense of cohesion, rather than competition and conflict, in the behind-the-scenes context of the kitchen, through spontaneous, pleasant and often jocular conversations. Moreover, the emotional climate established between these night-shift waiters then reverberated "on-stage" in their relations with customers, which were particularly relaxed and friendly. By contrast, among the day-shift wait staff, who as professionals needed the tips as a crucial source of income, a culture of competition developed aimed at securing the largest number of tables. The interaction between these waiters was minimal, since they spent most of their time developing good relations with customers in the hope of a good tip. Even here, however, a special kind of emotional amplification was noted, this time as the relationship between waiters and customers developed. Initially the daytime wait staff, in order to obtain those good tips, worked hard at managing and controlling any negative emotions through *surface acting*, i.e. "from the outside in"<sup>11</sup>, which consisted in particular of smiling and interacting in a friendly way with customers; the latter tended to respond with the same friendly attitude and conversations. From the point of view of the waiters' practical objectives this led to them obtaining a good tip, while in terms of the emotions, what happened is that emotions that were originally only simulated tended to become truly felt. These new and genuine emotions then persisted, even backstage in the kitchen, and remained in force once they were on-stage again in the dining room: in other words, at a certain point the waiters no longer needed to pretend.

##### **5. Is Collins' social actor too emotional?**

Given that Collins' ritual theory of emotions is closely linked to, and indeed unthinkable without, his more general theory of interaction rituals, and given that, as noted earlier, the most analytical and systematic version of the latter is set out in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), which indeed

---

<sup>11</sup> For a more general discussion of emotion work, see Hochschild's now classic contribution: for example, 2013.

contains his sociology of emotions <sup>12</sup>, I would now like to briefly reflect on some criticisms directed at this work of Collins in order to show that, although they may appear reasonable from a point of view "internal" to his theory, they can indeed be forgiven him if considered from a point of view "external" to it, that is, if we evaluate the Collins' work (and theory) from the point of view of the (history of the) sociology of emotions and, more generally, of the history of sociological thought.

First of all, a criticism made by Carlo Barone, and others, is probably right. He has written that "[i]f rational choice models sometimes tend to overestimate the actors' degree of rationality, Collins seems to fall into the opposite error" (Barone, 2005: 171). It is difficult to dispute the argument that the American sociologist tends to consider the maximization of emotional energy the sole or absolutely predominant decision-making criterion, even in situations where motivations based on emotional incentives appear to be limited and the logics of action, on the contrary, to be rational/instrumental (see *ibid.*). In this regard, Barone goes on to say:

[f]or example, according to Collins, individuals tend to ignore the costs of the available options, until exhaustion of their financial resources forces them to take note of budgetary constraints. Propelled by emotional impulses, we would therefore be incapable of *anticipating* the costs involved. Collins's actors seem unbelievably myopic (*ibid.*).

Furthermore: not all social situations are characterized by that particular co-presence of persons, that shared focus of attention and that common mood which constitutively characterize social rituals. Collins himself recognises that in many situations the degree of emotional effervescence is moderate or low, without however drawing the necessary conclusions on the terrain of his theory, as Barone has pointed out (*ibid.*).

Finally, it seems reasonable to argue (*ibid.*: 173) that Collins' theory lacks certain "bits" that are essential for a realistic sociological theory: he avoids adequately addressing questions such as primary socialization or normative acts and therefore configures social actors who, attracted to situations that seem to promise emotional gratification, appear completely independent of and thus not conditioned by the internalization of norms or mechanisms of action related to *routine*.

Now, I think one can summarize these criticisms of Collins' work (I hope without trivialising them) by stating that his social actor seems too emotional.

---

<sup>12</sup> See, in particular, Chapters 2 and 3, Collins, 2004.



Nevertheless, if on the one hand, Barone is right yet again when he writes that the theory of interaction rituals put forward in *Interaction Ritual Chains* "could avoid a great many criticisms and objections if it were conceived not as a self-sufficient theoretical enterprise, but as a research program which must (and can) be integrated with others, first and foremost with the theory of rational choice, within a multi-dimensional conception of the motivations of human action" (ibid.: 167), on the other hand, and this is what chiefly interests us here, Collins' configuration of an actor who effectively is perhaps too emotional is pardonable, in my opinion. Why? In a nutshell, because, as should by now be clear, Collins must be given credit for having contributed to making the *emotions* a *sociological theme*. That societies exist also because of "deep[er] emotional processes that produce social bonds of trust among particular kinds of people" (Collins, 2008 [1992]: 8) had certainly already been intuited by, amongst others, that great classical sociologist so often invoked by Collins who is Durkheim: the lesson of the latter on the non-rational or pre-rational foundations of society and hence his criticism of any merely contractualist approach to the study of society is constantly present in Collins' reflections. On the basis of that insight, however, the American sociologist has elaborated a fully-fledged theory of the emotions, as well as more generally, even with the limits noted above, a theory of the social actor and of society itself, a theory that has constituted the basis and point of reference for an autonomous sociological approach to the emotions: the ritual approach. All this happened, it is true, while the sociology of emotions was witnessing the elaboration of other theories and the configurability of other approaches (dramaturgical-cultural, symbolic interactionism, social exchange, structural, evolutionary: see Stets and Turner, 2005), especially in the United States. Nevertheless, Collins' contribution is particularly relevant if one considers that he is a sociologist and social theorist who could not, and cannot, be labelled a sociologist of the emotions alone, and above all, the international stature he has attained in the meantime.

