

Elias and the Sociology of Ideas: A Critique of Randall Collins's Microsociology of Intellectual Change

Thomas Krendl Gilbert

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

Volume 5, Issue 1, March 2016

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0005.106> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0005.106>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>]

Abstract: *This article applies Elias's research on the emotional mechanics of civilising processes to the sociology of intellectual life. Randall Collins's *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998), representing the dominant paradigm in this subfield, suffers the same analytic and theoretical problems that Elias dissected in the work of Talcott Parsons, reducing the long-term historical dynamics of emotion regulation to face-to-face interaction. I examine the case of the philosopher-theologian Søren Kierkegaard, demonstrating that the psychogenesis of existentialism has sociogenetic roots in structural shifts in the make-up of Denmark's court society during the early nineteenth century. I claim that process sociology has further applications to the social history of intellectual movements.*

Keywords: *knowledge, culture, symbolic interactionism, emotions*

The promise of a sociological portrayal of intellectual life remains unfulfilled. While the 'new sociology of ideas' (Camic and Gross 2001) has contributed to this effort by studying intellectual groups from within and building on the work of earlier sociologists of knowledge such as Mannheim (1972) and Merton (1973), this program has largely neglected Mannheim's emphasis on the sociological origins of human psychology, which is the clear starting point for examining the social dimension of mental activity. The dominant model for this subfield, forwarded by Randall Collins in *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) and *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (1998), was lauded in the review literature (Camic 2000; Fabiani 2000; Lamont 2001; Rössel 2000) yet has not been rigorously applied to subsequent case studies or theoretically honed.

This paper argues that Elias's research on the emotional mechanics of civilising processes presents an alternative and possibly superior paradigm of immediate use to case studies within this subfield. Here I will focus on the genesis of existentialism through an exploration of the intellectual context of its father, the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, using Elias's concept of social figurations to unlock the source of his creative output.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was surrounded by contradiction, both biographically and philosophically (Garff 2005). Early in his career he infamously refused to marry the young woman Regine Olsen on the grounds that he was 'already married to God.' In his mature works, Kierkegaard dissected recent ills such as the dominance of the 'crowd' over the 'single individual,' anxiety, 'infinite resignation' from God, and the seduction of Romantic literature. An unabashed royalist during Denmark's transition to democracy, he nevertheless became a pamphleteer in 1854 and declared war on the 'established order' of the State Church, believing that authorities had become incapable of representing true spirituality (Kirmmse 1990). Kierkegaard's posthumous reception exploded after World War I within neo-orthodox theology, which appropriated him as a voice for authenticity against what Karl Barth saw as the anti-humanism of liberal

Christianity. He was subsequently co-opted by movements ranging from French existentialism to literary deconstruction to Anglo-American philosophy of ethics.

Empirically considered, Kierkegaard was quite simply an enormously productive thinker of the modern self, completing over ten major published works from 1843 to 1848 alongside 7000 pages of unpublished journals. As such, the goal of the sociology of ideas is to identify the specific social conditions responsible for such a thinker's development. Collins's prominent theory holds that intellectual creativity has moved through intricate interpersonal networks of historical thinkers. Collins views trans-historical influence as 'the unfurling of the scroll of micro-situations [...] the meshing of chains of local encounters' (1998: 21). These connections are why several so-called 'great' philosophers often emerge from the same social setting. Collins calls this face-to-face meeting of the minds the 'interaction ritual' (1998: 21), adapted from Emile Durkheim's research on 'emotional patterns of social interaction' and Erving Goffman's emphasis on 'symbolic interaction [...] and the sociology of emotions' (2004: xi).

Collins does treat Kierkegaard, pointing to his contact with the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Indeed, Kierkegaard only stopped attending Schelling's lectures once he became too busy writing his first major work, *Either/Or*. However, Kierkegaard in fact wrote that Schelling's lectures significantly disappointed him (Garff 2005: 211), and there is no evidence that he sought out a personal conversation (Garff 2005: 209). Moreover, Collins cannot explain the much wider context of Kierkegaard's budding authorship. Indeed, many of the poetic fragments that open *Either/Or* began as unpublished notes originally written in Kierkegaard's early twenties (Garff 2005: 102); other sections comprised drafts of articles Kierkegaard had prepared for Copenhagen journals and newspapers. This would force Collins to conclude that Kierkegaard's Danish context was his main network for interaction. But Collins's entire methodology precludes this, as only canonical philosophers count as powerful network contacts. All Danish philosophers contemporary with Kierkegaard are known solely through references in his work, and were not creative in their own right.

