

Chapter 7

Randall Collins's Contribution to the Sociology of Emotions and Its Relevance in Interpreting Contemporary Italian Emotional Scenarios and Dynamics

Pratesi, Alessandro¹

Department of Social and Political Sciences (DSPS), University of Florence, Italy.

Abstract: The relationship between sociological knowledge and the emotional dimension has always been charged with tension. The willingness of the discipline to legitimise itself as a ‘science’ has often induced it to consider emotions as potential disrupters of “objective” results in the interpretation of the actions of individuals and groups. Yet ever since the classics of sociology, it has been clear that the emotional dimension constitutes an integral part of social action, at both the micro and macro levels. In this chapter, I examine the ideas of Randall Collins, one of the leading scholars of the sociology of the emotions, and show their relevance to interpret and understand some of the most recent social, emotional, and political trends characterising the Italian context. The following questions will lead the way. What main elements characterise Collins' contribution to the sociology of emotions? What do these elements tell us about the interdependence between personal biographies (at the micro-interactional level) and social change (at the macro-structural level)? What do they add to current debates on the theoretical and political relevance of emotions? How can Collins' IR model help us understand contemporary Italian emotional scenarios and dynamics? Starting from these questions, the general aim of this contribution is to illustrate not only how Collins managed to overcome a whole series of dichotomies that often characterised social theory at the end of the 20th century (*individual and society, micro and macro, emotions and rational action, positivism and interpretivism*, etc.), but also to clarify why and how Collins deserves a prominent place in current theoretical and empirical research on emotions.

Keywords: Sociology of emotions; Randall Collins; Micro-macro connections; Italian emotional dynamics; Social change.

Introduction

The relationship between sociological knowledge and the emotional dimension of social reality has always been charged with tension. The willingness of the discipline to legitimise itself as a science has often induced it to consider emotions as potential disrupters of “objective” results in the interpretation of the actions of individuals and groups. Yet, since the classics of sociology, it has been clear that the

¹ a.pratesi@unifi.it ; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1593-2375>

emotional dimension constitutes an integral part of social action, at both the micro and macro levels. Among the numerous scholars who gave rise to that branch of sociology known as the sociology of emotions (Hochschild, 1975, 1979; Kemper, 1978, 1990; Katz, 1988; Heise, 1979, 1987; Gordon, 1990; Denzin, 1985, 1990; Smith-Lovin, 1993; Barbalet, 2001; Turner and Stets, 2005, and many others) Randall Collins still seems to represent a notable and prominent outsider.

Collins has long been considered one of the most important living sociologists in the United States and beyond, although many aspects of the contemporary relevance of his contribution still remain to be discovered and appreciated. The author of numerous well-known works that immediately became classics of sociology—such as *Conflict Sociology* (1975), *The Credential Society* (1979), *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1988), *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), and *Violence: A Microsociological Theory* (2008), to name but a few—has had an enormous influence on the work of scholars in a wide range of disciplines. His contributions have covered subjects and approaches to knowledge that are often very different from one another yet have managed to stand out for their underlying consistency, as well as for their undeniable cultural and theoretical depth. As a sociologist of interaction rituals, social integration and conflict, moral solidarity and violence, with vast experience not only academic but also editorial and more generally human, Randall Collins has often been interviewed, and each interview has yielded new food for thought, new ideas, and new possible models of sociological interpretation (Santoro, 2012).

Nevertheless, Collins' academic success has not been matched by an equally evident impact on the more general public. This seems to be partly explained by the fact that the author has always deliberately avoided following trends of the moment, focusing instead on exploring and disseminating ambitious and unorthodox theoretical paradigms based on the use of unconventional sources and research methods inspired by a specific focus on microsociology or, to use the author's own words taken from Garfinkel (1967), a *radical microsociology*. Several international scholars have produced critical analyses of some aspects of Collins' work, but to date there is only one publication that systematically analyses Collins' numerous academic accomplishments (Weininger, Lareau, and Lizardo, 2019). Nonetheless, also this recent publication mainly analyses the microsociological elements of Collins' work, overlooking his macrosociological ones.

