Interview with Randall Collins
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How has your background affected your subsequent theories and work? What kinds of experiences did you have during your upbringing that affected your sociological theories?

I grew up in the state department. My father was a foreign service officer. Among my earliest memories is being in Berlin at the end of the Second World War. We went to Moscow, were stationed in Germany in various places, and South America. Interestingly enough, my friend from grad school, Arlie Hochschild, also grew up in the state department, although her father was an ambassador much more high-ranking than mine. And we both agreed that this experience made us receptive toward the ideas of Erving Goffman, because there's nothing like the diplomatic world for this stark contrast between what happens on the very formal idealized front stage and what happens back stage. I can remember my mother being wonderfully polite to people who were coming to visit in this tremendous round of sociability in the diplomatic world, and then she'd shut the door and it was like she took off a mask and became a different person. So, I think that's one source of it.

A second one, probably, is the fact that we were in Europe at the end of the second world war. Berlin was still full of bomb craters and dead bodies and so forth when I arrived there as a very small child. Then not long after that we went to Moscow during the height of the Cold War. I was there when the Korean war broke out. So, the idea of the world being full of big, violent, power conflicts was something I just immediately grew up with and so I suppose that's one thing that made me particularly interested in Max Weber, and especially the aspect of Weber that not that many people paid attention to at that time, namely the power politics side. I think my interest in geopolitics came from that.

Then the third thing I'll mention is sort of indirectly connected to my dad's career. When I got to be a teenager too old to go with him to these foreign posts I got sent to a New England prep school, a boarding school. It was my first encounter with the upper class. I became very clearly aware of the class distinctions. In most of American society, you don't encounter class distinctions unless you get close to the upper class. My father was a member of the upper middle class, but that's not the same thing. And the way in which that operates became quite clear to me. It wasn't that people would use terms that would say "oh, you're not part of the upper class," it was much more something that got enacted in every day life. For instance, I realized that a very large number of the boys at the prep school and the girls at some of the neighboring girls schools -- because there were these orchestrated social events, where they had tea dances and so forth -- their families knew each other, or they all went to vacation at the same place in Bermuda. A large part of their conversation would consist of "Do you know?," which meant "Do you know so-and-so?" I realized a little bit later that if there's a big enough network that it's very easy to spend half an hour or so tracing out who is two links away from you, if there are

enough connections in the network. On the other hand, people who are not part of that network can't talk to these people. So, I became very aware of social class. I guess lots of sociologists are interested in social class. I think most sociologists are interested in the poor, the lower social classes. I was interested in the top. I think mostly because I was thrown into this early experience.

Can you talk about your experiences at Berkeley during the sixties and how that affected the work that you were interested in doing and your subsequent theories?

I haven't thought about this in a long time. The atmosphere at Berkeley when the civil rights movement got going and the Free Speech movement was on campus was sort of a combination of "this is horrible" and "this is great." Everybody was very upset about the escalating atrocities that were occurring as the civil rights movement got going and people fought it out in the south, when people started getting killed. And the anti-war movement, concerned with the Vietnam war, was really concerned with napalm being dropped on peasant villages and so forth. In that sense there was the real sense that the world is horrible. On the other hand, the movement had so much elan, so much collective effervescence, that it really had a feeling of "this is tremendous energy" and a sense that we were doing something important -- and kind of happiness. And I had the feeling, like a lot of other people at that time, that this was the first time in my life I had ever done anything worth while. Everything before that was sort of this period of routine. Also the atmosphere of the 1950s was one that, even at that time, most people who were either intellectuals or politically on the left found it an oppressive period. So, this really seemed like a liberation from that.

One way that it affected my sociology was, a way to sum this up would be in something Herbert Blumer said, the person who really created symbolic interactionism, even though he always attributed it to his teacher George Herbert Mead. And Blumer was always preaching, I think that's the right word for it, he would hold forth pretty much in the same words repetitively on many occasions, about how the definition of the situation could change the whole thing. And this was happening at just the time that we had basically brought the university to a standstill. A small demonstration had escalated into a giant demonstration. And so there was a very strong sense that "yes, the constructedness of reality is right. It really does work."

