

## *If Philosophy Marries Sociology: Some Reflections on the Innovations they Bring*

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyze the interconnectedness of philosophy and sociology in terms of two newly emergent subdivisions of sociology, namely philosophical sociology and the sociology of philosophy. In the first part, sociology of philosophy is debated based on its strengths and its close relation to the history of philosophy. Especially, as an undisputed pioneer of the field, Collins' work is being reviewed. In the second part, Chernilo's project of a new idea of the philosophical sociology is debated by referring to the main discussion on normativity and humanity, highlighting its potential to reflect on the future of the social theory. Thus, in the concluding part, it is stressed that both subdivisions have substantial contributions to the sociology of knowledge but they have quite different positions when compared theoretically. The comparison is based on their epistemological novelty, ontological positions, theoretical and conceptual foundations, methodologies they apply and, in terms of their understanding of universality.

Keywords: Philosophical sociology, sociology of philosophy, R. Collins, D. Chernilo, social theory.

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## Introduction

This study aims to address the multiple aspects of the complex relationships between sociology and philosophy, and mainly their potential openings which they represent in the latest trend of social crises. I thus want to compare two subdivisions of sociology, sociology of philosophy and philosophical sociology in terms of their basic assumptions, problem areas, and theoretical positions. It is mostly agreed now that as Riesch (2014: 30) points many of the old boundaries have become blurred in our era, “with prominent sociologists (for example Latour, 2010) ‘coming out’ as philosophers while prominent philosophers (for example Kitcher, 2001) have started covering the societal element of science”.

In the first part, sociology of philosophy is debated based on its strengths and its close relation to the history of philosophy. Especially, as a pioneer of the field, Collins’ work (1998) as one of the areas of empirical sociology (Heidegren and Lundberg, 2010) and seen as a complete survey of the history of philosophy from a purely sociological point of view (Munz, 2000) is being reviewed. In the second part, Chernilo’s (2014) project of a new idea of the philosophical sociology is debated by referring to the main discussion on normativity and humanity, highlighting its potential to reflect on the future of the social theory. In his attempt to discuss philosophical sociology he intentionally reviewed the early twentieth-century tradition of philosophical anthropology “which is more to see as a systematic inquiry into ‘general concepts’ of humanity and human properties” (2014: 342). And a good example of such position can be seen, as Chernilo (2017:51) points, in Karl Löwith’s work of *Max Weber and Karl Marx* (1932).

It is important to consider that Chernilo (2014) makes it clear that his use of philosophical sociology has little to do with the application of networks analysis to intellectual history, as in Collins’ *Sociology of Philosophies* (1998). He describes philosophical sociology as “a philosophically informed form of sociology” (Chernilo, 2014: 342). Yet, a comparison of these two approaches offering novelty in the sociological thinking and both combining sociology with philosophy could give insights on the current trend in contemporary social theory. Moreover, innovative approaches might also reveal alternative solutions which could transmit us to a long-awaited moral and political consensus in the social sciences.

### **R. Collins and Sociology of Philosophy: Intellectual Actors on Stage**

In his works, Randall Collins presents a quite different position and challenges the traditional sociology of knowledge (Heidegren and Lundberg, 2010: 7) as he thinks philosophical thought and social position cannot be linked without intermediary elements. In order to understand Collins’ account, a brief introduction is necessarily pointing his sociological approach, method, and techniques he employs, and also his original terminology which he introduced within his work of *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998). The critical reviews are also briefly presented.

Collins conducted a rich, systematic, and empirically grounded account of intellectual change in three civilizations, namely Western, Indian and Asian. The subject of his work is the analysis which he presents as a new theory on social and conceptual networks showing the developmental process in the World philosophies (Hall, 2000:

201). Collins argues that intellectual thinking is an outcome of intergenerational chains of influences that are neither random nor deterministic. Creativity is not facilitated by mere ideas, culture, material base, or by random processes, but is produced in the intersection of external shocks and network configurations.

