

Steps to non-obvious discoveries. An interview with Randall Collins

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Abstract

This contribution consists of an elaboration of two interviews with Randall Collins, held in Trento and Milan in Spring 2017, within the context of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the journal *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*. Collins touches upon his early career stage and the relationship with prominent figures in the field of sociology such as Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, and Talcott Parsons. Further, he discusses the relation between social theory and non-scientific literature, ethnography and fictional writing, the origin and development of his microanalysis of violence.

In what follows, we present the outcome of the authors' work on the transcriptions of two interviews with Randall Collins, who has then also revised and approved the following text. The latter, therefore, does not reflect chronologically the arguments discussed, but remains anyway faithful to the transcriptions. The first interview took place in Trento, on April 25, 2017, and was conducted by Chiara Bassetti, Andrea Brighenti and Giolo Fele; the second one has been held in Milan by Sebastiano Citroni and Gianmarco Navarini on April 27, 2017.

Given his systematic and significant contribution both to qualitative research and social theory, Professor Collins had been invited by the editorial board of *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* for the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the journal. Indeed, alongside seminars at the University of Trento (Department of Sociology and Social Research, April 26), Milano Bicocca (Department of Sociology and Social Research, April 27), and Genoa (Department of Education Sciences, April 28), on April 29, 2017, he gave a lecture on "The Visual Data Revolution and Qualitative Sociology" in occasion of the celebration, held in Bologna, at the il Mulino publisher headquarters. The lecture was then published on the issue 2/2017 of the journal.

Randall Collins is Dorothy Swaine Thomas Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Along his career, he published more than twelve books and hundreds of articles, both on scientific journals and in his two blogs (<http://sociological-eye.blogspot.com/> and <http://creativity-via-sociology.blogspot.com/>). He worked with prominent figures in the field of sociology, including for instance Erving Goffman and Herbert Blumer, and he both witnessed and contributed to the development of the discipline from the mid-sixties on.

In the following, Collins touches upon his early career stage and the relationship with such figures. Other themes include the relation between social theory and non-scientific literature, ethnography and fictional writing, the origin and development of his microanalysis of violence. These topics does not exhaust the issues covered during the interviews, they have been selected by the authors for their relevance with respect to ethnography and qualitative research.

We would like to start from your general attitude towards sociology: what is sociology for you, and what does it mean to be a sociologist nowadays?

In my opinion, sociology is the most interesting of all fields. When I was a student at Harvard initially thought I was going to study engineering. Then I discovered all the courses in the social

sciences, and in philosophy and literature. I liked comparative literature, although the professors mainly did close analysis of texts, which was called New Criticism at that time. My school friends and I admired writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, Balzac. But admiring literature is not the same thing as admiring literature professors! Literature professors have become more interesting thirty years later because they discovered what they call “theory”, which is bringing in the sociological dimension. They go too far with post-Modernist philosophy, that everything is a text, because in the real world everything is not just a text. But to approach literature in that way is a fruitful idea. Sociology makes anything more interesting.

Can you tell us something about when you were a young sociologist? The fact of having studied with Herbert Blumer, Erving Goffman, and other ones... which creativity and ideas did it give to your work?

When I was at Harvard, Talcott Parsons was famous and infamous: the latter because he wrote so abstractly that it was hard to understand what he was talking about concretely. But Parsons was a powerful teacher: the best course I ever had was his course on the sociology of religion, which was basically Weber and Durkheim, giving a grand perspective. Parsons was not a friendly professor as one is supposed to be today: I remember going up to him after class, I asked him a question and he just said “Ask the teaching assistant” and he walked away; he was not going to talk to an undergraduate. He had us read Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and I thought “This is the best theoretical book I have ever read”. When I went to Berkeley, Reinhard Bendix taught that the importance of Weber was not in religion but in politics, bureaucracy, class struggles, taking the opposite position from Parsons, but together adding up to a comprehensive understanding.

Also at Berkeley, Herbert Blumer was the enemy of functionalists like Parsons: he would say “Where is society? Point to what it looks like!” Blumer was just publishing his lifework, *Symbolic Interactionism*, which became a very popular position. There were even some British ethnomethodologists, in the end of the 1960s, who were saying: “If we stop talking about social class it would not exist; it is just constructs!” I thought that was superficial of course. Then there was Goffman: he was the star of a department with a lot of stars! He was not flamboyant, he knew that he was the star. He would turn people away from his seminars: there were so many students they were sitting on the floor and Goffman in the front talking in a very low voice, as if to say, “If you cannot hear me, goodbye!” He had a strange personality, but he inspired people without attempting to do so.

Jumping straight away to ethnography, one of the reference person for the field is Clifford Geertz, who claimed that society is a text, to put it bluntly. Probably, not as anthropologists but as sociologists, we have something to say against this position. What do you think?

I had some encounters with Geertz when I was at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton in 1974 — I was in my “hippie phase” and we did not get along. This was just the beginning of his fame. In more recent years I read again his famous piece about cockfighting in Bali. As everyone knows, it has two parts. The first part is a wonderful ethnography of the strategies that people use when they must venture their social prestige, and it is wonderfully written, from the point of view of telling what it is like to be an ethnographer among foreign people. Then the second part, which is what made him famous: “thick description”. The first part is not about the code, it is about people interacting strategically. It is as if Geertz decided “I have a good piece that people want to publish and I will add my philosophy onto it at the end”. The two things do not fit together, and unfortunately it was the second part that was more influential.

Maybe we should be worried of just the opposite, not that literally people discover sociology but the fact that sociology discover literally studies. So, in a sense we have, especially in cultural sociology, the so-called semiotic turn.