Blumer and Erving Goffman already had a lot of students. I think there is a little bit of a difference between the ones who were slightly older than me. I don't mean a lot older, just a few years, the people who became the enthnometholdolgists. Harvey Sacks and Manny Schegloff were there. And quite a few other people sort of followed Goffman into doing micro-research on deviance. But connecting Blumer and Goffman's ideas to the political movement put it into a different perspective. It's not just like little things like pickpockets and horse race touts are constructing the situation, the whole political world is being constructed.

Have there been any experiences that you've had since that time that have had a big impact on your theories?

Nothing so dramatic as that. I think the main other thing that's happened since that time is, well, actually from a fairly early age since I was a child, I had liked reading history, real comparativist stuff. I really had an opportunity to delve really deeply into world history, and after a while I just acquired enough of that stuff that I was able to put it together. I spent well over twenty years on this big book on the comparative sociology of philosophy and that really got started when I was in graduate school.

A bit by accident, Joseph Ben-David happened to be a visiting professor the first year I was at Berkeley. Actually that was also the year that the free speech movement got started, so I was busy doing a lot of stuff. But he hired me to be his research assistant because he was working on a book, later published, called *The Scientist's Role in Society*, which is his theory about how being a scientist is a social role that emerged at a certain time of history, particularly in a certain institution, the university revolution in Germany. And he hired me to do research because I could read Spanish. He actually wanted me to research medieval Italian renaissance academies, and it's pretty hard to find someone who can read Italian. He said, "If you can read Spanish, you can read Italian." He gave me a dictionary and sent me into the archives. I realized that his method would work for lots of things. I had just been in the psychology department in Stanford and had shifted and thought I could apply this method for psychology. I sort of evolved a network method doing that -- because it worked pretty neatly -- and tried to explain why this network of psychologists appeared basically from the 1880s. I realized, this is a really powerful approach, it's kind of like getting the skeleton of things. Instead of starting off starting to classify their ideas and trying to see who influenced whom, go and look for who is a teacher of whom, and who is an enemy of whom. If you put these things together and then for more modern times trace what university they're in at what time and see what's happening to the institutions they're in, it really is like an x-ray into what's going on. I actually think that the idea of doing this big book about philosophy was already there when I was a grad student; it just took a long time to work into a full scale.

You do work on a lot of different areas, can you talk about your approach to doing sociology?

First, as to why I'm interested in this, the people who impressed me the most when I was a student were a combination of people who were very micro and people who were very macro. Blumer and Erving Goffman and actually psychologists I had worked with earlier than that, such as Jerome Bruner and a little bit Leon Festinger, impressed me that there was something really there at the micro-level. Not only that, you can see it in your life all around you, if you just keep your eyes open. I was always interested in that perspective. The macro stuff came from some of these other interests that I've mentioned: historical, political, military, and so forth.

In part I've tried to push a micro-macro connection to intellectually justify having the two together. On the other hand, there is a pragmatic justification for letting each specialty go its own way. It's a whole lot easier to do that and you don't really need to do micro stuff

while you're doing historical. Nevertheless, these are the areas that I'm interested in. The other justification for it is that my undergraduate teacher at Harvard, Talcott Parsons, had a really comprehensive theory that in many respects I didn't like very much, although he was very good at teaching you the important ideas of Weber and Durkheim. Parsons himself had a micro-to-macro view. The micro part of it I actually didn't like very much. It was the individual being socialized into norms and values, although he did a more interesting version of that by connecting it with Freud, who was very big in the 1950s. I always felt this was intellectually respectable to do because Parsons at any rate had attempted to do it.

We see several themes in your work, a Durkheimian thread and a conflict thread. Do you see these threads developing in sequence, in parallel? And are they in conflict with one another? How do you bring them together?

