

JUMBO SPEAKS

Charles Tilly, Columbia University, 13 August 2000

A discussion of Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies. A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998)

Randall Collins' survey of connections among philosophers and philosophies does not slither through intellectual history like some forest snake, but tramples the trees, leaving great swathes of flattened vegetation behind, trumpeting all the while. The ground trembles as Jumbo passes from one grove to the next. The pounding goes on for almost one thousand one hundred pages. Although page by page Collins' prose remains far from vivid, we have no choice but to heed this earth-shaking itinerary.

In a line of thought reaching back to Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman, and Collins' own earlier work, *The Sociology of Philosophies* proposes to explain formation and change of philosophical schools over humanity's entire literate history as a consequence of interaction rituals in which professional intellectuals seek to maximize emotional energy through intellectual exchanges with other professionals, but succeed variably in the effort as a function of their cultural capital and network locations. Because participants in such rituals have limited attention spans, runs the argument, no more than half a dozen significantly different positions can ever exist at once within the same philosophical conversation. Despite the exceptional influence of high-energy, high-capital individuals, positions emerge from cliques, or schools, of connected thinkers. Because new participants only enter such conversations by challenging existing interlocutors or by becoming their pupils, furthermore, networks of participants form through both dialogue and patronage. So long as those networks store and circulate emotional energy, philosophy thrives. Such networks sometimes reorganize because their material bases change. When that happens, philosophical creativity increases not through formation of a single new synthesis but through the struggles of rival factions. Anyone who poses so bold and clear a thesis at such a scale deserves attention and applause.

Let us be clear about what such an approach does not do, and what lines of argument it rejects. Collins stays as far as possible from any view of philosophy as irreversible intellectual progress, as incremental improvement in collective knowledge of the cosmos. Despite occasionally spotting parallels in forms of philosophical argument -- for example recurrent correspondences between increasing abstraction and better organized connections among philosophers -- Collins generally avoids trying to explain the actual content of philosophical discourse. Nor does he give much attention to constraints placed by previous forms and practices of argument on those that come later; Kuhnian paradigms figure as cultural capital transmitted and held by philosophical schools, but not as major causes of intellectual development. He does not compare philosophical production with other forms of intellectual activity, such as political innovation, linguistic change, art worlds, and the reckoning of kinship.

With the partial exception of uneasy concessions to the apparent superiority of modern science, furthermore, Collins wisely eschews judgments concerning the relative adequacy of different philosophical traditions, whatever criteria of adequacy we might prefer. Aside from locating schools of thought with respect to public authorities as his narratives unfold, Collins does not search for

regularities connecting the power positions of intellectuals with the character of their ideas. He avoids, finally, systematic explanations of variation in attributes of philosophizing except for increases and decreases in overall creativity, on one side, and cycles of abstraction versus reflexivity, on the other. He writes *Jumbo History*, with repeated uniformities far outweighing particularities and variations.

If we accept Collins' explanations, what positions must we reject? Collins says explicitly that he rejects the following positions:

1. Ideas beget ideas.
2. Individuals beget ideas.
3. Culture begets itself
4. Everything is fluid; it is impossible to fix any contours or sharpen any explanatory concepts.

So he does. But as his massive book proceeds he also rejects a notion dear to many sociologists, even to Emile Durkheim at times, namely:

5. Society begets ideas.

He does, to be sure, argue strenuously that the structure of social relations among philosophers affects which ideas prosper. Late in the book, he interpolates a delightful claim: Sociological constructivism actually assumes that social experience is knowable, at least to individuals, and thereby adopts a special brand of realism instead of the radical skepticism or discursive reductionism its advocates often affect. He also dares to claim that mathematics itself, far from constituting a superhuman invention or discovery, depends inescapably on human encounters with the world. But he denies the derivation of philosophical principles from locations of their proponents with respect to class, race, gender, capital, political organization, or geographic subdivision. So doing, he jettisons the most common forms of sociological reductionism.

In contrast to all these avoided approaches and rejected views, Collins commits himself to a transactional account of social life. For him, social reality exists in transactions among persons rather than in the recesses of individual minds. Even individual thought, in this account, consists largely or exclusively of recollections and rehearsals for encounters with others. (An informed reader will not be astonished to discover Charles Peirce as the book's most-cited American philosopher.) Of course philosophers ponder alone at times, but they then ponder how to join the next philosophical conversation, or how they should have joined the last.