In Italy, aside from a few translations and some valuable contributions that have highlighted the importance and originality of Collins' research (Bifulco, 2010; Santoro, 2012; Cerulo, 2024; Cerulo and Scribano, 2021; Iagulli, 2011, 2016; Bassetti and Citroni, 2018; Pratesi, 2018; Perulli and Pratesi, 2020), the author's impact on sociological production remains limited to certain areas and certainly does not do justice to his fame. The reasons for this discrepancy can be traced back to several possible factors, including the aforementioned heterogeneity of the topics addressed, the limited consideration of these topics in Italian sociology, and a certain reluctance of Italian sociology to take an interest in research approaches based on attempts to reconcile theory and empirical evidence starting from ambitious theoretical frameworks that reveal the connections between the micro and macro dimensions (Santoro, 2012). In addition to these reasons, there is another, much more probable and significant one, represented by the relative delay with which the theoretical relevance of emotions began to be appreciated in our country.

Based on these premises, the aim of this chapter is to highlight Collins' contribution to the sociology of emotions and, more generally, to contemporary sociological production, emphasizing its relevance

to interpret and understand some of the most recent social and political trends characterizing the Italian context. The following questions will lead the way. What main elements characterise Collins' contribution to the sociology of emotions? What do these elements tell us about the interdependence between personal biographies (at the micro-interactional level) and social change (at the macro-structural level)? What do they add to current debates on the theoretical and political relevance of emotions? How can Collins' IR model help us understand contemporary Italian emotional scenarios and dynamics? Starting from these questions, the general aim of this contribution is to illustrate not only how Collins managed to overcome a whole series of dichotomies that often characterised social theory at the end of the 20th century (individual and society, micro and macro, emotions and rational action, etc.), but also to clarify why and how Collins deserves a prominent place in current theoretical and empirical research on emotions also in the Italian context.

The Role of Emotions in Collins: Early Contributions

Long before bringing it to complete fruition and coherence in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), Collins had outlined his ritual theory on emotions in a series of publications. The first dates back to 1975, the so-called watershed year in the development of the sociology of emotions. Collins' seminal contribution to this breakthrough was effectively summarised a few years ago by Theodore Kemper (1990), another North American pioneer in this branch of sociology:

[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 *Conflict Sociology* (1975), Collins addresses the subject of emotions in an indirect but no less illuminating way, both in an anticipatory sense—outlining in advance the key role of emotional dynamics in understanding social reality—and in a retrospective sense—providing an original and unconventional interpretation of Durkheimian sociology, which is famously associated with the opposite tradition of the sociology of social order. In this classic work of contemporary sociology, in fact, overtly drawing on one of Durkheim's insights into the basic mechanisms of (emotional) solidarity, the author proposed a theory of conflict based in part on emotional bonds. According to Collins, such insight, often regrettably overshadowed by the functionalist representation that is conventionally provided, consists precisely in the idea that social bonds are not based on mere rational negotiation but above all on emotional ties linked to moral ideals.

Together with Durkheim, Erving Goffman's contribution also began to shape Collins's *Conflict Sociology* theory of interaction rituals, which would later be fully developed in the aforementioned 2004 publication. Collins acknowledges Goffman's ability to translate at the microsociological level Durkheim's insights into the fundamental ingredients of ritual (co-presence, focused attention of a group on the same object, mutual harmonisation of gestures and actions, etc.) underpinning the emotional attunement that constitutes the (affective) glue of moral solidarity and thus the formation of the social fabric. In addition to explicitly acknowledging his debt to Durkheim and Goffman, Collins frames them in the Weberian theory of conflict: far from eliminating conflict, emotional solidarity often becomes one of the most powerful instruments of conflict itself, for example when it translates into the cohesion of a group that competes with other groups (Iagulli, 2016).

