

Randall Collins is widely regarded as a leading figure in contemporary sociological theory. Eschewing interpretivist visions of the sociological project, Collins is an unabashed advocate of positivism and attempts, in his theoretical work, to formulate "generalized, causal, empirical explanations" (*Conflict Sociology*, 1975, p. 4) for social phenomena. Collins's positivism, however, diverges in at least two significant respects from that of mainstream American sociology. First, spurred on by an admittedly eclectic reading of Weber, Collins insists—in opposition to all presentist myopias—that sociologists with nomological ambitions should turn their attention to variation in the structure and culture of societies over the *longue durée* of human history. Second, distancing himself from the tendency of mainstream researchers to embrace—if only in the interests of parsimony—overly simplified models of human action, Collins grounds his theorization in a complex action-theoretical framework that, in his view, takes into consideration the emotional and semiotic contours of human action as these are revealed through phenomenological investigation. This framework, which revolves around the notion of "interaction ritual chains," marries insights from Goffman and from the Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms* to produce an image of individuals as strategic pursuers of "emotional energy" whose interactional choices, whatever their manifest meanings, take shape in an interactional economy where solidarity is the unit of exchange. Not content, however, to remain within the confines of action theory, Collins has mobilized the notion of interaction ritual chains to explore a wide-range of macro topics, from the structure of organizations to the geo-political situations of states, from social stratification to long-term developments in philosophical thought. These explorations, which have won Collins accolades at the same time that they have embroiled him in controversy, do not appropriate a Durkheimian concern with solidarity in the interests of a functionalist rendering of social processes. Rather, they superimpose an analytical focus on moral consciousness onto a broadly Weberian understanding of status group conflict, which Collins sees as a central dynamic in all social life. In his presentation to the theory@madison colloquium, Collins will, presumably, weave some of these theoretical considerations together to produce "a theory of sexual interaction"—a topic to which he has devoted considerable attention over the years. (by Neil Gross)