

# Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* - A review with speculative detours into the political theory of ritual

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*Cette recension a déjà paru sur le blog [Abandonedfootnotes](#). Nous remercions Xavier Marquez de nous avoir autorisé à la reproduire ici.*

I have previously encouraged people to read [Randall Collins'](#) work (his infrequently updated blog, [The Sociological Eye](#), is typically excellent), but it is only recently that I tackled his book on interaction rituals. And despite its forbidding title, seemingly promising a work on some technical topic in the sociology of religion, this is a very good book that deserves to be more widely read, especially beyond the disciplinary confines of sociology. (The title is in part a reference to Erving Goffman's *Interaction Ritual* ; but while "Interaction Ritual" is a great title, easily bringing to mind the rituals of everyday life with which Goffmann is principally concerned, the addition of *chains* makes the topic of Collins' book a bit obscure, even if the idea is clearly explained in the work itself).

The book presents an ambitious theory of social action based on rituals and the emotions they amplify – so ambitious, in fact, that it is likely to seem absurd at the margins, much like rational choice theory sounds absurd to most people when pushed to extremes. Skimming the reviews of the book in sociology journals one finds a mixture of admiration and annoyance at the scope of the book's claims, combined with a desire to put the theory in its place : interaction ritual chain theory *cannot* explain this or that phenomenon, or it exaggerates the importance of interaction rituals at the expense of meaningful communication or strategic action. But I tend to prefer theories that are ambitious and fruitful even if ultimately wrong, so I will not dwell overmuch on the book's shortcomings here.

The basic ideas of the theory are deceptively simple, drawn more or less in equal parts from Durkheim, Goffman, and Mead. Collins starts with the idea of a situation of co-presence, or really any physical gathering. A situation of that sort turns into a *ritual* when those physically present focus their attention on specific people, objects, or symbols, and are thereby constituted as a distinct *group* with more or less clear boundaries. This obviously includes religious rituals, but also a vast number of interpersonal interactions, ranging from informal small-group conversations and sexual acts at one end to academic lectures, workplace meetings, conference presentations, political rallies, sports events, and other large-scale physical gatherings with a joint focus at the other end of the scale. With a bit of conceptual stretching one can even include here *private* rituals (e.g., praying alone, having a solitary cigarette or a cup of coffee before working or after working), with only one participant (these are treated by Collins as secondary rituals, where the focus of attention is on the symbols and objects whose meaning and value is produced in primary social rituals) ; and one may also wish to treat situations of joint focus but no physical co-presence – [mediated interactions, in short](#) – as rituals (though Collins [claims](#), for reasons that will become clear below, that rituals without physical co-presence are far less likely to succeed *qua* rituals). As should be obvious, the

word “ritual” is here being used in a very capacious sense, without reference to the “ceremonial” aspects of many of the activities that we would normally call rituals, or to any hard and fast distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane ;” Collins stresses that he wants us to see ritual “almost everywhere” (p. 15). I have no particular problems with this ; “ritual”, like “game”, is a [family resemblance](#) term. The more interesting move comes when we ask what a ritual is *for*.

A ritual, for Collins, is basically an amplifier of emotion. (I pause to note that an *amplifier* of emotion is not necessarily a *generator* of emotion, though it is not clear whether or not Collins sees any important distinction here). We are literally “pumped up” by a successful ritual – we experience a buzz, exhilaration, [enthousiasmos](#), “[collective effervescence](#).” A great lecture, a sports spectacle in a vast stadium, a great concert, a fire-and-brimstone sermon, the rituals of solidarity among small military units ; these interactions *motivate* us, that is, they set us in motion, send us on our way to act beyond the immediate confines of the group situation (to read the book discussed in the lecture, follow the news of your sports team or music band and wear the team colors, proselytize for your sect, attack the enemy, and perhaps also to do the crappy jobs necessary to gather the material resources to do all of these things). Not every ritual is successful, of course (and not every ritual is *equally* successful for all participants, even when the ritual is generally successful – more on this point later) ; some ritual situations bore us, sending our attention wandering, and we end up feeling drained and depressed : think of a boring meeting at your workplace, or an awful lecture. These rituals are demotivating ; as Collins puts it, they sap our “emotional energy.”