## 6. Conclusions

As stated at the outset, it was not my objective in this paper to evaluate Collins' social theory, either his general theory or the associated theory more specifically focused on the emotions, nor was it my aim to critically situate Collins within the multifaceted panorama of the sociology of emotions; I simply wanted to call attention to his close relationship with this youthful branch of sociology. After noting that his important work, *Conflict Sociology* (1975), was one of the foundational episodes in the birth of the sociology of

emotions, I briefly reconstructed his ritual theory of emotions and mentioned a number of studies and research projects closely related to the sociological approach to the emotions that he helped to found. Finally, I pointed out that although the social actor who emerges from his social theory may seem excessively emotional, in my view this is pardonable precisely because Collins was one of the first sociologists to consider the emotions an eminently sociological topic: the emotional actor had been absent or totally residual for far too long in the history of sociological thought. Indeed, it is indisputable that emotions and sentiments were long confined to the margins of sociological theory and considered "non-decisive elements of social action [...] [on the contrary] often disruptive of rational action in relation to its aims" (Turnaturi, 1995: 10). From its earliest beginnings, sociological theory has been, if not dominated<sup>13</sup>, at least strongly characterized by the primacy of rational, normative, and, to a lesser extent, reflective actors. Once this fact is taken into consideration, Collins can surely be pardoned for elaborating a sociological theory or, if you prefer, a reading of the social world that overemphasises the emotional sphere. Of course, a pioneer of the Italian sociology of emotions like Gabriella Turnaturi<sup>14</sup> was right to say that the emotional actor should not be considered in opposition to the rational and normative actor, but simply as another of that actor's faces (ibid.: 14)<sup>15</sup>. And certainly the sociology of emotions is not so ingenuous as to thematise human action as exclusively emotional: determined, that is, solely by sentiments, motivations and affections. As a matter of fact, and in conclusion, I do not think that Collins is either: with a few excesses perhaps, he "merely" called attention to what sociology had long seriously underestimated, which is, to use the words of Turnaturi once again, that "*what we feel* is as significant and socially relevant as what we do and what we think" (ibid.: 15, emphasis added). In short, the social actor is a complex actor and consequently also an emotional one. Collins may have overestimated the importance of emotions in

---

<sup>13</sup> The process of "discovery" in which the most recent literature is engaged of the often indirect, but sometimes illuminating contributions to the (sociological) study of the emotions by the classical figures of sociology is very interesting: to cite only the Italian literature, see Cerulo, 2009, 2011, 2013 and Iagulli, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015; but also the pioneering studies of Mutti, 1992, Turnaturi, 1994 and Caccamo, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> A great deal is owed to Turnaturi now that, many years after she edited a valuable anthology (1995 ed.), the sociology of emotions is starting to carve out a scientific space for itself in Italy, too; we are still a long way, however, from the disciplinary and/or academic acknowledgements that began to arrive in Europe some years ago (see, on this last point, Kleres, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> On the relationship between emotions and reason in social action, see the recent volume by Cerulo and Crespi, eds., 2013.

social life, but in the context of the operation of "re-equilibrating the components of social action" that the contemporary sociology of emotions is significantly engaged in, the US scholar has undoubtedly played (and continues to play) a role of primary importance.

### **Bibliographical references**

- Baert, P., Carreira da Silva, F. (2010), *La teoria sociale contemporanea*, il Mulino, Bologna [ed. orig. 2010, *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. II ed.].
- Barbera, F. (2005), *Teoria, ricerca empirica, spiegazione e ordine sociale: la teoria dei rituali d'interazione di Randall Collins*, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 46, 1, 159-166.
- Barone, C. (2005), "Interaction Ritual Chains»: fino a dove può spingersi l'analisi di Collins?", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 46, 1, pp. 167-174.
- Bifulco L. (2010), *Rituale dell'interazione e conflitto. Un'introduzione alla sociologia di Randall Collins*, Ipermedium libri, S. Maria C.V. (CE).
- Caccamo, R., (1996), *Una sociologa e le emozioni. Helen Merrell Lynd (1896-1982)*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Cerulo, M. (2009), *Il sentire controverso. Introduzione alla sociologia delle emozioni*, Carocci, Roma.
- Cerulo, M. (2011), "Introduzione", in Tarde, G., *La logica sociale dei sentimenti*, cit., 7-23.
- Cerulo, M. (2013), *Gabriel Tarde e le emozioni: appunti per la riscoperta di un classico*, *Quaderni di teoria sociale*, 13, pp. 167-182.
- Cerulo, M., Crespi F. (2013) (eds.), *Emozioni e ragione nelle pratiche sociali*, Orthotes, Napoli-Salerno.
- Collins, R. (1975), *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science*, Academic Press, New York.
- Collins, R. (1981), *On the Micro-foundations of Macro-sociology*, *American Journal of Sociology*, 86, 5, 984-1014.
- Collins, R. (1990), "Stratification, Emotional Energy, and the Transient Emotions", in Kemper T.D. (ed.), *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 27-57.
- Collins, R. (1996), *Quattro tradizioni sociologiche*, Zanichelli, Bologna [ed. orig. 1994, *Four Sociological Traditions*].
- Collins, R. (2004), *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Collins, R. (2005), *Replica*, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 46, 1, 175-181.

