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## On Networks and Dialogues

This essay inquires into the possibility of extending Randall Collins' analysis (as it is presented in *The Sociology of Philosophies*) of the process of innovation within intellectual networks. What I have in mind is finding a way to put networks in contact. Since the content of this work is far too vast to be dealt with in a small essay such as this, I will focus mainly on a single issue which I deem central in the geography of this book. *The Sociology of Philosophies*, which Collins' publishers call the 'first history of world philosophy', points out that innovation in philosophy happens in groups, that it tends to stem out of social interaction - 'conversation, validation, the intimacy of proximity, and the look in your listener's eye that tells you you're onto something.'

I will try to show that although Collins attempts to provide us with an image of philosophy at a global scale, he overlooks some important details. Collins' picture testifies to the dynamics of the intellectual world, to the struggles of those in it to come up, make their mark, stay afloat, etc. The way of the dialogue (which plays an important part in the theoretical apparatus of the symbolic interactionism, a school from which Collins himself descends) is the most important way in which representatives of the Academia interact. Now, if we try to extrapolate and consider cultures instead of individuals we can easily proclaim dialogue as the way to be followed in an endeavor to bring them in contact. And, as we will see, this does not come with ease.

2.

In a radio interview at Madison University in Wisconsin, Collins recounts his first experience which led him to discover and adopt the research method of which he makes extensive use in *The Sociology of Philosophies*. In his first year as a graduate

student at the university of Berkeley, Collins worked as a research assistant for Joseph Ben-David. His task was to investigate 'Italian medieval/renaissance academies' (because he was able to find his way with Italian). Ben-David's later published book was called *The Scientist's Role in Society* and dealt with the idea that being a scientist is a social role, something which emerged at a certain time in history (namely, the university revolution in Germany, a topic which Collins himself covers).

'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 classifying 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.' (An Interview with Randall Collins)

If we are to summarize Collins' theory, we should stress at least two things. First, that philosophy stems out of social interaction and second, that the sort of creativity which persists through time and is influential is only achieved through competition and conflict. *The Sociology of Philosophies* gives us only three examples of major thinkers throughout all of known history who, somehow, made their mark by themselves. They are: the first-century Taoist metaphysician Wang Ch'ung, the fourteenth-century Zen mystic Bassui Tokusho, and the fourteenth-century Arabic philosopher Ibn Khaldun. Except them, everyone else was part of a school, a movement, had mentors and rivals, had followers and disciples, etc.

For example, although we associate psychoanalysis with Freud's name, we should not forget that its roots date back to 1902 when every Wednesday evening Freud would have Alfred Adler, Wilhelm Stekel, Max Kahane, and Rudolf Reitler as guests and, between pieces of strudel and cups of coffee, they would discuss about the unconscious. Moreover, in terms of art making and artists, Pissarro and Degas enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts at the same time. After a while, Pissarro met Monet and, later, Cézanne at the Académie Suisse. At the same time, Manet met Degas at the Louvre, Monet made friends with Renoir at Charles Gleyre's studio, and Renoir, in turn, met Pissarro and Cézanne and soon enough everyone was 'hanging out at the Café Guerbois on the Rue des Batignolles'.

What these examples should illustrate is the fact that innovation is a 'group product', rather than the other way around. Discussion, argumentation, (in)validation of hypothesis, giving and receiving feedback to and from your peers, all these are part of the project. In an essay about Group Thinking, Gladwell notes that: 'German Idealism was centered on Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Why? Not only because their philosophical ideas have the same roots but also, because they all lived together in the same house. Fichte steps to the fore as soon as he visits Tübingen in the 1790s inspiring the others, while they are still young students. Then he manages to turn Jena (where he was teaching from 1794 to 1799) into a centre for the philosophical movement later known as idealism. Almost a decade later, he lives in Dresden with the Romantic circle of the Schlegel brothers (where August Schlegel's wife, Caroline, has an affair with Schelling, followed later by a scandalous divorce and remarriage). Fichte moves then to Berlin, making an alliance with Schleiermacher and with Humboldt to establish the new-style university. This is where Hegel eventually ends up and puts the foundations of his school which gains rapid success, despite Schopenhauer's efforts.

But Collins is not the only one who stresses the social dimension of innovation. Jenny Uglow's book, *The Lunar Men*, recounts for us the story of a remarkable group of friends in Birmingham in the 1850's.