Emotional energy (EE) is the all-purpose term Collins uses to talk about the emotions and moods that motivate (anger, righteousness, joy, pride, etc.) or demotivate us (depression, sadness, etc.). A successful ritual generates and amplifies motivating emotions, while an unsuccessful ritual does the contrary. Perhaps Collins’ most controversial claim is the idea that we are basically EE “seekers” : much (all ?) of our social activity can be understood as a largely unconscious “flow” along the gradient of maximal EE charge *for us*, given our particular material resources and positions within the “market” for ritual situations (the set of ritual situations available to us). Our primary “motivation” is the search for motivation ; or more precisely, motivation (our “motive power”) is simply a result of emotional amplification in ritual situations, so that we are propelled along “chains” of situations where we achieve high levels of EE and avoid situation chains where the contrary is the case. Thus, our ordinary “interests” [cannot be understood apart from the ritual situations](#) which shape and indeed construct them as genuinely motivating values ; whether a person cares specifically for material goods, knowledge, or the welfare of some particular group depends on the ritual chains in which they participate and the way these rituals affect their emotional energy. As Collins puts it, “[h]uman behaviour may be characterized as emotional energy tropism. Social sources of EE directly energize behaviour ; the strongest energizing situation exerts the strongest pull” (pp. 181-182 ; he adds that “individuals do not experience such situations as controlling them ; because they are being filled with energy, they feel that they [are in] control ... When EE is strong, they see immediately what they want to do.”).

In keeping with the “energy” metaphor, Collins argues further that rituals *charge* symbols, objects, and persons with value (or, in the case of unsuccessful rituals, drain them of value) that then circulate in other rituals (in “chains” of interaction rituals) and in “private” settings (in secondary rituals). Consider a powerful symbol for some group, like the cross. Its power as a symbol – its concentration of meaning and value, and thus its ability to motivate action – is directly related to the success of the rituals in which it is a central focus of attention (church services, prayer rituals, etc.) ; and it is more powerful for those who participate in these rituals regularly and who are themselves

closer to the focus of attention. For these people, the cross becomes an increasingly powerful reminder of their bonds to one another, a genuinely “sacred” object whose violation can engender anger and around which other norms (prescribing forms of display, handling, material sacrifices, etc.) can also develop. At the same time, the cross obviously does not have the same motivating power for everyone (certainly not for every nominal Christian) ; its ability to awaken emotional reactions in people outside the ritual situation depends on how it circulates in the various “ritual chains” of people’s lives (whether it is something worn, referred to, exchanged, displayed in painting or art, etc.), and it decays with distance to the rituals that imbue the cross with value.

Thus, once an object or an idea (a “symbol” for short) is “charged” by rituals, it can serve to temporarily reinforce the identities of group members and motivate them to act in accordance with what they take to be the group’s values (defending the symbols that are central to the group’s rituals, for example), even when the group is not gathered together. By the same token, symbols will be *inert* for those who do not participate in the rituals that invest them with value and meaning ; the value and meaning (or more precisely, the motivational potential) of any symbol is *always* relative to particular groups and their rituals. And, crucially, *anything* can become a powerful symbol for some group, given a sufficiently successful ritual : a copy of Aristotle’s *Ethics* or Marx’s *Capital*, particular places or animals, the image of a person like Hugo Chávez (a charismatic person being simply a person who has been charged with emotional energy in interaction rituals, though we can also think of people who are especially skilled at producing successful interaction rituals), the expression of particular opinions (e.g., the idea that global warming is a hoax or that [shape-shifting lizards rule the world](#)) ; the key point is that these objects and symbols both reinforce the bonds between group members and store reserves of motivation that people can draw on outside the immediate context of the ritual.

