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Comment on Randall Collins/3. The Circulation of Violence. Techniques and The Role of Materiality in Randal Collins's Violence Theory

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Comment on Randall Collins/3

The Circulation of Violence. Techniques and The Role of Materiality in Randal Collins's Violence Theory

by Paolo Magaudda

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In reading Randal Collins' paper and the huge book on violence, from which the paper presented in "Sociologica" develops, I have been captured by two specific elements the author uses and would like to see them further developed. The former is the concept of the "technique" of violence and the way Collins sets the idea of "technique" quite at the center of his micro-sociological explanation of violence in society; the latter, partially connected with the previous, is the role accorded to artifacts and technologies in the process of construction of regimes of violence in society. Therefore, my comment will elaborate around these two elements: the centrality of the techniques and artifacts in explaining the phenomenon of violence. I will try to point out how a further analytical development of these two dimensions will allow expanding in a more structural form the overall argument on violence in society addressed by the author.

Indeed, I believe that taking into consideration in a more careful way these two elements could help Collins's theory to make a step forward, from what the same Collins defines as a "micro-sociological theory" to a broader conception related with the presence of violence in society. As I will argue later, taking techniques and artifacts into account more thoroughly would enable the comprehension of some more connections between the situated and individual interaction and the structural dimension of routines and practices connected with violence in society. While Collins's first book on violence is explicitly focused on the micro dimension of violence, the author is also working on the release of a second tome on the more structural, repet-

itive and institutionalized forms of violence [Collins 2008, 34]. Hence, my comments are also elaborated upon what I would like to find in the second book on structural violence the author is working on.

The Circulation of Techniques of Violence in Society

Let me start by considering the role of “techniques” in Collins’ paper. In practice, he says that is difficult to commit violent actions and, consequently, that human beings need some sort of help in circumventing the fear and the tension connected with these situations. Moreover, he also adds that the possibility to control the tension is given thanks to different kinds of interactional techniques of violence. This argument is developed quite clearly in the paper and has a prominent place in the overall analysis the author carries out in his long book. Here Collins reputedly affirms that the historical organization of these techniques is crucial in the evolution of the ways people delivered war. An example is the evolution of a disciplined social organization of troops, whose change had been fundamental to increase the length of battles, which ranged from the canonical one day battles of Roman and medieval age, through the three days of the more organized Napoleonic army, to the many months of the battles of the World Wars, as in the case of 10-months long battle of Verdun in 1916 [ibidem, 28].

The concept of “techniques” is central in Collins’s argument and is omnipresent within the long volume, where many different techniques are listed and analyzed. However, while the concept of techniques is used to explain how people manage violent situations, it seems to me that one interesting way to develop this point would be to see what there is beyond these techniques: the huge social work required for the existence, transmission and maintenance of these techniques in society. Here, my comment about Collins’s use of “violence techniques” is that a more careful and explicit consideration of how techniques are created, evolve, circulate, change, how they are taught and learned, could suitably expand the capability of Collins’s approach to make sense of the evolution of violence in society. The question is not only what kind of violence people can do thanks to the interactional techniques, but how society works to maintain and reproduce these techniques.

To develop this perspective, it would be useful to consider violence techniques not only as something to be used, but also as elements that require to be socially created, cultivated and constantly sustained. Collins is quickly referring to the fact that violent techniques need to be learned, but this aspect is only mentioned. I would like to see more on the foreground of his analysis on violence the fact that these

techniques also need to be taught and transmitted, thus requiring social agencies and actors directly or indirectly committed to this work of social transmission.

I stress this point because, looking to Collin's work, my impression is that this perspective on violence techniques is not alien to the framework sustaining the book. Especially, the question of the need to learn the techniques appears often, even if in a prevalently implicit way. For example, in his paper he deals with this topic when saying that people would not automatically be violent: before they need to "learn techniques of how to choose their victims and their moments of vulnerability." Anyway, both in the paper and in the book, the question of learning – and therefore of teaching – seems very rarely addressed by a direct route. For example, focusing on the question of learning techniques would also mean considering in which manner specific violent social domains, such as in the case of hooliganism (considered by Collins in chapter 8 of his book), are not only spaces where violence techniques are actually performed, but are also "institutions" and "agents" that contribute to developing and passing on these techniques to new generations.