'Their leader was Erasmus Darwin, a physician, inventor, and scientist, who began thinking about evolution a full fifty years before his grandson Charles. Darwin met, through his medical practice, an industrialist named Mathew Boulton and, later, his partner James Watt, the steam-engine pioneer. They, in turn, got to know Josiah Wedgwood, he of the famous pottery, and Joseph Priestley, the preacher who isolated oxygen and became known as one of history's great chemists, and the industrialist Samuel Galton (whose son married Darwin's daughter and produced the legendary nineteenth-century polymath Francis Galton), and the innovative glass-and-chemicals entrepreneur James Keir, and on and on.' (Gladwell, Group Thinking)

The name of the group – The Lunar Society – comes from the fact that they met each month at the time when the moon was full. The meetings were far from formal: they met for lunch, with wife and children, and they would keep talking well into the night, clearing the table to make room for their models and plans and instruments. They were curious about everything under the sun: from hygiene to astronomy, from optics to fossils and ferns. When they were not meeting, they still kept in touch by writing to each other with words of encouragement or advice.

'Uglow's book reveals how simplistic our view of groups really is. We divide them into cults and clubs, and dismiss the former for their insularity and the latter for their banality. The cult is the place where, cut off from your peers, you become crazy. The club is the place where, surrounded by your peers, you become boring. Yet if you can combine the best of those two states — the right kind of insularity with the right kind of homogeneity — you create an environment both safe enough and stimulating enough to make great thoughts possible. You get Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and a revolution in Western philosophy. You get Darwin, Watt, Wedgwood, and Priestley, and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.' (Gladwell, Group Thinking)

Now, to return to Collins, we have to acknowledge that he does not give an account of the principles that may define the networks as he does not supply us with a 'causal explanation of ideas and their changes'. What he does, however, is to

provide us with a compendium of intellectual networks as such which are supposed to count for an explanation. Collins sees the intellectual world as a massive conversation, a sort of struggle in which intellectuals elbow out 'adversaries', try to make their way to the fore. One succeeds in this struggle by making either of these two claims: 'My ideas are new' and 'My ideas are important'. He points out that there are similarities between the way intellectual networks across the world function (for example, we are told that logic and epistemology had a stimulating effect on philosophy of both the Greek classic period, as well as the Chinese period of 'hundred schools'), but there is not much offered in the direction of how networks interaction. What is important for Collins is simply the fact that human interaction is inexhaustibly fertile and that philosophy is deeply rooted in human society itself. In Collins' words, 'As long as there are intellectual networks capable of autonomous action to divide their own attention space, there will be philosophy. If we but knew the social structure of the intellectual world until the end of human-like consciousness in the universe, we could chart as long a sequence of future generations of philosophers'. (Collins, 857)

The point so far is that Collins is right in saying that innovation in philosophy (and not only) happens in networks. Collin's book illustrates that. As well, does Uglow's. Now, if we are to extrapolate and consider (instead of friends coming over for dinner every month when there's a full moon, or eating strudel Wednesdays afternoon while debating over the unconscious) something the size of a culture. How does a culture engage itself in dialogue with other cultures? On what basis? How does this exchange take place? Between people, there is the way of the dialogue. We recognize the other as the other and we cherish their input. When we talk about cultures, is it going to be the same?

3.

In order to find my way into this field, I will look for help in one of Charles Taylor's most influential and seminal essays - *The Politics of Recognition*.

Taylor points out (and Collins could not agree more) that mainstream philosophy often overlooked one important feature of human life, namely its dialogical character. Human identity, Taylor considers, is created 'dialogically', in relation to others. Because it is partly shaped by recognition, the withholding of recognition (or misrecognition) can be damaging to a person's dignity. 'We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression'. (Taylor, 230)

Understanding that one's identity is not generated inwardly, monologically, is crucial in understanding the close connection between identity and recognition.

It should be mentioned that Taylor does not take language to mean strictly the words we use when we are speaking. He broadens the view and takes into account other modes of expression such as art, gesture, love, etc., which we acquire in interaction with others or, using a phrase introduced by G.H. Mead - with our 'significant others' - and through which we not only communicate, but also define ourselves.

'Thus my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.' (Taylor, 231)

Differently put, my identity depends on being recognized by the others. It is only then that my identity can be regarded as authentic. The 'inwardly derived, personal, original identity' is not recognized as such *a priori*. Rather, it achieves that through interaction and exchange and this is not an easy endeavour since no guarantee is given as to its success. It is a fragile project which can fail at any time because it depends on both interacting parties.

Now, multiculturalism, according to Taylor, is a logical extension of the politics of equal respect and the politics of recognition, which are the two important

traditions in liberal democratic theory. On the one hand, we have the politics of equal dignity, based on the idea that all humans are equally deserving respect and equal rights; on the other hand, the politics of difference, based on the need for recognition of the unique identity of individuals and groups. These two perspectives appear to be incompatible, because the former requires treating people in a difference-blind manner, while the latter demands differential treatment, but Taylor maintains that both are built on the notion of equal respect. The difference is, considers Taylor, that:

'with the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or of this group, its distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is a cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity.' (Taylor, 234)

For Taylor, we should always work with the presumption that 'all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings'. In other words, any culture that proved to be lasting, must be so because it has something of worth, something inherently valuable. As well, in order to understand a very different culture and appreciate the value of its contributions, there must be what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons," in which 'we learn new vocabularies of comparison and where our standards are transformed by the study of the other'.