We can also look at this historically. Sociology as a research discipline dates from the late 19th century: studies on the family, studies on poverty, studies of criminals, but just descriptive information. Durkheim is the real breakthrough. There is wonderful material in the biography of Durkheim by Marcel Fournier. He describes Durkheim saying to his followers, “We must make surprising discoveries”, that people would look up to sociology. Durkheim set out to make surprising discoveries about suicide, and about crime. He moved into religion because he could make more surprising statements there. Before, let us say, 1890, who were the sociologists? Balzac is a better sociologist than Comte. Balzac described French society like an ethnographer, although I do not know how Balzac got his information. A few years later Zola deliberately went out and interviewed people before he wrote his novels. James Joyce was famous for his stylistic innovations but he is also a naturalistic writer and a very good observer. In my blog *The Sociological Eye* I edited his *Night Town* segment, removing all the fantasy sections and keeping the actual description of the customers, the whores, the police, and forth... it is our first good ethnography of a prostitution district.

We liked much your piece on Joyce. You can apparently take Joyce in order to show the functioning of mind, the stream of consciousness —nothing to do with sociology, with social life. But actually you demonstrate beautifully the contrary. Do you have additional thoughts on that? Not only in terms of what you could find but also in terms of the ways in which you demonstrate that. We think it is useful for sociologists to think of a method in order to study, for instance, literature. You show the way in which you could find sociology where nobody could find it.

It is a matter of understanding enough about literature as literature to be able bracket the literary aspects. Joyce’s stylistic innovations are famous. But if you look at his earlier works, he is still very much a naturalist. He is part of the movement admiring Ibsen, because Ibsen describes real domestic conflicts and real women. Joyce learned Norwegian to read Ibsen. Joyce's early writings had trouble getting published because they had too much about sex for those times, and he receives attacks from the catholic institutions. It is interesting that he moved to Trieste. Why would he move to a catholic country if he tried to escape from it? But Italy is also an anti-clerical country, maybe that is the reason. If we go back before the naturalists, it becomes hard to find sociology in the guise of literature, because they were not trying to be realistic; you cannot use Ariosto as a sociologist, maybe for understanding myths, but not for understanding society. But at the time of Kafka: we know Kafka worked for a big insurance company, and he grasped the ethos of bureaucracy just as it was beginning.

Can you say something regarding your way of reading Joyce: do you have a systematic way of addressing the study of texts?

I have read *Ulysses* maybe six times, and after about the third time, I began to see what was happening as realistic description, and what part is the author's style. It is not difficult to see what the fantasies are and what his descriptions are, if you compare it with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce had become the favorite student at the Jesuit school, so they let him go out at night, and he goes walking in the red light district. There is a passage where he is sitting in a pub, waiting to get up his nerve to find one of the whores. He puts his glass down and he sees the moisture makes a pattern on the table. It is the time he is starting to become a naturalistic writer,

less concerned with plot than with realistic details of experience. Good novelists are good observers of micro details.

There is a ratio between how long it takes to read about something and how long it takes for it to actually happen. If you are reading Max Weber, you could go through a thousand years in one minute. If you are reading the Old Testament of the Bible, you might have a couple of years go by in ten seconds of reading. But the Bible sometimes will come down to one scene, particularly the New Testament describing Jesus interacting with people, where something is happening in five minutes and you can read it one minute. With Joyce, he takes longer to describe it than for it to happen. It is not a one-to-one ratio, it is below one-to-one.

Faulkner is another writer that I have read a lot. He has tremendous rhythm, almost hypnotic. I do not know how consciously Faulkner was imitating Joyce, or also Freud, but it is that kind of phenomenological viewpoint. At the same time he is a great ethnographer of a Southern town, with all its love and hate between the races. His descriptions of violence are accurate-- time disappears, I cannot hear anything, there is a blur; there is an orange flash and later the bodies lying there. Hardly any social scientist did good analysis of violence until the 1990s. Before then it was just statistics collected from the police.

You taught a lot of courses on different topics. Also you are a novelist and a philosopher...

Yes, I am now publishing a novel. It is an offshoot of the violence book, called *Civil War Two*. When I finished the micro sociology of violence book I said I would do a succeeding volume on macro sociology. This should have a chapter on the sociology of war; then I realized that the modern military believe that they are undergoing an historic revolution: computers are going to eliminate the fog of war. This was quite a challenge because my theory of violence is about emotions: can computers overcome that? I started to read the military literature, and interviewing officers who have fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the wars they are fighting now are asymmetrical wars: one side has high-tech weapons, and the other side does not. I decided to write a thought experiment: what would happen if two high tech computerized armies fought each other? How could that happen? The US army could split into two, just as happened one hundred and fifty years ago. That is why it is called *Civil War Two*. When I started writing it was George Bush and his enemies and now you can read it as Trump and his enemies. America elects a president that half the country hates, so the country has a Civil War, which is what happened when Lincoln was elected president. But now each side has high tech-- it is what the war of 1861-65 would look like if it was fought now. My daughter and I set up a publishing company called Maren Ink to sell the novel online on Amazon, in electronic edition and also print copies.

Can you give us a suggestion about creativity and writing in these two fields: one is fictional, the other one is the academy and, in particular, theoretical research: how can a sociologist link or improve from one field to the other?

It is difficult to go from an academic field to the writing field because our perspective is what Bourdieu would call "production for producers", instead of production for consumers. Writing is like learning any other profession, you have to be immersed in the other people who are skilled at it. Many novelists started as journalists, which gave them the habit of writing every day for a deadline; and writing professionally, to fit what the newspaper has room to print. Good novelists also are ethnographers, who sometimes deliberately seek material for their novels. Hemingway would search out news stories, but would save the best material for his novels.