In fact, Collins's awareness of Kierkegaard's apparent self-cultivation conflicts with his own view of interpersonal inspiration and the emotional mechanics of group formation, as is apparent in his description of Kierkegaard's authorial motivations late in life:

Kierkegaard seems to have been acting not so much on his personal class interest as against the liberalising movement on his own class. The stance he had discovered, and that powered his creativity, was opposition as a value in itself (1998:767–8).

While provocative, this contradicts Collins's central thesis about the nature of intellectual change: the group as a necessary base for philosophical creativity is now devalued relative to the emotional mechanics of the self. Thus, Collins would be forced to admit that Kierkegaard's genius arose *ex nihilo* relative to both Schelling and 1840s Copenhagen.

This theoretical contradiction is one that an Eliasian framework is designed to overcome. Just as Elias criticised the sociological method of Talcott Parsons for trying to 'dissect analytically into their elementary components[...] the different types of society in his field of observation' (Elias 2000: 453), I hold that the framework of Collins fails to address Kierkegaard's productivity due to the subtle and emergent socio-historical contingencies within 1840s Copenhagen that his works were able to commandeer. These contingencies appeared not just on the level of networks, but in the very personality structures of Danish intellectuals. As Elias writes in *The Civilizing Process*:

A real understanding [...] of the changes in ideas and forms of cognition, can be gained only if one also takes into account the changes of human interdependencies in conjunction with the structure of conduct and, in fact, the framework of the psychic economy as a whole at a given stage of social development (2000: 408–9) .

Let us treat this statement as an alternative framework, one that can help us view this period of intellectual history as the product of a developing social figuration, identifiable with attention to how a given Copenhagen intellectual asserted himself as a cultural voice in the city. Early nineteenth-century Copenhagen, commonly referred to as Denmark's Golden Age, did sustain itself for several decades by means of successive generations of up-and-coming thinkers who managed to maintain an unstable relationship with the royal court society that nervously endorsed their endeavours. These complex interdependencies, moreover, were intimately connected with intellectuals' psychological development, as they became progressively enamoured with any combination of Pietist theology, literary Romanticism and philosophical idealism.

However, several of Kierkegaard's predecessors, even as they pursued conventional career paths, had already begun to break away from the rigid genre divisions in which discourse had been previously channeled. The literary critic Heiberg was the first in Denmark to try to popularise the philosophy of Hegel, but he never secured a professorship at the University of Copenhagen. He tried to circumvent this by founding popular literary journals in which he made proto-existential appeals to the importance of 'showing [...] reader[s] how [Hegel's] philosophical ideas can be found in everyday experience' (Stewart 2003: 65). He eventually became head of the Royal Theatre, and when the long-established Bishop Mynster tried to argue that Hegel's ideas were unable to solve extant theological disputes, Heiberg pushed him to precisely define which aspects of Christianity were irreducible to a Hegelian language. Mynster could only invoke ambiguous concepts such as 'living faith' and the 'childlike innocence of oneself before God.' Thus, even as church leaders attempted to preserve their own cultural authority, they could not help but begin to provide a language for an alternate figuration of anti-institutional religious expression. Moreover, these and other intellectuals had to fight such battles under pseudonyms, as their ideas became both too dangerously provocative for royalists to accept, yet also necessary in order to maintain some semblance of cohesion among the upper cultural caste.

This instability had become widespread by the time Kierkegaard reached intellectual maturity: across multiple fields, the social-psychological-institutional balance that had previously sustained and controlled the ideas of Danish intellectuals had begun to fall apart. But Kierkegaard himself was primed, at a far earlier age than his peers, to situationally confront and emotionally entrain this contradiction and hence later treat it as a topic worthy of philosophical investigation. Just as Elias, in his own variant on the sociology of knowledge, traced the historical concept of 'homo clausus' (the isolated, objective thinker capable of a pure epistemological gaze) to the historical shifting of affective manners surrounding the court societies of the Renaissance, we must be mindful of Kierkegaard's primary socialisation as constitutive of the dispositions that would later underlie his mature thought.

Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, was a Jutland peasant who travelled to Copenhagen as a boy, eventually becoming an established merchant. This upbringing set Søren apart from the culturally (and sometimes biologically) incestuous background of peers such as Johan Ludvig Heiberg and scions of Copenhagen's more established families, but it was his father's peasant background and lack of formal education that made Søren unique. Michael Pedersen's own Herrnhut upbringing led him to join the Copenhagen branch of the Moravian Brotherhood even as he became good friends with Jakob Mynster while the latter was head of the State Church; Søren would become virtually the only established theologian to have attended both services from boyhood. Furthermore, his large childhood household gave way to three melancholy men (himself, his father, and older brother) as several sisters and his mother died before Søren,

the youngest of the family, reached adulthood. Despite the specificity of this domestic milieu, and the guilt, anxiety, and overactive imagination Søren inherited from his father, Kierkegaard scholars have yet to recognise this upbringing as just a particularly extreme case of the anomie faced by all of his peers at the same moment in Danish history, as a rising middle class and a secularised intellectual caste made the audience for theological discourse progressively uncertain.

This upbringing, coupled with a highly traditional pedagogy in Copenhagen's elite educational system, prepared Kierkegaard to become the ultimate Stranger in Simmel's (2007) sense: he benefited from lifelong and deep access to the city's social capital while remaining critical of its cultural and intellectual offerings. However, these mechanics occurred on a level deeper than the atomised and situationalist interactions described by Collins. Rather, it was the interstitial experiences and psychic instability of the city's synthetic culture, based in the transformational shift in Denmark's social makeup, that would find its ultimate expression in Kierkegaard's own writings, which philosophically elevated the emotive conditions of the individual (subjective authenticity) over the Hegelian concern with abstract conceptual development (objectivity). As his work *Either/Or* exemplifies, Kierkegaard's own personality structure was built atop the accumulated emotional and psychological leftovers of the figuration already exhausted by his contemporaries. Much like Elias's sociological portrayal of Mozart, Kierkegaard was a transition figure, produced by the power structures of his surroundings even as his inner psychology and authorial development suggested an alternate, distinctly modern interpretation of the project of philosophy: the primacy of existential dread, the search for meaning, and a profound appreciation of the distinction between abstract thought and lived experience.

Indeed, *Either/Or* embodies a deep scepticism towards conventional ways of resolving philosophical dispute. The work is divided into two conflicting pseudonymous parts: the first half apparently written by a young man who spends his time seducing women; the second by a member of the judiciary, who attempts to convince his younger opponent to embrace a life of ethical responsibility and marriage. But Kierkegaard leaves the debate unresolved, interested not in positing its resolution but in unlocking its manifest *psychogenetic* reality by examining the shifting social relations behind it. The young man declares that 'what the philosophers say about Reality is often as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window which reads: Pressing Done Here. If you brought your clothes to be pressed, you would be fooled; for only the sign is for sale' (Kierkegaard 1987: 12). He thus rejects the ability of any external intellectual authority to persuade him. Indeed, both pseudonyms ironically speculate that the same author, i.e. Kierkegaard, may have written their respective halves, as if hinting that any true debate between their worldviews is sublated within a single personality.

In fact, *Either/Or*'s profundity lies in its reinvention of the traditional structure of such debates. As Kierkegaard writes, the choice that the reader faces in *Either/Or* is not between one worldview and another, but rather between 'choosing and not choosing.' To be a seducer *properly*, the judge argues, actually requires a conscious ethical dedication, so that embracing the institution of marriage becomes the highest fulfillment of one's erotic desires. Yet the judge's stuffy depiction of married life provokes the reader into embracing the young man's appreciation of feminine beauty and artistic expression. Just as Elias writes that in civilising processes 'the tensions and passions that were earlier directly released in the struggle of man and man, must now be worked out within the human being' (Elias 2000: 375), Kierkegaard recognises that the battle being fought is not between opposed positions but within the self, and his solution is not to attempt an overarching philosophical framework in the style of his Danish predecessors, but rather to become proficient at regulating whatever kind of selfhood one chooses to develop. In Eliasian terms, Kierkegaard has taken two contrasting personalities and transformed them into distinct varieties of legitimate personality types.

This transition suggested the formation of an entirely new disposition towards moral and religious authority, and aligns with Elias's emphasis on identifying the 'compelling force with which a particular social structure,

a particular form of social interweaving, is pushed through its tensions to a specific change and so to other forms of intertwining' in order to explain how 'changes arise in human mentality' (2000: 367). This, in short, is *Either/Or's* relationship with the Danish Golden Age environment that preceded it – the movement from social constraints in an unstable cultural system to self-restraints within each cultured individual. Moreover, the use of pseudonymous labels for certain positions has been reconfigured, no longer rooted in a fear of royal censorship, but instead in responsibly demarcating different elements of one's personality.