To combine these two points, it can be said that we would be able to find something valuable in the other cultures, if we at least care to expand our horizons in a Gadamerian fashion. Any approach to other cultures has to take this into account. Thus, we should all recognize the equal value of different cultures; we should not only let them 'survive' and struggle in a sort of competition of cultures, but acknowledge their worth as such.

'Indeed, for a culture sufficiently different from our own, we may have only the foggiest idea *ex ante* of what its valuable contribution might be. Because, for a sufficiently different culture, the very understanding of what it means to be of worth will be strange and unfamiliar to us. To approach, say, a raga with the presumption of value implicit in the well-tempered clavier would be forever to miss the point.' (Taylor, 252)

Cultures that have survived long enough and thus have something to say to humanity may not be easily scrutinized with the help of 'tools' used on regular basis in other cultures.

If for Kant dignity was implied by our status as rational agents, capable of directing our lives through principles, for Taylor the basis for our intuitions of equal dignity (although they may change in time) is a Universal Human Potential, a capacity that all humans share. This Universal Human Potential accounts for forming and defining one's identity, not only as an individual but as a culture as well. That's why, this potential should be equally respected in everyone, individuals as well as cultures. Potential, here, should not be understood as 'yet unrealized' or 'undeveloped', etc. It only refers to our approach to another culture whose value is only potential for us, until we are able enough to discover it as well. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. As an example, Taylor refers to the American novelist Saul Bellow (Nobel prize for literature 1976) who is

'[...] quoted as saying something like "When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy we will read him", this is taken as a quintessential statement of European arrogance, not just because Bellow is allegedly being insensitive to the value of Zulu culture, but frequently also because it is seen to reflect a denial in principle of human equality. The possibility that Zulus, while having the same potential for culture formation as anyone else, might nevertheless have come up with a culture that is less valuable than others is ruled out from the start. Even to entertain this possibility is to deny human equality'. (Taylor, 236)



The error committed by the American writer has to do less with an insensitive mistake in evaluation and more with the denial of a fundamental ethical principal. This shows the depths of ethnocentricity and the difficulties which come along with it. If we are to put ourselves in Bellow's position, we have to expect that excellence can only be something matching our own (European) criteria (when the Zulus produce a *Tolstoy*). And not only that: we also assume that other cultures had nothing yet to say to us and their contribution is situated in a fuzzy future (*when* the Zulus produce a Tolstoy). There is no trace of enlarging horizons here. There is no hope of finding something valuable here. All there is has to do with waiting for the others to stretch or shrink to fit the outlines and the frames already prepared.

'There must be something midway between the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other. There are other cultures, and we have to live together more and more, both on a world scale and commingled in each individual society. What we have is the presumption of equal worth: a stance we take in embarking on the study of the other. Perhaps we don't need to ask whether it's something that others can demand from us as a right'.  
(Taylor, 256)

To sum up, Taylor holds that in a world which becomes smaller at a very fast pace, in which cultures' interaction is a daily event, we have to be ready to re-analyse our attitude accordingly and consider it their right to ask for a presumption of equal worth in any attempt to understand them.

4.

Collins stresses the importance of social interaction in the process of making philosophy, of bringing something new into it. 'Thinking has a social form', he notes towards the end of his book. There are no isolated brains or bodiless minds. Thinking, or 'verbal thinking' is an activity made up of either internal or manifest

conversations. Truth can only come to light in a social network, concludes Collins. As for the future...

'[...] the future will consist in still further fanning out rather than convergence. [...] Crossing disciplinary boundaries expands the possibilities still further. Reflexive methods, treating a topic from the viewpoint of its history, of feminist critique, of its social production, of textual rhetoric, and other standpoints, results in further fanning out in the pattern of permutations and combinations.' (Collins, 879)

This fanning out should also comprise crossing cultural boundaries, a process which, as Taylor pointed out, is not at all easy and about which Collins seems to go over rather lightly. *The Sociology of Philosophies* produces a vast compendium of world philosophies but this is done, somehow, at the expense of intensive considerations, of more refined and detailed analysis. Illustration in and of itself is far from any empirical wrapping up. Moreover, Collins seems to be rather swift in categorizing and classifying philosophers, in counting them and measuring their influence (and here, again, extensiveness weighs more than intensiveness), etc. This only testifies to the fact that 'philosophies' are made to fit a certain framework and thus, 'the first history of world philosophies' should be rather titled 'the first European history of world philosophies'.

Nevertheless, Collins is right in saying that truth can only come to life in social networks and that dialogue ensures a connection among people. However, dialogue in itself is not enough when it comes to cultures. It surely establishes a connection among them but prior to that we should be able to recognize the equal value of the Other, we should be ready to expand our own horizons in order to understand something that is not Us, or made in our fashion and not expect the Other to mold onto a ready made structure.

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