Stated more incautiously than I think Collins would, rituals are what I would call engines of sacrality : they *produce* sacred things the way a generator might charge a battery. There is no room in the theory for a distinction in kind between the sacred and the profane ; a sufficiently powerful ritual can make anything that is a joint focus of attention into a sacred object, its sacrality merely the measure of its emotional charge for a particular group. And because rituals are omnipresent in human life, sacred objects and symbols are also omnipresent. (From this point of view, the idea that the modern world is especially “disenchanted” is basically a myth, though I suppose it is possible that rituals in the modern world are more “fragmented” – there are a multiplicity of symbols that become charged with emotional energy and value rather than a relatively small set of such symbols, including the symbol “god”). Or, as the South Indian poet Bavasanna once put it ([as quoted by David Shulman](#)) :

*The pot is a god. The winnowing fan is a god. The stone in the street is a god. The comb is a god. The bowstring is also a god. The bushel is a god and the spouted cup is a god.*

*Gods, gods, there are so many there’s no place left for a foot.*

Though Collins does not say this, this view implies that ritual is prior to belief : belief “in” a cause, or a leader, or a god, or anything of the sort is primarily attachment to particular symbols of group membership that have been charged with value by powerful rituals, and should tend to decay in the absence of rituals “recharging” these symbols. (Collins suggests that a week is a good estimate of

the half-life of the emotional charge of most symbols ; hence the weekly services of churches or the weekly frequency of many intimate rituals, for example). Moreover, motivated reasoning should be ubiquitous, as [indeed it seems to be](#) ; for the most part, we do not reason our way to most of our important beliefs, but acquire these through participation in communities with their interaction rituals (which may not *look* like obvious rituals ; note that as long as we are participants in a successful interaction ritual, our focus is on the things the ritual is about, not on the ritual itself). Sociologists time and again find that many (most ?) people [join social movements before they acquire clear beliefs about issues](#) ; we then justify these beliefs *ex post* and defend them against perceived threats. And when a particular belief becomes [entangled with an identity](#) - when it becomes, in other words, a focus in some chain of successful interaction rituals, circulating as a marker of membership in some group- it then becomes more or less immune to rational argument. This is not to say that we cannot on occasion reason our way to various positions ; but solid “belief” (in the sense that people most people have in mind when they say that they believe “in” something, ranging from Christianity to socialism) needs a lot of help from interaction ritual chains (understood as repeated, focused interactions that charge certain symbols with value). Belief without ritual and community is typically a fickle thing, discarded just as easily as acquired.

But *how* do successful rituals manage to amplify emotion and produce sacred objects and symbols ? Here Collins draws a picture of human beings as *homo saltans*. Emotional charge or motivational energy is built up from *entrainment* : the micro-coordination of gesture, voice, and attention in rhythmic activity, down to tiny fractions of a second. Think of how in an engrossing conversation the partners are wholly attuned to one another, laughing and exhibiting emotional reactions simultaneously, keeping eye contact, taking turns at precisely the right moments, mirroring each other’s reactions ; or how a sports event, a sermon, or a concert produces emotional energy through the rhythmic synchronization of the fans or congregants in call and response, or simply in dance. Or consider sexual acts, to which Collins devotes a long and very interesting chapter. Emotional amplification works everywhere through physical *resonance* ; as we become progressively *attuned* to the physical activity of others, individual emotions (which are, after all, rooted in physical dispositions) come to be shared and amplified. (Consider the difference between listening to a recording of comedian in the privacy of one’s own room and listening to a comedian live while in a room of people laughing ; or the fact that [one can feel the need to cry when one is surrounded by people crying](#)).

(We might even say that patterns of micro-coordination are the building blocks of macro-coordination : the larger circuits of collective action are nourished by the smaller-scale rituals of collective micro-activity. Though we are not there yet ; we have not yet seen how to translate the micro-coordination characteristic of successful rituals to the patterns of macro-coordination that produces what we normally call *power*).

Reading these parts of Collins’ book on how successful rituals depend on high levels of emotional entrainment brought to mind some very old passages from Plato, who among the great philosophers is perhaps the one most keenly aware of the significance and power of ritual in this sense. Plato’s entire theory of education, for example, is premised on the idea that successful character formation depends on ritual chains that focus attention on the right sorts of symbols and are built up from precise attention to rhythmic elements ; *character* education is inseparable from participation in “musical” rituals, and lack of participation - or the inability to become fully attuned to the rhythms of these rituals - can therefore weaken character. We are situational beings, requiring constant reinforcement of our character through ritual. As the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* puts it, using

rather more elevated language :

