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# Comment on Randall Collins/1. An Approach to Violence

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# Comment on Randall Collins/1

## An Approach to Violence

by Michel Wieviorka

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It is obviously an honour to be considered a worthy adversary by Randall Collins and in this article I will attempt to reply to him at the level which is his: theoretical and fundamental.

By dealing with violence, Randall Collins is one of those who, today, gives preference to what he calls a "micro-sociological theory," as opposed to "macro-sociological" approaches which are nonetheless not without interest. He considers that to move "from macro-history to the interior of the individual consciousness," it is essential to take into consideration "a key micro-sociological component, the situation of immediate social interaction." This is in fact where the core of the theoretical and empirical debate resides.

### **The Limits of Interactionism**

Even if transformed into complementary approaches, the micro/macro opposition is not satisfactory. To be exact when Randall Collins refers to as "micro" approaches he means interactionist approaches. In the first place it is worth noting that the interactionists are not the only people to take an interest in the "local," as he does; indeed, there are also all sorts of sociological orientations and, in particular, those falling under methodological individualism and taking the individual rather than the

system as their starting point, which do not necessarily have a strong interest in the study of interpersonal interactions.

The vocation of interactionism is to be interested in interaction and, as a result, it deduces that this is where social action is located. Now, to comprehend violence, it is not sufficient to understand what is at issue in a situation, close up, at the time when it is being perpetrated and to reduce this situation, which Randall Collins refers to as "local," to interactions. Some forms of violence, and he himself refers to them, operate at a distance, particularly in recent or present-day warfare: where is the interaction when an American bomber drops an atomic bomb on Hiroshima? An important aspect of Randall Collins' approach even involves stating that today, in comparison with the past, various changes have made it possible to avoid violent interaction with tense and confrontational one to one encounters.

Randall Collins is well aware that one also has to consider the social, political, cultural, economic and even social anthropological conditions which make violence possible and the processes which lead thereto. "Pure" interactionism does not suffice on its own, something which was clear to Erving Goffman, the best spokesman for this type of approach, was aware as explained that his research had nothing to do with the understanding of political processes and historical changes which come under other types of analysis. As a result, the approach adopted by Randall Collins is strange since it promotes a type of explanation (interactionist) which he is constantly required to complete with anthropo-historical elements, almost by a sort of grand narrative recounting for example the transition from pre-modernity to modernity. A narrative of this sort is open to challenges and, moreover, it has certain similarities, as it happens, with a form of evolutionism which one would not expect in the writings of someone as erudite as Randall Collins.

In some ways, Randall Collins' approach reminds me of that of Ted Robert Gurr who, in the 1970s, in relation to violence, suggested a central paradigm (in this instance, the relative frustration paradigm) but who, to be credible, felt obliged to include in addition all sorts of other explanatory factors which had nothing to do with this paradigm. We have here a juxtaposition of explanatory elements and not their integration.

## **Sociology and History**

My own approach is not a combination of "micro" and "macro" theories, terms which I try to avoid. It is above all sociological, and while history does interest me my aim is not to produce a grand historical fresco, a history of violence. It is instead

to shed light on specific events, processes or historical moments. The staple material of my book is empirical research and extensive reading, in particular in the areas which Randall Collins prioritizes.<sup>1</sup> I maintain that for numerous societies the mid 1970s (some will say: 1973, with the oil crisis) constituted a watershed, where in some societies there was a transition from one set of problems and their representations to another – one could call it a shift in paradigm. This is true in countless spheres, and if one wishes to understand present-day violence, these and other changes have to be taken into consideration; some are world level (like the disintegration then the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War) others restricted to certain societies (like the historical decline of the workers' movement and the structural conflict opposing it to the masters of labour).

In considering the major questions posed by violence, my whole endeavor has consisted in constructing an integrated, or in any event coherent, package or set of analytical tools enabling us to shed a new and powerful light on specific historical experiences, and my objective was not to work out “the” good micro, or macro, theory. These tools aim to go beyond the limits of the theoretical arena of the opposition between micro and macro; they do not necessarily refer to it.

Consequently I did not claim that I was studying the historical entity which violence might constitute, its spatial and temporal diversity and its major changes; I focused on certain points in time and certain places which it seemed to me particularly significant for an adequate evaluation of present-day violence. Above all, I have sought to conceptualize violence sociologically by providing the analytical tools which may give us a better understanding of some of its forms.

A sociological approach cannot claim to provide a historical synthesis but it can contribute a useful set of equipment, the heuristical value of which will vary. When Max Weber made a link between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and supported it with historical knowledge he was suggesting a strong and original hypothesis at his time since it was a question of explaining economic behavior by religious convictions. And if sociologists and historians, as was the case at an early date, demonstrated, amongst other criticisms, that capitalism had appeared in circumstances other than directly linked to Protestantism,<sup>2</sup> that does not mean we have to forget Max Weber; it merely indicates that the relevance of his approach does not make of it a watertight theory, nor a historical demonstration valid worldwide.

<sup>1</sup> For example, and amongst many other books, see John Dower [1993] and Joanna Bourke [1999].

<sup>2</sup> As soon as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was published the controversy was launched by little known researchers such as H. Fischer and F. Rachfahl, and other confirmed authors like L. Brentano and W. Sombart. Max Weber made a very well-argued reply.

One cannot attain historical understanding directly or wholly from a sociological analysis, or a sociological conceptualization; the registers are separate and, to my mind, the main task is to attempt to link them.

### **Pure Violence**

Randall Collins suggests a historical and social anthropological approach to cruelty and ferocious violence which, in his opinion, is particularly present in pre-modern times where public rituals play an important role and where boundaries between groups are strong. He considers that cruelty stressed the "alienness of the outsider" and "terrorized the lower strata into keeping their place." My proposals are of another order.