Kierkegaard wrote years later that not even he understood *Either/Or*, but it so obviously denoted a radical break with accepted genre standards that he noted, soon after its publication, that, 'Even if the book itself were meaningless, its genesis would nonetheless be the pithiest epigram I have written over the philosophical drivel of this age' (Garff 2005: 225). This genesis was both a direct product of the exhausted social figuration of other Danish intellectuals and the first hint of something new. In subsequent works, Kierkegaard further outlined and clarified his philosophical concerns, and meanwhile associated more and more with Copenhagen's lower classes, seeing their behaviour on the streets as just as philosophically intriguing as the idealist system of Hegel. Hence Kierkegaard became less attached to the stratified culture of the Golden Age and more to an egalitarian form of social consciousness; likewise, Elias writes:

As the structure of human relationships was changed [...] as the individual was now embedded in the human network quite differently from before and molded by the web of his dependencies, so too did the structure of individual consciousness and affects change, the structure of the interplay between drives and drive-controls, between conscious and unconscious levels of the personality (2000: 397).

With this framing in mind – marrying Elias's attention to widespread shifts in the sociology of consciousness with a granular accounting of how intellectual discourse can be ruptured, transposed, or contextually reinvented – a processual approach to the psychogenesis and sociogenesis of the existential impulse can be far more enlightening than Collins's network-based theory of intellectual change. While an analysis of network connections between leading thinkers certainly approximates the contours of the history of philosophy, Collins can only point to ritualised 'emotional energy' as a kind of black box that becomes activated when two philosophers meet for intellectual discussion. Rather, a genetic investigation of the emotions in question is necessary if we are to identify and understand the emergent moments at which new philosophical paradigms are crafted. Elias's work already contains a thorough methodology for such a project. ^[1]_[#N1]His work can and should be applied to the sociology of ideas if we are to more fully unlock the complex social dynamics that define the creative production of ideas.

Endnotes

1. Moreover, Elias's figurational perspective, and in particular its relevance for the development of a 'post-philosophical sociology,' has already been advanced by Kilminster (1998) as a potential framework for the sociology of knowledge. The empirical case I outline here is meant as an affirmation of this programme and a call for its extension to other cases of theoretical interest. [↗]_[#N1-ptr1]

References

- Camic, Charles. 2000. 'The Sociology of Philosophy' (review essay). *European Journal of Sociology* 3:95–102.
- Camic, Charles and Gross, Neil. 2001. 'The New Sociology of Ideas.' In Judith R. Blau (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, Blackwell, pp. 236–49.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Randall. 1998. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Elias, Norbert. 2000. *The Civilizing Process*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Fabiani, Jean-Louis. 2000. 'The Sociology of Philosophy' (review essay). *European Journal of Sociology* 3:107–11.
- Garff, Joakim. 2005. *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1987. *Either/Or*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kilminster, Richard. 1998. *The Sociological Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Global Age*. London: Routledge.
- Lamont, Michèle. 2001. 'Three Questions for a Big Book: Collins's *The Sociology of Philosophies*.' *Sociological Theory* 19(1):86–91.
- Mannheim, Karl. [1929] 1972. *Ideology & Utopia*, translated by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils. London: Lowe & Brydone.
- Merton, Robert K. 1973. *The Sociology of Science*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rössel, Jörg. 2000. 'The Sociology of Philosophy' (review essay). *European Journal of Sociology* 3:102–7.
- Stewart, Jon. 2003. *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Biography

Thomas Krendl Gilbert is a PhD student in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. His research interests broadly focus on how the self is synthesised within social fields, and pursues this question from a variety of angles. One project is a comparative study of fundamental physics research in the US and Europe, examining how scientists cultivate practices of adjudication and conceptual parsimony in the absence of empirical data. His dissertation topic is a study of political radicals' reception of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy in late nineteenth century Germany, and the role this reception played in the project of German state formation. These research topics build on previous work as an M.Phil. student in Political Thought and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge, a Fulbright Scholar in Denmark, and undergraduate training at Northwestern University in physics, philosophy, and sociology.