these forms of child-training, which consist in right discipline in pleasures and pains, grow slack and weakened to a great extent in the course of men's lives ; so the gods, in pity for the human race thus born to misery, have ordained the feasts of thanksgiving as periods of respite from their troubles ; and they have granted them as companions in their feasts the Muses and Apollo the master of music, and Dionysus, that they may at least set right again their modes of discipline by associating in their feasts with gods. ... [A]lmost without exception, every young creature is incapable of keeping either its body or its tongue quiet, [653°] and is always striving to move and to cry, leaping and skipping and delighting in dances and games, and uttering, also, noises of every description. Now, whereas all other creatures are devoid of any perception of the various kinds of order and disorder in movement (which we term rhythm and harmony), to men the very gods, who were given, as we said, to be our fellows in the dance, have granted the pleasurable perception of rhythm and harmony, whereby they cause us to move [654a] and lead our choirs, linking us one with another by means of songs and dances ; and to the choir they have given its name from the "joy" [*chara*] implanted therein. (653c-654a, Bury translation, slightly modified).

Or, as Collins puts it, more prosaically, "[i]n general, "personality" traits are just these results of experiencing particular kinds of IR chains."

Collins follows four basically theoretical chapters (describing the interaction ritual model of social action and providing evidence of how rituals amplify and generate emotion) with five more applied chapters : on "private" thinking and its sources in interaction rituals (technically this is a "theory" chapter, though it felt more like one of the applied chapters), sex and the generation of sexuality in interaction rituals, situational stratification (class, status, and power), tobacco rituals and anti-rituals (which provoked at least [one outraged response](#) arguing that Collins is basically an apologist for tobacco companies), and a chapter on the production of "individualism" in the modern world. Not all chapters are equally successful (I liked the tobacco and situational stratification chapters best) ; and though Collins' range of scholarship is wide, there is a tendency to look primarily to evidence from the USA and Britain and universalize it rather too quickly.

Rather than describe in detail these specific applications of the theory (though more on "power" in a minute), let me instead speculate a bit on how one might use these ideas to think about politics. Here are a number of potential topics that seem like they could benefit this framework, in descending order of epistemic certainty (later topics I'm less sure about).

1. Cults of personality. I've mentioned [before](#) that I think cults of personality emerge from interaction rituals. Not all of these interaction rituals will be successful, but it is enough if some of them *do* produce true believers - people for whom the leader is a sacred object (hardcore Chavistas, Red Guards, etc.) who can then act as norm enforcers and provide a core of supporters enhancing the mobilization of emotion in various settings. Collins' theory also suggests that, as in many "power rituals", the "frontstage" performance of worship does *not* imply anything much about behaviour outside of the ritual context ("backstage"), especially for those people who are at the margins of the ritual and are not energized by its performance. (The world is *full* of people who feign compliance and drag their feet, in Collins' presentation). Indeed, the theory tells us precisely *where* to look for "preference falsification" : among marginal participants in forced rituals, especially low-status group



members for whom the ritual is draining rather than motivating, and who derive their sources of motivation from other rituals (e.g., private “niches” of deep friendship in socialist countries before 1989, church services and other intense ritual situations, etc.)

More interestingly, I take it that the theory points to what we might call the “social construction of charisma.” Charisma for the most part does not *precede* successful rituals, but is built up by them. The charismatic leader is the person who both becomes emotionally energized by being the focus of attention in successful rituals, and is in turn charged as a sacred object by ritual participants. Thus, though some people will of course be more skillful than others at using ritual situations to amplify collective emotion (and hence will be more likely to be considered “charismatic” leaders), the mere *fact* that someone can compel attention may often be sufficient to produce an aura of charisma, especially if the rituals are otherwise successful (one thinks here of in retrospect fairly *uncharismatic* leaders like Stalin or Kim Jong-il). I suspect that more skilful producers of charisma are precisely the people who seem to have the knack for putting together already charged symbols produced in everyday interaction rituals into larger narratives and symbols leading to them ; Chávez was a master of this art, effortlessly associating himself with “the people.” (By contrast, his chosen successor, Maduro, is not yet a sacred object, charged in an endless series of interaction rituals, since he has not yet been the focus of attention for long in successful interaction rituals ; this appears as a lack of charisma, though it could yet change).

