

PRINCETON STUDIES IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

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Interaction Ritual Chains

Randall Collins

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK ARGUES for the continuity of a chief theoretical pathway from classic sociology to the present. Durkheim launched sociology on a high theoretical level by providing an explanation for some of the most central questions: what produces social membership, moral beliefs, and the ideas with which people communicate and think. The key is that these are linked together by the same mechanism: ideas are symbols of group membership, and thus culture is generated by the moral—which is to say emotional—patterns of social interaction. But whereas Durkheim is usually interpreted, and subjected to criticism, as a global theory of the moral integration of an entire society, I interpret the theory through the eyes of Erving Goffman and the microsociological movement; that is to say, in the spirit of symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, social constructionism, and sociology of emotions. In their spirit, however, not the letter, since I put the ritual mechanism at the center and try to show how it makes maximal explanatory power out of the insights of these micro-sociological perspectives. Starting with a Durkheimian mechanism, we can see how variations in the intensity of rituals lead to variations in social membership patterns and the ideas that accompany them; all this takes place not on the global level of a "society" in the large sense but as memberships that are local, sometimes ephemeral, stratified, and conflictual.

I do not insist on the letter of Durkheim or Goffman either, but on the fruitfulness of what we can do with these ideas for theorizing a social world of flux and variation. Chapter 1 sketches the intellectual history of the social theory of ritual, with an eye to disencumbering what is most useful in the Durkheim tradition, from interpretations that have grown up around it like vines upon old trees in the jungle. Once having disentangled it, I amalgamate it with what is most useful in radical microsociology. Here Goffman is a pathbreaker, but I do some disentangling, too, to separate out what parts of Goffman are most useful for the current project.

Chapter 2 presents my formulation of the theoretical model, which I call by Goffman's term, interaction ritual (for short, IR). Since terminological accretions are hard to slough off, we are not necessarily confined to calling it by this term. We could call it, more generically, the mutual-focus / emotional-entrainment mechanism. It is a model of interactional situations varying along those two dimensions—how much

mutual focus of attention occurs, and how much emotional entrainment builds up among the participants. Where mutual focus and entrainment become intense, self-reinforcing feedback processes generate moments of compelling emotional experience. These in turn become motivational magnets and moments of cultural significance, experiences where culture is created, denigrated, or reinforced. I illustrate the process of creating symbols by analyzing a first-hand video recording of the creation of new national symbols during the catastrophe of 9/11/2001. Rituals create symbols in first-order, face-to-face interaction, which constitutes the starting point in an array of further second- and third-order circuits in which symbols can be recirculated. Once infused with situational emotion, symbols can be circulated through networks of conversation, and internalized as thinking within the individual circuits of the mind. Ultimately the intensity of human concern with symbols, ranging from enthusiastic and obsessive to bored and alienated, depends upon periodic repetition of IRs; how meaningful these recirculated symbols are depends on what level of emotional intensity is reached in the first-order social encounters in which those symbols are used. Since we are often confronted with symbols apart from the interactional context that determines how alive they are, I offer some rules for unraveling symbols by tracing them back to the interactional situations in which they acquire what emotional significance they have, and then through their recycling in conversational networks and solitary experience.

Chapters 3 through 5 examine the implications of the IR mechanism. Chapter 3 presents an interactional theory of emotions. It emphasizes the differences among the specific emotions as conventionally recognized—anger, joy, fear, etc.—and the social emotion par excellence that I call emotional energy, or EE. Durkheim noted that a successful social ritual makes the individual participant feel strong, confident, full of impulses to take the initiative. Part of the collective effervescence of a highly focused, emotionally entrained interaction is apportioned to the individuals, who come away from the situation carrying the group-aroused emotion for a time in their bodies. Conversely, a weak or failed social ritual lowers the confidence and initiative of participants—it lowers their EE—as does being in the position of an outsider or victim who is emotionally battered by someone else's interaction ritual that does not allow one inside. An interaction ritual is an emotion transformer, taking some emotions as ingredients, and turning them into other emotions as outcomes. Short-term situational emotions carry across situations, in the form of emotional energy, with its hidden resonance of group membership, setting up chains of interaction rituals over time. Membership and its boundaries, solidarity, high and low

emotional energy: these features work together. Hence the stratification of interaction—interacting with people who are higher or lower in power, and interacting from a position of status acceptance or rejection—gives each individual a jolt, upward or downward, to their level of EE. Social structure, viewed up close as a chain of interactional situations, is an ongoing process of stratifying individuals by their emotional energy.

