Points of view

On politics, emotional cultures and social change in times of crisis: an interview with Randall Collins

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Abstract. This interview was conducted between the Spring and the Summer 2020 by means of an interactive email exchange. Our conversation with Randall Collins had been planned a few months before the global pandemic as part of ongoing conversations inspired by the creation of an interdisciplinary study group on emotions at the University of Florence, and was eventually boosted by some of the recent developments in global politics and in the pandemic itself. The starting point, is Collins' original ability to reconcile—through his emotion-based theoretical model (2004)—two significant and allegedly clashing aspects of social life: conflict and solidarity. We then move on to discuss the ways in which current theories of emotions can be reconsidered in light of recent emerging phenomena (such as right-wing populism and nationalism) at an international level. In addition, we introduce the theme of the global health emergency and discuss the role of different emotional cultures in dealing with the pandemic, in Italy and the USA. Finally, we consider whether or not it is possible to talk about *ethics of emotions*, i.e. whether some emotions can be interpreted as 'more ethically relevant' than others within the context of current social and political scenarios.

Keywords: emotions, crisis times, conflict, solidarity, right-wing populism in Italy and the US, emotional cultures, global pandemic, ethics of emotion.

CONFLICT AND SOLIDARITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

AP: I would like to start this conversation with the idea of solidarity, that too often has permeated discourses in the current crisis times. Over time, you developed a conflictual sociology that combines two substantial aspects: an idea of society as a place inevitably characterized by multidimensional stratification and conflicting interests; and a perspective that underlines the relevance of social solidarity for all forms of collective organization. Emotions are the common denominator of social action and

the bridging element between conflict and social cohesion/solidarity. Emotions are constantly at the center of interactions and wider social mechanisms and processes: they are the ingredients of the rituals that structure the situations in which social action takes place; they are the foundation of social solidarity, but also a relevant factor in social stratification; they provide motivation for people's actions and activities; they accompany all forms of individual and collective mobilization; they animate conflicts and characterize violent behavior. How do you think conflict and solidarity/social cohesion relate to each other in present times?...

RC: Conflict and social solidarity are always related; since no conflict is successfully mobilized without solidarity of the group that engages in the struggle. In the classic form of Marx, all significant conflict was between stratified classes; and he famously argued in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that the better mobilized and more class-conscious group wins. In general, this continues to be true today, adding that Durkheim, Goffman and interaction ritual theory provide a more detailed mechanism for solidarity and therefore mobilization; and that there are many more dimensions besides class that can engage in conflict (gender, ethnicity, religion, life-style, age groups etc.)

RETHINKING THEORIES OF EMOTIONS IN LIGHT OF NEW EMERGING PHENOMENA

AP: Since emotional dynamics are central in the production of society, we cannot understand social dynamics without grasping them. However, rather than merely analyzing current social and political phenomena in light of the theoretical contribution of emotions, it might be more productive rethinking current theories of emotions in light of such emerging phenomena. What are your thoughts on that? How can the study of emotions help us to understand contemporary political dynamics at national and international level?

RC: What has developed in the sociology of emotions are more techniques for studying the emotions people display and a wider range of situations in which we can see these emotions. Emotions can be seen in facial expressions, voices, gestures and body postures. These provide tools for examining empirically how people act with different intensities and kinds of emotions, as seen in photos and videos; many of these are now accessible on-line. Thus, by looking at images of people on the street, we can see how much deference, solidarity, alienation, or self-centeredness there exists. For example, women are seen in public much more frequently than in filmed streets in the 1980s; similarly – although this might seem surprising in view of recent protests – black and white people are seen together in crowds more than previously. (These data are for the USA; comparable data may be available for other countries.)

How can these methods be used to study political dynamics at the macro level? Macro terms like national and international are just a way of conceiving of mass processes by single nouns; they actually consist of large numbers of persons in interaction. In reality, the entire population of a nation never engages in concerted action; most politics consists of social behavior of two kinds: officials who have authority in big organizations such as the state and the military; and people who take part in political movements, such as demonstrations, as well as their more violent counterparts (who are always a smaller yet number). Getting natural, authentic images of high officials is difficult, since they usually put on an artificial front-stage performance for any camera; sometimes we get behind the scenes when their email leaks out. Demos on the other hand are amply depicted on videos; see for instance Anne Nassauer, (2019) *Situational Breakdowns: Understanding Protest Violence*, and Isabel Bramsen on the emotional dynamics of movements in Europe, America, and the Middle East. Extreme violent groups are more secretive; but ethnographic methods yield a portrait of their own emotions and social practices that generate both their own radical group solidarity, and their highly negative emotions about their enemies. See the research of the intrepid Italian sociologist, Alessandro Orsini, (2011) *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*; (2017) *Sacrifice: My Life in a Fascist Militia.*

AP: Several analyses and interpretations of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the USA tend to explain these developments by referring to the concept of "emotion" (or affect and/or its cognate terms). In order to describe the general affective tone of a historically situated experience of society, some scholars talk about *affectivité implicative* (Martuccelli, 2016), *affective atmospheres* (Anderson, 2009), *affective resonance* (Mühlhoff 2015, 2019), or identify in a very specific emotion – quite often anger – the hallmark and origin (if not the cause) of many of the political and social phenomena that characterize contemporary societies. Do you think that, from a historical and cultural point of view, the nature of emotion and its role in driving (or preventing) social and political change has reached a new quality in contemporary societies?