2. The mobilization of social movements. Along the same lines, we could understand the way in which social movements are built up in terms of chains of interaction rituals (Collins himself describes one case by looking at growth of social movements against tobacco). Movements grow as charged symbols come to link a larger set of groups whose rituals for the production of solidarity ([WUNC displays](#), to use the terminology of the late Charles Tilly) are sufficiently compatible. (I think also here of Ernesto Laclau’s ideas about how the “people” in populism – its master symbol – is constituted by linked “chains of demands” – charged symbols that circulate among and link otherwise disparate groups).

The lens of ritual also emphasizes the tremendous importance of *physical* mobilization ; ritual is far more powerful when people are physically together and aware of each other’s reactions. Movements that depend on “social” media can hardly match the power of movements that are forged in physical co-presence. Marches, campaign rallies, etc. are not important because they provide information, or even because they are costly signals of commitment (though they are sometimes that) but because they concentrate and amplify emotion, motivating people to keep going in sometimes quite difficult circumstances. (You don’t go to a campaign rally to learn a candidate’s position, but to show solidarity and renew your commitment to a cause or a person).

More generally, the lens of ritual provides a way of thinking about *power* as the capacity to mobilize or disrupt collective action rather than as the capacity to enforce orders in micro-situations or to produce calculable consequences in the world. Power in this sense is produced in micro-rituals of solidarity and cemented by strong emotional experiences that circulate in the form of charged symbols (like common experiences of war ; hence [the strength of political parties forged in warfare as against parties held together only by patronage](#)). Collins mostly discusses power in terms of deference rituals or the ability to produce calculable consequences, but the theory he offers can provide resources for thinking about the sources of collective action more generally.

3. The (relative) insignificance of ideology. Taken in its strongest terms, Collins' theory seems to suggest that ideology is generally unimportant. Whether a symbol acquires socially motivating value depends much less on its "generalized" meaning than on its place within chains of interaction rituals ; we are not generally the dupes of rhetorical framings and persuasive strategies *except* in the context of successful ritual situations. (Collins notes, for example, that most advertisement seems to be unsuccessful at actually persuading people to buy products, and is mostly intended to preserve attention space against competitors). From this perspective, the decline of labor movements worldwide, for example, may owe less to any *ideological* changes ("persuasion" and "manipulation" taken in a very broad sense) than to (intentional or unintentional) changes in the conditions for the ritual production of solidarity. Chris Bertram [recently mused on the occasion of Margaret Thatcher's death](#) that UK society used to be socially more class-differentiated (there were strong institutions where class solidarities and roles were produced) but is now less so (since these institutions have vanished), despite very low levels of economic mobility and higher levels of economic inequality ; many people now "feel" that there is more equality. From the interaction ritual perspective, these changes are not the result of the working class becoming simply convinced of lies due to clever persuasive strategies by elites, but of the less central place of rituals and symbols reinforcing class solidarity in their lives. This is in turn due to any number of causes : laws that made labor unions more difficult to organize, structural changes in employment patterns, the decay of rituals of deference, the emergence of rituals focused on celebrities that cut across social class, etc.

4. The (near) impossibility of deliberative democracy. I confess that the interaction ritual perspective makes me feel pessimistic about the prospects for anything like genuinely deliberative democracy. Deliberation is itself a ritual situation, but one that seems particularly fragile and unlikely to produce strong commitments, unlike many other political rituals, since it is premised on disagreement. The basic building blocks of political solidarity – all the rituals inadvertently sacralising various opinions as tokens of membership – seem to cut against the possibility of successful deliberation except in very rare circumstances. But this is something I would need to think more about.

5. The ritual origins of civilization. From reading Peter Watson's "[The Great Divide : History and Human Nature in the Old World and the New](#)" I take it that the conventional wisdom in anthropology today seems to be that "civilization" (or perhaps better, cities) did not emerge *from* agriculture ; the first cities are *ritual* centers, and precede the development of agriculture. Though this idea (including the fact that much early religious practice seems to have *also* depended on the chemical amplification of experience through hallucinogens) seems to fit within the overall perspective of the theory, I don't quite know what to make of it yet.

All in all, for me this was one of those books that changes the way I see things ; everyday situations – a committee meeting, a lecture, a political event – suddenly appeared in a new light, and even everyday problems – habit formation, how to give an interesting talk, etc. – seemed to benefit from the insights Collins' perspective provides.