But sometimes the experience happens by accident of one's life course, which later becomes a novel. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is based on being an officer in the Crimean War, but adding female characters to make the book more popular-- just as an opera composer would add parts for a soprano. Tolstoy is also an excellent micro-sociologist, which is why *War and Peace* is 1000 pages long-- it covers many years with scenes in micro detail. Dostoevsky did not become a major writer until he gets arrested for being a political radical and was sent to Siberia where he met murderers and peasants. When he came back he had wonderful material about the people he met in prison; all his great novels use same kind of material-- radicals and murderers. Dickens was from a middle-class family, but his father went to debtors prison and he gets sent to work in a factory doing child labor; suddenly there is an inheritance and he is back in the middle class but with the advantage of being the only respectable Englishman who actually knows what lower class life is like. What is crucial for literary writers is being good observers of some part of the world that other literate people have not seen.

Is there any practical advice?

You would not want to be like Dostoevsky and get yourself sent to Siberia because you might not come back. But something like that: Hemingway volunteered to be in the World War when he did not have to be and then everything that happened to him he later turned into a novel. What you need to take from sociology is being a careful observer and having some detachment. The two things that kill academics as popular writers is that we are too abstract even if we are writing concretely, as the aspect of things we are interested in are abstract; the other obstacle is not being detached enough from ourselves to write professionally for an audience.

You are saying that a good novelist and a good sociologist share this ability to observe. But then for both there is the necessity to describe and give it somehow to a third party. Is there a link between what you observe and the way in which you describe it? I mean the attention to the details should be also in the writing.

There is no necessary link, and that is why for a long time people have had inaccurate views. People say things which are not at all true because ordinary rhetoric gets in the way. You have to learn to be a good observer. Now we have academic disciplines and a divide between sociology and anthropology. For Durkheim they were not divided. The separation comes from England, where sociology was considered to be merely a social reform movement in behalf of the poor people, and universities like Oxford did not teach sociology. The first good observers among anthropologists were Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, who developed the method of living among the native peoples for a long time, and getting to know how they think and behave; you cannot merely be a traveler asking colonial officials what the natives are like. That was important for sociology since some of the most innovative ethnographers, like Erving Goffman were trained by these anthropologists. Goffman was trained by Lloyd Warner, who was one of Radcliffe-Brown's students, and worked in Australia. When Lloyd Warner got a university job in the United States, he said: we know more about the aborigines than about modern people. He picked a medium-size city in Massachusetts, and concluded: "there are six tribes here, there is the upper-upper class, then the lower upper class", etcetera, seeing classes as tribes. Warner was attacked for not being Marxist enough, for not emphasizing the economic dimension. Nevertheless, it is a good description of social classes as tribes, stacked one above the other like a totem pole, where to be part of the tribe you have to have perform its rituals. When Goffman picked an island, it was the Shetland Islands, and the tribes he studied were the working class and the upper class and their interactions.

We were thinking that there is a paradox regarding the fact that wanting to know what happen in a situation you have to rely on descriptions and thoughts made just after the fact. In which ways what a person can remember of what happened can be a description of what happened?

You are raising the point that I encountered in my own research, whether people can describe a violent incident if you ask them afterwards. It is yes and no. If you just let them say it in their own language, they'll give you a bunch of clichés, and they can be quite inaccurate. But if you ask them things like, "How many people were there?", and "Where were they standing and what did they do?", "How long did it take?", "Where were you standing? Where was the other guy?", "How loud was it?" they may not be able to tell you everything but they can remember the important details. It is surprising how bad journalists are at describing what they see. I have collected hundreds of pictures of people in riots and I have never seen a picture in which it looked like a film version of a riot, where everybody is attacking each other.

Mostly the photos show two lines of opponents in a standoff, with perhaps two or three guys in the front, who are giving the finger or throwing a rock, and if you look closely you can see that the other people are not paying attention. These are not the leaders of the group, and the other people are not following and the police are not giving too much attention to them either. Most of what is called a riot is not violent, just groups of people standing around waiting for something to happen. But when violence does start, what you see above all is empty space with people running around in it, trying to escape. Violence in photos of riots involves very few people. Typically five or six people catch one person from the other side, who has fallen down and is being beaten by the little group. I have seen that picture many times, in riots all over the world. But when you read the journalistic caption on the photo, it is sounds like everybody is rioting. But if you look at the picture, there are two people throwing rocks and about fifty people standing at a distance watching them. I have a video taken by a criminology researcher of a riot in Philadelphia a few years ago. Saint Patrick's day, traditionally, is a day when everybody drinks on the street, in a certain district. The researchers drove around with a camera all day long; in about six hours of film, there were four minutes of violence. I have been in riots too, and there is a lot of running around, smell of tear gas, but very little violence. A riot is much more in the dramatics than the actual behavior.

You mention the issue of people that are not good in describing also in chapter one of your book on violence, and you point to the fact that we do not have in our ordinary discourse a good vocabulary in order to express this things, to describe the details which are not verbal or what is happening in a situation. But I have this feeling, that this is partially true also in academic discourse, not only in ordinary discourse. If you take some time to describe in detail what happen from the emotional dynamic point view, there are a lot of colleagues that are getting bored, "Why are you telling me all these things?" I was wondering, what you think about it?