Collins documents these claims by constructing a second book inside his book. Almost seven hundred pages of *The Sociology of Philosophies* present narratives of philosophical production in ancient Greece, ancient China, India, Buddhist and Neo-Confucian China, Japan, Islam, Judaism, Christendom, what he calls rapid-development science, secular western thought, the German university revolution, western philosophy since 1800, then more narrowly French intellectuals over the same period. He organizes each discussion around the network of leading philosophers in

the setting at hand, with ties properly representing both filiation and dialogue. His narratives show that leading philosophers cluster in particular settings and do, indeed, connect with each other through patronage, filiation, attack, and dialogue.

Such a demonstration raises four haunting concerns: selectivity, economy, plausibility, and relevance. On the question of selectivity, we must worry that Collins' sources, largely histories of philosophy, themselves organize around principles of filiation and dialogue as produced by philosophical victors and their later chroniclers. If so, the evidence tells us less about how philosophers did their work at the time than about how intellectual historians constructed their stories after the fact. Where are the losers, loners, zealots, prophets, mavericks, and popularizers?

As for economy, Collins usually summarizes his account of a philosophical epoch by means of diagrams linking major thinkers through filiation and dialogue. Nevertheless, he has permitted himself to dump major chunks of his raw data onto page after page in the form of painstaking and at times mind-numbing narrative. (The procedure calls to mind Art Stinchcombe's comment on volume I of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*: "Few of us have the privilege of publishing our reading notes.") Although we readers of sociological research often enjoy colorful quotations from interviews, we generally insist that survey researchers reduce their data by means of one formalism or another rather than reviewing the transcripts of interview after interview. Similarly, network analysts may call particular nodes to our attention and may even publish their summary matrices, but by and large we do not tolerate their taking us through vast webs link by link. Since analysts of texts and of networks are inventing neat, compact ways of detecting and describing regularities in their raw materials, future investigations following Collins' lead would do well to economize their analyses.

What about plausibility? Leaving aside possible revivals of the approaches Collins avoids or explicitly rejects, within his own framework it seems odd that filiation and dialogue bear so much weight, while entrepreneurship and brokerage bear none. In Collins' own diagram of French philosophers, for example, second-rate philosophers but first-rate brokers such as Victor Cousin and Emile Boutroux occupy far more central positions than, say, Henri Bergson or Henri Poincaré, to say nothing of sociology's lonely godfather Auguste Comte. Perhaps it would have opened too wide a door to the social reductionism that Collins strives to exclude from his analysis, but the virtual absence of wheeling and dealing from the account reduces its plausibility.

Again, the central scheme provides a lame explanation for short circuits and dead ends in philosophical investigation, essentially attributing them to the lesser cultural capital and emotional energy of their adepts. Surely both the structure of the ideas and the methods adopted for their pursuit play a part. Since elsewhere Collins allows that some ideas contain "deep trouble" in the form of self-propagating difficulties (for example, the opposition of free will to determinism), philosophical content appears to matter more than the book's guiding arguments concede. At this point, in fact, one begins to wonder whether some of the causal arrows point in the wrong direction, for example whether recognition as an intellectual success generates cultural capital and emotional energy rather than the other way round.

Relevance raises the greatest concern. Collins' explanatory theory features interaction rituals and flows of emotional energy. Readers might therefore reasonably expect him to do one or both of two things: either

- a) provide evidence that interaction rituals and flows of emotional energy not only occur but also cause the production of philosophies; or
- b) show clearly how and why time-space clustering and interpersonal connection of philosophical production follow as necessary consequences of interaction rituals and flows of emotional energy, hence can with caution serve as proxies for the operation of those rituals and flows.

He does neither. Even in principle, he never tells us how to detect interaction rituals, emotional energy flows, and – most important – their causal impact on the production of philosophies. He moves rapidly to the documentation of clustering, connection, and opposition in a wide variety of historical settings. That documentation makes its point, but it does not display the proposed causal processes at work. As the book closes, instead of reviewing and synthesizing the evidence for his main explanatory argument, Collins moves on to what he himself calls meta-reflections. Those meta-reflections do not concern how interaction rituals and flows of emotional energy cause philosophical production, but how one round of philosophizing affects the next and how we can reconcile social construction with the production of reliable knowledge – welcome, intelligent reflections, but not the synthesis of theory and evidence promised a thousand pages earlier.

1680 words in main text.