Looking to the methodology he employs he uses the history of philosophy to test his ideas about the relationship between concrete human interactions and social structure that is, “the relation between what have come to be called the micro and the macro” (Goodman, 2001: 92): He uses his “*micro-macro theory*” of interactional ritual chains in order to explain how broad linkages among *intellectual actors (networks)* create an autonomous arena of discourse or an argumentative community. He synthesizes Goffman and Durkheim to posit multiple intellectual interaction ritual chains which constitute a kind of macro space, and whose rituals are specialized for and meaningful only to intellectuals.

Collins’s view has close relations to the ethnomethodology and conversational analysis. These micro sociologies do not wholly reject macro-sociological concepts, but they attempt to improve on their explanations by reconstituting macro concepts on radically empirical micro-foundations (Goodman, 2001: 92). Macro concepts such as schools of philosophy, cultural capital, opportunity structures, and the like, are used but always with the understanding that they should be translatable into actual interactions between people. Collins’s micro-sociology does not focus on the individual subject; rather, for Collins, the micro is the empirically observable interactions between individuals. Therefore, Collins’s analytical focus is not the individual philosopher but the small social circles that met regularly and that, if successful, became the core of influential philosophical schools (Goodman, 2001: 93).

Fuller (2000: 247-48) who finds Collins account Eurocentric (concluding the Western Philosophy is the most progressive philosophical culture amongst all) in his critical review reveals Collins work with the following features. Collins defined philosophy using its official definitions (e.g. through disciplinary histories) for sociological purposes, self-definitions (philosophical schools) and less of symptomatic definitions (philosophical works). But public definitions are ignored. With regards to ontology, Collins focuses on the progress (or lack) of philosophy as an activity and its autonomy from society as a subject needed to be sociologically explained. Epistemologically speaking, Collins uses narrow reflexivity meaning that philosophy reflects on the logical presuppositions of its claims. Thus, Collins position denies or excludes the wider reflexivity which philosophy reflects on the social conditions of its practice.

Some of the key notions which seem very important in his theory are “*emotional energy (EE)*”, “*interaction rituals*” (IRs), “*law of small numbers*” and “*networks of philosophers*”. The concept of “*emotional energy*” (EE) is only presented in the abstract of his book. He never offers a single concrete case taken from memoirs or diaries of lecture, conference, discussion, or debate where participants describe the sort of emotional content (Goodman, 2000). “EE stands for feelings of confidence, elation, spiritual strength, enthusiasm and power of initiative. People with high EE are therefore enterprising and possess self-confidence” (Heidegren and Lundberg, 2010: 8). The emotions associated with ritualized group interactions constitute micro-mechanisms that explain the patterns of actions that make up social structures

(Goodman, 2001: 93-94). Collins calls these encounters “*interaction rituals*” (IRs). They generate the central features of social organization—authority, property, and group membership—by creating and reproducing binding cultural symbols and associated emotional energies. Collins (2000: 159) thinks the objects of the common focus of attention in a successful IR become symbols representing membership; individuals can carry these symbols with them as reminders of the group’s intensity and as personal batteries for EE. Collins does provide us with many examples of interaction ritual chains in philosophy (Goodman, 2000).

Collins’s study suggests that only three to six active philosophical schools are able to reproduce themselves for more than one or two generations. He calls this the “*law of small numbers*” (Collins, 1998: 81-82; Goodman, 2001: 95). The number of schools of thought that reproduce themselves in the following generations is on the order of three to six: the lower limit because the minimum of argument, two positions, usually generates a third as plague upon both houses; the upper limit because beyond this, additional positions lose visibility and cannot recruit followers to carry their memory to the next generations. When the upper limit is violated, the next generation experiences a collapse and amalgamation of schools (Collins, 2000: 164). “Given that creativity is a process fraught with conflict, the number of philosophical schools will necessarily exceed one. If only one position dominates the field, as depicted, philosophy stagnates” (Heidegren and Lundberg, 2010: 10).