If people are very theoretical or ideological, it is hard for them to move off of their fixed ideas. But for most ordinary people, you can ask them questions like, how long did it take? did it feel like you were losing track of time? How were you breathing, were you breathing hard, did you feel relaxed, did you feel hot or sweating. Once you ask people those questions they are pretty good at remembering, since these were exciting events. Sometimes you need to give people more background about what you want to know.

For instance, when I was writing the micro-violence book, a colleague called me up saying, "Would you like to interview a mafia hit man?", and I said okay, and we arranged to meet at a an ordinary restaurant along the highway. I met him at the bar, and I said to him, "I do not want to know who

you are and I do not want to know what you've done but I want to ask you questions about how people in your line of business do things." And then I talked a bit about what I knew about military violence, just to let him know that I knew something about violence. And then I heard some interesting things from him. He put great emphasis on the point that, if you are good as a hit man, people cannot be suspicious of you, and you have to appear as a completely ordinary person. He really got into the details of what is it like to appear to be an ordinary person. At the same time — this is typical of the mafia— he was given information about where his target lived, what his daily habits were, where he parked his car, that kind of things. I told him about some mafia hits that I knew had happened in Philadelphia, and he was interested in that, it was a way of getting the conversation going. My main difficulty with him was that I talked with him for several hours, and in the end we walked out to the parking lot, I could not get him to stop talking. His problem in life was that he felt he was an expert at what he was doing, he had accumulated a lot of money, which he had hidden; but people just thought he was an ordinary working class guy, and he could not tell anybody his stories of how good he was.

We started with the question of how you can do an in-depth interview with somebody about a field where people are not good observers. Mafia assassins, on the other hand, are very good observers. That is their most important skill. To the extent that I have developed a theory of violence, it is about the social techniques of people who are good at violence. What makes them violent is not so much that they are more immoral than other people. A lot of people are not moral, but most of them are not good at violence. Even among gang members, most of them are not very good at it. They just pretend to be.

Where do you possibly get the data, because it could be anywhere and the fact that it could be anywhere makes it difficult to choose actually where to look for it?

There are a couple of possibilities. One of them is filming people in particular locations, it could be in a cafe, in a park, a street corner, etcetera. The other one possibility is collective ethnography by trained observers. Perhaps you know the book by David Grazian, *On the Make* [2008.] It is a collective ethnography, as he recruited hundreds of his students to describe going out to a nightclub and then he himself would go out in the daytime and interview the people who work at the nightclub. Grazian assembles the scene from the point of view of the girls, the boys, the waiters, the bouncers, the club owners. Grazian describes it as a prestige-chasing situation: the boys are trying to get prestige among themselves by what women they can meet, and the girls are playing at putting them off. The descriptions in Grazian's book are not very micro, but a summary; they give a general account of what they did in the evening, but they are not getting a minute-by-minute picture. We should be able to fill in the detail if we are interested, for instance, in how sexual prestige is achieved, or fails. Many places now have CCTV, so we could actually study the micro-processes. There is a lot of CCTV footage - for the most part, people have not thought of interesting things to do with it. Mostly videos are collected in case a crime happens, and if not, they throw it away. There are certainly more opportunities, as many people produce videos from their mobile cameras.

Your first article on violence, "Three Faces of Cruelty. Toward a Comparative Sociology of Violence" was in 1974, the year before Conflict Sociology. That paper make me think to a basic question: is it possible to write a book on micro-history?

This kind of book has already been written by Norbert Elias. He was at the Frankfurt School in the 1920's where his colleagues were Marxists or Weberians, and some of them Freudians. Elias used Weber against Freud: Freud is correct for modern times, but if we go back to the Middle Ages,

Freud is wrong because people did not repress sex or other bodily urges. Now there is a movement of Elias scholars in Holland and in England. Elias interprets Freudian repression as what he calls a *habitus*, although not in the same sense as Bourdieu, because it is a Freudian unconscious created by historic change.

When did you start to study violence?

I seriously started studying this when I was a visiting professor at Harvard. Boston is an area where there are a lot of white gangs, not just black gangs. Since it is expensive to live right at Harvard, I lived at some distance. I was walking down the street around seven o'clock in the evening and I can hear somebody breaking bottles. I can see this guy but he is not picking up the trash, he is taking bottles out of the trash and smashing them so you can hear the glass break. Then I hear a car door slam. Now I see there are two young guys up the street, Irish or Italian, but working class looking young guys. One of them yells out something like "Hey Joey! I am going to get you Joey," and the two of them run out towards the solo guy. The solo guy stops in the middle of the street, and starts yelling: "*Two against one, two against one! Fair fight, fair fight!*" I stopped to watch them, I was about 40 meters away, and a woman who was coming along the street stops behind me like she is curious but did not want to be too close. The three tough guys in the street went on yelling at each other. Then we the audience get tired and they get tired, and after a few minutes the threatened fight breaks up and everyone went away.

