Awakening the Leader within You

by Jean-Louis Fabiani

To make their highly original interactionist sociology widely accessible, Randall Collins and Maren McConnell revisit the careers of Statesmen and entrepreneurs. Their ambition is to resolve an old problem: what are leaders made of?

Reviewed: Randall Collins and Maren McConnell, *Napoleon Never Slept: How Great Leaders Leverage Social Energy: Microtechniques of success from Jesus to Steve Jobs*, Los Angeles, Maren Ink, 2016, 248 pp.

In his preface to the first edition of the *Division of Social Work* in 1893, Durkheim wrote: 'We would not judge our research to be worth one hour's trouble if it were to have only a speculative interest. If we carefully separate theoretical problems from practical ones, it is not in order to neglect the latter, but, on the contrary, to become better able to solve them.'[1] Clearly the French sociologist was thinking of the pathological aspects of modern societies, which could have major psychic effects, and whose social causes he had undertaken to reveal. He thus opened up the question of the practical efficiency of sociology, a paradoxical science that differs from philosophy in that it combines theoretical power with social utility. The practical side of Durkheimism was indissociable from the reform of the State inscribed in the Third Republic's programme. This was to have a collective effect by creating social cohesion and would hence ensure an efficient public morality.

Randall Collins and Maren McConnell have retained Durkheim's lesson on the practical use of sociology, but transposed it to the individual level of *self-help*, or achieving success. As Collins has been recognised as of the one of the most ambitious theoreticians of American sociology his approach may seem surprising. But it will only surprise those who only remember the nomothetic ambition of his work. Since his first major book, *Conflict Sociology*, published in 1975,[2] he has remained convinced that sociology as a science is capable

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[1] English translation from Emile Durkheim Critical Assessments, edited by Peter Hamilton, Routledge 1995.
[2] Collins, R. *Conflict Sociology. Toward an Explanatory Science*, New York, Academic Press, 1975.

of producing transhistorical laws. However, another Collins exists behind the elegant and erudite *homo academicus*: the one who wrote his doctoral thesis at Berkeley at the peak of counter-culture, who left university to join a Buddhist monastery, was a motorcycle repairman and published a remarkable detective novel, *The Case of the Philosopher's Ring*, under the pseudonym Dr John Watson.[3] He has also discreetly collaborated as a screenwriter with the Hollywood cinema industry and knows its least artistic features. Randall Collins' biography would be unbelievable in France. Could one imagine Luc Boltanski or Bernard Lahire publishing a short treatise on personal development? Their readers would never get over it.

Social energy based on interaction and charisma

It is however this excursion beyond academic sociology that gives this short, amazing book its value. It contains all the principles that govern Collins' general sociology, presented in a simplified and stylised manner, and Maren McConnell clearly seems to have adopted these principles. The first is that one is allowed to speak of social interactions as generalities, independently of the period they belong to: the book consists of three large chapters, respectively dedicated to Steve Jobs, Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander the Great. These three men's trajectories can be analysed using the same grid, which could also be applied to Howard Hughes, Sam Walton (the founder of WalMart), Claude Bébéar and François Pinault. This viewpoint clearly sets Collins apart from a large section of contemporary sociology, which on the contrary has undertaken to historicise all its objects by radicalising Weberian epistemology. This is the case of Jean-Claude Passeron's book, *Sociological Reasoning*, published in 2013 in English.[4] Collins' nomotheic ambition is most evident in his key work, *The Sociology of Philosophies*[5] that provides a universal theory of intellectual production

The second principle is that social interaction can be defined as energy. While the idea is not originally Collins', an outline of the same idea appears in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in the form of a sociology of collective effervescence, he makes it central to his conceptual construction. In his mature work, the author of *Interaction Ritual Chains*[6] developed a post-Durkheimian theory of 'emotional energy' that can be summed up as follows: EE, as Collins and McConnell abbreviate it, corresponds to a feeling of being pumped up, both physically and mentally, by interaction. There are people with a high EE level (the authors do not go into detail on the levels people are originally endowed with, which could be pre-social) who transmit energy through interaction, and whose energy capital is in return reinforced by interaction.

[3] Collins, R. *The Case of the Philosopher's Ring by Dr. John Watson, New York, Crown Publishers, 1978.*

[4] Passeron, J-P, *Sociological Reasoning*, The Bardwell Press, 2013.

[5] Collins, R. *The Sociology of Philosophies. A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*, Cambridge (Mass), The Belknap Press, 1998.

[6] Collins, R. *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

The third principle is the universality of the concept of charisma, which Collins tries to elucidate rationally based on a purely interactionist problematic: in an interaction charisma is produced on the basis of the exchange of energy flows. It hence does not constitute a property inalienable from the person, but is eminently relational. Emotional energy produces flows and feedback loops, but it is never limited to this horizontal level: in a clearly Weberian problematic, it is also a structure of domination. The authors add another active disposition to EE, this is EDOM (emotional domination). EDOM is produced by a dissymmetry in energy that is the principle of charisma. It is the condition of leadership, be it military, political and above all, economic.

The fourth principle consists of a deconstruction of the notions of genius and talent, a blind spot of numerous sociological theories, to the benefit of an evaluation of exceptional performance based on the ability to pay attention to detail. It also includes a form of what one could call *vista*, which is not some kind of supernatural vision, but on the contrary a sort of enhanced vision. This ability to see can be compared to Bourdieu's sense of play, which includes a sense of anticipation linked to bringing the body into play on a playing field or in a particular field.