Collins’ intellectuals consist of concrete groups of friends, discussion partners, teachers, students, etc. It is in small, closed, “*networks of philosophers*” and intellectuals that ideas are born and tested. These groups are oriented towards other similar groups within the philosophical attention space – not towards a political or social public. It is thus a mistake, according to Collins, to trace philosophical thought back to socio-political or cultural factors. Instead of being reflections of, for example, class interests, the Protestant spirit or male/female thought is determined by the rivalry between groups within the philosophical field (Collins, 2002: 48). When an intellectual tradition or an academic subject has started to produce its own symbols, tools and research questions, these can no longer be explained on the basis of general cultural or socio-political factors. They have already left society behind them (Heidegren and Lundberg, 2010: 8). The most influential innovations, according to Collins (2000: 164) occur where there is a maximum of both vertical and horizontal density in the networks, where creative conflict builds up among unbroken chains across the generations so that the famous ideas become formulated through the mouths and pens of a few individuals.

Even though each civilization Collins discuss is molded from different starting-point, and thus contains a distinct developmental path, the general principle of intellectual change through vertical and horizontal networks is universal. It contains two inter-linked patterns 1. Stratification, and 2. Solidarity along emotionally charged specialized symbols representing membership in intellectual networks. Diverse vertical intergenerational sequences and horizontal disputes with contemporaries define the parameters of the intellectual discourse. Without these intellectual networks, human knowledge can be destroyed for ages. According to Collins prolific philosophers are products of these circles of creativity and of chains of significant teachers and students. As depicted earlier, the main function of these groups is not cognitive but rather emotional.

## **Criticisms posed on Collins' Account**

Collins (2000a: 299) himself, summarizes the criticism towards his account into two main camps: Those who find his approach too sociological, losing the central character of philosophy and progress toward truth, and those who find his analysis too close to Whig history, caught within the views of the contemporary philosophical establishment, not sufficiently constructivist or pluralist. And alternatively, some critics find his internalist analysis of intellectual networks problematic and they would like to put more emphasis on the traditional externalist sociology of knowledge. Some specific comments are exemplified in the following:

- “Collins’s sociological view of philosophy is completely and, I might add, extravagantly formal. The contents do not count, and the sociology is conceived entirely in terms of who knows whom, that is, it is a study of the formal links between practitioners of the art or craft of philosophy” (Munz, 2000: 208-209).
- “The key element lacking in Collins’s account, I shall argue, is a clear notion of intellectual progress. This puts me at odds with Collins’s historical sociology since he makes a sharp disjunction between philosophy and science” (Jarvie, 2000: 274).
- “He tends to exaggerate, to overstate his claim by saying that nothing but networks matter. This will not do. Other theories and the realities that they describe are not really given a proper hearing” (Hall, 2000: 203).
- “While Collins’s macrosociology of knowledge provides important insights into the role of conflict in an intellectual field, his microsociology is more problematic. In particular, Collins’s micro theory ignores the fundamental importance of social interpretations. This leads him to use a vague and unproductive notion of emotions” (Goodman, 2001: 92).

## **D. Chernilo and Philosophical Sociology: Humanity in Question**

In the case of philosophical sociology Chernilo (2015) thinks the main intellectual source for the idea comes from philosophical anthropology. A second insight for the idea comes from Max Weber’s lecture on *Science as a Vocation* (1970). Weber contends that sociology can make a contribution to public debates by unpacking the various practical and indeed normative implications of different policy options. “By means of its expert empirical knowledge, sociology can cast a critical eye on what is exactly being advocated, both in normatively and in practice, in particular instances” (Chernilo, 2015: 5).

In order to understand Chernilo’s account and its strengths a brief introduction is necessary by presenting the main problem of his thought, his sociological approach, and also the key themes he has introduced within his works of *The Idea of Philosophical Sociology* (2014) and *Debating Humanity: Towards a Philosophical Sociology* (2017). Chernilo (2014) debates the contemporary sociology and degeneration of the institutions has two problems: First, one underlying common theme to all these crises refers to the problematic location of the normative in social life. For him the normative is not the central sphere of social life – it arguably never was – but nor is it possible to conceptualize the social without it.