After this, I started looking for these kinds of incidents. I will tell you about another episode that occurred near where I lived in center city of Philadelphia. It was around traffic-jam time in the late afternoon when there are lots of cars on the street. A young white guy, may be 25 years old, was riding a bicycle in between the cars and he got hit by a taxi. He was not hurt but his bicycle was knocked over, and he is embarrassed. The white guy was menacing the taxi driver (who looked like an African immigrant) and yelling for him to "come out, come out", but the taxi driver would not come out and fight with him. The other people in cars start blowing their horns because he left his bike in the street while he stands in front of the taxi, blocking all the traffic. Eventually —I do not mean a long time, it was probably 60 seconds— with the people blowing their horns because they are angry at him, he picks up his bike, throws it on the sidewalk and gets out of the street. All this happens about 20 meters from the corner and now the light turns red. A couple of cars have gone through and the African taxi driver is gone. But there is another black guy, further back in the queue who had been blocked, he looks like a criminal tough guy, he has a cool-looking white Mercedes, and he yells out the window "Oh you asshole" or something like that. The white guy picks up the chain lock from his bike and walks back out into the street, while the black guy starts to get out of his Mercedes and fight him. But they both stop before they meet; probably the black guy looked at the chain and thought "Shit, my nice Mercedes!" Also people are blowing their horns again, and the light has turned green. The standoff ends; the black guy gets back in his Mercedes and drives off. The white guy gets back on his bike and does the same damn thing again, riding recklessly among the cars. Falling down in front of the taxi was like an affront to his self-esteem, but he couldn't get anyone to fight so he could get his honor back. Throughout the incident, the audience-- consisting of people in the other cars-- wanted the confrontation to end. As I was able to show by comparing across incidents, the attitude of the audience has a powerful effect on whether a fight will happen or will abort.

that was the starting point of your reflections...

Yes, but theoretically the starting point was realizing that in my book "Conflict Sociology" [1975] I was doing Weberian/Marxian conflict theory, but there was no conflict in it; it was just antagonistic structures. I started to look for research on conflict. Studies by sociologists on the American army in the Second World had found most soldiers were not firing their guns. That was the beginning point of the analysis; then I started collecting photos of riots. After living in California where it is suburban, I began teaching in Boston and Philadelphia, where if you just stand on the street you'll see something threatening.

Was this also a way to grow from macro to micro?

Marx is macro; Weber has a micro element when he talks about action, but you never see an individual doing anything, it is just a philosophical concept. American sociology over the years was taking most of its theory from Europe, but it did have an impetus towards doing research; a lot was statistical research but some was observational, and this turned out to be better at making discoveries. Observations are necessarily micro, because the world is experienced on the micro level.

As scholars and sociologists we tend to see the micro, meso and macro distinctions as frames that we apply to social processes, which mean that the same process can be seen at different scales, or levels. But the way you argue seems different: in a Weberian way, you approach the point of view of the actors and how they see the situation in which they are involved. According to you, the micro, meso and macro are just frames of the social researcher or they can be taken from the point of view of the actors?

This is basically the neo-Kantian point that we look at observers' categories, and if you are a philosophical idealist there is nothing behind the representations, nothing but the categories of perception. But that is not true: there is a more complicated universe in which categories exist. This skeptical argument is associated with the Postmodernists: researchers cannot get out of their discourse, nothing is accessible beyond it. It is like claiming the Gulf War did not happen-- it did not happen unless you were there and you got blasted by it.

I want to draw a connection to differences among social classes: there is research about poor people and people who live in peasant villages whose world is entirely in their immediate network; they do not see much of anything at a distance. The upper classes have wider networks and they have more abstract categories. It would not make sense to talk to somebody in the lower classes about statistics, but upper classes talk about them all the time: they read The Wall Street Journal and turn to the pages to know if their investments are going up or down and complicated manipulations like stock derivatives. This segregates people: members of the lower vs. upper classes cannot join the same conversation; they are living in different universes. My point is that categories of discourse and perception are not just media we see the world through; they are also determined by people's location in the social world.

I am interested in your category of violent styles. Can you tell us more about the role of interaction styles or styles of managing conflicts into triggering the development of violence?

Even when there is a lot of conflict, statistically there is a relatively small amount of violence. A gangbanger may say "I am going to kill you", but not today, it will be tomorrow, next week... then keep on putting it off and eventually it may never happen. That is a style. My friend Elijah Anderson says the "code of the street" is actually a way of avoiding violence. It is like: "This is my

street and you disrespected me, and we are going to do something about it” but it is only in a small fraction of times that they actually do something about it. You can see how people in the ghetto turn on and off this code. One morning I was out jogging in Philadelphia, at the border between white and black neighbourhoods. It was Sunday morning; there was a nice-looking young black guy coming down the street, he was happy and then he saw me coming in a dark jogging suit, and I could see his body posture going into the street code. It is partly about showing "Do not mess with me", but it is also a membership sign.

Compare the upper-middle class: you lose prestige by getting into a physical fight. There was a case of a famous sociology professor, Alvin Gouldner, who was a big guy, who came originally from the working class. During the Sixties, one of his colleagues accused him of having worked for the CIA. Gouldner went down the hall, angry, to speak with him, and then punched him; I do not think he hurt him. The other guy did what people in his social class do: he called his lawyer and he sued Gouldner for many thousands of dollars, and the story was carried on the front-page of the New York Times. Gouldner got a job offer in Europe and left the country. A few years later he wanted to come back, but no university would hire him. He was one of the most famous sociologists in the US but he would never have been allowed to come back and work in the United States; he broke the code. That is a real class distinction. Although he rose from the working class, once you get into the upper-middle class you better adopt their code.

Your observation brings also to another question we were talking about, regarding the fact that you can have a relatively easy access to the life of poor people, whereas there are much less ethnographies of the upper classes, the elite.

Yes, unless the upper class do it themselves. We have some good studies of upper class women, but it is hard to know what their husbands do, the everyday processes of how they wield power or make money.

Our wonder refers to the fact that there is this ethnography of the one percent, or ethnography of the elite, as some studies are labeled. But it is only on the work side. You can see what they do on their job, but you have absolutely no access or almost no access to what they do at home, how they manage their bodies for example, which is something intimate, and something that we know instead about migrants, poor people, working class members, and etcetera.