A few years later, three further publications laid the foundations of Collins' ritual-dramaturgical theory, which would come to fruition in his 2004 text: *On the microfoundations of macrosociology* (1981), *Stratification, emotional energy, and the transient emotions* (1990) and, finally, *Emotional energy as the common denominator of rational action* (1993). In these works, the author provides convincing evidence that emotions play a key role within general sociological theory and that a sociology of emotions is necessary to address the fundamental issues of the discipline, particularly those concerning social dynamics. In his 1981 article, Collins addresses the challenge of operationalising macrosociological concepts by interpreting them in terms of agglomerations of micro-events. The author argues that individuals continually negotiate social coalitions through “chains of interaction rituals” in which interactions “create symbols of group membership”. Each encounter is a sort of marketplace in which social actors tacitly compare the interactional and emotional resources acquired in previous encounters (Collins, 1981). Based on these comparisons, they will be driven to look for those ritual encounters in which their micro-resources produce higher emotional returns and to avoid or move away from less productive ritual encounters. Large-scale structural changes are produced by combinations of three main types of such resources: increases in general culture; new “technologies” or ways to produce emotional outcomes; and new cultures (or individual reputations) emerging out of substantial and typically conflictual events.

In his 1990 contribution, which is part of a collection edited by Kemper that provides an overview of the most innovative sociological studies on emotions, Collins anticipates some of the main tenets of his interaction ritual theory, starting from his well-known micro-translation of macro-structures, the distinction between short-term (disruptive) and long-term emotions (long-term) duration, which he then defines in terms of Emotional Energy, to the detailed description of the fundamental elements but also the outcomes of the ritual of interaction of Durkheimian descent, to include the description of the different status and power rituals and finally to provide a possible agenda for empirical research based on these theoretical premises. One of the key elements of this contribution is its description of emotions not only as a bridging element between the micro and macro dimensions, but above all as “independent variables” in the process of construction of social reality.

In his 1993 article, Collins advances a proposal to overcome many of the impasses that have long characterised the social theory of rational action: i.e., the altruistic behaviour that does not involve cost/benefit calculations; the absence of a common metric between different forms of action; and the anecdotal evidence that, in everyday encounters and interactions, individuals' choices involve very little calculation. This contribution also revisits the idea that value-oriented behaviour is shaped by a specific social mechanism: interaction rituals (IR). Since interaction rituals differ both in terms of the level of solidarity they produce and in terms of their emotional costs, involvement in rituals is regulated by a market that shapes individual behaviour. Over time, interaction rituals produce variable amounts of Emotional Energy (EE) in everyone, and this latter acts as a metric or *common denominator* with regard to what individuals choose between alternative actions. Individuals engage in interaction rituals to maximise their overall level of Emotional Energy. The economics of participation in interaction rituals also influences and often determines individual drive to participate in the economy of material goods (Lawler and Thye, 2003).

However, it is in the book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) that the author fully develops his ritual and dramaturgical theory. This work represents a sort of theoretical synthesis of the author's sociological perspective as it has developed since the 1970s. The model of “interaction ritual chains” is a theory

explaining why and how individuals decide to interact in a given situation. Let us therefore examine its main arguments in more detail.

Collins' Interaction Ritual Chains Model

Collins' theory can be shortly outlined by considering two main criteria: firstly, in line with Goffman, the focus of his microsociological explanation is not the individual, but the *situation*. Collins' theory is primarily a theory based on *situations* and *interactions*. It is a theory of temporary encounters between emotionally charged human bodies that are aware of their emotions because they have gone through a series of previous encounters. This does not mean that the individual does not exist, but rather that an individual is not simply a body; it is an emotionally charged body whose present, past and future characteristics are determined by the contextual dynamics that occur in different interactions and situations (Pratesi, 2018). The second guiding criterion is the concept of *ritual*, to be interpreted both in the Durkheimian and Goffmanian sense. Ritual is a mechanism based on the state of mutual emotional focus and attention that occurs during an interaction and produces a momentarily shared reality between the interacting individuals (Pratesi, 2018, 2026).