Well, it's pretty typical to see the Durkheimian school as being a functionalist school. It certainly got interpreted that way, and Parsons was instrumental in creating that. There's a lot of justification. I mean Durkheim is pretty much a functionalist, before the term was created. And for that matter, Erving Goffman, the most striking of all the micro sociologists, a lot of people think of him as a symbolic interactionist. He never liked that. He liked me because I was one of the few people who could see that he wasn't a symbolic interactionist, but he was right out of the British social anthropology school, the Durkheimians, and sort of a micro-functionalist.

Given my political background and connections and biases, you might think that I'd be hostile to this, but somewhere pretty early on it struck me that you could use the Durkheim model for processes of group solidarity and it's the groups that are in conflict with each other much more than individuals. But that's actually become sort of a running theme and I'm far from the only person who has thought of this. It really means, "don't use the individual as the unit of analysis." The micro version of that is, you could say, "use the group as the unit of analysis." That kind of sounds like a crude version of Marxism, you know, classes really do have unity. That's far too crude for the way things operate. You could try to make that more complicated by using Weber's class, status, and party. But most people find that too formalistic a classification scheme.

The way I've come to work it is to emphasize that the real unit of analysis is the situation, and situations have their dynamics and individuals get constructed out of those situations. And then you're able to bring in a lot of really good micro-research. You know, ethnomethodology is often hard to translate into anything else, but if you look at it as being concerned with "how do situations operate," for example, "how do conversations operate" -- for example, what Sacks and Schegloff call the rules of turn-taking in conversations -- you can see that's really a kind of Durkheimian ritual of maintaining this very fine-grained solidarity on the micro level. I think that helps solve a lot of problems. Encounters do have this sort of magnatism that pulls people in. Some of the "ethnos," like John Heritage, noticed there is this bias toward reconstructing the same social structure in the micro situation. Conflict is pretty much hard to mobilize at the micro-level.

To what extent is solidarity a foundation of sociological theory? To what extent is it a problem to be studied?

I don't think you can take it for granted, that flows too easily in the old functionalist perspective and maybe that's its biggest flaw. On the other hand, there's a certain sense in which Durkheim and Parsons are on the right track, there are all of these pressures toward generating conformity and even getting it inside of people. I don't think one should take that as a baseline, as a natural given, but to understand what is the mechanism that produces more solidarity and less solidarity. That's led to an interest in the sociology of the emotions, particularly emotions as things which are shared among people. Here's a nice example of this, it's sort of analytically complex: when one person getting angry will get the other person angry. If you do an analysis of turn-taking in conversations, generally speaking, friendly happy conversations have a real kind of rhythmic quality. I guess Sudnow said this, it's like singing together and everyone comes in on the beat. Strained conversations are ones that have a lot of pauses. In an angry kind of conversation, people tend to not allow each other to have turns, they just try to talk on top of each other, try to talk over each other. Nevertheless, on a certain other level, many angry conversations have a terrifically close timing to them. It's all these kind of aspects. People's voice tones kind of echo each other. I don't want to call it solidarity because it sounds peculiar to say that conflict is solidarity, but it's entraining. You get pulled into it. The structure of conflict has this magnetism all by itself. And that's like Simmel's point where he says conflict is not the opposite of solidarity. The real opposite is indifference or avoidance. So, they are connected together.

To move to an earlier phase of your career, you have written some of the major pieces that have been cited in empirical work on education ("The Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification" and The Credential Society). These are cited pretty regularly. Do you follow that work, and what do you think about it?

One of my regrets doing lots of different stuff is that you can't always follow up stuff that you've done earlier. I predicted some twenty years ago that the dynamics of the credential seeking process would lead to further inflationary effects. And as far as I can see that certainly has happened. I've written a little about this recently, mainly because I'm interested in the question, "Can education inflation go on indefinitely?" The difference that emerges here between a monetary system and educational credentials is that it is pretty costless to produce more money. All you have to do is have the government change the denomination on the bills, so you end up like Yugoslavia with a million dinars equalling a penny. But it is expensive to produce more educational credentials. At some point the cost side of it is going to kick in and constrain the inflationary side of it. I would like to do some more work on that.