My formulation would be along the lines of Goffman: upper class people are front stage people. They want to control the front stage, they like being on the front stage and they will not let people other people into their back stage. Whereas lower class people, some of them do not even have a private area. If you are living on the sidewalk, you cannot control your front stage at all. Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is an eclectic book, not at all systematic, but it is an effort to understand what the structures of everyday life are like. His first project was about how upper class guests and working class employees in a resort hotel presented front stages to each other and hid their back stages. Goffman then decided to go into the schizophrenic ward of a mental hospital to see what it is like when people are not allowed to have a back stage. His two years of research in the mental hospital are ostensibly in his book *Asylums*, but it is mostly about comparisons. He says, “a mental hospital has the structure of a total institution, the nunnery has the same structure, the army boot camp has the same structure, prison, etcetera”. But he does not give you much of his data on the schizophrenia ward. Another book, *Stigma*, has more of the data, and especially in *Behavior in Public Places*, which is an odd title because his data there heavily comes from people who are

bad in public places. But that was his theory, rather an anti-Freudian theory. Everett Hughes (who was Goffman's teacher) told me that when Goffman showed up at Chicago as a graduate student in the late 1940's, he was an ardent Freudian, and then he converted to a sociological view. You can see Goffman's work as a criticism of Freud: Freud thinks it is something that happened in your childhood, I will show you that people become considered mentally ill when others cannot explain what they are doing in any other way. They break the ordinary rules of being both in public and in private. Goffman wrote at least four different books where he used his data from that mental hospital.

Talking about Goffman, particularly the ways in which he uses materials and data; we see that he uses different sources of data, from his own personal experiences, from newspapers, pictures, and etcetera. This seems also is your way of proceeding, by using different material and building on them.

Pragmatically, I have tried to get information anyway I can about what violence really looks like. In the eighties, I started collecting photos of any violence I could find, mostly just cutting them from the newspapers. In those days you could not even scan it, you just have to clip it out, or make a Xerox copy of it. At that time, my professional identity was as a Weberian sociologist, following Weber's method of worldwide historical comparisons of long-term macro processes. On the theoretical side, I was trying to foster a movement to build sociology around conflict, instead of around social functions. I was trying to integrate Marx and Weber, leaning to the Weberian side because of its more complex and empirically realistic theory. At some point I realized that I wrote about conflict but I never described any conflict. There is little explicit treatment of conflict in Marx, except *The Eighteenth Brumaire* or his account of the 1871 revolution in *The Civil War in France*. But in those writings Marx was working as a journalist; he tells you who the different political factions are and ascribes particular social identities to them. He did not tell you how on such and such a date people went into the streets to fight. Better descriptions of how conflict goes on are given by Thomas Carlyle in *The French Revolution*. He will tell you that "at six o'clock in the morning, all the fires were lit in Paris because they were making weapons to attack the Bastille." It is a great book on violence because it gives hour-by-hour detail, from which we can develop a theory of violence as a process. I have used Carlyle's data for a micro-analysis of the tipping point of the French Revolution in August 1789 (in an article in AJS 2017).

Mao said "Power comes out of the barrel of a gun". Now I would say Mao was wrong: power does not come out of the barrel of a gun, power comes out of being able to emotionally dominate people. I have mentioned research by sociologists in the US army in the Second World War who found only about 20% of soldiers in combat were actually firing their guns. Gradually more researchers have found this phenomenon and similar patterns in the police. Much of the material in my book on violence already existed, but nobody saw the significance of it: interviews with cops who describe that they had no sense of time while they were firing their gun, or they could not hear the sound of their gun going off — as if they fall into a psychological tunnel. My aim was to put it together into a theoretical pattern. Having already formalized a Durkheimian model of interaction rituals, enabled me to see that violent interaction is a strange variant of interaction ritual. Around that time the Rodney King incident happened (in 1991), when we first had video cameras and were able to see what police violence actually looked like.

You also describe the social techniques for been effective in doing violence, are those "techniques of the body" in Maussian terms? More generally, it seems that a sociological study of sport actions can be based on this social interactions in which there are embodied skills that then you have to

display. How to translate what we know about violent situations to ordinary situations, or to elite actions or specialized actions, like those in sports?

The violence book shows the tension that people are under when they try to commit violence, which is why you need special techniques to be successful at violence. The most important thing that we learn from micro-sociology of violence are the conditions by which people establish emotional dominance. Without that, confrontational tension keeps violence from happening. To put it the other way around, if you have the technique of not allowing the other person to establish emotional dominance, a fight soon becomes boring and ends. On the personal level, at least, there are techniques for stopping violence.

Conflict relations are mainly about emotional dominance. Solidarity relationships vary in a similar way. In everyday life, there is hierarchy between persons who are popular and persons who are not, with some "okay persons" in the middle. Why does this hierarchy exist? Instead of approaching the issue as if it is a long-standing personality trait, I suggest it is an interactional position. What we call "personality" consists of interactional techniques, or lack of techniques. The fact that people can perform solidarity ritual in everyday life gives my theory an optimistic view. This is Durkheimian optimism. But solidarity ritual easily turns into a hierarchy between people who have a lot of solidarity and people who do not.