Remaining on the example of hooliganism, take the case of the relationship between Italian hooliganism and violence. Violent fights between hooligans and policemen are an endemic feature of Italian society; in these situations young people learn many different things (such as grouping together and singing) and, among them, also how to manage violence and rioting. When we look at the overlay between violence outside football stadium and political demonstrations we can see that violent techniques learned within hooliganism can pass over to other domains (and vice versa; at this regard see Dal Lago and De Biasi [1994], Podaliri and Balestri [1998]). This is good example of what we can observe when we focus on how violence techniques circulate in different social domains and it usefully helps to explain how situations where violence techniques are performed are usually also situations in which these techniques are constantly reproduced and transmitted.

The creation and sustaining of violent techniques is work that requires a huge social, organizational and cultural labor. At this regard, a crucial element regards the circulation of knowledge and competences required in learning and performing these techniques. Therefore, the analysis of the social organization of violence techniques can be clearly helped by focusing on the ways in which these competences and knowledge, involved in the creation and stabilization of violence, circulate in society. Thus, what is interesting is also to focus on the material and cultural infrastructures that allow the creation and reproduction of these techniques in society. From this perspective, the analysis of violence primarily in terms of the mechanism of their social techniques opens the door to the analysis of the circulation of these social techniques and, consequently, to the social organization of this circulation. In doing so,

we are moving from the narrowed examination of individual violent interactions toward a more structural analysis of the material and cultural infrastructure of violence in society.

Material Artifacts and Technologies of Violence

The second point I want to highlight regards the role of artifacts and technologies in explaining violence and its techniques. Similarly to the previous argument, I have confidence that considering in a more detailed way artifacts and technologies could widen the range of explanation of Collins's theory and also strengthen the considerations elaborated upon the structural dimension of the social circulation of the techniques of violence.

Also, when analyzing the relationship between artifacts and technologies, we can observe that, although Collins's paper takes them into consideration, it does not go in deep to inquire their structural role in creating and stabilizing violence (and their techniques). For instance, in the paper Collins rightly introduces this matter considering the development of the "fight at distance" – those situations where there is no need to see the enemy and to perceive him as a human being. It is emphasized that the rise and diffusion of this technique at distance is strictly related with the emergence of new weapons and technologies, which have radically altered the methods of fighting. Moreover, it is noted that weapons have become smaller and more precise and that this had many consequences on phenomenology of battles, for example affecting how armies are displaced along the territories and make them occurring in broader spaces during smaller times. Collins points out a dialectic relationship between the change in the contemporary violence and the diffusion of new high technologies, such as video cameras and computerized identity checks. In short, changes in weapons and technologies deeply influenced the techniques of violence confrontation.

Here again, we can consider weapons and technologies not only as something that have consequences on the violent interactions, but as some element that are substantive part in the work of creating and stabilization of violence in society. In order to explain this second point, I will take a (theoretical) step back. Techniques in general, and techniques for violence in particular, are not individual strategies or the outcome of idiosyncratic schemes of action by single human beings. Rather, social techniques of violence can be seen as the product of shared social practices, which are common among localized and specific social groups. In this sense – and putting the matter in terms of a "theory of practice" (see Schatzky et al. [2001], Reckwitz [2002], Shove e Pantzar [2005]) – violence techniques are one fragment of a whole set of

elements needed to violent practices, which consist of an heterogeneous, but in some way coherent, assemblage of different elements: “forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” [Reckwitz 2002 249]. I myself have recently adopted this framework to explain changes in music consumption practices [Magaudda 2011] and I think it could be also useful when adopted in the inquiry of social practices of violence, within which techniques to circumvent the fear of violence can be interpreted as one of the elements contributing to making the practices of violence possible. In both music and violence practices, all elements involved (cognitive, cultural, material, psychological, etc.) are interconnected one another and what is important is not only to recognize each one of these elements, but also, above all, to understand how these elements interact, coagulate and co-evolve together.

Just to give a quick example: a change of a feature in weapons (i.e. their weight or their shape) has led to a transformation in their use and in the actual ways of fighting; but these changes also produce a modification in the cultural ideas of what fighting is; in the cognitive consideration of the “enemy”; in the emotional status connected with “pressing a button”; in the “techniques of violence,” in the ways they are learned, and so on. Considering violence as a social practice means looking at the whole set of elements contributing to the creation of the condition of fighting: from interactional techniques (on which Collins’s theory especially focuses) to weapons, passing through the cultural representation of violence and the pragmatic ways of committing violence.

Once we have a framework to understand how regimes of interactions, cultural representations and objects are all part of the same set of elements shaping violence in society, we can concentrate on the role of weapons and technologies. The assumption here is that weapons and technologies are embodying and transmitting a whole – even if not fully coherent – set of violent dispositions, understandings and techniques that characterize a given society. My specific comment is that, while Collins recognized that artifacts and technologies are at the center of the matter, their structural role could be further addressed. Particularly, he does not enter the discussion of what these weapons can tell us about the structural relation between society and violence. Indeed, as competences and knowledge implicated in violence techniques, technologies and weapon are not only useful tools to carry on violent actions, but can also be seen as the outcome of the work of an entire society that sustains certain forms of violence.