Every interaction generates status and power effects: those interactions that the author defines as “successful” combine a high degree of mutual attention, i.e. a high degree of intersubjectivity, with a high degree of emotional attunement, and produce a sense of belonging or group solidarity; in other words, the individuals involved in the interaction do not experience any imbalance in terms of status and power (Pratesi, 2018). Consistent with what he outlined in his 1993 article, Collins describes this sense of belonging in terms of *emotional energy* (EE), which is comparable to the psychological concept of drive, but with a specific social orientation: it is a long-lasting emotion that emerges in various situations and interactions and either encourages or discourages individuals from initiating new interactions. It is defined as “a feeling of confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction” (Collins, 2004: 108). Conversely, those interactions in which there is no shared focus of attention, there are marked power and status differences between the interacting individuals and, above all, there is no emotional attunement are defined by Collins as “unsuccessful”. Unsuccessful interactions generate feelings of status exclusion, induce withdrawal from action and interaction, and produce negative emotional states. In Collins' model, *emotional energy* is therefore both the ingredient or the fuel and the outcome or the product of social interaction (Pratesi, 2018).

Individuals' choices, behaviours, and decisions are based on both emotional ingredients and outcomes, and their ability to either increase or lose emotional energy (EE) is influenced by their status and power. In short: emotion-oriented and emotion-driven behaviour is produced by the dynamics of interaction rituals (IRs); emotional solidarity with a group (status membership) is the primary benefit of any successful interaction, and EE is a measurable equivalent of the concept of utility; the interaction ritual generates a variable level of EE in each individual, which works as a sort of benchmark driving choices between different courses of action; the cognitive process is “micro-situated” and temporally bound to the immediate interaction, or better, “*the individual's way of thinking is determined by the emotional energy and cognitive symbols generated by IRs*” (Collins 1993, 205). The idea of an interaction rituals *market* represents an important theoretical advance establishing a link to rational choice theory. Individuals invest in interaction rituals based on their supply of EE, the availability of collective symbols, and any other ingredients that might make the interaction successful.

Decisions regarding the conciliation of different aspects of everyday life are based on emotional outcomes (see also Smith-Lovin, 1993 on this point) and the patently unrealistic premises of rational choice theorists, associating rationality with individual choices affected by efficacy, efficiency, and costs/benefits analyses, is reformulated in terms of choices concerned with the production of EE. “Comparing” or “choosing”, Collins argues, can only be interpreted as metaphors. Most of the time, people do not consciously calculate all the possible consequences of what they are about to do (Pratesi, 2018). But since EE can always be felt or perceived, individuals can also make emotionally oriented choices unconsciously. Emotional energy, therefore, is the yardstick for all choices, and the appeal of each option is evaluated in terms of the amount of EE it can bring or take away. *“Power, altruism, love, and every other social goal are measured by the same yardstick, the increase or decrease that the interactive process involved in it produces for one's emotional energy”* (Collins, 2004: 172).

In this sense, privilege, status, and power are not merely the result of an unequal distribution of material, social, and cultural resources. *“It is a flow of emotional energy across different situations that makes some individuals more impressive, more attractive or dominant; [and] puts other individuals in their shadow, narrowing their sources of emotional energy to the alternatives of participating as followers or being relegated passively to the sidelines”* (Collins, 2004: xiii). In Collins' model, then, the level of emotional energy becomes a clear indicator of social position. *“There is no sharp break between material markets and the market for emotional payoffs in IR; these are all motivated by EE-seeking”* (Collins, 2004: xv). In other words, we can conceive *social stratification* also in terms of an *unequal distribution of EE* rather than a mere unequal distribution of material resources or social positions. Consequently, we can visualise (and possibly measure empirically) social stratification through a careful analysis of how emotional stratification is enacted in micro-interactions (Pratesi, 2018).