Between those two processes —emotional domination and group solidarity— we can encompass most of social life. The upper class constitutes itself by being successful, and that is about emotional domination. But also it is to a certain extent about keeping up enough informal solidarity with people who could be your rivals, you need to know if they are your business enemies, what they are doing, and maybe you can steal their secrets from them, or hire their best people away from them. It is a tricky world that they are in. People think that Donald Trump is unusual. Trump is a typical businessman, he is just very good at being ruthless. But at the same time, he relies on his family as these are the only people he can trust. A French sociologist, Michel Villette wrote a wonderful book [*From Predators to Icons: Exposing the Myth of the Business Hero*; 2009] about how people make big fortunes both in Europe and the United States. Most of them grew up in families of entrepreneurs, not in families of bureaucrats or employees. Their families combined business and personal relationships, based on meeting the other people in their field. From a early age they learned the secret of the business. In a changing world, they learned where the technical innovations were being made. You don't need to create the innovation yourself, but only to wait until the innovator runs into financial troubles, when you can step in and take over what they have developed. You offer to buy them out and then, if it is a bad deal for them, just let them sue you, and you have enough money to not have to give in, just give a small settlement. Villette reported that 90% of the people mentioned in his book made their fortune by this tactic. These are the people who make a lot of money: some of them seem like nice people, but they are also very ruthless.

I was thinking about techniques and your work on charisma, magnetism, and these things that allows you to "win" or to be at the centre in ordinary life situations. You also developed a Goffmanian theory of sexual interaction, I was wondering which is the role of the erotic in ordinary situations. Is there a technique similar to emotional dominance or charismatic dominance within ordinary situations, and how does the erotic enter this ordinary situation notwithstanding what we do to keep it in a separate box of our life?

Sexual intercourse itself is a form of interaction ritual. The problem is the rising and falling intensity of love and sexual attraction. The two things are not the same, but people try to connect

them. Most of the time when people have what they call love, they want to turn it into sex. That may or may not work out, because successful sex is not automatic. People have to learn how to do sex with each particular partner-- how to build up the shared rhythm that constitutes an interaction ritual. The data that I have gathered on this process is from analyzing relationships with prostitutes. The striking thing is that customers want women to not be prostitutes while they are being prostitutes, like, I cannot get turned on to you because you are being too mercenary. You can read about this online where people describe their experiences with prostitutes. The main complaint is about sex workers who stop in the middle of sex and ask for more money. On one website, a guy was asking the other punters: "After you have sex, would it be okay to ask her if we could just lie there and cuddle together?" In recent years, sex workers advertise "the girlfriend experience". Love and sex are overlapping efforts. There is a sexual turn on —and I will come back to that in a minute because we do not know how that works— but the other half is the same thing that enables people to be friends-- being able to get into a good conversational rhythm, having similar things to talk about, and having the same kind of back stage view of the front stage. Friendship is a micro-skill or micro-resonance.

To go back to thinking about sexual attraction, it varies a lot because of sexual markets. These take the form: there is somebody who is very sexually attractive, and there are a lot of people attracted to her or him, and so they get in each other's way. I have heard this from my daughter, who is a model, and a very good-looking young lady, and she gets unhappy about "Why are all these men staring at me?" From her point of view, she could pick almost anybody, so, why would she want to deal with those men staring at her? The sexual market creates totally different viewpoints. This is why movie stars tend to marry each other, because they have the same problem with the public: thousands of people want to get near to them, so they pick somebody who understands their problem. The question remains why some people have more or less sexual attractiveness. Is this a general trait, or is it specific to particular relationships? I have observed some women, particularly women academics, who are actually quite attractive but they do not act attractive at all, and so they are not. It is a role to learn. Conversely, there are a couple of women I know (oddly enough both of them grew up in Argentina), and neither one of them, I would say, is attractive, but there is something attractive in their body movements and how they present themselves.

Somewhere you said that ethology is necessary, is the nearest science to sociology. Probably sexual interactions are just a beautiful opportunity to do ethology of social interaction between people. Nothing to do with meanings or exchanging values, but just with rituals of presenting themselves and organizing the situation and organizing the occasion.

If we are thinking in terms of close microanalysis, it would be interesting see what micro-gestures they are giving or not giving out as a sexual relationship progresses.

What do you think about the current spread of social media and new technology that allow people to overcome easily the tension and the emotional dynamics that are involved in the co-presence of the situation? Given that your argument on violence is that the situation prevents in many ways the outburst of violence, what do you think about the current transformation the face to face co-presence is undergoing?

If we think about this from a Goffmanian point of view, there are two related things that can happen with co-presence. One consists in some degree of solidarity or alienation, and the other one is prestige. In Goffman's famous dissertation about the Shetland Islands hotel, we see the workers who come out of the kitchen door and are polite to the customers, but when they go back in the kitchen

they show what we would now call resistance. I try to generalize this into a micro theory of stratification: the higher social classes dominate the front stages; lower class people are dominated by others on the front stage, they prefer to be in the back stage. In some structures they are not allowed to have a back stage; and that was Goffman's analysis of the schizophrenic ward, where there is little space for resistance. In Goffman's theory, the symptoms that mentally ill people display are actually resistance: I will piss on the radiator just to show my resistance to this situation.

Now, what happens when interactions are mediated? This is not new, we just have new forms of social media. When postal system developed in the 19th century, people could write letters; we can see in novels the self-presentation and strategic interaction that takes place in letters. Then came telephones and more recently electronic media which can transmit both text and images. Goffman was writing in the era of the telephone, but people still met face to face to perform the most important social occasions. I suppose we could have a party on the telephone while we all have a drink at home, but this would not be a very good party, it would lack collective effervescence. You could have a wedding by telephone, but nobody does it: co-presence adds something important to the ceremony. Now sociologists are beginning to analyze behavior on Facebook, and I have encouraged my students to do this. What they conclude is that Facebook is a front stage that is easy to manipulate: you may pretend to show your backstage but you are really showing a front stage version of a backstage.