Thus, Chernilo sustains the idea of philosophical sociology on three main pillars: (1) a revalorization of the relationships between sociology and philosophy; (2) a universalistic principle of humanity that works as a major regulative idea of sociological research, and; (3) an argument on the social (immanent) and presocial (transcendental) sources of the normative in social life (Chernilo, 2014).

In his work Chernilo (2014) refers to the German sociology to the first and good examples of the philosophical sociology which argued partly normativity and epistemology within the sociological theory in such as Tönnies discussed ethical and good conduct of life (2015) or Simmel (1909) putting the concept of philosophical anticipation which differentiates sociology from its mere scientific contributions by having metaphysical dimensions. But his strongest reference is to Löwith's work of *Max Weber and Karl Marx* (1932), debating that both sociologists investigated "what is it that makes man 'human' within the capitalistic world" (Chernilo, 2014: 343). And Löwith (1993) simultaneously offered a new kind of sociology that empirically informed and normatively oriented, and this is why they are seen as philosophical sociologists.

Chernilo (2014: 345) has pointed out the universalistic principle of humanity. He thinks the status of the shared humanity should be philosophically and normatively grounded. For this purpose, he differed three main ways in which conceptions of the human have actually operated in sociology's history such as "substantive" (eg. theories of Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Utilitarianism, theories of power and theories of language which may end up with monistic accounts of human nature rather than an abstract principle of humanity), "teleological" (eg. theories of evolutionist, modernizing, historicist and dialectical approaches focus on the establishment of the progressive social order, as Jews, Slavs, slaves, blacks, women, children- have been placed outside the human family) and "counterfactual" theories (eg. Margret Archer's explicit call for the clarification of contemporary sociology's principle of humanity). With the reference to the counterfactual theories, the principles of humanity, Chernilo concludes, makes apparent that sociological research treats all human beings as equally equipped for the creation and recreation of social life. "It is human rather than socio-cultural empathy that makes sociological work possible" (Chernilo, 2014: 348). In summary, Chernilo argues that sociology's principle of humanity is conceptually, methodologically, and normatively universalistic in character.

Chernilo makes an argument on the social (immanent) and pre-social (transcendental) sources of the normative in social life. The debate on Bendix's thoughts leads Chernilo to say that we mistake the relative independence of human nature vis- a- vis social factors for reductionist ideas that only consider humanity's irrational elements and we end up with conceptions of both the social and the human that are wholly devoid of normative content. In relation to this irrationalism Chernilo analyse contemporary sociology and finds it problematic as there are two accounts regarding the normative in social sciences, which are non-normative understanding of the normative (reducing the normative to what people think the normative is) and militant positions (anticipating rather than explicitly pursues normative self-clarification) that are highly normative in orientation. In both cases, mainstream sociology has grown skeptical of its own ability to think normative as normative. Paradoxically constructivism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and globalism all contribute to advance or criticize normative questions with their anti-positivistic arguments.

Chernilo (349) discuss Weber's (value-free social science) and Bourdieu's positions (less powerful actors ought to be favored against those of more powerful ones) within this context and finds both problematic.

Some of the key themes which seem very important in Chernilo's theory are "*humanity*", "*post-humanity*", and the "*sociology of human rights*". Chernilo in his *Debating Humanity* (2017) points out that "all good sociological questions are, in the last instance, also philosophical ones". Sociology and philosophy always had a close but problematic relation. The early sociological imagination was very much embedded in the philosophical debates of its time such as Marx, Simmel, Tönnies. In order to see that sociologists need to know more philosophy, the interconnectedness between sociology and philosophy then becomes visible. Weber, Marx or Simmel, they both accepted and rejected the significance of philosophy vis-a-vis sociological research. And the future prospect of sociology is similar to the historical one. Just there is, of course, much social theory debate (Chernilo & Beer, 2017).