But this is just one of the many examples of Collins' interpretation of what happens at the level of micro-situated interactions in macro structures. Collins overcomes the dichotomous and misleading opposition between the two analytical levels and shows how social structures constantly and dynamically emerge from micro-situated interaction. Furthermore, he clearly shows not only the need to overcome the false dichotomy between individual and society, but also how to achieve this. Let us therefore look in more detail at how this can be achieved by contextualising the discussion within Italian analytical and political scenarios.

Overcoming Misleading Dichotomies between Micro and Macro, Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches

From his earliest works, Collins seeks to overcome the profound and misleading dichotomies that characterised sociological thinking in the 1960s and early 1970s—in particular, the epistemological divisions between theories of social order centred on conflict and those centred on consensus, and the methodological divisions between positivists and interpretivists (Malešević and Loyal, 2019). As early as the 1970s, in *Conflict Sociology* (1975), Collins rejected both structural-functionalist approaches in general and Parsons' reductionist reading of Weber; but he also criticised Marxist classic interpretations of social conflict. As an alternative, Collins advanced a general theory of conflict that combined the contributions of Weber, Marx, Durkheim, and Goffman. On the methodological front, *Conflict Sociology* distances itself from both the radical *positivism* that was gaining ground in American

sociology and the most radical versions of *interpretivism*, maintaining that sociology can still generate cumulative knowledge without falling into either extreme (Malešević and Loyal, 2019).

One thing I did not realise when I wrote *Conflict Sociology* in the early 1970s was that the field of sociology was divided into much more polarised positions than I had thought. On the one hand, the positivists were organising themselves on much more solid institutional bases, with more advanced statistics, larger data sets, and much more funding. On the other hand, the more theoretically interesting traditions were becoming more radical, with the development of various forms of microsociology that were so extreme in their social constructivism that they rejected many forms of generalisation, except for interpretivist methods or the notion that there were widely shared cultural rules beneath the surface of social life. Ethnomethodologists were about to take a stand in favour of the idea that sociology had no authentic object of research and should be abolished in favour of the study of methods of constructing social reality. This is just one of the ways in which sociology developed as a fragmented field. Clearly, an effort at synthesis would not be welcomed by most of these factions. This is, frankly speaking, one of the reasons why I have set aside my role as a synthesiser, becoming more and more of a specialist myself over time in the study of the rituals of interaction and violence (Collins, in Santoro 2012, 729).

According to Malešević and Loyal (2019) in the 1980s and 1990s, Collins shifted his focus to macrosociological issues, exploring the impact of political changes, the development of nation states, global wars, revolutions, and ethnic conflicts. Drawing on Weber's political interpretations, Collins discussed power politics, state prestige, and the struggle for status as the main forces influencing social and political life at the macro level. In 1988, he published another ambitious book, *Sociological Theories*, to provide an overview of the entire field of sociology through a question that was one of his obsessions at the time: the distinction and link between *micro* and *macro*. Social networks—at the meso level—were the main conceptual tool he proposed for this link, together with a strategic focus on the organisational dimension of social life. Over time, the theoretical elements that bridge the micro and macro dimensions and thus untangle the false dichotomy between *individual* and *society* became increasingly evident in his work.

Although his early work also focused on micro-interactional aspects and themes, it is only more recently that his research programme, strongly influenced by Durkheim and Goffman, has come to the fore (Malešević and Loyal, 2019). The main focus of Collins' two major publications in recent decades, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) and *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008), is the micro-universe of everyday interactions. In both publications, the micro foundation of macro formations appears in all its clarity. We have seen how in *Interaction Ritual Chains* Collins provides the most convincing arguments for overcoming the dichotomous thinking and dualisms that too often characterised social theory in the twentieth century and for understanding social behaviour in terms of essentially micro-situated activities fuelled by emotions and organised by rituals. In it, the link between the micro and macro dimensions of social reality also becomes clearer and more explicit. When chains of ritual interactions reach a high emotional intensity, they generate a state of *collective effervescence*, the already mentioned Durkheimian concept that describes the group focused attention characterised by attuned bodily and cognitive rhythmical rituals, which Collins takes up to explain very different forms of social action: from smoking rituals to patterns of social stratification, from sexual intercourses to political institutions (Malešević and Loyal, 2019).