The whole book is informed by a critique of the type of bureaucracy that regiments academic life, a constant in Collins' work since *The Credential Society* (1979).[7] This is his most political book in which, in a clearly liberal inspiration, he questions the multiplication of entrance barriers introduced by the modern university, to constitute myriad closed professional worlds. Leaders were precocious and rarely completed a university course. Collins remains insensitive to the 'trade union', and as such, the collectivist dimension of sociology, including in America, and continues to make the expansion of the individual sphere the cornerstone of his intellectual investigation.

From military strategy to economic activity, the unity of leadership

One of the great qualities of this practical book is that it is based on a serious study of military strategy. This object is one of Collins' very old preoccupations. The reflections on Basil Liddell Hart, the British military historian's work are central to *Conflict Sociology*, and his more recent work on violence[8] owes a lot of its originality to the quality of the information he provides on effective action on battlefields, particularly in terms of infantry battles. The evocative strength of the book is largely created by the description of Caesar, Alexander and Napoleon's respective military strategies. Although they differ widely as a result of the

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[7] Collins, R. *The Credential Society. A Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, New York, Academic Press, 1979.
[8] Collins, R *Violence. A Micro-Sociological Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

historical conditions and technological resources available at the time, these strategies show common characteristics in that they are primarily based on the actors' exceptional quality of vision. A battle is a spatial arrangement in which every detail counts. The focus has to be on the details. A great strategist stands out by his capacity to pay attention, which his unfortunate rivals do not possess.

Collins and McConnell afford greater importance to a sharp perception of details than to a synthetic view of the terrain. Both doubtless come together in an articulation that is yet to be defined, as the meeting of two armies is also that of masses in movement. But the key remains the leaders' ability to grasp often infinitesimal details. In the *Gallic Wars* César reveals that, thanks to his abilities as an ethnologist, the Gallic tribes largely facilitated his military victories. The sociology of leadership is always based on a sociology of attention. The military leader is also the person who manages temporal constraints. Victory is a question of speed as we know, but the authors underscore the impedimentum to the mobility of armies, comprised by the unwieldy luggage train. They remind us that victory is often won through efficient logistics rather than the numerical superiority of armies. The Roman army's bridge builders and pavers thus created the conditions for the victory over the Gauls. The conquest of space, which is the principle behind military ambition, is based on mastering temporality, whereas the hurried observer only notices one dimension, the movement of the combat units.

Both these authors directly transpose the lessons of military strategy onto the economic world, particularly with regard to the great innovators. The opening chapter on Steve Jobs is fascinating in this respect. The economy can be read as the war, continued by other means, in that it is based on an ability to pay attention to detail. Jobs could spend weeks, even months, on the details of a product, which the ordinary consumer would never appreciate, as they would be concealed beneath the cover. By doing this, the boss of Apple starts by creating a collective mobilization through a current of emotional energy. He creates a 'focus' that all his troops share. Then he identifies a space of difference, which is not only technological, the *edge,* which is the expression of an emotional community, the basis for the recognition of the originality of an Apple product. Steve Jobs often produces a counter intuitive energy: it works through regular insults addressed to the teams, who are nonetheless intensely mobilised. Far from discouraging the members, this tends to galvanise them, a result that calls the usual psychological representations of positive energy into question. Jobs' 'Troops I am not happy with you' is the same as / a symmetrical reflection of Napoleonic congratulations. It pumps up.

The numerous other examples drawn from the economic sphere, and often borrowed from Michel Villette and Catherine Vuillermot's excellent book, *From Predators to Icons: Exposing the Myth of the Business Hero,*[9] show a wide variety of conditions under which industrial leaders succeed, and reintroduce a macro-sociological dimension into the

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[9] Villette, M. et Vuillermot, *de* C. *From Predators to Icons: Exposing the Myth of the Business Hero,* Trans. George Holoch, Cornell University Press, 2009.

explanation of exceptional trajectories. Thus Claude Bébéar and François Pinault benefitted from unique conjunctures, often based on legal configurations, which they knew how to exploit. This does not call into question a large number of Collins and McConnell's subtle observations on the ability of these businessmen to see what others did not. But everything Villette and Vuillermot analyse is not reduced to the theory of emotional energy, which is the basis of our authors' reasoning. Reintroducing complexity is always a threat to the nomological edifice of the social sciences, and the objections that can be raised are always somewhat facile. They do not radically question these authors' effort, and we can say their work shows a strong force of conviction at the level at which it is located, that is to say at the heart of social interaction in its most fundamental aspects. It is not absurd to say that Napoleon was a great chief executive officer (CEO): he was a brilliant manager of military resources and an innovator in the field of strategy. The transposability of the analytical schemas set out in the book is unquestionable and makes this a valuable work.

A question remains: can leadership be democratised? Would this book be efficient in the social world? After reading it, will I see myself as a leader? The work ends with 'Eleven Principles for Winning Big'. Let us imagine for a moment that these principles are truly efficient and they really transform readers into leaders. From Jesus to Steve Jobs, there have been few producers and captors of emotional energy. By focusing attention on great men, the book ignores the impact they had on history. Those who have succeeded in pumping a great deal of emotional energy are also often those who bored their citizens to death. Napoleon said to those concerned about the huge losses his battles caused: 'a man like me does not bother his head about the lives of a million men'. Under these circumstances, it is maybe better that everybody does not think they are Napoleon. In any event it is well worth reading this short fascinating book, a masterful exercise in democratic sociology on completely undemocratic object.

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