For him, the core dimension of being human (say *humanity*) is our unique ability to acknowledge each other as humans through normative ideas, practices, and institutions. This is a fundamental social fact. Secondly, imagination is important as human reflexivity gives us the ability to create new practices institutions and ideas: The imagination as the ability to envisage stuff that is actually new. It is our normative imagination which gives us the ability to create new forms such as human rights. In his book Chernilo (2017) presents a selection of writers. Starting from Sartre and Heidegger, the following chapters focus on post 2nd World War writers such as Arendt in the 1950s and 60s, Parsons in the 1960s and 70s, Jonas and Habermas in the 1970s and 80s, Taylor in the 1990s, Archer and Boltanski after the turn of the century.

Chernilo thinks (Chernilo and Beer, 2017), we see the normative dimensions of social life is dependent upon conceptions of the human are not always or necessarily articulated in full. The ways in which we grant rights to each other, the ways in which we construe justifications for our social arrangements, the ways in which we evaluate whether certain practices or institutions are acceptable or not, all these normative issues are the ones that are construes around ideas of the human (Chernilo and Beer, 2017): He points that only a universalistic conception of the human is adequate for the purposes of sociological research, and more importantly, as normative standpoint: empirically, this is the case because the human potentials that we now have in the 21st century are, if not the same, at least wholly comparable with those of 2,000, 3,000 or 5,000 years ago: the linguistic, social, emotional and bodily skills that constitute us as members of the same species. Conceptually, this is also the case because fundamental social relations such as competition, cooperation, hierarchies, solidarity, violence, etc. are again universals that we found in all known human societies; and, normatively, this matters because sociology has a core critical edge that favors those emancipatory values, practices, and institutions that open up spaces that had been closed before for particular groups.

With regards to the debate on "*post-humanity*" Chernilo (2014: 340) thinks post-social and indeed post-human standpoints embracing premature with the following words: "I should rather suggest that we are not in a position to make such claims not least because we still do not fully understand the role that ideas of humanity and

human nature have actually played within sociology. In turn, this exploration may help us account for sociology's difficulties in understanding the normative."

Chernilo (2017), also questions the implicit notions of the human (of *the Anthropos*) that are being mobilized in the Anthropocene debate. From the geological point of view in various disciplines of natural sciences, humans are a new geological epoch that is dominated by human activity: humans are agents with the demonstrated ability to fundamentally alter the normal cycles of nature. This debate emerged in the past 15 years and recently is also available in social sciences and humanities. The vision of the future that the Anthropocene portrays is fundamentally dystopian claiming that natural resources are depleted in a way that human life is being questioned. Chernilo and Beer (2017)- discuss that the slavery, torture or extreme poverty univocally and universally are wrong. Ideas of justice, fairness or freedom – are in need to be defined- do not hold unless we uphold universalistic ideas of humanity. For Chernilo, this is the main difference he has with posthumanism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism of all kinds, they all reject the possibility of a universalist concept of humanity. For Chernilo their ideas of justice of fairness and equality are reduced to strategic bargaining (e.g. Bourdieu), positionality (postcolonialism) or power relations (Foucault).

Chernilo discusses the artificial intelligence and he says this is not his central concern. 19th century it was machine driven physical power; in the 20th-century cybernetics in the 1940s to the ideas of the information society in the 1990s, it was information-processing machines that were to enhance human, and now in the 21st century the argument is that genetically-enhanced nature and indeed computer-generated intelligence which is thought to alter human predicament. This is the wrong way of thinking for Chernilo (Chernilo and Beer, 2017). The correct way is to seek an improved understanding of the set of anthropological features that remain stable in the human makeup. As technology is the fundamental link between nature and society, it has always played and continue to play a key role in the ways in which humans see themselves. For Chernilo, transhumanist utopias (carbon-free and free from disease-and-death ideas of humanity become realized) are more like dystopias, exaggerated claims of radical transformation of the human.