However, it is in Collins' book on violence that this analytical approach finds its most wide-ranging application. In his *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008), Collins shows how even the most individualist forms of violence, such as murders, suicide bombings, or sniper shootings, involve a substantial degree of ritualism and collective interaction. The book challenges conventional views that associate violence with morally wrong individuals, conceptualising violent acts as situational responses" (ibidem, 6).

Having already formalized a Durkheimian model of interaction rituals, enabled me to see that violent interaction is a strange variant of interaction ritual. [...] A The most important thing that we learn from micro-sociology of violence are the conditions by which people establish emotional dominance. Without that, confrontational tension keeps violence from happening. To put it the other way around, if you have the technique of not allowing the other person to establish emotional dominance, a fight soon becomes boring and ends. On the personal level, at least, there are techniques for stopping violence. (Collins, in Bassetti e Citroni, 2018: 489-490)

In this sense, the situated interaction that gives rise to multiple, subsequent *chains of interaction rituals* conceptually precedes and practically constitutes society and its various structures, which are nothing more than recurring and linked patterns of interactions. Collins has a dynamic rather than static conception of social structures, and the common denominator of social action is represented by the emotions that develop in the course of ongoing interaction rituals.

Interpreting Contemporary Italian Emotional Scenarios and Dynamics through Collins' Insights

Based on Collins' ability to challenge the traditional opposition between micro- and macro-levels of sociological analysis, in this section I provide some examples of how his theoretical insights can be applied to analyse and interpret contemporary Italian phenomena. Collins conceptualises social and political structures and institutions in terms of outcomes emerging from ongoing chains of emotionally charged and driven interactions that are eventually sedimented. In this sense, macro-structural processes are nothing more than the result of recurring patterns in the production and circulation of emotional energy (EE), symbols, and solidarities produced and reproduced through interaction rituals over time. This sociological perspective conceptualises emotions not merely as individual experiences, but as *causal mechanisms* linking situated interactions to the construction and solidification of enduring and structural forms of power, inequality, and social order. Emotional energy, as we saw, is a long-term emotional drive—expressed in terms of confidence, enthusiasm, initiative for action and interaction, or, conversely, loss of confidence, apathy, and withdrawal from action and interaction—that individuals acquire or lose through different types of interaction rituals. Unequal status and power positions and therefore unequal access to successful interaction rituals generate unequal stocks of EE, which in turn translate into unequal opportunities to speak out, act, lead, control, or resist against dominant structures or discourses. For Collins, people are EE-seekers constantly assessing their existential balance in terms of emotional costs and benefits and constantly attracted by EE-empowering and repelled by EE-draining situations. In this way, the author provides a radical interpretation of the micro-macro links by showing the micro-foundations of macro-sociology (see also Collins 1981) and how social stratification, power, entitlement, and cultural and political legitimacy are endlessly enacted and solidified through people's everyday interactions.

Applied to the current Italian context, this approach can help us to reinterpret macro-level phenomena and dynamics—such as political polarisation, institutional delegitimization², cultural stagnation, recession, or innovation—as the cumulative result of recurring patterns of interaction rituals occurring in the public sphere rather than in terms of abstract structural and cultural trends. Thus, for example, the contemporary political and cultural scenario in Italy represents a paradigmatic illustration of Collins’ theoretical insights. Over the past decade, Italian public and political life has been traversed by several forms of intense *affective atmospheres* (Anderson, 2009; Massumi, 2015; Martuccelli, 2016; Mishra, 2017; Mühlhoff, 2015, 2019; Schneider, 2023) characterised by resentment, conflict, divisions, recurring moral panics, and highly ritualised confrontations played through television talk shows, social media platforms, and poisoning electoral campaigns. From a Collinsian theoretical perspective, these public arenas can be analysed as interaction ritual settings designed *ad hoc* to maximise emotional outcomes in terms of status and power as well as EE production for “insiders” and political allies while simultaneously producing exclusion, humiliation, or emotional (and hence political) defeat for “outsiders” perceived as enemies (Ahmed, 2004). The political battlefield, in fact, is not played anymore on political programmes and practical contents as it is on emotional appeals and emotion-based slogans.