The major implications raised by this reflection for the development of Collins work on the more structured forms of violence is that material objects and technolo-

gies can be fruitfully considered as elements that give continuity and stability to the forms through which people manage violent situations. The role of materiality in structuring social relationships and in stabilizing shared paths of actions represents one of the main points raised by the “material turn” in social sciences, which has been influencing a section of sociological thought in the last fifteen years. While the attention to the role of materiality has been initially settled by science & technology studies (i.e. Latour [1987] and Bijker et al. [1987]) and by anthropological studies of everyday life (i.e. Appadurai [1986] and Miller [1987]), since the ninety different other fields of the social sciences have turned their interest to the constitutive and structural role of materiality on social relations. In this regard, readers of *Sociologica* have had the possibility to see (in issue 1/ 2008) how *the centrality of materiality* has also influenced a mainstream sector of sociological thought such as economic sociology [Sweedberg, 2008]; see also Pinch and Sweedberg [2008]. One of the main points raised by this theoretical milieu is that material objects and technologies could not only be seen as useful tools to perform some specific actions, but can also be analyzed as a material infrastructural dimension of social interaction. In the context of violence in society, objects and technologies can be seen not only as tools strategically used to circumvent the tension of violence, but also as the medium through which people learn to act and commit violence. Therefore, materiality can be fruitfully seen as one vehicle through which social forms of interaction (in this case violent ones) are constantly reproduced in society or rather transformed or altered.

Summing up my comments on Collins’s work, I have pointed out that, while his work makes intriguing references to the role of techniques and artifacts in shaping social violent interactions, a more analytical consideration of these elements could be a helpful way to further develop his analysis of violence in society. Indeed, when we consider the circulation of interactional competences, and violent artifacts associated with these competences, and if we see them in terms of how they contribute to stabilizing or changing patterns of social interactions, we have at disposal one more standpoint to analyze the structural presence of violence in society. The improvement generated by the perspective I have adopted is twofold. On one level, it allows to see social techniques not only as strategies involved in the interactional performativity of violence, but, in a more substantial way, as crucial elements in producing and reproducing the condition of existence of violence. Secondly, this perspective will also offer the opportunity to connect Collins’s explicitly micro-sociological analysis to a wider analysis of the social infrastructures enabling violent actions in society. This view could help understand in a deeper way that violence is not only the output of an individual management of fear and tension, but it is also

the outcome of shared social practices, regularly sustained by social agents, artifacts and cultures.

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Abstract: How explain macro trends in violence, such as historical shifts in rates of crime, while using a micro-theory of situational interaction? Wieviorka argues that the world-wide rise in crime rates since the 1960s resulted from the combination of a macro cause – the breakdown of regulated and limited class conflict – plus a micro process of individual meaninglessness, so that violence became the new means of constructing identities. Wieviorka's theory clashes with evidence that on the micro level, humans are not proficient at violence. Violence is largely shaped by an emotional barrier of confrontational tension/fear [ct/f], so that most conflict goes no further than blustering gestures and words. Violence is messy, imprecise, and atrocious, because it happens only when local conditions allow pathways to circumvent ct/f. But how can this theory explain rising or falling macro-trends in violence? Interactional techniques are invented: such as football hooligans style of overwhelming police by maneuvering to assemble where they have huge local superiority of numbers; or another kind of technique, the clandestine approach to delivering a close attack by a suicide bomber. These techniques can be charted as they spread from one place to another. To complete the picture, authorities' counter-techniques of violence control also evolve and spread; the balance between these two sides results in the historical macro-trends of violence.

Keywords: Violence theory; violence techniques; materiality; practice theory; circulation if practices.

Paolo Magaudda (PhD in Sociology, 2007) is Research Fellow at the University of Padua, working with the CIGA Centre and the Research Unit PaSTIS within the Department of Sociology. His main interests are in the fields of science & technology (STS), consumption studies, cultural studies, food studies, popular music and digital cultures. He has published more than thirty articles and chapters in Italian and international journals and books. He has recently edited the book *Scienza sullo schermo. La rappresentazione della scienza e della tecnologia nella televisione italiana* [with F. Neresini, Il Mulino, 2011]. His research book on the consumption of musical artifacts, titled *Oggetti da ascoltare. Hifi, iPod e consumo delle tecnologie musicali*, will be out in spring 2012 for Il Mulino.