- Collins, R. (2006), *Teorie sociologiche*, il Mulino, Bologna, ediz. ridotta di Collins 1992 [ed. orig. 1988, *Theoretical Sociology*].
- Collins, R. (2008), *L'intelligenza sociologica. Un'introduzione alla sociologia non-ovvia*, Ipermedium libri, S. Maria C.V. (CE) [ed. orig. 1992, *Sociological Insight - An Introduction to Non-Obvious Sociology*].
- Collins, R. (2014), *Violenza. Un'analisi sociologica*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli [ed. orig. 2008, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*].
- Franzese, S. (2010), "Randall Collins", in Protti M. e Franzese S., *Percorsi sociologici. Per una storia della sociologia contemporanea*, Mondadori Università, Milano, 319-334.
- Giglioli, P.P. (1990), *Rituale, interazione, vita quotidiana. Saggi su Goffman e Garfinkel*, Clueb, Bologna.
- Hallet, T. (2003), *Emotional Feedback and Amplification in Social Interaction*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 44, 4, 705-726.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1975), "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities", in Millman M. e Kanter R. (eds.), *Another Voice. Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science*, Garden City, New York, 280-307.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2013), *Lavoro emozionale e struttura sociale* (ed. M. Cerulo), Armando Editore, Roma [ed. orig. 1979, *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules and Social Structure*, *American Journal of Sociology*, 85, 3, 551-575].
- Iagulli, P. (2011), *La sociologia delle emozioni. Un'introduzione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Iagulli, P. (2012), *Sé ed emozioni nell'interazionismo simbolico*, *Studi di sociologia*, 3, 289-307.
- Iagulli, P. (2014), *Erving Goffman e la sociologia delle emozioni*, *Studi di sociologia*, 1, 31-52.
- Iagulli, P. (2015), *Le emozioni nel Sistema di politica positiva di Auguste Comte*, *Politica.eu* ([www.rivistapolitica.eu](http://www.rivistapolitica.eu)), 1, 42-56.
- Kemper, T.D. (1978), *Toward a Sociology of Emotions: Some Problems and Some Solutions*, *The American Sociologist*, 13, pp. 30-41.
- Kemper, T.D. (1990), "Themes and Variations in the Sociology of Emotions.", in Id. (ed.), *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 3-23.
- Kleres, J. (2009), "Preface: Notes on the Sociology of Emotions in Europe", in Hopkins D., Kleres J., Flam H., Kuzmics H. (eds.), *Theorizing Emotions. Sociological Explorations and Applications*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 7-27.
- Mutti, A. (1992), *Il contributo di Pareto alla sociologia delle emozioni*, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 32, 4, 465-487.
- Santoro, M. (2012), *La sociologia in (inter)azione. Una conversazione con Randall Collins*, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 53, 4, 719-750.

- Shott, S. (1979), *Emotion and Social Life: A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis*, American Journal of Sociology, 6, 1317-1334.
- Summers-Effler, E. (2002), *The Micro Potential for Social Change: Emotion, Consciousness, and Social Movement Formation*, Sociological Theory, 20, 41-60.
- Turnaturi, G. (1994), *Flirt, seduzione, amore. Simmel e le emozioni*, Anabasi, Milano.
- Turnaturi, G. (1995), "Introduzione", in Id. (ed.), *La sociologia delle emozioni*, cit., 7-24.
- Turnaturi, G. (1995) (ed.), *La sociologia delle emozioni*, Anabasi, Milano.
- Turner, J.H., Stets J.E. (2005), *The Sociology of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Wallace, R.A., Wolf A. (2008), *La teoria sociologica contemporanea*, il Mulino, Bologna [ed. orig. 2006, Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition].
- Zajac, B. (1998), *Becoming a Nun: A General Mode of Entering Religious Life*, Review of Religious Research, 54, 403-423.
- Zajac, B. (2003), *The Vocation of Catholic Nuns: An Example of Interaction Ritual Theory*, Unpublished working paper, Indiana State University.