Chernilo (2015:5) also criticize the Bruno Latour's (2013) discussion on the illusion of humanity and the claim that there is a need to a new ontology which can do without the distinction between humans and nonhumans. Chernilo finds Latour's philosophical result of his investigation even more reductionist ontology that allows only for the networks.

Lastly, it is important to stress that Chernilo (2014:351) finds it important to discuss the connection of the "*sociology of human rights*" with the enlightenment and the natural law tradition and to stress the importance of the human dignity. The relativistic challenge is that like all social institutions human rights are socially constructed. And their insufficient practical purchase and only partial success in terms of their normative standards. The contribution of philosophical sociology lies here in unpacking the interconnections between their anthropological grounding in a principle of humanity that remains pre-social and their social-cultural actualization. Thus, the normativity of human rights can only be justified in relation to a universal but is lived and actualized in the particulars of our actually existing polities; their normativity is immanent because they are only exercised in society but it is also transcendental in

terms of our innate ability to recognize others and ourselves as members of the same human species.

## Conclusion

It is concluded that both subdivisions have substantial contributions to the sociology of knowledge but they have quite different positions when compared theoretically. The comparison is based on their epistemological novelty, ontological positions, theoretical and conceptual foundations, methodologies they apply and, in terms of their understanding of universality (See Table 1).

Collins intends to use the history of philosophy to test his ideas about the relationship between concrete human interactions and social structure. He is also criticized by some who find his analysis too close to Whig history. With his tendency to embrace Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Goffman, Mead, network metaphors, mathematical sociology, and historical sociology, Collins's general view is diachronic in this respect. Yet, when we think about the implications of his theory the *universality of horizontal a vertical intellectual networks* that he offers could give new insights in our era in which technology (such as neural networks, deep-learning, big data debates, digital identities, new forms of information- quantum, and etc.) is getting more and more interconnected with human's (and nonhuman's) behavior and is one of the most important in shaping societies.

Feature	Collins	Chernilo
General View	Diachronic	Futuristic
Description of Philosophy	Formalistic towards philosophy	Contextual towards philosophy
Ontology	Philosophies (Thought)	Normativity (Ethics) and Humanity
What sort of analysis	Weber, Durkheim, Macro-Micro	Philosophical Sociologists: e.g. Weber, Marx, and Etc.
Methodological Approach	Quantitative	Qualitative
The dominant standpoint	SOCIOLOGY: From sociology of knowledge to the sociology of philosophies	PHILOSOPHY: From philosophy of knowledge to the philosophical sociology
Universality	Universality of horizontal and vertical networks	Universality of humanism and a human nature.

Table 1. Theoretical Comparison of the Sociology of Philosophies and the Philosophical Sociology.

On the other hand, we can posit Chernilo's view as futuristic in some kind. Chernilo says he is not keen on embarking on speculative futurology in terms of trends that may be reshaping our notions of the human. But we can certainly see some powerful challenges in the ways in which we see and treat each other as humans. On the negative side, there are wars, patterns of forced migration, natural disasters and the persistence of extreme forms of poverty and coercion. On a more positive note, we find the democratization of technology, growing life-expectancy or increased literacy. It is perhaps in the unanticipated interaction between these forces, and their

exponential cycles of reproduction at unprecedented speed and globally, where the future transformation of the human may lie.

Thus, for Chernilo we do indeed need to reflect on post-human cyborgs, non-human actants, material cultures, and biopolitical transformations, and we may eventually have to redefine our ontologies of the human and the social accordingly. But philosophical sociology offers the reminder that, first, we still do not fully understand what human beings are vis-à-vis our conceptualizations of the social and, secondly, that all these insights matter on the basis of prior and systematic human intervention; we care about them because of their consequences on human and social life.

Finally, it could be said that both subdivisions offer a dual approach, both scientific (sociological) and philosophical although having opposing methodological approaches, different standpoints, and quite differing ontologies. With the reference to their potential implications and themes they refer to, I believe the future very much lies before these innovative theories.

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