Privilege and power is not simply a result of unequal material and cultural resources. It is a flow of emotional energy across situations that makes some individuals more impressive, more attractive or dominant; the same situational flow puts other persons in their shadow, narrowing their sources of EE to the alternatives of participating as followers or being relegated passively to the sidelines. Social dominance—whether it takes the form of leadership, popularity, intellectual innovativeness, or physical aggressiveness—is often acceded to by others who encounter such a person, because it occurs through emotional processes that pump some individuals up while depressing others.

Chapter 4 shows how IRs produce the flow of motivation from situation to situation. I widen IR theory so as to predict what will happen as individuals steer from one situation to another, by borrowing concepts from rational choice theory. Some social theorists may find the mixture uncomfortable or even heretical. On the face of it, the image of the calculating self-interested individual seems at odds with the Durkheimian micro-collectivity with its moral solidarity. My rationale is that rational choice theory is not really a model of situational interaction, but a meso-level theory of what individuals will do over the medium run of situations over a period of time. Choice implies working out alternatives, and in real life these present themselves gradually and through experience over a series of occasions. The anomalies of rational choice analysis arise because individuals in micro-situations do not calculate very well the range of alternatives hypothetically available to them; but calculation is not what is most useful in this model, but rather the propensity of individuals to drift, consciously or unconsciously, toward those situations where there is the greatest payoff of benefits over costs. Humans are not very good at calculating costs and benefits, but they feel their way toward goals because they can judge everything subconsciously by its contribution to a fundamental motive: seeking maximal emotional energy in interaction rituals.

The aggregate of situations can be regarded as a market for interaction rituals. The concept is not so startling if we recall the familiar sociological concept of a marriage market. Consider also its extension to the concept of sexual-preference markets (i.e. competitive matchups in a pool of available potential partners for short-term sexual and roman-

tic relationships, subdivided by heterosexual and homosexual markets, and so on), and the notion of the market dynamics of friendship formation. Thus we may conceive of all IRs as a market. I do not mean this formulation to be offensive to people's humanistic sensibilities; people who seek romantic partners or make close friends are often genuinely committed to these relationships; they feel at home inside a common horizon of cultural experience; and they share positive emotions in an unselfconscious, noncalculating way. But these are micro-level contents of these interactions; the market aspect comes in at the meso-level, the aggregate of interactions among which individuals implicitly or explicitly choose. Not everyone can be lovers or close friends with everyone else, and the range of who is available and who has already committed themselves to someone else will have an inescapable effect on even the most romantic.

What I call IR chains is a model of motivation that pulls and pushes individuals from situation to situation, steered by the market-like patterns of how each participant's stock of social resources—their EE and their membership symbols (or cultural capital) accumulated in previous IRs—meshes with those of each person they encounter. The degree to which these elements mesh makes up the ingredients for what kind of IR will happen when these persons meet. The relative degree of emotional intensity that each IR reaches is implicitly compared with other IRs within those persons' social horizons, drawing individuals to social situations where they feel more emotionally involved, and away from other interactions that have a lower emotional magnetism or an emotional repulsion. The market for EE in IRs thus is an overarching mechanism motivating individuals as they move through the IR chains that make up their lives.