Populist political communication in Italy (and elsewhere) relies heavily on symbols, reiterated slogans, and emotionally charged narratives about national security, sovereignty, and pride. This constant construction of a reality increasingly divided between *insiders* and *outsiders*, *allies* and *enemies* facilitate mutual focus of attention and emotional attunement among supporters, generating high levels of EE and a strong sense of belonging and moral solidarity. The success of such interaction rituals does not primarily depend on the consistency and accountability of political proposals, but rather on their strategic ability to repeatedly boost followers’ supplies of emotional energy through recognisable, familiar, and reassuring interactional formats. Reassuring inasmuch they produce and extreme simplification of the reality accessible to all, regardless of their social, cultural, economic, or emotional resources: they divide the political world between “us” and “the others”. At the macro level, the cumulative effect of these interaction ritual chains is the consolidation (or the revamp) of deep-rooted political ideologies and identities grounded less in reliable programmes than in emotional appeals³. Political conflict becomes a form of ritualised conflict based on emotional dynamics: an ongoing struggle over symbolic boundaries that constantly reproduces itself because it is emotionally rewarding for participants and for the “winning” political leaders. Thus, Collins’ framework helps us explain why certain *myths* and stereotypes—such as those concerning the alleged invasion of migrant people or the presence of a supposed “gender ideology” threatening traditional family values—resist to any scientific evidence or attempt to create counter-narratives based on facts. Indeed, what is at stake is not primarily objective knowledge or the common good, but an endless, shallow, and hopeless search for emotional energy and group membership.

² In the Italian political scenario, for example, the ongoing delegitimization of the European Union, especially by the Lega Party, is well-known and has been recently addressed by the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, who has also highlighted the extremely dangerous risks associated with the resurgence of international politics based on the indiscriminate use of violence for political and military domination, reminiscent of tragic and abominable events of our recent past.

³ This was at the origin of Italian Fascism in the 20th century and still is nowadays at the origin of several resurging “fascisms” across the Globe.

To take another example, Collins' theory can be similarly revealing when applied to the Italian university system and the broader area of cultural and intellectual production. Over the past two decades, Italian universities have undergone profound transformations driven by austerity measures, managerial reforms, precariousness of young researchers and academics, and increasing bureaucratic control. While these changes are often analysed in terms of funding cuts or governance models, a Collinsian approach draws attention to their emotional implications at the level of everyday interactions. Teaching, research seminars, conferences, meetings, evaluation procedures, and competitive grant systems represent interaction rituals whose success or failure deeply affects academics' stocks of EE. The proliferation of low-solidarity rituals—characterised by competition, power asymmetries, lack of shared focus, and lack of emotional attunement—tends to drain emotional energy rather than enhance it. Precarious scholars, early-career researchers, and adjunct faculty members are systematically positioned in interactional settings that generate status insecurity, exclusion, and emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, the abundance of successful interaction rituals that actually characterise this fortunate and privileged work environment can produce high levels of EE that stimulate and facilitate theoretical and methodological advances, confidence, initiative for further interactions, and high-quality scientific production.

At the macro level, the combination of these micro and emotion-based dynamics contributes to either weaken or reinforce intellectual creativity and critical capacity within the Italian academic context as well as in other academic contexts. Reduced emotional energy translates into risk-averse research agendas, diminished public engagement, and a retreat from ambitious theoretical work. Increased emotional energy can create virtuous loops of further EE production, rich and rewarding research agendas, and extremely productive forms of collaboration. Collins' theoretical model thus provides a convincing explanation for how political decisions affecting key institutional contexts indirectly shape the emotional structuring of knowledge production, with long-term consequences and implications for cultural and scientific innovation.