You hear politicians talk at great length particularly in a period like right now when there are no major foreign policy issues. They campaign heavily on how they are going to reform education. I think they haven't got the slightest idea of how to reform education. The major problem of education is basically stratification. Not everyone does well

because basically this is a system of getting credentials and some people are going to get the best jobs out of this. The more people compete the more inflationary it is. I haven't seen a single politician who has figured that out. Maybe it's intractable. Maybe nobody wants to think about this. Okay, let's get all the lowest students better, so what? So they will all become Ph.D.'s in physics? Or will it just be that you need a Ph.D. to get a job at McDonalds? I think it's a major issue of stratification in the future; it deserves more analysis. Unfortunately, I am sort of flying down some other pathways at the moment, so I haven't had a chance to work on this.

More generally, what should be the relationship between theory and the empirical work that it inspires?

As close as possible, really. It's a peculiarity of sociology and couple of other fields, it's hard to think of many other fields where theory and research are so divorced from each other. Well, that's too strong of a way of putting it, because some people do combine them. It's just that we institutionalize the separation. There are people who are theory specialists. We have classes in theory that are required. Just as there are classes in method which are required. I think that there are ways in which our field encourages work on theory in which all you have to do is analyze the texts of previous theorists. Empirical work, often which is guided by a sort of practical policy issue, in which case you don't really need a lot of theory to generate the data. As far as I know, none of the sciences have classes in theory or for that matter classes in method. It's all pretty much connected.

Actually, I think that a really good source of progress in theory in sociology has not really come from the people who work in theory, but comes from particular research areas which have done a lot of cumulation. For example, the area of social movements has been really wonderfully cumulative over the past twenty years. The area of macrosociology of the state, the kind of stuff that Tilly, Skocpol, Michael Mann and others have done, has really developed a theoretical paradigm and argued about it and made it more refined. The world system group has been very good at expanding their empirical range and moving beyond any kind of Marxist dogmatism that might have been there. I think there are a lot of areas where empirical sociologists have generated a lot of theory. I get a little annoyed at theory textbooks, because their version of what we put in a theory textbook is stuff which excludes anything empirical. So any theory after 1960 or so, let's bring in Foucault and the post-modernists, just because they have the label theory attached to it. And ignore these areas of substantive theory. I should add network theory has just recently crystallizing into a theory that has a lot of substantive significance to it.

What would you say an appropriate level of macro-explanation is? Is there a valid level of macro explanation? Or should it all be reduced to micro-explanation?

Often the way these questions have been framed already in the literature will give you a starting point. If you want to be concerned about the world system, you have to start with a pretty high degree of historical summary. If you're going to talk about "is there a succession of hegemonies within the world system, from Spain to Holland to England to

the US, and what comes after that?," you really have to take that on the level on which it exists. Connecting that with Goffman or conversation analysis would seem like a pretty formalistic exercise. You could kind of work it through, but what would you get from it?

But I think there's a different way in which to approach that. You need to approach that on the level of "what are the analytic principles of the theory?" and "to what extent are those actually being constrained by something at a different level?" And so in a way it works more like, you wouldn't go from micro encounters where you are using Goffman to say the Wallerstein level in one swoop, but you think about political movements or the organizations which crystallize out of them, there's a very important way in which those are sort of blown up micro-situations. In fact, what's really striking about a revolutionary situation is that it's an event which is really changing a macro structure, but during the moment when it's happening it feels like a micro-situation . It feels like, say, everybody in St. Petersburg in 1917 is all focused on the same thing. And people all over Russia are following things on the telegraph and so it actually does bear out. So if you think about it that way you might say the more stable versions of macro situations are the ones where the micro encounters that make them up are not really linked together or they are linked together in a pretty much taken-for-granted or routinized way. What brings them into a much sharper focus allows the dynamism that happens in micro-situations to spread pretty widely.