What I have done here is to give a theory of individuals' motivation based on where they are located at any moment in time in the aggregate of IR chains that makes up their market of possible social relationships. We can also turn this picture around to see it from another angle. Instead of focusing on the individual, we can look at the structuring of an entire social arena or institution as a linkage of IR chains. The institution that I have in mind here is the economy in the narrow sense of the term: that is, markets for labor, goods, and financial instruments (for short, "material markets"). According to the well-known theory in economic sociology, material markets are embedded in relations of social trust and implicit rules of the game. I translate this into a situationally fluctuating pattern. What economic sociologists treat rather abstractly as "trust" is not a static element nor merely a background that sets up the arena for the economic game but upon which economic motives provide the dynamics of action. What we think of as "social

embedding" is in fact in the center of economic action. Any successful IRs produce moral solidarity, which is another word for "trust"; but the IR chain produces more than trust, since the full-scale process of individual motivation is generated in IR chains. The mechanism is the same whether these chains are focused on material economic activities or on purely sociable relationships. EE-seeking is the master motive across all institutional arenas; and thus it is the IRs that generate differing levels of EE in economic life that set the motivation to work at a level of intensity ranging from enthusiastically to slackly; to engage in entrepreneurship or shy away from it; to join in a wave of investment or to pull one's money and one's emotional attention away from financial markets.

There is no sharp break between material markets and the market for emotional payoffs in IRs; these are all motivated by EE-seeking. Of course, participating in the material market is often less enthusiastic than constrained and perfunctory, making ends meet rather than positively seeking high emotional experiences. As hard-bitten realists would say, people work not for rituals but because they need material goods to survive. My counterargument is that social motivation determines even when people want to survive, as well as more normally what they want material goods for. Variations in intensity of economic action are determined from the side of variations in social motivation. The material market is motivated by demand for material goods because material resources are among the ingredients needed to produce intense IR experiences. There are feedback loops between the material economy and the economy of rituals; each is a necessary input into the other. In Max Weber's version, the intensity of motivation for a particular kind of religious experience drove the expansion of modern capitalism. In my generalization of this line of argument, the entire social-interactional marketplace for IRs is what drives the motivation to work, produce, invest, and consume in the material market. At the level of general theory, it is impossible to explain human behavior by separate spheres of motivation without a common denominator among them, since that would leave no way of choosing among them in concrete situations. The theoretical solution is to conceive of the market for high-intensity IRs and the market for material goods as unified, one flowing into the other. Although we cannot get from material motivations to deriving social motivations, we can unify these realms from the social rather than the material side.

Chapter 5 rounds out the applications of the basic IR mechanism with a theory of thinking. The central point is that IRs charge up ideas with varying degrees of membership significance by marking them with differing amounts of EE. Some ideas are therefore easier to think

with than others—for particular individuals in a particular situation located in a chain of situations. Such ideas spring to the mind, or flow trippingly on the tongue, whereas other ideas are less attracted into the interaction, or even excluded from it by a tacit social barrier. Thinking is an internalized conversation—a theoretical point familiar from George Herbert Mead—and thus we can trace the inner linkages of ideas from external conversations through internal conversations and back out. This tracing is easiest to do empirically in the thinking of intellectuals, since we know more about their social networks with other intellectuals, and about the inner thinking that became externalized in their writing. From this entry point, the chapter moves on to forms of thinking that are only quasi-verbal, as well as verbal incantations and internal rituals that make inner selves so often different from outer selves. I offer examples, inspired by conversation analysis, of how to study internalized conversation empirically. The chapter draws considerably on the symbolic interactionist tradition, ranging from the classics to contemporary analyses by Jonathan Turner, Norbert Wiley, Thomas Scheff, and Jack Katz, among others. It concludes, nevertheless, that Mead's metaphors of the parts of the self (I, me, Generalized Other) can be replaced by a more processual model of the focus of attention and flow of energy in internalized interaction rituals.