Cruelty may indeed be instrumental; but it is primarily an extreme case in which violence becomes an end in itself, one could describe it as violence for violence' sake or pure violence. This gives rise to a paradox: violence for the sake of violence, or for pleasure, is rare today because it requires favorable conditions which are difficult to fulfill (for example: being assured of impunity, that there are no witnesses). It thus becomes a secondary or marginal dimension of the major expressions of present-day violence, whereas it does constitute its purest form. It may well be that the aspects which are theoretically the most central to violence are also concretely the most marginal.

Randall Collins' remarks about the "stressful" dimension of violence revealed by documents (photos, videos, etc.) are absolutely true, but it seems to me difficult to make of them the core of the analysis of violence. Countless experiences of violence do not correspond to this level of stress. Stanley Milgram's famous experiments [Milgram 1974], that are an important reference for Christopher Browning in his well-known study on the violence perpetrated by a Nazi battalion on the Eastern Front during World War II [Browning 1992], for example, make submission to authority a much more explanatory factor for certain forms of violence than recourse to the idea of interaction.

### **Barbarism in Civilization**

There is in Randall Collins' writing an evolutionism which is not expressed as such but is nonetheless apparent. It consists in postulating that violence today is set in a trend whereby "weapons have become more lethal, more accurate" with the result that combats can be fought at a distance without "confrontational tension" or that

”some people learn specific techniques for overcoming confrontational tension.” In short, ”A major component of the history of violence, therefore, is the invention of new techniques of circumventing confrontational tension, and the spread of these techniques by diffusion.“ However such assumptions are challenged by the recent mass massacres – the Rwandan genocide in the Great Lakes region of Africa, ethnic cleansing in ex-Yugoslavia – which were perpetrated, including by very close neighbours?<sup>3</sup> Indeed for Norbert Elias this major historian and sociologist, quoted by Randall Collins, Nazi barbarism was also a shock, both intellectual and personal, which was all the greater as it took place in one of the most civilized societies of the time.

Barbarism is always liable to appear at our doors, even amongst us, and not only within populations that one might be tempted to describe as pre-modern. Randall Collins does refer, as I also do, to ”suicide bombing” but in some experiences this has been associated with other more classical forms of violence.

### **Violence and Conflict, Subjectivity and Inter-Subjectivity**

Contrary to Randall Collins, I consider that violence is sociologically the contrary of the conflictual relation. Violence indicates rupture and not relation and violence involves the subjectivity of the person or persons who perpetuate it, much more than the inter-subjectivity of actors in relation and interaction. It is obvious that inter-subjectivity can be part of the experience of violence, but that it be at the core of its explanation seems to me to be inaccurate. There may be ”*confrontational tension and fear*” without this ending in violence and there are countless situations of violence in which these elements are not present or in an unequal, weak and non-decisive manner. But perhaps we should deconstruct the term “violence” and not make of it an over-general concept making uniform phenomena which are distinct, some of them being better suited to Randall Collins’ vision than others.

### **A Challenge**

The social sciences never go very far in their thinking about what they demonstrate, about the tests, the proof of the scientific approach in their analyses or their findings. This does present a general problem and in ending this reply I would like to make a suggestion here concerning violence which corresponds to this preoccupation. There is at least one test of the relevance of a mode of approach to violence: it

<sup>3</sup> See for example Jean Hatzfeld [2003].

consists in examining how this mode of approach can contribute to thinking about an end to violence. In my forthcoming book, *Evil* [Wieviorka 2012], there is a chapter devoted precisely to associating my analyses of violence with various analytical proposals concerning the conditions which would contribute to its decline or weakening, and policies which could further these proposals. Does the interactionism developed by Randall Collins offer pointers in that direction? It remains doubtful. Indeed if violence is produced in interaction I do not see how it is possible to envisage reducing it except by declaring the banning of certain forms of interaction. I would be very interested to know what political measures, for example, Randall Collins could deduce from his analyses.

Finally, to end, I would like to express a regret: it is that he has not had access to the French version of my book [Wieviorka 2005]. One of the three parts could not be translated in the English edition which might perhaps have led him to other criticisms but also perhaps to rapprochements on some points. Does discussion in the social sciences really have to be quasi-monopolized by the English language?

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## Comment on Randall Collins/1

### An Approach to Violence

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Abstract: How explain macro trends in violence, such as historical shifts in rates of crime, while using a micro-theory of situational interaction? Wieviorka argues that the world-wide rise in crime rates since the 1960s resulted from the combination of a macro cause—the breakdown of regulated and limited class conflict—plus a micro process of individual meaninglessness, so that violence became the new means of constructing identities. Wieviorka's theory clashes with evidence that on the micro level, humans are not proficient at violence. Violence is largely shaped by an emotional barrier of confrontational tension/fear [ct/f], so that most conflict goes no further than blustering gestures and words. Violence is messy, imprecise, and atrocious, because it happens only when local conditions allow pathways to circumvent ct/f. But how can this theory explain rising or falling macro-trends in violence? Interactional techniques are invented: such as football hooligans style of overwhelming police by maneuvering to assemble where they have huge local superiority of numbers; or another kind of technique, the clandestine approach to delivering a close attack by a suicide bomber. These techniques can be charted as they spread from one place to another. To complete the picture, authorities' counter-techniques of violence control also evolve and spread; the balance between these two sides results in the historical macro-trends of violence.

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*Keywords: Violence; conflict; interactionism; subjectivity; intersubjectivity.*

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