RC: As far as I can tell from available evidence, the range of human emotions has not changed very much over time. What has changed most strikingly has been the way emotions are communicated. Until recently emotions were mostly expressed face-to-face; remote communication of emotions was mainly by writing, which could be highly rhetorical but did not affect people viscerally. Now emotions can be communicated in combination of personal image and voice; also with words, although as any actor or speech-maker knows, which words are used is less important than the rhythm that can be built up between speaker and audience. In the last decade of the social media, people have become more self-conscious about what emotions they are trying to express; some of these devices, such as emojis, are rather artificial; but now there is much attention to conveying emotions, and also to critiquing the emotional displays of people we dislike. As sociologists, a next step for us is to attempt a kind of "emotional survey" of how much various kinds of emotions are expressed over the social media. We also need to examine the receiving side – how much do people accept the communicated emotions as authentic or reject them as manipulated? When and how much do communicated emotions mobilize a social movement? Since we know also that social movements can fail (the Arab Spring is just one of many examples), we should study the conditions that make media-enabled movements last longer, or end more quickly.

AP: In your eminent book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) you describe a "Goffmanian Revolution" taking place between the 1950s and 1970s-a shift toward greater casualness in interaction (p. 371). The Trump phenomenon as well as other current manifestations of neo-populism, in Italy and elsewhere, can only be explained if we begin to question how such manifestations resonate with the affective sphere of many people. People who seem to have found in the political incorrectness of some political leaders and in their boldness and arrogance not only a legitimate way to oppose politically the traditional elites of power, but above all a way to identify themselves emotionally with what is perceived as a display of "frankness" and "authenticity", even when blatant forms of racism or gender discrimination emerge. To which extent do you think that the *casualness revolution* you described a few years ago has also influenced the levels of what is tolerated and tolerable in public discourse and politics? In other words, has the casualness revolution lowered the bar of decorum and respectability in political debates and discourses?

Strictly related to these subject matters, what is your diagnosis of the social transformations that have affected the US in the last 30 years? And what does Europe look like from your social observatory?

RC: I will answer these two questions together. It is a very good point, that the casualness revolution has lowered the bar of decorum. In his book, *Informalization*, Cas Wouters documented the change in etiquette books in Europe and America over a century; his conclusion is that informalization is a leveling of class distinctions, previously expressed in proper clothing, discourse, and manners. I agree in part with this analysis. In my own research comparing photos from different dates, we see a continuous effort to hide signs of social class; especially in the high-tech industries since the 1980s, but also for instance viewing persons in the first-class compartments of airplanes. Neckties, dress shirts, suits are discarded in favor of blue jeans and sweat shirts. This change has gone along with changing forms of address; instead of polite salutations in letters and messages, using title and or last name, there has been a shift to almost compulsory addressing everyone by their first name – which was once a sign of intimacy, but now conveys nothing. That does not mean that authority differences disappear; the boss still has the

power to hire and fire, and the fact that everyone dresses alike and speaks casually just makes power more invisible, and the surface more unreliable.

My research comparing photos from the 1920s through the 2000s (Collins, Randall. 2014. "Four Theories of Informalization and How to Test Them." *Human Figurations* :3 No. 2. (online journal) http://quod.lib.umich. edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.2*?rgn=full+text) confirms Wouters' theory that social class markers have tended to disappear, starting already in the 1930s and accelerating in the 1980s-90s. But other dimensions of status inequality have developed: wearing athletic clothes, which once marked the leisure activities of the upper class, but after 1980 shifted to a claim to superior fitness, and to pseudo-athletic claims by wearing professional team insignia; a sexiness elite (starting in the 1960s) striving at maximal showing off one's body; antinomian elites-- cooler and more rebellious than thou-- from the hippies, to punks, heroin chic, ripped clothes etc. Thus, although Wouters give an optimistic interpretation-- social inequalities disappear or at least become shameful-- I suggest that informalization generates new claims for social ranking. It is an ever-competitive game that some people find offensive and other find enjoyment and status in "blowing their minds" as hippies used to say (Dadists said "*épater le bourgeois*"). The ubiquity of the antinomian style on the media (broadcast and social) is part of today's atmosphere of contention over the once-proper Goffmanian formalities of everyday life.