Part II applies the general theory to specialized and historically located areas of social life. Chapter 6 is a theory of sexual interaction, treated micro-empirically: that is to say, what people actually do in erotic situations. It is not, first and foremost, a theory of what cultural meanings about sex exist in a culture, nor does it stay on the level of what statistical aggregate of sexual actions individuals perform with what degree of frequency; it is instead a theory of what kind of interaction actually happens when people have sex. What this is might seem obvious, but when examined sociologically large alternatives of interpretation open up. What people actually do, and what they find erotically stimulating, cannot be explained by individual motives of pleasure-seeking; what practices are considered sexual and what body zones become erotic targets are both historically and situationally variable. The erotic symbolism of the body is constructed by the focus and intensity of interaction rituals. The baseline form of erotic action—sexual intercourse—fits the IR model very closely. No wonder: sexual intercourse is an archetypal high point of mutual entrainment and collective effervescence, creating the most primitive form of solidarity and the most immediate standards of morality; the interlocking feelings of love and sexual possession are a ritually very tight membership in a group usually of size two.

On this baseline model, I show how nongenital sexual targets are constructed as they become the focus of attention in erotic IRs. Sexual ritual can also take forms that have relatively low solidarity among the participants—sex that is selfish, coerced, or otherwise not oriented toward membership with the partner of the moment. But these forms of sex do not escape social explanation: these are forms of sexual action in which the focus of attention is not so much local but in another arena, not on the relationship between the individual love-makers but on the larger scenes of erotic negotiation and display in which they seek membership and prestige. The micro-level of sexual interaction is shaped within a larger arena, a concatenation of IR chains. I illustrate this with the historical changes in the places where sexual negotiating and sexual carousing have taken place during the twentieth century, and in the array of practices that have thereby become eroticized. Among other things that can be explained in this way are the growth of distinctively modern forms of homosexuality.

Chapter 7 offers a micro-sociological view of stratification in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I describe stratification as seen from below, from the angle of the situations in which inequality actually is acted out. This micro-empirical view matches up, eventually, with the Weberian scheme of economic class, status group, and political power; but instead of taking these as macro-structures that can be grasped in their aggregate, statistical form, it shows how they can be recast in terms of the dynamics of everyday life. In our historical times, immediate social experience has come loose from the categorical identities of macro-stratification, giving greater weight to the dynamics of situational stratification. The changing distribution of resources for staging interaction rituals, and the changing conditions that once compelled people to be audiences for stratified rituals and now enable them to evade them, explain how this evaporation of deference rituals has come about.

Chapter 8 takes up a set of minor rituals that are carried out in private and in leisure situations, off duty from serious occasions. Such rituals have their historical ups and downs, which gives us an opportunity to look at the changing social ingredients that have gone into constructing these little rituals of privacy and sociability. Erving Goffman pioneered the study of such rituals, but as a pioneer he was too concerned with showing their general properties to pay attention to how they have changed historically. Ironically, he wrote just at the time that a massive shift in the rituals of everyday life was going on: the collapse of formally polite, overtly stratified boundary-marking rituals, which observers of the 1960s sometimes called the rise of the "counterculture" and which I prefer to call the "Goffmanian revolu-

tion." It is this revolution favoring standards of casualness over standards of formality that characterizes the situational stratification of the turn of the twenty-first century, where overt signs of class differences are hidden and formality is widely considered bad form. This is a recent instance of a shift in the prevailing rituals of everyday life, one of a series of such shifts that have taken place across the centuries.

Chapter 8 traces these micro-structural shifts in the ritualism of casual interaction by taking smoking rituals as a tracer element. The conditions that created various kinds of tobacco rituals since the sixteenth century, and fostered conflict over the legitimacy of such rituals throughout that time, cast light more generally on other kinds of substance ingestion. The same kind of analysis could have been performed by focusing on the social history of alcohol or drug use. These have been heavily studied by other researchers, although generally under other theoretical lenses; the analysis of tobacco ritual and anti-ritual may thus be fresh enough to bring out the analytical points more clearly.