Beyond politics and the academic context, Collins' framework can be extended to other key domains of contemporary Italian society and beyond⁴. Recurring national matters—government crises, economic recessions, public debates on migration, public health emergencies, etc.—generate intense sequences of interaction rituals that alternatively can produce either solidarity or conflict and division. Moments of collective mobilisation, such as volunteering or local self-help initiatives, can be interpreted as high-intensity rituals that temporarily redistribute emotional energy and create new symbolic communities. However, when such interaction rituals are not sustained by institutional support or are rapidly reabsorbed into divisive and conflict-driven political narratives, their emotional supplies tend to dissipate over time. Collins' emphasis on *chains of interaction rituals* as a metaphor of concatenated and connected (rather than separated) events highlights the importance of continuity: solidarity as well as its opposite become socially and politically relevant only when emotional dynamics are repeatedly renewed and reproduced across time and situations.

Concluding Remarks

⁴ At this regard, see also a recent publication by Adrian Scribano on the *Sociology of Hope* (Scribano, 2025).

Collins sought to develop a sociological theory in which the main sociological traditions (Weberian, Marxist, Durkheimian, Goffmanian, and Symbolic Interactionist) are combined and integrated into a new synthesis, of which his theory of interaction ritual chains (2004) constitutes the core and focal point (Santoro 2012). “*Once we see the differences, we can start looking for the conditions that explain these differences. This is how good theory develops*” (Collins, in Santoro, 2012: 744).

His *Interaction Ritual Chains* model offers a solid and compelling theoretical framework to analyse contemporary phenomena and their emotional foundations overcoming long-standing conceptual issues such as the distinction between micro and macro dimensions in sociology. This framework can also be applied to interpret several emotional scenarios characterising the Italian context, showing macro-structural processes of social change from patterns of micro-situated and emotion-based interaction rituals. Conceptualising the constant search and the ongoing production of emotional energy as the key link between micro-situated interactions and macro-level outcomes, Collins allows us to reinterpret phenomena as broad and diverse as political conflict and polarisation, institutional crises and involutions, and social and cultural change in terms of dynamic, emotional processes embedded in everyday interaction rituals.

In a manner not dramatically different from other intellectual contexts, Italian sociology has long been marked by a relative opposition between quantitative macro-structural analyses and qualitative, micro-situated, and phenomenological approaches. In this sense, Collins’ noteworthy contribution represents an invitation to combine different sociological traditions within a single analytical model that sheds light on the not-so-visible links between micro and macro levels and between emotions and social change. In doing so, not only does it significantly contribute to further advance the sociology of emotions but also provides us with indispensable tools to understand contemporary societies and their possible futures.

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Biographical Sketch:

Name: Alessandro Pratesi

Affiliation: Department of Social and Political Sciences (DSPS), University of Firenze, Italy

Education:

BA in Sociology, University of Florence (Italy)

MA in History and Civilization at the EHESS, Paris

PhD in Sociology, University of Pennsylvania (UPENN), Philadelphia, US

Business Address: Via delle Pandette, 32 - 50127 Firenze (FI)

Research and Professional Experience: Alessandro Pratesi is Associate Professor in Sociology at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Florence, where he is also a member of the interdisciplinary PhD programme «Social and Political Change» (University of Florence and University of Turin). He studied and worked in France, at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), in the United States, at the University of Pennsylvania (UPENN), and in the United Kingdom, at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and the University of Chester (UK). At the University of Pennsylvania, he developed his expertise in the Sociology of Emotions working with Randall Collins. He is a member of the international research networks on emotions of the European Sociological Association (ESA), the International Sociological Association (ISA), and the British Sociological Association (BSA). He has worked for several years on the topics of emotions, care and the ethics of care, citizenship, and social inclusion.

Selected publications from the Last 3 Years:

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