Does Europe look different than America in these trends? The informalization trend started in the 1920s with youth culture in Germany; the sporty look advanced in France in the late 1940s. The phase of wearing mass-produced athletic clothes and calling everyone by their first name started in the US, but by the 2000s had spread widely in Europe and elsewhere. For recent updates, one should collect photos and observations and report your conclusions.

DIFFERENT EMOTIONAL CULTURES DEALING WITH THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

AP: Let's now talk about the current global emergency. In Italy, the initial reaction of the very first weeks of the current pandemic, especially on an individual level, was perhaps a mix of disbelief, apprehension and impasse. Eventually, collective emotional reactions seem to have prevailed, at least on a symbolic level. Singing or playing out of the balconies or displaying the Italian national flag, allegedly became the emblem of the solidarity that cemented the nation around symbolic gestures—true Durkheimian sacred objects. Several balconies still display the flag or other typical paraphernalia such as hand-painted cloths with the slogan "*Andrà tutto bene*" ("Everything's gonna be all right") written on them. But the other forms of emotional displays have generally lasted only a few weeks. You described a similar pattern of emotional reaction for the shock of 9/11, that provoked an entirely new set of collective responses. And perhaps we might be able to compare the way(s) Americans reacted to 9/11 and the way(s) they are reacting now to the pandemic. However, my question is on a slightly different level: do you think that the different "emotional cultures" characterizing Italy and the USA (so far and so close countries) might have a different impact in terms of *care policy* in the two countries? Said differently—assuming that the pandemic forces us to rethink, for instance, our ideas about people's welfare and well-being—do you think that different emotional cultures and habits will have a role in the rethinking process? Or not necessarily?

RC: Are there distinctive emotional cultures in different countries or regions? This has been a widespread impression given by travellors, since the time of Sir Francis Bacon at least; but since closer observation usually shows that people even within the same region differ in emotional style among themselves, we must beware of impressionistic judgments based mainly on the most striking examples. Modern micro-sociology gives us more detailed evidence (e.g. analysis of voice recordings by Corsaro, in Allen Grimshaw, *Conflict Talk*), supporting generalizations such as Italians are more likely to talk with their hands moving and to carry on multi-sided conversations unlike Anglophone turning-taking rules. Does this matter for cultures of care as translated into public policy? Rather than offering a theory for an area I know little about, I recommend thinking about research method: does the culture of emotional expression and conversational interaction, which can be documented in personal

interactions in Italy, also express a particular kind of attitude about care for other people? And does such an attitude, if it exists, filter through directly into political discourse and political action? Or are there weightier forces at the level of bureaucratic organization? It is a challenging topic for micro/macro research.

THE ETHICS OF EMOTIONS

AP: Emotions are ethically neutral: there are not "bad" or "good" emotions as such, but it all depends on the emotions' origins and outcomes. For example, in terms of origins, fear can be legitimate or illegitimate, rational o irrational, life-preserving or suicidal. In terms of outcomes, instead, fear can have useful/constructive or detrimental/destructive consequences. It is legitimate, rational and life-preserving when we face a real life-threatening event (the well-known meeting with a grizzly bear on a mountain pathway) and run away; illegitimate, irrational and even suicidal (for the economy) when we deal with the phenomenon of immigration as if was a massive problem rather than a massive opportunity (for cultural diversity and enrichment, economic growth, cosmopolitanism, etc.)

Given these premises, is it possible to talk about *ethics of emotions*? Are there emotions that can be interpreted as "more ethically relevant" than others?

RC: Ethics is itself an emotion. In fact, it is one of the main emotions Durkheim dealt with in his theory of religion (and therefore in wider theory of interaction ritual). Successful rituals create and reinforce moral obligations and beliefs about what is moral; the more successful such rituals, the more intensely moral individuals feel (above all while they are in the midst of other people carrying out the ritual); and -- the dark side of rituals and morality-- the more they feel a righteous duty to attack and punish moral deviance. Let us try to think further into this question. Since there are all kinds of interaction rituals (cheering for your sports team, for example), do they have different emotional and therefore moral qualities? On the whole, the morality of sport rituals is rather tribalistic, self-centered groups destroying their enemies, although sometimes this is overlaid by another ritual of community with the opponent through the ethics of good sports. So yes, some rituals have a more univeralistic and less self-centered quality. Religious rituals tend to focus on emotions of awe for the sacred, sometimes on altruistic love. There are political equivalents of both kinds of rituals: demos and speeches that arouse tribalistic anger and fear and righteous punishment; demos and speeches (more rare) that attempt to spread compassion. The history of religious movements has often been in the latter category, but even there, movements generate feelings of membership and hence of boundaries and status differences. It is often an ethical conundrum. The best rituals (to invoke a moral standard) are the ones that include an element of caution: tread carefully.

AP: Thank you very much for your time and contribution, Randall.

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