The opportunity to change our perceptual gestalts, at least as sociologists, is all the greater because we are living in the midst of an under-analyzed phenomenon in everyday life: the success, after many centuries of failure, of an anti-smoking movement in the late twentieth century. The naïve explanation would be simply that medical evidence has now become available to show the dangers of tobacco, and that the movement to restrict and prohibit it has followed as a matter of normal public policy. Yet it would be theoretically strange if that were all there is to it. Our theories of social movements, of politics, of changes in lifestyles do not generally show much evidence that major social changes come about simply because scientists intervene to tell people what they must do for their material self-interest, whereupon they do it. This naïve explanation is generally unchallenged, within sociology as elsewhere in the academic world, perhaps because most sociologists are in the status group that is most committed to the anti-smoking movement; thus we do not see the triumph of the anti-smoking movement as a social phenomenon to be explained, because we view the issue through the categories promulgated by that movement. Ideological participants do not make good analysts of their own movement. By the same token, we are not very good analysts of the target of the movement, tobacco users in all their historical forms, as long as we see them only in the categories of addicts or dupes of media advertising in which they are conventionally discussed. By viewing the entire historical process with greater detachment, it is possible to contribute to a sociological, and not merely medical, understanding of addictive or persistently entraining forms of substance ingestion generally.

Rituals of bodily ingestion always have a physiological aspect, but that is not good theoretical grounds for handing over primacy to non-social scientists when we are explaining social behavior. Interaction rituals in general are processes that take place as human bodies come close enough to each other so that their nervous systems become mutually attuned in rhythms and anticipations of each other, and the physiological substratum that produces emotions in one individual's body becomes stimulated in feedback loops that run through the other person's body. Within that moment at least, the social interaction is driving the physiology. This is the normal baseline of human interaction, even without any ingestion of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, caffeine, or food; and when ingestion of these is added to the interaction ritual, their physiological effects are deeply entwined with and shaped by the social pattern. I am arguing for a strong form of social construction, not only of conscious mental processes, not only of emotions, but also of the experience of whatever is bodily ingested. The chemical character of whatever kind of substance is ingested also has some independent effect, and in some instances that effect may be overriding: strychnine will not act like sugar. But we would be entirely on the wrong footing to assume that all ingested substances are in the extreme categories like strychnine; most of the socially popular substances for bodily ingestion have had widely differing effects in different social contexts, and it is their social uses that have determined what people have made of them. Even in the instance of tobacco use in the late twentieth century, the overriding causal factors determining usage have been not in the physical effects per se but in those effects as socially experienced.

The aggregate effect of these chapters may be to provoke the question, doesn't all this sociologizing go too far? Doesn't it miss what escapes sociology, what makes us unique as individuals, and what constitutes our private inner experience? Is not the model of interaction rituals especially biased toward the image of the human being as the noisy extrovert, always seeking crowds, never alone, without an inner life? Chapter 9 meets these issues head on. Individualism itself is a social product. As Durkheim and his followers, notably Marcel Mauss, argued, social structures across the range of human history have produced a variety of individuals to just the extent that social structures are differentiated: the greater variety of social situations, the more unique each individual's experience, and the greater variety of individuals. Furthermore, it is not only a matter of society in some historical formations producing a greater or lesser variety of individuals; some societies—notably our own—produce an ideal or ideology of individualism. Social interactions produce both symbols and moralizing about

them. Where the ritualism of social interactions celebrating the collective has dwindled, what has arisen in its place are situational rituals involving what Goffman pointed to as the cult of the individual.

Individuality comes in many different forms, many of which could be extroverted; so it remains to be shown how inwardly oriented personalities are socially created. I outline seven kinds of introversion together with the historical conditions that have produced them. Despite our image of introversion as a modern personality type, some of these types are rather common premodern personalities. Even in the modern world, there are several types of introverts, besides the hyper-reflexive or neurotic type, which some observers have seen in the image of Hamlet or a Freudian patient as emblematic of modern life. In fact, most types of introversion are not only socially produced, but have their patterns, when situations call for it, of extroverted social interaction as well. Even within the most extreme personalities, inward and outward play off of each other in an endless chain.

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