Talking about the quality of the co-presence, the idea of closeness and distance have dramatically changed: it is now easier to be physically close by but not there, meaning detached from interaction. It is a possibility that has always existed but current technological development made things more easy.

The theory of interaction should not stay constant. As new media develop, the central sociological questions can still be asked: how does this affect solidarity? How does it affect prestige or power? Let me give a few observations about these points. First of all, powerful people do not like to use the media for their interactions. For instance, Steve Jobs wanted to meet important people face to face. His biography shows his technique of emotional domination. He wanted to meet physically with his engineers and technicians who were creating new products. And he did not just deliver a brief message: he was willing to take many hours to convince them of what he wanted the product to be. Colleagues said he had an almost magic power to convince engineers who initially said something was scientifically impossible —after six hours they would say, okay Steve Jobs says it can be done, let us try it. They called it "Steve's reality distortion field"-- in fact it was a very intense interaction ritual.

Are you saying that powerful people do not like to use the social media?

Yes! Powerful people are front stage people. They guard their backstage carefully, because that is where they deal with each other. It is hard for us to study it, since it is unusual to get this data. The biggest strategic move in Hillary Clinton's campaign versus Trump was to publicize a recording of Trump making sexual statements about women — that was definitely backstage! Ordinarily upper class people are delegitimated when their backstage is revealed. But Trump is so egotistical about his front stage that he just ignored it; he refused to be emotionally dominated. His opponents were outraged that they could not bring him down with a scandal. The opposition to Trump can be regarded as a Goffmanian outrage.

Back to the issue of co-presence: why should people spend money on a business class ticket to meet somebody when they could do it on-line? Because the people who are good at negotiating want to meet face to face, either because they feel they can dominate or just they can discern more information. Some high-ranking people have a Facebook account but a secretary puts things on it; they use it like an advertising agency. Moving from power to solidarity, it is interesting that the word "friend" has changed its meaning quite a lot. For the ancient Romans, *amicus* meant "ally". For modern people, a friend is backstage: your friends are the ones with whom you hang out, which is a slang expression meaning "we are not doing any serious work". Network researchers are not very sensitive to the micro level, although a network link is a repeated interaction. They operationalize a close tie as people with whom you discuss important topics. But that is not what friends talk about, maybe once in five years, but friends are mostly people with whom you have fun. This is in line with Bourdieu's theory: people are attracted to others who have the same habitus of consumption. It is a type of cultural capital but it also divides people. Bourdieu places emphasis on the exclusion and he misses that this is the main form of friendship: if you have the same cultural capital, that is what you talk about. Today people are divided by music-- different kinds of music brings some people together and excludes others.

Now, back to the social media. What kinds of things do people put up on Facebook? "I went to a concert", "That restaurant is good", etcetera, which automatically gets into the taste universe of who is included and who is excluded. Young people on the whole think they are egalitarian, but they overlook that tastes in entertainment divide people, rather than bringing them together. Similarly with humor, which is a good thing, creating moments of shared pleasure. But humor is segregating, because humor is mostly saying things which are literally not true and you are supposed to understand at two levels, but if you do not understand, it is just untrue. During the O.J. Simpson trial, a TV reporter interviewing a black woman said "Don't you think the prosecution is playing the race card?", and the woman said angrily that race is not a card. It was a good response at the level of strategic interaction. It illustrates Harold Garfinkel's point: that any statement can be questioned at great length, if you refuse to accept commonsense understandings. If you want to stop somebody else from carrying out an argument, you only need to ask "What do you mean by that?" after every utterance.

Moving to a different issue. You and other colleagues founded the two most important journals for sociological theory. How do you remember this enterprise? And what is the current situation of academic journals today according to you?

We go back to the 1970s, when there were two main American journals, the *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review*. Both were dominated by statistical research, although occasionally a theory paper was published. So there was a feeling that demand existed for another journal. A publisher wrote to me and asked if I would like to start a journal for our publishing company? Then I talked to Alvin Gouldner and he said "Yes, I got an offer like this from a Dutch publisher; why not join together and create a theory journal?" We decided to go to the Dutch publisher, with the Journal *Theory and Society*. Gouldner was renting a summer house in Italy, in Terracina, we went there and planned the journal and started inviting people to the editorial board. We decided to add some European sociologists, so we invited Pierre Bourdieu as co-editor; he came to our first meeting, which was at Bellagio. Bourdieu had not yet become famous and he liked having the attention of American sociologists. He told me, "I intend to conquer France by way of America." But he and Gouldner had a conflict over control of the journal. Bourdieu resigned, I did too (having taken Bourdieu's side in the conflict), and Gouldner had the journal to himself. A few

years later the Publications Committee of the American Sociological Association thought it would be a good idea to have a theory journal, to be called *Sociological Theory*. They liked the idea of having three editors and I was named editor along with Peter Berger and Irving Zeitlin. It was another triumvirate which disintegrated after some conflict, so I ended up being the sole editor.

Do you think there are new ideas in the current journal system?

My main complaint is about money. Most journals now are run by big publishers who are very concerned about being driven out of business by the internet. So now you must pay 40 euros for one article on-line, and that is bad for the authors because you want people to be able to read your article. It is one of the reasons why I decided to set up a blog: I write articles and give them away for free. The journals are important in a professional sense, however, because they provide selection by the network of colleagues. Sometimes that is bad because they may say "this article is not good because it did not cite me" or "this article is bad because it does not use the method I use". On the other hand, peer review does tend to select better articles. Books are still more important than articles, because you can buy a 200 page book for 20 dollars, which is a better deal than buying articles, and usually the treatment is more comprehensive. Thank God that book publishers are still there.