When, if at all, does aggregated individual level data constitute a valid macro-level explanatory force?

Well, I've said some harsh things methodologically about just simply aggregating individual level data. In general, I think that pretty much all data is good to have. You just have to make your judgement about what it's good for. I think the most important thing is the coherence of the different aspects of data. We're going to switch a level down so we're not really on the level of the world system but something more on the meso level. Think about path models of status attainment, things of that sort. From my point of view this is committing all kinds of sins because it is taking individuals out of their context and so forth. But nevertheless it is giving you some information about some of the things that are happening. It is more like a framework that needs to be filled in. Let's visualize, what does it mean, each one of these factors here that you think are flowing through things? What's the real situational dynamic here? I think that, in a way, this kind of aggregated individual, multiple correlation kind of stuff does give you a sketch of something that is going on out there. If you go looking for that in terms of "it's like there are these unique discrete factors out there that actually have the causal force," then I think we're always going to have big gaps. But if we think of those as pointing us to "where are these micro-interactional processes happening?," then maybe we can fill it in.

What distinguishes sociology from other disciplines like psychology, anthropology, economics? Is it topic area? Is it method? Historical trajectory?

I'll just think out loud on this. There are several possibilities. One of the things that strikes me is that there are just distinctly different ethos in these areas; it's like you're talking about different tribes. And often the tribes don't like each other. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Like there's a fairly big area of economic sociology. We've had a big series of colloquia at Penn. Lots of people come, we have wonderful close connections with people in Business schools, for example. But economists never come. On the other hand, we don't go to their stuff either. It's kind of like a different mindset. Political science I find sort of different. It is a sort of different tribe, although I get along with them a lot better, we've got a lot more in common. We have a slightly different take on it. Oddly enough, they think of sociologists as being rather ideological. But in political science, it's built right into the framework of what they are doing. So it's pretty hard for them to not think in terms of, "Is this the normatively correct policy?"

Sociology is actually on the borderlines of lots of these fields, so it's easy to make these connections. Anthropology often is in the same department and in France it pretty much started out being the same field. So, if you follow the Durkheimian tradition you end up pretty much constantly encountering anthropologists. Something that happens if a field gets institutionalized in its own department, so maybe it's organized a certain way in different countries, is that, not surprisingly it takes on its own intellectual history and the terms mean different things and you become concerned about other matters.

On the other hand, it's important to think about this historically. I see that a lot of French intellectual history is following on paths which have branched out from the same place where some of the English speaking stuff is coming from, even though we go in different directions. So you kind of think yourself back into what's the common connection among these.

Are there any contemporary political movements that you feel are reflective of your work or affect your work in any way?

I used to be really interested in the peace movement. That is pretty much how I got into pushing geopolitical analysis. It seemed to me that if the world got blown up by nuclear war, which we seemed to me pretty close to in the early Reagan administration, then pretty much everything else was off. That was the crucial item. To some extent I follow up what's happened in the old Soviet bloc since it's fallen apart, and have had some interest in trying to look at it from the same angle.

On the other hand, the other policy issue that I was really interested in early on in my life, namely educational stratification, educational credentialism, I realized, after I published my book on this in 1979, I realized, you know, if I keep on trying to make this, get this argument across to the public, I should put myself in to be Ronald Reagan's secretary of education. Because the conservatives want to get rid of the education system too. At least they did at that time. So, I said, "I'm really just attacking the organization in which we all work and make our living." We make our living off this expanding credential system. So, I thought, "I think I'll switch to something else."

Well, actually, I've been interested in the feminist movement and gender stratification for quite some time. I think that's heavily influenced by my wife, who is a very dynamic person in bringing women into the judicial field. All of these things are wound together. I did work on a theory of sexual stratification that's bringing the erotic aspect into gender stratification pretty early on. Various aspects of that keep coming back, including work that I'm doing now on a sort of Goffmanian theory of sexual interaction. That has migrated away from the social movement aspects. Here partly because whenever you follow out your own theoretical trajectories, it means that you are no longer committed to following out the line of what the social movement wants to say. Particularly because a lot of feminist theory took its theory either from reinterpretations of Freud or the deconstructionist movement, the theoretical ammunition used by most people that officially call themselves feminist theorists is, in my view, kind of remote from sociological devices that I think are worth using.

I've gotten pretty interested in the gay movement literature recently. For a long time I had this idea in the back of my mind, which I had never been able to follow up, that we really ought to be able to compare various kinds of sexuality. So instead of treating homosexuality over here, heterosexuality over here, as separate areas of interest, we should take these as well, what are the conditions which move people to one or the other. And it's not so easy to do that if you're in purely the contemporary period, but if you do this historically, it becomes really striking. There's this wonderful body of work developing now about the period when homosexuality was big in ancient Greece. And some of the things that emerge from that are: first of all, it really shows that a certain kind of social structure can make something very widespread that in another society is a taboo or just a very distinctive minority. But also ancient Athenian homosexuality is terrifically different from that which exists in the gay movement today. I think there is a lot of valuable material in that. And then, I've been to some extent following the sociology of analytical stuff which has come out of the gay movement recently.

Your work has provoked a lot of controversies. And you have a sort of iconoclastic reputation. Is that something that you've tried to create or is it a byproduct of what your interests are?

I don't know how to take that. I could say, all right I'm interested in producing a comprehensive sociological theory, my interest is not in provoking conflict. You know, how the different aspects of how things fit together. On the other hand, our field is full of both specializations of various sorts, so people like to defend the boundaries of their specialty, and also theoretical commitments of various kinds and some people don't like to see those overturned. Maybe it has surprised me since I have provoked conflict, since I'd like theoretical integration. On the other hand, I can see pretty well now, fields are organized around conflicts, so maybe that's not surprising I wouldn't say that I go out of my way to seek for fights. On the other hand, I don't feel any need to rein in what I want to say.

Assume that you have an audience of first- through third-year grad students, people early on in their careers, do you have any advice for them on how to be a good sociologist, things they ought to do?

It kind of strikes me that people's careers really do get set around the time they are graduate students. Not necessarily in their first year, but in there, by the time they've gotten through. It's not entirely true, I do know some people who have made fairly big shifts later on in their career. Well, okay, if I get to do a little bit of preaching: the thing I would like to encourage graduate students to do is, try and maintain more than one specialty that you're working on. There's tremendous amount of pressure to be a specialist. That's not necessarily bad, specialties are these communities that do maintain a lot of focus and become quite sophisticated. It's pretty difficult to be a generalist in everything. You may end up being an abstract theorist. That becomes a specialty by itself. But I think that actually working in a couple of different specialties does give you more openness, particularly because each specialty does have its borders which are connected to it and so you are able to kind of play things off each other inside your own mind. One specialty will have an effect on what you think about the other one. I think it would generate more ideas and more innovation.

If you could recommend one novel that all sociologists should read, what would it be and why?

It would probably be *Ulysses*. See, that's my micro answer there. *Ulysses* is really a wonderful case of not exactly micro-macro, but it's going through, it's not really about a particular individual, but it's really about this whole city seen as someone like Goffman might see it, moment by moment. I actually thought that some time in the future, I would like to try my hand at writing yet another novel. I don't mean I'm trying to aim to do the literary quality of *Ulysses*, but one that in effect could try and use the fiction mode to be able to see a complete social community in terms of the micro interactions and rituals.

Can you mention your novel and how you came to write it?

I was interested in being a writer before I got into either psychology or sociology. At various times in my career, I've actually quit the academic world and became a writer. The one successful novel that I wrote was in the end of the 1970s, *The Case of the Philosopher's Ring*, which was actually a pretty easy novel to write. It was an imitation Sherlock Holmes novel. Sherlock Holmes novels were being revived at that time and so it was easy for me to put that together. I also wrote a much longer novel about the British empire in India, which was never finished. I hope some time in the future there will be another one.